

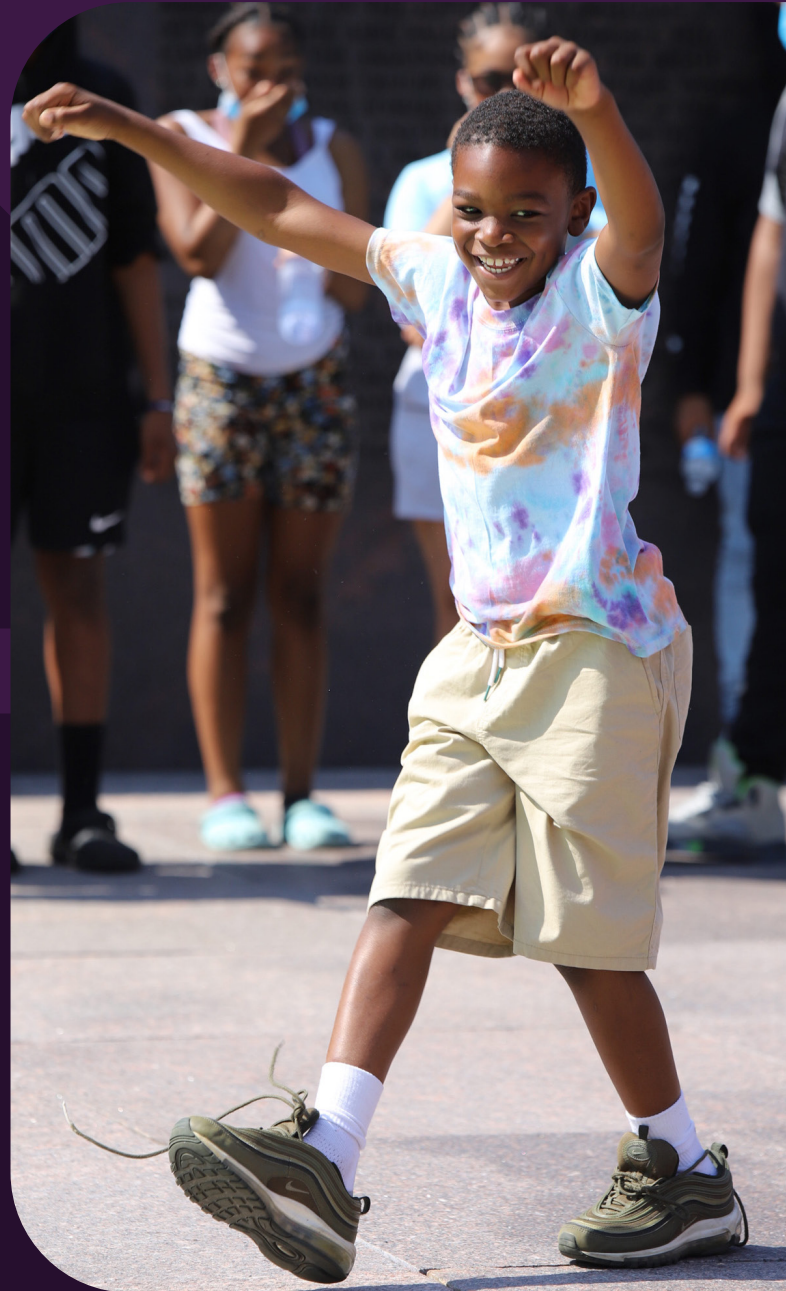


**children's
defense fund**
unleashing the joy in growing up

Narrative Guide

to Promote Youth
Well-Being

2024



Acknowledgements

Children’s Defense Fund (CDF) and its partners envision a nation where marginalized children flourish, leaders prioritize children’s and youth’s well-being, and communities wield their power to ensure young people thrive. Achieving these goals requires changing hearts and minds — not just policy — so that the deeply held world views dictating how we make decisions and treat each other reflect our values. To do this, we must operate in frames of abundance, rather than scarcity; we must reckon with how we got here and dream about where we can go, rather than accepting the status quo as inevitable. This work will build a stronger movement for all children, youth and families, and for a new narrative power to take form.



CDF commissioned Spitfire Strategies to develop this narrative guide to help advocates advance a new narrative of safety, joy, and care for children and youth — the elements required for well-being. The guidance herein builds upon the avid and fierce efforts of people and organizations fighting to promote and advance youth well-being in communities and neighborhoods across the country.

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Through this guide, we hope to provide framing, language, and guidance that will help you and your organization reach your priority audiences and inspire them to share your vision for a world where all children and young people thrive.

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Introduction

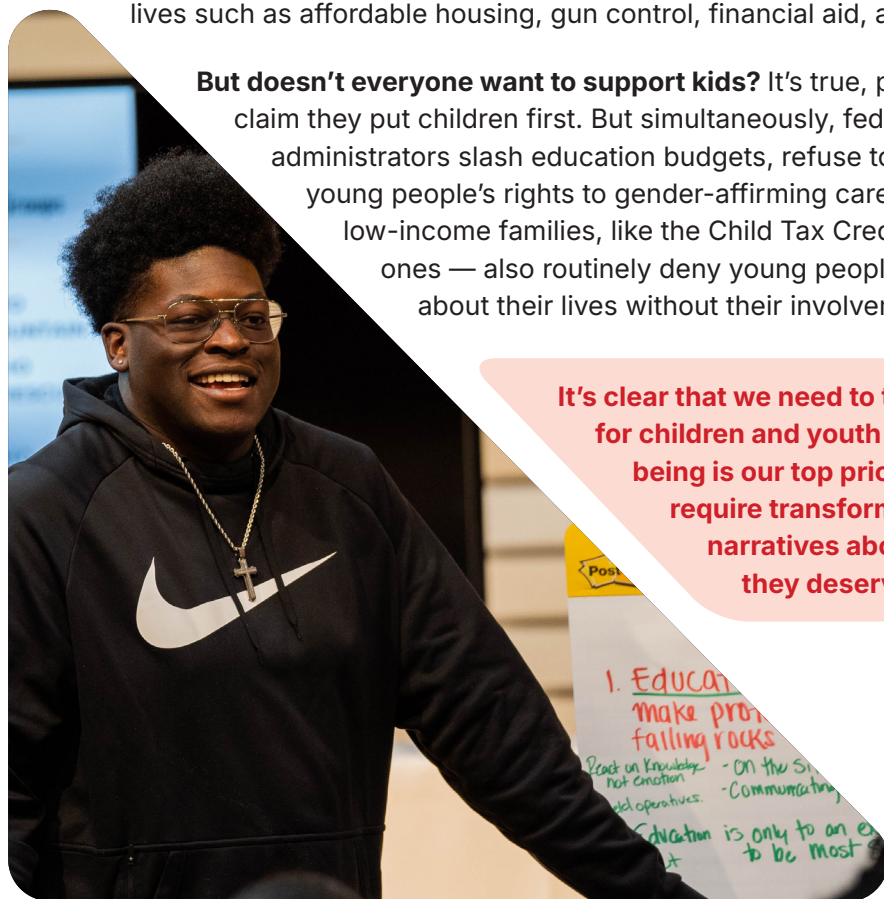
No matter where they live, the color of their skin, or who they love, all children deserve a happy and healthy childhood. They shouldn't have to worry about whether they're safe to be themselves, their parents can make ends meet, or that they will get hassled by the police on their way home from school. As they grow, young people should have the support they need to succeed at school, make friends, and dream big about the future.

However, the majority of our current policies and programs for children, youth, and their families aren't focused on well-being. Instead, they're mired by scarcity and distrust, and promote a one-size-fits all approach to growing up. The United States ranks low on nearly every indicator of youth well-being — from carbon emissions that will prevent kids from having a healthy and sustainable future to health care access and quality education. While child poverty decreased during COVID-19 because of investments in safety net programs, it is on the rise again. When adjusting for race and ethnicity, the gap grows even wider. [In 2019, 30.6% of Black children and 29.8% of Indigenous children in the U.S. lived in poverty as compared to 10.2% of white children.](#)

Much of the existing programs and provisions for children, youth, and families are rooted in this country's long history of racism and the marginalization of Black and brown people. Tropes like the [Welfare Queen](#), the criminality of young Black men, or the adultification of young Black girls all continue to influence beliefs about what many children, young people, and their families deserve. Our systems set up Black and brown children and their families to have just enough, while white, wealthy children and their families get what they need to get ahead and stay ahead. This not only affects what are widely considered "children's issues" like education and paid family leave, but a whole range of issues that impact children and young people's lives such as affordable housing, gun control, financial aid, and climate change.

But doesn't everyone want to support kids? It's true, people across the political spectrum claim they put children first. But simultaneously, federal, state, and local politicians and administrators slash education budgets, refuse to pass commonsense gun laws, restrict young people's rights to gender-affirming care, and fail to protect critical programs for low-income families, like the Child Tax Credit. Policymakers — even well-meaning ones — also routinely deny young people their agency by making decisions about their lives without their involvement.

It's clear that we need to transform policies and programs for children and youth in this country so that youth well-being is our top priority, not just nice to have. This will require transforming not just policy, but also harmful narratives about children and youth and what they deserve.



Harmful narratives about children and youth, and who deserves care and support, are deeply ingrained in our society, and they influence everything from how we treat our neighbors to what public policies we support. We can — and must — change the words we use and the stories we tell to challenge narratives that harm our communities and rob kids and young people of fulfilling childhoods and futures.

Terms to know

Stories — the language within them and the ideas they convey — are part of larger communication systems, which connect to, and reinforce our shared values and identity. These systems include frames and narratives, all working together to set the terms of an issue and loading each story and messaging with meaning and context.

Frames are mental structures that share the way we see the world and can set the terms for how an issue is understood. Think: Individualism.

Narratives are the deeper stories that surround these issues; they are shortcuts for how to explain the world and the myths that define us. Think: The American Dream.



Framing the Narrative



For this guidance, we focused on three primary frames that shape dominant narratives about young people: **deservedness, protection, and autonomy.**

Spitfire selected these frames after research that included analyses of national news coverage, social media conversations, and the narrative landscape surrounding youth well-being from October 2022 through April 2024. We also spoke to CDF's partners and child advocates across issues areas. During these discussions, partners shared opportunities and challenges from their work, and through those discussions, Spitfire identified a set of themes related to communication needs, advocacy and legislative priorities, opportunities for further collaboration among groups, and an aligned vision to prioritize youth well-being.

Criteria for youth well-being narratives:

- ✓ Challenging narratives and prevailing assumptions about who does and doesn't deserve support, respect, and dignity. This includes children and young people, but also their parents or caregivers.
- ✓ Replacing antiquated ideas about "protecting" children and youth with programs and initiatives that promote physical and emotional safety while recognizing young people's agency.
- ✓ Promoting the idea that it is our collective responsibility to care for children and young people.
- ✓ Promoting the idea that childhood is innately valuable, not just a stepping stone for what a child will become later on in life.

We will know we've been successful when:

- ✓ Young people feel safe, experience joy, and get the care they need to thrive.
- ✓ More adults feel responsible for the collective support of young people and expand the issues they consider as youth issues.
- ✓ Liberal and moderate lawmakers champion pro-children and youth policies and block policies that stifle progress.

Frames

The following frames are dominant frames in our public discourse. While these frames affect young people differently at different ages they color and influence all discussions of education, children's health, food assistance, juvenile justice, and more.

Individual responsibility and deservedness vs. collective responsibility

Current narrative

X

The only people who deserve a fulfilling life and public support are those who work hard enough, follow the rules, and don't let anything get in their way. Children — especially young children — living in poverty deserve our help because they're innocent, but the adults are a different story. Their circumstance is the result of their choices and work ethic. Even if someone got dealt a bad hand in life, it is up to them to overcome those challenges because life isn't fair for anyone.

Youth well-being narrative

✓

All children deserve a happy and healthy childhood. That means all children and young people not only have what they need to survive, (a roof over their heads, food to eat, clothes on their backs) but get the care and support they need to grow, feel safe, and experience joy. It's all of our responsibility to care for children and young people, especially those youth who come from historically marginalized communities that have not been afforded the same opportunities and support as white communities have for generations.



Protection vs. youth agency



Current narrative

Adults must protect children and young people from harm because they cannot protect themselves. That includes not only protecting them from bodily harm, but also divisive content or ideas that don't reflect traditional American values.

Youth well-being narrative

Safety

It is our collective responsibility to ensure children and young people feel safe at home, school, and in their communities. Young people are safest when they live in well-resourced communities that have affordable housing, safe places to play, high-quality schools, and local grocery stores with nutritious foods.



Agency

We all remember what it was like to be young and the frustration that comes with feeling powerless to control our own destiny. It's all our responsibility to fight for the children we used to be by demanding young people have a say in their own lives and the policies that impact them. When young people have agency and seats at the table where decisions are made, our homes, communities, and nation are better for it.



Guiding Messages



The messaging below is intended to support organizations to counter harmful narratives and seed the youth well-being narrative. The messaging reflects the [race class narrative](#) messaging architecture, which helps build cross-racial support and solidarity for our issues and holds the people who spread harmful narratives accountable. These messages should be tailored for different audiences based on their unique values and the barriers you need to overcome to inspire them to act. In the next phase of our work, we will share a toolkit to make it as easy as possible for your organization to integrate youth well-being messaging into your ongoing work.

Frame: community responsibility

Purpose	Messaging
Lead with shared value.	Most of us, whether or not we have children of our own, believe that young people deserve to feel safe to be themselves, experience joy, and get the care they need to thrive.
Name the motivations and who benefits from harm.	But under the guise of “protecting children,” certain lawmakers slash programs that provide everyday necessities for children and their families — like affordable housing, food assistance, and financial aid — for their own political gain. Rooted in racism, these efforts set up some families to have just enough to get by, while others get ahead and stay there.
Identify collective solutions.	We all have a role to play in caring for young people, no matter their background. We must demand policies and practices that celebrate young people for who they are, give them a seat at the table where decisions are made, and provide the resources they need to grow without barriers.
Vision.	Together we can ensure all young people — no matter where they live, the color of their skin, or who they love — feel safe, experience joy, and get the care they need to flourish.

Frame: youth agency

Purpose	Messaging
Lead with shared value.	We all remember what it was like to be young and the frustration that comes with feeling powerless to control our own destiny. This is why we must fight for the children we used to be by demanding young people have a say in their own lives and the policies that impact them.
Name the motivations and who benefits from harm.	Under the guise of “protecting children,” some politicians wield their power to control and silence young people for their own political gain. Even well-meaning policymakers assume they know best, so they don’t give young people a seat at the table. Elected officials work for the people, and that includes young people.
Identify collective solutions.	Young people can truly flourish when their voices are heard. We must demand policies and practices that honor young people’s agency to make their own educational, health, and personal decisions. That includes providing platforms for young people to advocate for what they want and need.
Vision.	When young people truly have the power to make decisions about the issues that impact them, not only are programs and policies more likely to meet their needs, but youth feel more hopeful about the world and their place in it. Together, we can ensure that every young person feels valued, supported, and knows their voice matters.



Narrative

Recommendations



In addition to the narrative frames and suggested messaging above, these recommendations are intended to provide additional guidance for organizations and individuals to seed youth well-being narratives across issue areas. These recommendations came out of the research phase of our work and may continue to shift as we learn more and continue to test this messaging.

Recommendation 1: Use safety over a protection frame.

Protection frames are used often but not always in positive ways. Protection frames, or the idea that children need to be protected from harm are common, but what constitutes “harm” differs based on your political leanings and world view. For some, it’s bodily harm from others (e.g., gun violence or abuse). For others, it’s emotional harm (e.g., bullying or unattainable beauty standards) or perceived ideological harm (e.g., books with LGBTQ+ content or “wokeness”). On its face, the idea that we should protect children seems irrefutable. However, protection frames can also lead to punitive solutions to complex problems and rob young people of their agency. If you look at how this frame is used for children and youth across age, gender and race, it also becomes clear that protection is not offered equally. A safety frame may be more effective.

Recommendation 2: Uplift youth voices.

Narratives about child and youth well-being must be created in partnership with children and youth as well as the families and caregivers that surround them. Few news stories about children or youth issues directly quote young people. Articles usually quote adults — teachers, legislators, policy experts and/or parents. When young people’s stories were included, they were told in the third person and only focused on the challenges young people experience. Adults (e.g., policy experts, legislators, educators, or parents) were quoted most and when news coverage included young people’s stories, they were in third person and only focused on challenges. Youth well-being messaging should be tailored for a variety of messengers and audiences to capture youth voices and lean into the power of peer-to-peer messengers.

Recommendation 3: Use crisis framing strategically.

During our research, nearly every narrative about children and youth was framed as a crisis (e.g., children's mental health crisis). While issues affecting children are critical, framing everything as a crisis makes it difficult for audiences to know when they should feel a true sense of urgency. Feelings of urgency cannot be sustained over long periods and are useful for specific, short-term calls to action. A crisis frame is also deficit-based (which often perpetuates exclusion and bias) rather than asset-based (which fosters a sense of belonging and prioritizes inclusion). Advocates need to use this frame strategically.

Recommendation 4: Make the case that childhood is inherently valuable.

Narratives about children are often focused on the future, tying children's worth to their potential economic success and contributions, rather than to who they are as people. Beyond preparing children for the future, which most people agree is important, we need to build the case for why it's important for kids to be kids to avoid supporting harmful frames that view kids as property and/or investments.



Recommendation 5: Continue to use a multigenerational frame.

We cannot transform the lives of children and youth without supporting their families and caregivers. However, narratives about children and youth often talk about them as if they exist on their own. Youth well-being messaging must lean into the idea that we cannot support children in isolation and what's good for families, parents, and caregivers is good for kids as well.

Recommendation 6: Expand the lens of what are considered children and youth issues.

As noted in research by [Frameworks and Leading for Kids](#), people often struggle to connect children and youth to issues beyond education and/or care (e.g., childcare or parental leave). But advocates know that nearly every social issue impacts children and youth — from climate change, to jobs, to affordable housing, and more. To ensure children and youth's interests are better represented in public policy, youth well-being narratives need to help expand the scope of what people think of as “children's issues” — even within our own movement.



References and Resources



We reviewed and referenced the following background research content and resources to inform our understanding of the narratives around youth well-being and formulating the findings in our research report and this guide.

- **Building Blocks for Youth:** ["Off Balance: Youth, Race & Crime in the News."](#)
- **Color of Change:** ["A Dangerous Distortion of Our Families."](#)
- **FrameWorks Institute:** ["Collective Caregiving: A Frame for Talking About What Kids and Families Need to Thrive."](#)
- **Advocated for Youth:** ["Countering the 'Parents Rights' Narrative: Effective Messaging to Inspire Action."](#)
- **Freedom To Learn:** ["We Make the Future: Messaging Guide and Digital Toolkit."](#)

