

A TOOLKIT FOR COMMUNICATORS

No Small Thing

Framing Diaper Need as a Systemic Issue

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**National
Diaper Bank
Network**

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Introduction

In the United States today, nearly half of families with small children experience diaper need¹—the inability to afford enough clean diapers to keep a baby healthy and happy. Despite its scale, diaper need is largely invisible to the public. When people do think about it, they often blame parents or assume diapers are already covered by government or charity programs. These incorrect assumptions block support for systemic solutions.

Because these kinds of assumptions shape public perceptions of diaper need, advocates must be intentional about framing—choosing words, values, and explanations that shift understanding from individual blame to collective responsibility and systemic solutions.

Framing is the way we package and explain information. Every communication involves choices—what to highlight, how to explain causes and solutions, what values to invoke, and what stories to tell. These choices shape how people understand an issue, who they see as responsible, and whether they believe change is possible. The frames we use now set the stage for broader public understanding and long-term support.

This toolkit equips advocates, policymakers, service providers, and funders with evidence-based framing strategies to talk about diaper need. It offers practical guidance, ready-to-use messages, and examples to help shift public conversations from individual blame to collective responsibility and systemic solutions.

[Click here](#) to access the research that informs the recommendations included in this toolkit.

¹National Diaper Bank Network. (2025, May 7). The NDBN diaper check 2024: Diaper insecurity among U.S. children and families. <https://nationaldiaperbanknetwork.org/the-ndbn-diaper-check-2024/>

Quick Reference Chart

SAY THIS TO DO THIS

SAY This	To DO This
<i>"Diaper need means not having enough clean diapers to keep a baby healthy and happy."</i>	Define the issue clearly so people share a baseline understanding.
<i>"Our economy is designed in ways that make basics like diapers unaffordable for many families."</i>	Connect diaper need to larger systemic causes, not individual blame.
<i>"Diaper need is a hole in our social fabric. We can repair it by strengthening support systems."</i>	Use metaphors that highlight interconnectedness and solutions.
<i>"We can build a future where every family has what they need—or continue down a path where even more families are left behind."</i>	Present two possible futures to make collective choices visible.
<i>"Because of systemic racism, Black women are more likely to experience diaper need, even while doing everything possible for their children."</i>	Make inequities visible by naming systemic racism.

Framing Recommendations at a Glance

- 1. Define diaper need clearly and consistently.**

Start with a simple, shared definition.

- 2. Start big, then zoom in.**

Connect diaper need to broader systems before focusing on families.

- 3. Use systemic metaphors.**

Talk about diaper need as a hole in the social fabric.

- 4. Show two possible futures.**

Offer both a positive and negative vision to clarify the stakes.

- 5. Pair immediate and long-term solutions.**

Present help today alongside policy redesign.

- 6. Make inequities explicit.**

Name racial inequities and their systemic roots.

- 7. Keep communications on frame.**

Prepare for pushback and pivot to systemic solutions.

Words and Ideas to Advance and Avoid

Advance	Avoid	Why
Designed economy	<i>Leading with poverty</i>	Talking about “poverty” cues individual blame; “designed economy” highlights policy choices.
Collective responsibility	<i>Parental responsibility</i>	Keeps focus on systems, not “good” or “bad” parents.
Repair the social fabric	<i>Safety net</i>	“Safety net” often connotes failure; “social fabric” conveys interconnection.
Policy choices create diaper need	<i>Accidents of the market</i>	Counters naturalism by naming intentional design.

Common Communications Traps and How to Avoid Them

Even skilled communicators can unintentionally reinforce the very mindsets we want to move away from. The following are the most common traps in communicating about diaper need, why they are counterproductive, and how to avoid them.

TRAP 1

Leading with crisis and child suffering

Why it happens

Diaper need is urgent, and communicators want to show how high the stakes are. Images of babies in pain or stories of parents suffering feel powerful and attention-grabbing.

Why it backfires

While these stories can spark sympathy, they also reinforce individual blame. Audiences often conclude, “That parent should do better,” rather than, “Our systems need to change.” Focusing on crisis also narrows the problem to individual families, leaving systemic causes invisible.

How to reframe

Lead with systems first. Describe how economic design and policy choices make diapers unaffordable, then connect to the impact on families. Pair urgency with solutions.

TRAP 2

Centering individual stories without context

Why it happens

Personal stories are compelling and easy to tell.

Why it backfires

Stories told in isolation activate individualism. Audiences zoom in on what a parent did or didn’t do, rather than what structures made their situation possible. Listeners may blame the individual or distance themselves by saying, “That would never happen to me.”

How to reframe

Always zoom out. Use stories to illustrate systemic drivers (low wages, high prices, lack of public programs). Make clear that the issue is widespread and rooted in design, not in one parent’s choices. [Click here to get more guidance](#) on how to tell individual stories that spark systems thinking.

TRAP 3

Framing around “poverty”

Why it happens

Poverty is clearly related to diaper need, and advocates want to acknowledge the connection.

Why it backfires

The public’s dominant associations with “poverty” are unproductive. People often assume poverty is the result of bad decisions, laziness, or cultural failings. Even when advocates describe poverty as structural, the word itself cues unproductive mindsets.

How to reframe

Use economy by design language. Say that our economy is designed in ways that benefit the few while making basics like diapers unaffordable for many. This shifts attention from individuals to systems and policies.

TRAP 4

Using worthiness framing

Why it happens

Advocates want to show that parents work hard and therefore deserve support.

Why it backfires

This frames help as conditional or something only “good” parents can qualify for. It cues judgment about who is “deserving” or “undeserving” and suggests that families who struggle have somehow failed.

How to reframe (using the social fabric metaphor)

Emphasize that we are all held together by a shared social fabric made up of the systems that support families. When that fabric weakens, families fall through not because of their choices, but because the systems are frayed. By focusing attention on the need to repair and strengthen our social fabric, audiences can more quickly grasp systemic causes and solutions.

TRAP 5

Relying on numbers without explanation

Why it happens

Advocates understandably assume that numbers alone will help people understand the scope of the problem and the need for systemic solutions.

Why it backfires

Numbers without context are easily dismissed or misunderstood. Audiences may minimize the scale of the problem or fail to connect data to systemic causes.

How to reframe

Pair data with explanatory framing. Instead of “One in two families experience diaper need,” say, “According to The NDBN Diaper Check 2024, nearly half of families with small children experience diaper need because our economy is designed in ways that make basics like diapers unaffordable.”

TRAP 6

Getting stuck in opposition frames

Why it happens

Communicators feel pressure to rebut myths head-on.

Why it backfires

Repeating myths (“Some say parents just need to budget better ...”) reinforces them, even if you argue against them. Audiences remember the myth, not your correction.

How to reframe

Don’t repeat myths; redirect instead. Use bridge-and-pivot techniques: “What’s really at stake is whether families can afford basics. Diaper need happens because of low wages and high prices.”

TRAP 7

Using fatalistic tones

Why it happens

Communicators want to stress how serious the problem is.

Why it backfires

Overly dire language makes audiences feel helpless and resigned. People conclude, “Nothing can be done.”

How to reframe

Balance urgency with efficacy. Talk about diaper need as urgent but solvable: “We can repair the holes in our social fabric by strengthening support systems and redesigning policies so every family has what they need.

Taken together, these traps remind us that how we say something matters as much as what we say. Avoiding these pitfalls keeps conversations on track and focused on systemic solutions.

Conversations about diaper need often veer into myths and individual blame. The key is to **bridge and pivot**: acknowledge, then redirect.”

Common Communications Derailers and Pivots

Derailer 1

“Parents just need to budget better.”

False Start	Bridge	Pivot
<i>“Most parents budget carefully.” (Keeps focus on parents’ choices.)</i>	<i>“What’s really at stake here is ...”</i>	<i>“... that our policy choices result in low wages and high prices, which make basics like diapers out of reach.”</i>

Derailer 2

“Charities can handle this.”

False Start	Bridge	Pivot
<i>Charities are already doing a lot, but it’s not enough.” (Validates charity as the main solution.)</i>	<i>Another way to look at this is ...”</i>	<i>“... that diaper banks help today, but we also need to redesign our economy so that every family can count on access.”</i>

Derailer 3

“Nothing will ever change.”

False Start	Bridge	Pivot
<i>“That’s not true. Some families are doing better.” (Sounds anecdotal, not systemic.)</i>	<i>“That speaks to a bigger point: ...”</i>	<i>“... We’ve solved basic needs problems before through policy. Diaper need is solvable too if we make collective choices.”</i>

BRIDGE AND PIVOT PHRASES TO KEEP HANDY

- “What’s most important to understand is ...”
- “Another way to look at this is ...”
- “That speaks to a bigger point ...”
- “What’s really at stake here is ...”

Framing Racial Equity

Racial inequities in diaper need are real and persistent. Black women, Latinas, and Indigenous women are disproportionately affected because of structural racism in wages, housing, health care, and child care. Yet public conversations often erase race or fall into stereotypes that blame families of color. Here we include guidance for communicators who are explicitly addressing racial equity.

Guidance for Communicators

- **Name systemic racism directly.** Do not rely on vague terms like “inequities” or “disparities.”
Example: *“Because of systemic racism in wages and housing, Black women are more likely to experience diaper need, even while doing everything possible for their children.”*
- **Connect past to present.** Show how discriminatory policies in housing, labor, and social services shape today’s inequities. Example: *“From redlining to wage discrimination, policies of the past continue to make basics like diapers harder to afford for families of color.”*
- **Avoid cultural blame.** Steer clear of narratives that pathologize communities of color. Always explain outcomes in terms of structures, not choices.
- **Lift up shared humanity.** Remind audiences that when some families are left unsupported, the whole social fabric frays.
- **Paint a positive, inclusive vision.** Emphasize that addressing racial inequities benefits everyone by creating stronger and more just systems.

Flexing the Frame for Different Audiences

Funders and Donors

Model Language

“Investing in diaper programs addresses urgent needs today and builds momentum for systemic change. Every diaper distributed keeps a child healthy and also highlights how our economy fails families. Your support repairs the social fabric, strengthens our communities, and helps redesign systems so all families can thrive.”

Policymakers

Model Language

“Our economy is designed in ways that funnel profits upward while families struggle with basics. Diaper need is a direct result. Parents are forced to choose between diapers, rent, and food. That’s not an accident. It’s policy, and we can fix it. By funding diaper distribution and enacting policies that raise wages and lower costs, we can build a future where every child has what they need.”

General Public

Model Language

“Almost half of families with small children experience diaper need, according to The NDBN Diaper Check 2024. This is about how our economy is designed. Diaper need is a hole in our social fabric, weakening us all. We can repair it by supporting families now and redesigning policies so no parent has to choose between diapers and dinner.”

Telling Personal Stories about Diaper Need

Personal stories are powerful advocacy tools. They humanize issues, draw attention, and invite empathy. But how we tell stories matters as much as the stories themselves. Without careful framing, personal stories can reinforce harmful assumptions about individual blame or worthiness or cue fatalism. With the right framing, they can spotlight systemic problems, highlight resilience, and show a path toward solutions.

The Stories We Are Talking About

- Telling your own advocacy story about diaper need.
- Supporting others to tell their stories with systemic framing.
- Retelling someone else's story in your communications ethically, responsibly, and strategically.

Framing Tip: We are always making framing decisions about how to tell our stories.

Framing Tip: Personal storytelling for advocacy requires different framing choices than personal storytelling for connection or catharsis.

Recommendations for Strong Advocacy Stories

1. Even in a crisis situation, “crisis” is not the most effective frame.

Instead of portraying families only as desperate, show how solutions are available. Stories should demonstrate both the problem and what can be done about it. This inspires action rather than resignation.

2. Offer solutions.

Make sure every story points toward a policy fix, a program, or a systemic change. Stories that only highlight suffering can leave audiences feeling pity but resigned to the status quo.

3. Emphasize individual agency in the face of harm.

Highlight resilience and resourcefulness. This helps audiences see parents as active contributors, not passive victims.

4. Unmask the sources of harm by naming policies.

Show explicitly how policies, wages, or pricing systems create diaper need. This shifts blame away from parents and directs attention toward structures that can be changed.

5. Explain how action is needed because of who people are, not what they do.

Shift from conditional worthiness (“This parent deserves help because they worked hard”) to inherent dignity (“All children deserve clean diapers”).

6. Move from sympathy to lived expertise.

Instead of presenting parents as objects of pity or in need of charity, highlight their knowledge and insights. Position lived experience as expertise in how systems succeed or fail and what we need to be doing moving forward.

Before/After Story Examples

Before (crisis frame)	After (solutions + agency frame)
<i>“Lisa cried when she couldn’t afford diapers for her baby. She felt ashamed and helpless.”</i>	<i>“Lisa works full-time, but rising prices meant she couldn’t always afford diapers. She turned to her local diaper bank, where she saw firsthand how programs fill urgent needs. Her story shows why we need both diaper banks and policies that make basics affordable for all families.”</i>
WHY THE AFTER IS BETTER	
<ul style="list-style-type: none">■ Offers a solution (diaper bank + policy)■ Shows Lisa’s agency, not just suffering■ Shifts focus from shame to systemic causes	

Before	After
<i>“Marcus works two jobs and has never asked for help. Now he can’t afford diapers. Families like his deserve support after working so hard.”</i>	<i>“Marcus’s story reminds us that every child deserves clean diapers, no matter their parent’s job or income. Families like his show how rising costs and stagnant wages create diaper need. By repairing our social fabric through policies and programs, we can ensure no parents like Marcus have to make impossible choices.”</i>
WHY THE AFTER IS BETTER	
<ul style="list-style-type: none">■ Avoids conditional worthiness■ Highlights shared humanity■ Links to systemic causes and solutions	

Channel-Specific Guidance and Models

Different channels require different framing moves. Here's how to adapt systemic framing of diaper need across platforms.

Social Media Posts

Social media rewards brevity, emotion, and shareable language. Keep messages short, systemic, and solution-oriented.





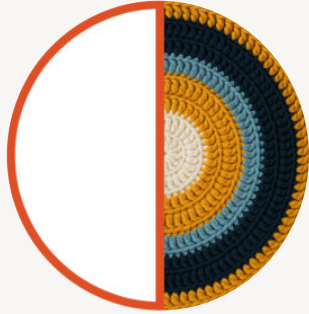
Visual Design and Graphics

Visuals can cue systemic frames instantly.



Metaphor Illustrations

Show a fabric with holes being repaired or threads interwoven into a stronger whole.



Data Visualization

Instead of “50 percent of families face diaper need” in a chart, show half of a quilt square missing or half of a circle threadbare.



Paired Imagery

Contrast “two possible futures”: a parent choosing between diapers and groceries versus a family supported by affordable basics.

Op-Eds

Op-eds allow for depth and argumentation.

Structure

1. Start big → explain how the economy is designed in ways that make basics unaffordable.
2. Zoom in → show how diaper need is one visible symptom of that design.
3. Point to inequities → name racial and gender inequities.
4. Offer solutions → pair immediate relief (diaper banks) with long-term redesign (wage and family policy).

Sample opening paragraph

“Our economy is working exactly as designed: to concentrate wealth among the few while leaving millions of families struggling to afford basics. Diaper need is one of the clearest signs. According to the NDBN Diaper Check 2024, nearly half of families with infants can’t afford enough diapers. This is about our policy choices. If we want children to thrive, we need to expand diaper programs today and redesign our economy for tomorrow.”

Grant Proposals

Grant proposals should link immediate impact with systemic leverage.

Strong framing

- *“Every diaper distributed is a step toward equity. While providing immediate relief, diaper banks also make visible the need for upstream policy change. By funding this work, you support both urgent family needs and the long-term repair of our social fabric.”*
- *“Your investment in diaper banks goes beyond basic supplies. It builds momentum for wage reform, child care access, and systemic solutions that strengthen families across the country.”*

State-Level Testimony

Legislative testimony must be concise, compelling, and solution-focused.

Strong framing

- *“Families in our state are forced to choose between diapers, rent, and food because our economy is designed to benefit the few. Diaper need is a hole in our social fabric. We can repair it with policies that make basics affordable and expand diaper distribution today.”*
- *“Diaper need is solvable. With your support for statewide diaper assistance, we can both meet urgent needs and build fairer systems for the future.”*

Earned Media (Interviews, Press Quotes)

When speaking to reporters, frame briefly, and avoid repeating myths.

Q: “Isn’t diaper need just about budgeting?”

A: “What’s most important to understand is that diaper need happens because wages are too low and prices are too high. These are policy choices, and we can choose differently.”

Q: “Why should government get involved?”

A: “Because right now our economy is not working for children and families when so many are facing diaper need. We’ve solved problems like this before through smart policies. Diaper need is no different.”

Newsletters and Email Campaigns

Newsletters are a chance to educate supporters and mobilize them for action.

- *“Diaper need is one of the most visible signs of an economy that doesn’t work for families. Nearly half of parents face this challenge, according to The NDBN Diaper Check 2024. But together, we can change it. Support our programs today and join us in calling for policies that make diapers affordable for all families.”*
- *“When parents can’t afford diapers, it means our systems are failing. That’s why we’re asking you to support immediate diaper distribution and broader economic reform.”*

Checklist for Communicators

- Did I clearly **define diaper need**?

Yes No

- Did I **start big, then zoom in**?

Yes No

- Did I avoid **traps** (poverty frame, sympathy stories, parental blame)?

Yes No

- Did I include a **policy or systemic solution**?

Yes No

- Did I make **racial equity explicit**?

Yes No

- Did I flex my frame for the right **audience**?

Yes No

- Did I keep the message **on frame** when challenged?

Yes No

- Did I use **inclusive language** that connects us all?

Yes No

About FrameWorks

The FrameWorks Institute is a non-profit think tank that advances the mission-driven sector's capacity to frame the public discourse about social and scientific issues. The organization's signature approach, Strategic Frame Analysis®, offers empirical guidance on what to say, how to say it, and what to leave unsaid. FrameWorks designs, conducts, and publishes multi-method, multi-disciplinary framing research to prepare experts and advocates to expand their constituencies, to build public will, and to further public understanding. To make sure this research drives social change, FrameWorks supports partners in reframing, through strategic consultation, campaign design, FrameChecks®, toolkits, online courses, and in-depth learning engagements known as FrameLabs. In 2015, FrameWorks was named one of nine organizations worldwide to receive the MacArthur Award for Creative and Effective Institutions.

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