

Part III

What You Can Do



As an individual your voice can be very effective in educating your community and your policy makers about early childhood issues in Iowa. The voice of a passionate, well-informed and watchful constituent goes a long way with legislators. You can provide them with information on topics with which they may not be familiar. You might even introduce them to a different perspective on an issue — a perspective they may not have heard or considered before.

Together, we can make a real difference in the lives of young children and their families in our community. It is up to each of us to become an advocate for children and early childhood issues.

Communicate with parents, community leaders, and legislators to:

- Serve on a Community Empowerment Board in your area
- Apply to serve on the Iowa Empowerment Board
- Advocate for quality child care services
- Link quality programs to child outcomes
- Connect early childhood and economic development
- Advocate for working wages and benefits for early childhood providers
- Volunteer in your child's school
- Run for School Board
- Become a member of the Parent Teacher Association (PTA)
- Volunteer on a Child Care Center's Board of Directors

Following is specific information on how to EDUCATE your community, ADVOCATE on behalf of children and ACTIVATE your community.

Advocacy Efforts from Around the State

A message every adult should read, because children are watching you and doing as you do, not as you say.

When you thought I wasn't looking, I saw you hang my first painting on the refrigerator, and I immediately wanted to paint another one.

When you thought I wasn't looking I saw you feed a stray cat, and I learned that it was good to be kind to animals.

When you thought I wasn't looking, I saw you make my favorite cake for me and I learned that the little things can be the special things in life.

When you thought I wasn't looking I heard you say a prayer, and I knew there is a God I could always talk to and I learned to trust in God.

When you thought I wasn't looking, I saw you make a meal and take it to a friend who was sick, and I learned that we all have to help take care of each other.

When you thought I wasn't looking, I saw you give of your time and money to help people who had nothing and I learned that those who have something should give to those who don't.

When you thought I wasn't looking, I felt you kiss me good night and I felt loved and safe.

When you thought I wasn't looking, I saw you take care of our house and everyone in it and I learned we have to take care of what we are given.

When you thought I wasn't looking, I saw how you handled your responsibilities, even when you didn't feel good and I learned that I would have to be responsible when I grow up.

When you thought I wasn't looking, I saw tears come from your eyes and I learned that sometimes things hurt, but it's all right to cry.

When you thought I wasn't looking, I saw that you cared and I wanted to be everything that I could be.

When you thought I wasn't looking, I learned most of life's lessons that I need to know to be a good person.

When you thought I wasn't looking, I looked at you and wanted to say, "Thanks for all the things I saw when you thought I wasn't looking."

Each of us, parent or friend, influence the life of a child.

Here are some ways in which you can get involved:

The annual **Day on the Hill** on February 4 and 5th, 2003 will provide the kick off for ongoing activities in support of quality early care and education. On February 4, 10 a.m. to 4 p.m. at the Hotel Fort Des Moines, we will be hearing about the issues from two national speakers. Ann Crittenden, an award-winning journalist and author, will discuss the economic impact of quality child care on our society. Kahree Wahid, the state and community liaison for the National Head Start Association Governmental Affairs Division, will give us tips on working with legislators. At 4 p.m., we will be **Raising Voices, Linking Hands for Children** during a candlelight vigil at the Hotel Fort Des Moines.

February 5 will be our **day at the State Capitol**. Through individual discussions with legislators and exhibits about your successful programs and projects, we will be sharing our message. The annual Empowerment Exhibit Fair will be expanded and enhanced to include all early childhood programs and projects across the state. A short briefing at 8:30 a.m. will provide you with the information you will need in your meetings with legislators.

Tuesdays for Tots – Every Tuesday during the legislative session, legislators will hear from their constituents about the importance of making children a priority. The contacts with legislators may be made in person, by phone, by e-mail or through a letter to the editor in your local newspaper. The key is to keep children's issues in front of legislators on a regular basis.

Persons with e-mail addresses may sign up to be part of the e-advocacy part of Tuesdays for Tots. Each week you will receive an e-mail message that we will ask you to send to your legislators on Tuesday. The messages will be short. You may want to add a sentence or two related to the message to personalize your e-mail.

Caravan to the Capitol to March 4th for Children – On Tuesday, March 4, we are asking anyone concerned about the care and education of young children in Iowa to come to the Capitol for a rally and meeting with legislators. The caravans will bring people from around the state to the Capitol. We hope that local media will cover the activities as the caravan travels through the state.

Educate, Advocate and Activate

This is Where the Battle is Won or Lost! When all is said and done, there is absolutely no substitute for the kind of “grassroots” advocacy that educates and activates a legislator’s constituents to action. As we have seen, legislators almost always have an “ear to the ground” when it comes to issues their constituents are concerned with or feel strongly about. One of the primary goals of grassroots advocacy is to increase the level of knowledge about early childhood issues among the people of Iowa and to motivate them to voice their views and opinions to their representatives.

The best way to achieve this is for legislators to hear from children, parents, grandparents, caregivers, and the average voter that your children matter. What follows is a list of effective strategies that can be employed to get the “Children First” message to legislators. All of them are designed to get legislators thinking more about early childhood issues and help them to see that there is broad based constituency support for their proposing good policy initiatives and supporting early childhood development.

Remember: Children can’t vote. It is up to us to stand up for them throughout the year to ensure that their needs are first on legislative agendas!

Voting

Our government was founded on democratic principles; on the idea that everyone has an equal voice, through their votes, in the direction our society takes. Over the years, that right has become more truly universal. African Americans were given the right to vote in 1870 with the passage of the 15th Amendment; women were given the right to vote with the passage of the 19th Amendment in 1920. In 1965, the Voting Rights Act was enacted to overturn decades of racial discrimination; and in 1971, the 26th Amendment gave 18 year olds the right to vote. Additionally, poll taxes, restrictions on property ownership, and other barriers to voting have all melted away over the years. In 1995, the passage of the "Motor Voter" bill made it easier than ever for people to register to vote.

Ironically, although voting has been made possible for more and more people, fewer and fewer Americans are actually exercising that right. In 1994, less than 40% of the voting-age population in the United States actually voted in any election. Compare that figure with democracies in Europe, which consistently have voter turnout rates of 70, 80, or even 90%. As Americans we like to pride ourselves on being part of the world's leading democracy, but that claim becomes a bit hollow in the face of these statistics.

It's easy to forget, with the general level of voter apathy that exists, the importance of voting, and how powerful even a single vote can be. For example, did you know:

- In 1776, one vote gave America the English language instead of German.
- In 1845, one vote saved Andrew Johnson from impeachment.
- In 1876, one vote gave Rutherford B. Hayes the Presidency of the United States.
- In 1923, one vote gave Adolf Hitler the leadership of the Nazi Party.

Our votes can and do change our history. They have consequences we may not have ever imagined. And as long as many people who could vote don't, many possibilities will remain unrealized.

Light Your Candle

So many people feel so overwhelmed and disempowered by the stresses of modern life that they convince themselves they can't make a difference. So they don't even try. They bury their talents in the ground and let their spirits wither on the vine of life. I hope they will bestir themselves at least to say every day as an anonymous old man did: "I don't have the answers, life is not easy, but my heart is in the right place."

It is so important not to let ourselves off the hook or to become apathetic or cynical by telling ourselves that nothing works or makes a difference. Every day, light your small candle. Tutor or mentor or speak to or smile at that one child – your own or one you teach or serve in some way. Every election, take the time to vote for leaders who put children first and against those who don't. Every month decide to write a letter to the editor and to your representatives about a need children have in your community.

The inaction and actions of many human beings over a long time contributed to the crises our children face, and it is the action and struggle of many human beings over time that will solve them. So every day, light your small candle. It just might be the one that sparks the movement to save our children's and nation's future.

Adapted from the writings of Marian Wright Edelman, Founder of the Children's Defense Fund

- It helps people who have traditionally avoided participation in the government understand how they can really have an impact on systems and processes that they have always seen as being outside of their lives. And because of this...
- Registering to vote and exercising that right can be both educational and self-esteem-building for people who have felt powerless for a very long time.

What Can I Do?

Start a Letter Writing or Postcard Campaign
(see appendix for a sample letter and specifics on a Take Five postcard campaign)

Encourage parents, children, members of your community to write a note about how a particular program has helped them and send it to your elected officials.

- Create and circulate a list of the addresses, fax and phone numbers and email addresses of local legislators.
- Distribute this list to early childhood advocates, child care centers and faith-based organizations and other congregations that care about children.

Letterwriting Tips:

- Use stationary if possible. Typed letters are easier to read than ones that are handwritten but a clear, easy to read hand written letter is more personal.
- Make sure that a return address is included in the letter.
- Be sure to identify yourself, your place of residence, and the particular issue or bill you are interested in.
- Be specific, factual, and state the evidence for your position.
- Refer to bills by name, number, and its status if you can. State clearly your position and what you expect the legislator to do.
- The letter should be no more than one typewritten page in length.

Effective Activities for Advocates

Find out who represents you

To find out who your House and Senate representatives are, visit www.legis.state.ia.us. At the home page, scroll about halfway down the page to the heading, "Legislators". Click on "Find Your Legislators" that is listed under the heading Legislators. You will be asked for your address including zip code. This will give you both your federal legislators and your state legislators names and contact information.

Contact Your Legislators

It is very important to be in regular contact with your legislators and their staff. Regular communication with them will make them more responsive to your requests. If you have not done so already, contact your legislators and introduce yourself. Do not overlook the staff. Be sure to provide staff with information on how to contact you, including your full name and address.

Telephone your Legislator

Sometimes, a well-timed phone call to your legislator can make all the difference. Be sure to list the points you want to make before you call. When you call, state your name, where you live, your position, and ask to speak with your legislator. (Again, it helps tremendously to have already cultivated a relationship with the individual.) If you are able to speak with the legislator, try to be brief and to the point. Don't forget to thank the legislator for their time. If the legislator is unavailable, ask to leave a message with the clerk. Make sure you leave the bill number you are interested in and state your support or opposition to it before you hang up.

Send a Fax

Follow the same guidelines as given for letter writing. Be sure to include your name and address. State your point in a brief, concise manner and be clear about what action you want.

Meet with your Legislators

- Make an appointment ahead of time. Legislators are busy people with many demands on their time. If you show up at their offices unannounced you are likely to find them not in or unavailable. You also want to avoid the situation where a legislator tries to fit you into an already packed schedule. If you can't make an appointment ahead of time, go to the legislator's office and speak to his or her assistant. Tell them who you are and ask if there is any possibility of meeting with the legislator at some point later in the day.
- Designate a spokesperson.
- Have your notes ready.
- Make your case as clearly as possible, tell the legislator why you are interested in the issue and state clearly what you expect him or her to do.
- Thank the legislator for his or her time.
- Write a short letter thanking the legislator for their time and willingness to listen to you. A follow up letter also provides you with the opportunity to reiterate your position.

Candidate and Business Leadership Pledges

- Generate a mailing list of legislators, business leaders, and members of the Chamber of Commerce.
- Draft a pledge that promises support for early childhood initiatives in general or for a particular initiative.
- Accompany each pledge with a cover letter that explains who you are, the purpose of the pledge and whether or how it will be shared with the public.
- Ask the legislator or business leader to sign the pledge.
- Publicize the existence of the pledge and encourage voters to ask legislators if they have signed it.

Advertise Your Program's or Initiative's Support and Successes

There are many effective things you can do to let people know how much your program or initiative helps children and parents in your community. There are many children and parents who benefit from your program or initiative's efforts and do not even realize it. Below is a list of the steps to take.

- Reach out to parents making use of your program or initiative. Ask them to contact their legislators and let them know what your efforts means to them.
- If possible, find parents who are currently working because they were able – through your initiative's support - to have child care. Ask these parents to write or contact their legislators to let them know their views.
- Document success stories and send them as human interest or community news items to your local newspaper, television, or radio station.

Engage Legislators

It is important to send legislators written invitations to any and all events. Even if they can't attend, the message will get across that early childhood issues are prominent on the public agenda. Below is a list of steps to take.

- Ask your state representatives to attend the opening of new child care facilities. Ask them to say a few words on the subject, or on the issue of child care in general.
- Organize a forum on child care issues in your county. Ask prominent early childhood activists and business leaders, parents, child care providers and state representatives to participate. The forum can be advertised in community bulletin boards on local newspapers, radio and television stations. Topics can include:
 - Quality child care availability and affordability
 - The state of children in your community
 - The impact of child care on quality of life issues.

- Child care affordability and availability as an issue in attracting and retaining businesses and economic investment.
- The importance of attracting and retaining child care workers and the importance of consistent, on-going relationships to the well being of children.

Invite legislators and neighbors to an informal “coffee and conversation” at your home. Tell the legislator the gathering is an opportunity for him or her to get to know constituents and that you are interested in hearing their views on early childhood issues.

Show Off!

Ask your state representatives, business and faith leaders to visit your center, home or program. Organizing an open house or tour is public awareness and advocacy initiative that moves community leaders, elected officials, clergy, and other community members out of their offices, boardrooms and legislative chambers and into the real world of children and families. By visiting sites throughout your community, the tour personalizes children and moves local leaders to action.

Involve the Faith Community

Don't overlook the faith community and your own congregation. Places of worship have always made a difference in the lives of children and families. Traditionally, many have offered youth community choirs, church sports teams, hiking and camping youth groups, as well as parent support groups. But increasingly, they're doing more and places of worship house almost 1/3 of child-care programs today.

Faith Communities Can Support Children

Educate congregations through worship bulletin inserts

- Organize a Children's Sabbath – the 11th annual Children's Sabbath will be held the third weekend in October 2002. On the Children's Sabbath, religious congregations hold special worship services, religious education programs, and congregational activities inspiring people of faith to respond to children's needs. It encourages a long-term commitment to help children and families through prayer, education, service, and advocacy. Please visit www.childrensdefense.org for more information.
- Organize forums on early childhood issues facing your community from a faith community perspective.
 - Sponsor training sessions for congregations that address their social outreach ministry needs.
 - Provide an effective vehicle to educate and involve congregations in public policy issues.
- Create a church-sponsored family-support center providing child care, family social activities, and resources.
- Provide child care so parents can attend services. Care can be extended into the morning, freeing parents for a quiet breakfast together. Some churches offer Parents' Morning Out programs one morning during the week.
- Support church-based and community-based programs for young fathers and single mothers.
- Reach out to parents and children beyond your neighborhoods by teaming up with suburban or inner-city congregations to sponsor programs and offer resources.
- Offer quality child care and preschool programs.
 - Enlist older members of the congregation to share their talents and services with young parents and children.
 - Organize a Community Covenant for Children.

Additional Outreach Ideas

Community, religious and business leaders:

- Develop local key contact list.
- Keep key contacts informed of upcoming events and recent accomplishments.
- Host forums, coffee hours, focus groups.
- Place information in local business/chamber publications.
- Partner in events

Legislators

- Schedule an open house or visit with your legislator
- Make one-on-one contact with business/civic champions
- Send periodic mailings when appropriate
- Leave behind reminders of your visit

Media

- Identify the reports/contacts covering early childhood issues.
- Organize media tours of your organization.
- Keep a flow of information to media, but do not become a burden
- Only send newsworthy information. Avoid “fluff.”

Child Advocates, Child Care Directors and Nonprofits

- Keep contacts informed about upcoming events and recent accomplishments
- Ask to be included in newsletters
- Send periodic mailing when appropriate.

General Public

- Develop local speaker’s bureau to promote your topics
- Participate in community fairs or special events
- Share success stories through the media
- Host Open Houses.
- Ask others to share your information on their website or offer a link to your website.