



background

Report # 133

Public Perceptions Of Children

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Shaping the public image of children New strategies focus on promoting accuracy and hope

How the public perceives children, their circumstances, characteristics and conditions is not a trivial matter. Such perceptions can influence public policy, for example, and can be particularly important in times of economic stress, when public spending tends to come under greater scrutiny.

As studies shed light on how communication methods affect public perception, researchers are exploring new strategies focused not only on promoting an accurate understanding of children and issues important to their well-being, but also on inspiring hope, and reporting positive developments and progress made toward improving their conditions.

Recent research suggests that investigating such strategies has merit.

For example, a growing body of evidence reports that the public generally perceives the rates of teen pregnancy, drug use, school dropout and juvenile crime to be greater than what statistical evidence shows them to be. At the same time, studies suggest that public awareness of positive youth-related activities, such as participation in volunteer services, tends to be low.

Findings such as these raise questions about the effectiveness of how children's issues are most often communicated, including the reliance on often-dire statistics and dramatic anecdotes of children enduring hardship.

"To me, it's an argument against using more big numbers and trends and creating a crisis," said Junlei Li, Ph.D, of the University of Pittsburgh Office of Child Development (OCD) Division of Applied Research and Evaluation. "I think this continuous

effort to create crises using numbers or very sad stories is counterproductive. Crisis doesn't surprise people. It just adds to this false impression that most things related to children are getting worse and there is nothing you can do to make them better."

OCD and several partners are developing communication strategies for child-related issues as part of the project, Something Worth Giving. The idea is to create a standing, cohesive and effective communications strategy for western Pennsylvania to promote a better understanding of children's issues, and mobilize support and volunteers around those issues as the need arises.

Working with OCD are Carnegie Mellon University faculty, Saturday Light Brigade, Pittsburgh Cares, and other partners. The Grable Foundation provided the initial seed grant and a grant to continue the initiative.

Perception and Policy

Studies published over the past two decades suggest that news media reports, in particular, have contributed to public perceptions of children, their conditions and behaviors that are largely negative and often disconnected from what the statistical evidence shows.

Public perception can influence public policy and investment in children.

Several sources contribute to shaping public perceptions of the condition of children, including the news media, government, universities and research organizations, child advocacy groups, religious and community leaders and personal experiences. The news media and personal experiences were the leading sources cited in a recent national study as informing their perceptions of children.

Each source has shortcomings. Personal experiences, for instance, are likely shaped by anecdotal rather than empirical evidence. And news media accounts tend to ignore the positive and focus on the negative aspects of children and youth.

Studies report that major newspapers do not frequently cover topics related to child well-being. But when

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news organizations do report on children, the children are often portrayed as tragic and the stories largely focus on their involvement in negative activities and events.

Nearly 95% of child-related stories reported on television and in print focus on crime and violence, according to a Casey Journalism Center on Children and Families survey of national news coverage of child-related issues.

Studies conducted over the past two decades suggest that such sources of information have contributed to public perceptions of children, their conditions and behaviors that are largely negative and often disconnected from statistical evidence.

In one study, nearly two-thirds of the respondents said school drop-out rates had increased when, according to statistical evidence, the rates had been declining.

Another study, which looked at public misconceptions about trends in teen pregnancy and sexual activity, found that most adults were unaware that most sexually active teens report using birth control, that teen pregnancy rates declined since the 1990s and that teenagers account for only a small portion of all unintended pregnancies.

Flawed Strategies

The news media, advocacy organizations and others have long relied on strategies for reporting on children that research suggests are ineffective in promoting accurate understanding of important issues. Among the most common strategies are the use of statistics and the use of anecdotes. Both are often used to convey a crisis.

Anecdotes depicting individual hardships, such as living in poverty, are often used to present an issue in human terms. But research suggests

that rather than promoting empathy, such anecdotes can reinforce the perception that those depicted have some measure of control over their circumstances and are responsible for the hardships they are shown to endure.

Researchers also report that when a problem such as poverty is perceived as individually caused, people are less likely to state a desire to help the poor.

Using statistics also has shortcomings, particularly when they are used with little or no interpretation.

The public has a high rate of statistical illiteracy, as do many professionals whose jobs involve interpreting or reporting statistical information. A study of medical literature, for instance, found high levels of statistical illiteracy were found among doctors.

New Platforms Explored

OCD and its partners in the Something Worth Giving project have investigated how the public receives information about children and is developing a new communication platform to educate the public about issues important to children, youth,

and families and mobilize support around those issues without resorting to traditional crisis-oriented strategies.

Research provides some suggestions for more effectively using elements such as statistics and anecdotes.

Statistics, for example, have more meaning when interpretation is provided and numbers are blended with the narrative rather than presented alone without the context necessary to understand their significance.

As Something Worth Giving moves forward, another consideration is changing the tone of the messages that flow from the new communications platform – shifting away from relying on the “imperiled child” framework that has been a staple of the reporting on children’s conditions.

“What we need is an alternative,” said Dr. Li. “Is there a way to tell uplifting, hopeful, positive stories that could educate people about the needs, but also educate people about the possibility of things getting better?”



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