

Investing in Infants and Toddlers: Effective Messaging for Business Leaders

Insights from focus groups with ReadyNation members



Acknowledgements

Council for a Strong America is a national, bipartisan nonprofit that unites five organizations comprised of law enforcement leaders, retired admirals and generals, business executives, faith leaders, and prominent coaches and athletes who promote solutions that ensure our next generation of Americans will be successful, productive members of society.

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Business executives building a skilled workforce by promoting solutions that prepare children to succeed in education, work, and life

Supported by tax-deductible contributions from foundations, individuals, and corporations.

Major funder: Pritzker Children's Initiative

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October 2021

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Overview and Purpose

ReadyNation is a national, bipartisan business leader network of current and former executives focused on strengthening workforce development and the economy through the promotion of smart investments in America's children and youth.

ReadyNation leaders commissioned the Prenatal-to-3 Policy Impact Center, led by Cynthia Osborne, to conduct two focus groups with ReadyNation members. The purpose was to determine key messages that resonate with business leaders regarding the importance of investing in early childhood, particularly infants and toddlers. ReadyNation will use these messages internally to provide members with talking points to communicate with other stakeholders. ReadyNation will also share the messages with early childhood advocates to help their messages resonate with the business community.

Focus Group Findings

ReadyNation members identified two major challenges that the business community faces—**remaining globally competitive and retaining skilled workers—and discussed how early childhood investments, particularly those focused on infants and toddlers, can help to resolve these challenges.** Each challenge and the respective messages regarding solutions are outlined below.

Challenge #1: Businesses need a talented workforce to maintain global competitiveness, but the U.S. is falling behind.

Why invest in early childhood?

The issue of competitiveness was a key theme of focus group participants. They shared a sense of urgency that the U.S. is falling behind its European and Asian business

competitors, and that the current and entering workforce is not well-prepared to meet the needs of businesses across industry sectors

“We are falling behind and cannot remain globally competitive, unless we invest in our workforce.”

ReadyNation business leaders discussed five messages that build on one another, as to why investing in early childhood, particularly infants and toddlers, will help the U.S. maintain a globally competitive workforce.

Message #1

The science is unequivocal—early experiences set the stage for all subsequent health, educational, and social outcomes. Chronic exposure to early adversity impacts the developing brain and body and can have long-term consequences for children and society.

The science on early childhood development motivated focus group participants. Most participants came to understand the impact of stress on the developing brain and body. Participants noted that pictures that reveal the neurological damage that occurs to brains when children are neglected helped to educate them on the urgency of investing in the birth-to-3-year period.

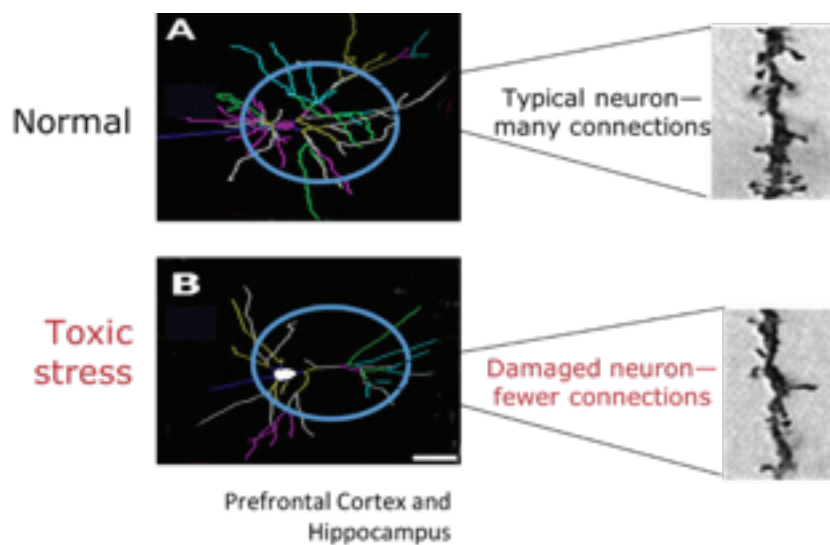
Below is an example of a commonly used image that illustrates early brain development.

An understanding of early childhood development, particularly the role that stress and adversity play on early brain development and body systems, can help to motivate business leaders to support investments in infants and toddlers.

Message #2:

We have the answers, we know what works, and there are consequences of inaction.

Rigorous evidence demonstrates the substantial impact that many early childhood programs and policies have on improving children's short- and long-term outcomes.



Source: Radley, et al. (2004)

Most participants were familiar with the evidence of the impact that high-quality child care has on school readiness, educational outcomes, and employment. But, other business leaders also spoke about the effectiveness of home visiting programs and other interventions that improve both opportunities and outcomes.

ReadyNation business leaders observed that using evidence to guide policy choices is the right approach, but the empirical evidence needs to be supplemented with anecdotal stories and made specific to the local context in order to connect with many business leaders and politicians. They recommended creating case studies of successful businesses or communities that have effectively served infants, toddlers, and families and consequently improved educational and workforce outcomes. The business leaders also noted the importance of discussing the immediate and longer-term impacts of early childhood investments; and that the short-term impacts are particularly important for political leaders who face biannual election cycles.

Message #3

Early childhood is the absolute best investment society can make. The return on investment is substantial, both in the short and longer term.

Return on investment (ROI) is the theme that resonated most with the ReadyNation business leaders. Most participants were familiar with the studies on the ROI of high-quality child care and pre-K, but some also discussed the ROI of home visiting programs.

Notably, the focus group participants flagged the need to go beyond talking about cost avoidance in ROI conversations, and discuss how investing in infants and toddlers will lead to other important business outcomes,

such as increased productivity, innovation, a more skilled workforce, higher worker retention, and stronger global competitiveness.

Again, the business leaders noted that it is imperative to discuss shorter-term benefits and ROI when speaking with politicians. It is similarly important to make clear, where possible, how investments in early childhood will directly affect business leaders; for example, an \$X investment in child care will lead to an increase of Y in productivity.

Message #4

Failing to invest in children when they are young will be costly to society over the long term. We either pay now or we pay later.

Another important takeaway from the focus groups was in regard to the tradeoffs of either investing in children in their earliest years, or needing to spend more on subsequent societal costs (such as prison, health care, or social services). The quote below illustrates this message well:

 ***We can't miss our window of opportunity. Interventions are more expensive and less effective in later years. So, we invest early because it is harder and more costly later on."***

Message #5

Children are the future leaders and wealth builders of society. Investing in the earliest years is smart from a fiscal perspective and right from a moral perspective.


ReadyNation business leaders discussed that supporting investments in early childhood is driven by the head and the heart. They recognize that many children don't have the support systems they need and face hurdles to success. In addition to direct programs to support infants and toddlers, participants discussed the need to empower parents to care for their children, through programs and resources to enhance their parenting skills.

Among the business leaders, there was a general consensus that our children are our future workforce, parents, and community leaders. Ensuring that these children develop into productive adults requires investments in the earliest years; business leaders can talk authentically about how this investment will be good for businesses and society, in addition to it being the smart thing to do.

**Challenge #2:
Businesses need to attract and retain a high-quality workforce today, but there are shortages of qualified workers. Parents, especially mothers, are struggling to pay for child care, and they cannot work without it.**

Why invest in early childhood?

In addition to a concern about building the workforce of tomorrow to remain globally competitive, ReadyNation business leaders discussed the challenges that many businesses are facing today regarding talent attraction and retention. They noted that a lack of affordable child care, particularly for infants and toddlers, is a

 **It's a challenge for us to get people to come to work. Not because they are not interested. It's because the cost of child care is more than they can make working."**

huge reason that many parents, particularly mothers, are struggling to enter or remain in the workforce. They also pointed out that this absence is hurting businesses. Although the business leaders did not discuss this problem as much as they discussed building a competitive workforce, focus group participants shared three key interrelated messages on the importance of supporting investments in early childhood to retain a strong workforce today.

Message #1

Child care is essential to enable parents, particularly mothers, to work, but high-quality, affordable child care is in short supply.

Several participants discussed the challenges of keeping workers because of a lack of affordable child care. The pandemic has exacerbated this challenge, but the lack of affordable care predated the pandemic. The business leaders noted that some companies use child care as a way to recruit workers, but that most businesses are not able to offer child care on site, and, therefore, government support is needed.

Message #2

High-quality child care helps parents today and improves the workforce of tomorrow.

Given the link between high-quality child care and better outcomes for children in the short and long term, many ReadyNation business leaders discussed child care as a two-generation issue; quality and affordable care allows parents to work today and it

helps children become more productive workers tomorrow.

Message #3

Reduce the financial and emotional stress of your workforce, and your workforce will be stronger.

Finally, participants discussed the importance of reducing stressors that workers experience so that they are able to be more productive.

Conclusion

The ReadyNation business leaders who participated in the two focus groups identified key messages that they use to persuade other stakeholders as to the importance of early childhood investments, particularly those targeted at infants and toddlers. In such conversations, they begin by articulating the problem or challenge that their business is facing, then make specific arguments as to how investing in our youngest learners will help to resolve the challenges.

In particular, business leaders are concerned about remaining globally competitive and identified the importance of building a skilled workforce. They are motivated by the brain science that illustrates how important the prenatal-to-3 period is to healthy development, but they are equally motivated by the evidence that investments work and pay off in the short and long term. Although their motivations to support investments in early childhood may be largely pragmatic, they also recognize that these early investments are good for children and society.

ReadyNation can help to support their business leaders by continuing to educate them on the science of the developing child, introducing them to the evidence of policies and programs that work, and developing case studies of local businesses or communities that provide examples of success. ReadyNation members are well-positioned as unexpected messengers to promote solutions that help young children succeed, as well as contribute to a strong current and future workforce.

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