

Communicate with Elected Officials

Developing personal, ongoing relationships with elected officials is the most effective way to secure lawmakers' support on children's issues. You can build these relationships through phone calls, letters, e-mails, in-person meetings, and scheduled program tours.

General Tips

As you are building these strong, personal relationships, it is important to remember that:

- Policymakers care about issues that affect their constituents and they respond to concise, persuasive arguments that are easily understood and communicated.
- Letters, e-mails, and phone calls are effective ways to communicate. Five or six letters or phone calls on a specific issue will encourage the elected official to pay much closer attention to that issue. Personalized letters are always most effective.
- You know much more about children's issues than your elected official. Leverage your knowledge to educate and build up a relationship with your elected official so that you are seen as a resource for information on children's issues and possible legislation.
- Sharing stories about children and their families and how they are affected by an issue is very effective at building support for your position.
- Legislators' staff members are wonderful resource. Developing a good relationship with legislative staff can lead to direct contact with a legislator over time.

Phone Calls, Letters, and E-mails

Correspondence from constituents reminds elected officials that the public is tracking specific issues, legislation, and their voting records. Whenever communicating with legislators through a phone call, letter, or e-mail, remember these tips:

- Identify yourself as a constituent.
- Make sure you touch on every point you wish to convey.
- If possible, keep written correspondence to one page, and phone calls to five minutes.
- When addressing a specific piece of legislation, refer to the bill number.
- Include factual and, if possible, local information and examples that support your viewpoint.
- Stay on topic—discuss one issue per written communication or conversation.
- Include a call to action, specifying what you want the lawmaker to do.

If making a phone call, practice your remarks. The more you rehearse, the more comfortable you will be delivering your message when it counts. Practice with another person to identify any areas where your message isn't clear or effective.

Written correspondence to U.S. representatives and senators takes an extended period of time to reach them because all mail is carefully screened for safety. It is recommended that you fax letters to your representative's and senators' district and Washington, DC, offices.

See the Resources section for samples of a phone-call script, letter, and e-mail.

In-Person Meeting with Your Elected Official

Legislators want to be responsive to their constituents and their needs and will spend time with visitors when possible.

Scheduling a Visit

- Schedule an appointment with policymakers in advance of your visit.
- Have several dates and times available for a face-to-face meeting. When calling to make an appointment with a member of Congress, ask for the scheduler, not the legislator. If the scheduler is not available, leave a message and follow up with another phone call.
- Let the scheduler know what issue you want to discuss with the legislator.
- If the representative won't be available during your visit, ask to meet with a staff person knowledgeable about your issue.
- Find out how much time you will have with the policymaker.
- After making an appointment, leave your name and contact information with the scheduler as well as the names of any relevant organizations you are affiliated with.

Meeting with Your Representative

- Dress professionally.
- Practice your talking points.
- Look for common ground and compliment the official for past support if applicable.
- Allow the elected official time to ask questions and share observations or opinions.

- Anticipate opposing arguments. Be prepared to defend your perspective and stay focused on suggestions for constructive solutions.
- Ask elected officials what it would take for them to change their minds. Several communications may be necessary to effectively persuade a policymaker.
- Be friendly, firm, and positive in your messaging even if your legislator does not share your perspective. A rational, balanced conversation will keep the official's door open to future contact.
- Bring informational materials such as fact sheets, articles, or research studies to leave with the legislator and staff. When possible, use local data. For example, cite how many children under five live in their district and how many early childhood slots are available.
- Remember that you are an authority with content knowledge and expertise to share.
- Do not forget a call to action. Let the legislators know what you want them to do: vote for a bill, talk with colleagues, sponsor legislation, etc.
- Offer to provide relevant follow-up contact or materials after the meeting.
- Take notes, particularly if further contact is expected.
- Thank your legislators or their staff members for the time they've spent and any supportive actions they will take.

After the Meeting

- Follow up with an e-mail thanking

the legislators or staff persons for their time and reminding them of any action commitments they made.

- Let them know what follow-up action they can expect from you if you offered to provide their office with further information.
- Talk with other advocates about the meeting and strategize next steps.
- Do not send photocopied letters to legislators. It is better to send brief personalized letters than to send letters that have clearly been duplicated.

Invite Elected Officials to Visit Your Program

The visual impact of showing policy-makers firsthand where children play and learn is worth a thousand words. Site visits give elected officials the opportunity to connect the policies they make with real children and providers in their districts. Site visits are a great strategy for building lasting relationships and impressions.

- Find out when your state or federal legislators will be in your area. Congressional calendars can be found at www.house.gov or www.senate.gov. In addition to recesses, members of Congress may also be home on weekends or holidays. Session calendars for the Illinois General Assembly can be found at www.ilga.gov.
- Invite your legislators. Remember to give sufficient advance notice if there is a specific occasion when you would like them to visit.
- Confirm the date and time of the visit one week in advance. Ask if others will be accompanying the legislator, and let them know if the local media will be present.
- Inform parents and staff that the legislator will be visiting and assure them that they and the children do not need to do anything different or special. Invite them to participate if they wish.
- Invite the local media to attend, making sure to get parental permission for children's photographs or names to be used in stories.

On the Day of the Visit

- Be available to welcome and introduce your legislator to children, staff, parents, and other guests.
- Use the opportunity to inform your official about important issues affecting young children and their families in the district.
- Showcase an activity that demonstrates a strong age-appropriate learning environment as a way of informing the official about the importance of your work with young children.
- Encourage your official to participate in an activity.
- Take photos to use for your program's newsletter and to send to the legislator with follow-up correspondence.
- Maintain the relationship with a follow-up thank-you note and further communication when you have specific information about early childhood issues to share.
- Add the official's name and address to your mailing list to maintain contact and provide updates.

