

Child Abuse and Neglect Prevention: Getting Your Message Out Through the Media

August 2000

By the National Clearinghouse on Child Abuse and Neglect Information, a service of the National Center on Child Abuse and Neglect, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services

While many consider the media fearsome adversaries, they can be powerful allies if approached strategically. Carefully considering your answers to the following questions will help you build a strategy for working with media professionals to get your message out to the people you want to reach.

Why do you want media attention?

Your organization's goals will point you to the most appropriate media strategies. Do you want to build awareness of your program within the community? Promote a particular attitude or behavior? Advocate for policy change? The answers to these questions will shape whom you want to reach with your message and which media outlets you target. Parents of young children probably have very different viewing and reading habits than State legislators.

What is your "news?"

Often, what we consider newsworthy and exciting in our own programs would make a reporter yawn. The news media have their own criteria for judging what is worth covering, so to get their attention you will need to frame the issue in an appealing way. Try to find a current news issue, event, or annual celebration that you can use as a "peg" for your story. For example, if the media bring attention to a case of child maltreatment in your community, use this as an opportunity to talk about preventing child abuse. Provide a local angle to national news stories, such as a family in jeopardy because Congress may cut funding for your program. The media like stories with conflict, human interest, novelty, or superlatives (biggest, best, etc.).

What type of media coverage do you want?

The term "media" refers to many different types of entities-radio, television, newspapers, magazines-that vary extensively within each category. Each of these channels provides different opportunities to reach particular audiences with a specific type of message. If you want to ensure that your message is stated in the best possible way, you may consider submitting an opinion editorial (op-ed) stating your position on an issue to the newspaper, writing a letter to the editor, or creating a public service announcement (PSA). A news format provides greater credibility and exposure, but you will have less control over the content and slant of the story.

Whom will you contact in the media?

The key to implementing your media strategy is getting your information to the right people at the right places. Your public library should have media reference books listing the media outlets in your area, such as television and radio stations, daily and weekly newspapers, college newspapers, regional magazines, and news wire services. Call each outlet to find out who covers children and family issues, health and welfare, violence, or other topics of interest to your program. Ask about deadlines, audience demographics, preferences for receiving information (e.g., phone, fax, or mail), options for submitting opinion pieces, and other special formats, such as community calendars, that you can use.

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How will you contact the media?

Once you have identified your media contacts, start to establish beneficial working relationships with them before you need to pitch them a story. Write to reporters or producers who cover your issues to give them reactions to their stories and provide them with an information packet on your organization for future reference. When you have news or an event to promote, send out a press release or news advisory containing the most important information to your media list. Follow up with a phone call as close to the event as possible. Most news organizations work under tight timeframes, so ask if the person is on deadline before going into your pitch. Be ready to follow up with additional information, and be enthusiastic about the topic as you explain why it is newsworthy.

What do you have to offer?

Keep in mind that the news media need people like you to help them fill column-inches and airtime. You know the topic, you have ideas for interesting stories, and you have access to the people the stories are about. Succinct information, such as fact sheets and backgrounders, will help the reporter quickly understand the issue. The more "pieces" of the story you can provide—real people affected by the issues, experts, copies of relevant studies—the more likely it will be covered. If you want television coverage, make sure you have visuals to offer, such as children playing at a family support center, a counselor speaking with parents, or other compelling action shots.

How will you respond when the media call you?

Even if you do not actively seek them out, the media may come to you for information or your reaction to a news story. When this happens, do not panic! Designate a contact within your organization who is comfortable talking to the media and has the authority to speak for the organization. Always be honest, and if you don't know the answer to a question, say so. Find out the reporter's deadline and either call back with the answer or make a referral to other sources who could speak on that point. Speak in plain English, without jargon or acronyms, and repeat your main message in different ways. Avoid mumbling or speaking too fast when talking to media that will edit tape for "sound bites." Once you establish yourself as a credible, reliable source, the media will continue to come to you on related stories and will be more receptive to your own story ideas.

Which media strategies can your available resources support?

Although getting news coverage is often thought of as free publicity, those press conferences, news releases, and slick media kits aren't cheap! The resources and effort your staff puts in makes it "earned media" rather than free. But when you compare the price of these activities to that of a mass media campaign and/or buying airtime or advertising space, pitching stories seems like a bargain. Of course, there is a time and place for investing in such a campaign if you have the resources; when done well, you can reach large numbers of people in your target audience with your carefully crafted message. Make sure, in any case, that your organization has the capacity to respond if your chosen strategy is successful. If you are promoting a phone number to order a brochure or to speak with a counselor, for example, be prepared with adequate phone lines and a large supply of brochures.

What other sources of free publicity are available in your community?

Your community may have many media resources available to organizations like yours free of charge. Many cable companies provide free production facilities and airtime on their public access channel; for very little expense, your organization could develop programs on various topics. Local radio and television talk shows often look for guests with interesting stories or strong

opinions on community issues. Public transit systems often offer free public service advertising space on their buses or subways. Television stations may be willing to work with your organization to create and air an ongoing campaign, giving your message better exposure than if you had sent your own public service announcements. Businesses might co-sponsor your campaign, supermarkets could place your message on their grocery bags, fast food restaurants could put your design on their placemats. Be creative and don't be afraid to ask for what you want...the worst they can say is "no" and more likely it will be "yes."

How will you know if you've been effective?

Look back at your chosen media strategies. Did you achieve the goals and objectives you laid out? You can track the number of media "hits," or responses to your pitches, using clippings bureaus. These companies scan metropolitan and local community newspapers, television and radio news, and news wire services to provide you with clippings or transcripts of all stories mentioning your organization, a specific event, or topics of interest. If your goal was to increase the number of clients signing up for a program, look at enrollment before and after your media activities. If you wanted to increase community awareness of an issue, conduct a before-and-after survey to evaluate your campaign. Have the media come to rely on you as a trusted source? Has the level of attention to your issues heightened in the media since you began your efforts? You may be successful on many different levels, so be sure to identify all your accomplishments. Use each encounter with the media as a learning experience for the future.

Here are some suggested methods for reaching your audience through the media:

Links in the Media Outreach Chain

Media Outlets:

- **Television stations** - news, talk shows, entertainment, paid advertising, editorials, public service advertising
- **Radio stations** - news, talk shows, paid advertising, editorials, public service advertising
- **Magazines** - feature stories, advice columns, public service advertising
- **Newspapers** - news, features, letters to the editor, editorials, op-ed page, community calendar, paid advertising
- **Public transit systems** - bus and subway placards, bus shelter ads
- **Billboard providers** - public service advertising

Potential Campaign Partners:

- Media outlets
- Stores and businesses
- Schools/PTAs
- Children's organizations
- Hospitals
- Religious organizations
- Local utility companies
- Service clubs
- Local social service agencies
- Police/fire departments

Media Outreach Ideas

- Hold a press conference to announce the results of new research conducted by your organization, to provide a local angle to a national story, or to unveil a new public service campaign. But make sure you have real news.
- Invite representatives from local media outlets to a breakfast featuring a variety of speakers to help them understand and learn about child maltreatment.
- Ask a local supermarket chain to print information on child abuse prevention on their grocery bags, stuff flyers with parenting tips into shopping bags, or put up posters in their stores.
- Approach local sports stadiums and arenas to place a child abuse prevention message on their scoreboard/video screens.
- Create educational envelope stuffers for large employers in your area to include with paychecks or for utility companies to send out with their bills.
- Use communications or graphic arts students from a local college to assist you in designing campaign materials as a class project or for nominal payment.
- Develop a cable television program on parenting using public access production facilities. This could include dramatized skits, a talk show format with interesting guests, or presentations of relevant videos developed by other organizations.
- Contact producers of local talk radio shows with an advisory telling them about your issue with a description of an expert who is available to talk. Include a contact number and be prepared to make follow-up calls.