

ALABAMA PARTNERSHIP FOR CHILDREN MESSAGING GUIDE

WHAT ARE MESSAGES?

Messages are words and phrases that describe something. They are bite-sized statements about what we do and why people should care. They are the key takeaway from your conversation, your presentation, or your material. They are what you want everyone to know. They also tap into what is important to the people you're talking to, connecting your work to their priorities, needs, and perspectives. Good messages are memorable, concise, and engaging.

Repetition of messages is important. The more people hear the same message, the more likely they are to remember it.

WHAT IS IN THIS DOCUMENT?

Developed by the Alabama Partnership for Children (APC), this document is a “cheat sheet” of messages you can use to describe the importance of early childhood and to promote adoption and expansion of early childhood programs in Alabama. It includes the main points you should drive home when you communicate with policymakers, engaged parents, and other advocates. It also includes supporting points to use, as possible, especially in longer, written communication.

WHY SHOULD I USE THESE MESSAGES?

Using a few points and repeating them often over time will greatly increase the chance they are remembered and “taken to heart”—and that support for early childhood will grow.

When Alabama advocates work together and use the same messages, we can:

- Raise awareness of the importance of the early childhood period to individual children, families, communities, and the state of Alabama.
- Show that early childhood is an urgent issue with broad public support that deserves attention and action now.
- Present an organized, professional image.
- Recruit new partners across sectors, including the business, faith, and other communities, as well as “across the aisle.”

WHEN SHOULD I USE THE MESSAGES?

Use the attached messages any time you have an opportunity to talk or write about support for early childhood development, such as in conversations, interviews, presentations, emails, articles, social media posts, and web content, just to name a few. You don't need to include every message in all of your conversations or materials. Rather, pick and choose the most appropriate messages for each audience and situation. There may be some instances in which you need to slightly adapt these messages, but try to keep them as they are. In general, stay positive with your messaging, focusing on what can be done to support young children and families. Also, stay local with examples, stories, and data from across the state of Alabama.

OBJECTIVE

Promote adoption and expansion of early childhood programs in Alabama



WHAT ELSE CAN I USE?

You also can rely on resources already prepared for you on the APC website, www.smartstartalabama.org/programs/blueprint.

Blueprint Information Package. This collection of materials can be printed and distributed in person, or online via PDF. The package includes five inserts:

- Blueprint Overview
- Strong Families Need Strong Foundations [Families & Communities]
- Children Are Healthy and Thriving [Health]
- Success in Schools Starts Early [Early Education]
- Questions for Candidates

Action Agenda. This document outlines specific steps that early childhood advocates can take to make a difference.

Social Media Calendar. Use the images and sample posts on your organization’s and/or personal account, or just share the posts of advocacy organizations to which you belong. Use **#ALearlychildhoodmatters** to join the conversation on making early childhood issues a priority in our state elections.

VOICES for Alabama’s Children “VOICES CAN” network to receive legislative updates and alerts. <https://alavoices.org/mission-and-vision/join-us/join>

GUIDING PRINCIPLES

- Meet those you want to influence “where they are” (their priorities, needs, and perspectives).
- Create communication that appeals to them.
- Say more with less.
- Make the “ask”—what do you want them to do?
- “Repeat, repeat, repeat” to ensure a clear, consistent, and concise message is heard.

**Tips for Talking to Candidates from the
VOICES for Alabama’s Children Voters’ Guide**

- Introduce yourself and let them know if you are a voter in their district.
- Establish a relationship.
- Be knowledgeable and to the point about your issues.
- Tell a personal story if you can.
- Thank them for their time.

Be an advocate for children’s causes that are important to you, using the most powerful tool only you have—your personal stories. Advocacy not only means endorsing a cause or idea, but recommending, promoting, defending, or arguing for an issue. Remember you are one of many people vying for the attention of the candidate or your legislator.

<https://alavoices.org/publications-2018-voters-guide/>

FOR YOUR EYES ONLY

Since this message document is a “cheat sheet” for you, please do not share it directly with policymakers or candidates. Keep it as an internal document and use it whenever a communication opportunity presents itself. We hope you’ll find this tool an easy and effective way to communicate about the importance of early childhood in Alabama. Good luck!

If you have any questions or need additional support, please email us at info@smartstartalabama.org, or call (866) 711-4025.



EARLY CHILDHOOD MESSAGES

1. What happens in early childhood matters, not only to individuals, but to all of Alabama.

Supporting Points

- **For Our Children:** By age 5, the architecture of the human brain is 90% developed, and early experiences have literally shaped how the brain is built. Like a home, a strong foundation built in the early years means a higher probability of positive outcomes for our children. A weak foundation increases the odds of difficulties later in life. Adverse experiences—poverty, abuse, neglect—interfere with children’s healthy development and impact their entire lives.
- **For All of Us:** From low education and poor health outcomes to high crime and addiction, the biggest challenges we face in our state connect back to early childhood. The early childhood period dramatically affects education, health, quality of life, and the economy in our state.

2. Early childhood is an opportunity for Alabama.

Supporting Points

- If we invest wisely in children and families, the next generation will pay us back through a lifetime of productivity and responsible citizenship.
- Supporting early childhood means supporting strong families, school readiness, and prosperity for Alabama.

3. Alabama early childhood advocates have come together to develop a plan—a blueprint for strong families, school readiness, and prosperity in our state.

Supporting Points

- 30 organizations have come together as the Alabama Young Child Wellness Council to adopt a common approach to supporting early childhood with three pillars: families and communities, health, and early education.
- We are working together with policymakers, businesses, and service providers to support select programs that can make the biggest difference for Alabama.

4. Alabama voters want their government to support early childhood.

Supporting Points

- A 2018 bipartisan poll of more than 600 register voters in Alabama shows strong and growing support for pre-K across all major demographic and party lines, including men, people in rural areas, older Alabamians, and conservative Republicans. Strong support is there even if it means more taxes and spending.
- Voters support more than just pre-K. More Alabamians than ever see supporting early childhood as a top priority.

5. Alabama has great early childhood programs that are working, but access to them is an urgent problem.

Supporting Points

- The programs supported by the Alabama Young Child Wellness Council are working. For example, Alabama’s First Class Pre-K program has ranked #1 in the nation for quality for 12 consecutive years. Children who go through it have much better language skills, do better in school, and are better at following instructions, keeping to a structured schedule, and respecting authority figures.
- Access to early childhood programs is an urgent problem. Some examples:
 - **Home visiting:** Only 2% of eligible parents in Alabama who want the support of a home visiting program can get it. We must expand grant opportunities for communities to participate.
 - **Pre-K:** Only 28% of our 4-year-olds have access to the First Class Pre-K program. We must fully fund the program.
 - **Child care licensing:** 50% of centers are unlicensed, leaving our children vulnerable at the earliest ages. We must eliminate exemptions.



6. Please support programs that strengthen families, increase health, and ensure quality early education in Alabama.

Supporting Points

- To be effective, supports for children and young families must start well before kindergarten—they must begin before birth.
- The Alabama Young Child Wellness Council has identified the following immediate priorities:
 - **Home Visiting and Family Strengthening Programs**, which are proven to enhance health, reduce abuse and neglect, and improve school readiness, all without an infrastructure investment.
 - **Healthy Child Development Programs**, such as the Help Me Grow program, which supports early health and behavior screening for 28,000 children each year and has a 90% success rate connecting families with service providers, as well as ALL KIDS (Alabama CHIP).
 - **Early Education Programs**, such as First Class Pre-K and inspecting and licensing all child care facilities.

RESPONSES TO COMMON MISCONCEPTIONS

Educating children before they reach kindergarten age is the responsibility of parents, and the state should not get involved or pay for it.

Parents are their children's first and most important teachers, and it is a family's responsibility to raise their children to be successful, healthy adults. However, some parents simply do not know what they can do to help their children succeed. Some parents lack positive examples from their own childhood. Home visiting can provide those examples and help break the cycle of poverty and dependency in Alabama.

Given other budget priorities facing the state right now, Alabama should not add more funding for early childhood programs.

Early childhood programs are some of the most cost-effective approaches we can take to support prosperity in Alabama. From low education and poor health outcomes to high crime and addiction, the biggest challenges we face in our state connect back to early childhood. Consider the cost of building prisons and keeping inmates. We need to invest in success now or pay for failure later.

Most of the problems facing Alabama are because the rates of minority populations are growing.

Poverty is the real issue. People of color are definitely struggling more than ever with poverty, but it is pervasive in Alabama across race and geography. Poverty leads to poor health, inadequate child care, abuse and neglect, low academic achievement, behavioral and emotional problems, and more. Early childhood is the best time to protect against the effects of poverty.

Early childhood programs will take away funding from existing programs and erode the budget for pre-K.

A parent cannot focus on developing just one part of a child. Similarly, we in Alabama cannot focus on just one program. In fact, other early childhood programs enhance the effectiveness of pre-K. The advocacy community agrees on the need to support three pillars: families and communities, health, and early education.

Forcing all child care centers to go through licensing takes away religious freedom.

Licensing is about health and safety, not curriculum or religious beliefs. With uniform licensing, parents are better informed and understand what their children are getting. They get trained staff who understand children's needs and how they can help them grow and develop. They know their children are cared for in a quality environment with health and safety standards that protect them from smoking and other hazards.

