MOVING CHILDREN’S ORAL HEALTH ONTO THE PUBLIC AGENDA
Watch Your Mouth™ is a campaign designed by the FrameWorks Institute to help move public policy solutions forward to address a widespread health problem – poor oral health among children. Watch Your Mouth builds on a body of policy and communications research to illuminate the need for systemic solutions to children’s oral health. As a comprehensive, coordinated campaign, it helps advocates build a broad constituency equipped to engage in a consistent communications strategy.

There are three critical components to implementing this campaign successfully: policy development, coalition building, and strategic communications. Typically, through the work of a core group of stakeholders, a public policy agenda is developed. Once this has been accomplished, the Watch Your Mouth campaign is designed to build grassroots support for those policy solutions by engaging partners within various important target groups (business, legislators, educators, and medical professionals, among others). And finally, supporting the work of this broad-based coalition, Watch Your Mouth utilizes a focused communications strategy to increase public understanding and support. The campaign has been extensively tested in four states to date, using both qualitative and quantitative research, and has demonstrated its ability to build public will.
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The issue of children’s oral health – what defines it, the consequences of ignoring it, and what can be done to improve it – is virtually unrecognized by most Americans. For this reason, there is a need to build broader understanding of the problem if oral health is to achieve salience among key publics. Advocates in the field have considerable expertise and commitment, but they need support from a much wider array of community stakeholders, health and child advocates, and policy makers if they are to achieve the goal of improving children’s oral health.

Among children’s issues, oral health is not as visible to the general public as such topics as child poverty, immunization or safety. Because of this, it is important to be able to demonstrate to potential collaborators that oral health is not a distraction from other children’s issues but rather a new topic that can help veterans of children’s advocates open up a much broader conversation about the goals and responsibilities of communities in providing basic services to children.

FrameWorks’ research supports this conclusion. When presented with compelling information about the consequences of children’s oral health problems, FrameWorks found that adults make the connection to children’s overall health status and increase their support for public policies to address those problems. In sum, children’s oral health appears to prove useful as a prism issue for supporting a broader children’s health agenda.

PRE-CAMPAIGN PUBLIC UNDERSTANDING: THE FRAMES WE ARE UP AGAINST

FrameWorks Institute research demonstrates that, when people think of oral health, they automatically think of cosmetic issues and assign responsibility to individuals. They talk about smiles, teeth, toothbrushes, flossing and consumption of junk food. When asked to consider the consequences of poor oral health, they most often mention cosmetic beauty and poor self-esteem. Very few people mention discomfort or pain.

The research found that few people make an automatic linkage between children’s oral health and their overall health, nor to their achievement in school or their ability to thrive. Additionally, when children’s oral health is specifically discussed, people think of parenting issues and discipline. In other words, poor oral health in children is commonly viewed as a by-product of bad parenting.

By contrast, oral health experts agree that solutions to children’s oral health problems lie in an array of policies that include: water fluoridation, increasing the number of public health dentists, Medicaid and SCHIP reform to ensure that eligible children actually see dentists, expansion of workplace health insurance to include dental coverage, and more aggressive application of proven preventive measures like sealants. In sum, there exists a wide cognitive gap between ordinary people’s thinking about how children’s oral health works and matters, on the one hand, and the opinion of experts about the causes and consequences of poor oral health and available remedies. Given this gap, how can framing research and practice help advocates do a better job of engaging and educating the public?

Fortunately, when we frame information differently, people reconsider their assumptions, understand the importance of the issue and the role for the community, and ultimately support the systemic solutions proposed by advocates.
The purpose of the Watch Your Mouth campaign is to reframe children’s oral health so that we can move forward public policy solutions to these widespread problems. The FrameWorks Institute’s research suggests a number of clear and effective ways to set up a new frame for public understanding of oral health. Key to this reframing is an emphasis on the prevalence and severity of the problem, its consequences, and the efficacy of prevention in solving this problem.

Tooth decay is the most common chronic childhood disease in America. Nationally, it affects 50% of first graders and 80% of 17-year-olds. When a child’s oral health suffers, so does school performance, because children who are in pain cannot pay attention to teachers and parents, and thus, they lose ground. Untreated oral disease has been linked with long-term health problems such as heart and respiratory diseases. The good news is we know how to prevent the majority this disease from ever occurring.

When we begin to “reframe” the issue of children’s oral health in this way, FrameWorks Institute research shows that the public reconsiders the issue, and is more likely to support the public policy solutions necessary to improve children’s oral health.

This is but a small sample of the specific reframing suggestions that licensors of Watch Your Mouth receive when embarking on a campaign, and that get consistently integrated into the earned media, paid media and coalition-building efforts that constitute the three key components of this effective campaign.

The Watch Your Mouth campaign has been carried out in four states: Washington, New Hampshire, Massachusetts and Maine.

Washington State served as the pilot state for WYM, launching the campaign to coincide with the U.S. Surgeon General’s first ever report on the oral health of Americans in 2000. In the two years of this effort, campaigners saw measurable increases in public understanding of oral health as a legitimate health issue and in support for the coalition’s policy priorities, such as community water fluoridation, increasing Medicaid dental coverage for low-income children and introducing dental screenings in schools.

In 2005, Massachusetts launched Watch Your Mouth to compliment the policy advocacy work being done by a statewide Taskforce. In four years of campaigning, Massachusetts made great advances—from reinstating Medicaid Dental benefits for all adults in the state, to launching new children’s oral health initiatives. In addition to policy successes, this state has also seen remarkable increases in the public’s overall understanding of the importance of children’s oral health.

Each state that has implemented Watch Your Mouth has made great strides in increasing public awareness and, importantly, public understanding of the issue of children’s oral health. Key to these successes has been locating the campaign within a coalition with identified policy priorities that has a broad base of members who can be mobilized for action across the state.
The Watch Your Mouth campaign is copyrighted and owned by the FrameWorks Institute. It is designed for replication, thereby maximizing the successful model that has now been tested in four states. In order to use the campaign and all its elements, entities (states, organizations, etc.) must qualify for use of the campaign, as accepted franchisees. Because Watch Your Mouth is not a campaign designed to put personal solutions forward, but a campaign that addresses systemic barriers to oral health, a franchisee must commit to upholding the integrity, nature and scope of the campaign.

The licensing arrangement is intended to develop a successful partnership between Frameworks and the licensee, and protect the communications elements from being used in ineffective or inappropriate ways. Therefore, licensing is intended to meet the following objectives:

- Allow for broad use of the WYM campaign
- Maintain quality control
- Ensure continued effectiveness
- Assure each licensee of expert consultation
- Create synergies between users and a national campaign model
- Assure that conflicting messages are not used in different regions

There are three elements necessary for the effective implementation of this campaign:

- Knowledge of issue framing
- Effective communications vehicles (advertising, events, earned media, etc.) tailored to the individual situation
- Mobilized [grassroots] coalitions to develop policy, advocate for policy, and deploy communications

Upon licensing the campaign, Frameworks would provide the first two of these components. The third would be the responsibility of the licensee, and is no less critical, as a key factor in the success of a campaign is unifying a mobilized constituency to work toward on policy change with a coordinated communications strategy.

Licensees receive as part of their investment: workshops designed to inspire, educate and enable local groups to mount the campaign; toolkits that explain the issue and how to promote it; regular access to FrameWorks personnel who understand the issue and the campaign; ongoing review of materials and feedback to improve them; the adaptation of existing ads to suit the licensee’s policy menu; new creative ads designed to support the licensee’s policies; op/eds created to support the policies; design and supervision of website; collaboration in evaluation; presentation to Boards and funders; and other products and interactions as FrameWorks and the licensee identify them.

These essential campaign components can be tailored to meet the specific needs of your state and the public sector you wish to energize, congruent with the overall campaign strategy articulated by FrameWorks. In short, this is a collaboration that requires shared ownership for implementing and adapting a campaign model that is rich and robust in its support for local adaptation and innovation. Importantly, it is a partnership, not a vendor relationship.

By licensing the Watch Your Mouth campaign, your coalition partners will be trained in the research and framing methodology employed by the FrameWorks Institute – called Strategic Frame Analysis™. You will be provided with the campaign tools and materials designed to launch WYM in your region, and you will receive ongoing consultation from the FrameWorks Institute.
SOME OF THE CAMPAIGN PRODUCTS DEVELOPED TO DATE INCLUDE:

- The highly memorable campaign tagline, WATCH YOUR MOUTH
- Broadcast
  - Television PSA
  - Radio PSAs
- Print
  - Print Ads
  - Original Op/Eds, Editorial Board Memos, and articles
  - Free Standing Inserts for Newspapers
  - Subway Posters
- Collateral
  - Posters
  - Bill Stuffers
  - Informational Brochures
- A Comprehensive Web Site
- Promotional Items such as
  - Mugs
  - Temporary Tattoos
  - Lapel Pins
  - Coffee Sleeves
  - Golf Balls
  - Tote Bags

The Watch Your Mouth campaign can propel the improvement of children’s oral health to the forefront in your state. The FrameWorks Institute looks forward to the opportunity to work in concert with you and the partners in your state to achieve our collective goals.

To learn more about the FrameWorks Institute and the work it undertakes, visit http://www.frameworksinstitute.org