

Big Work Happens Here:

A Messenger's Manual

Developed by the FrameWorks Institute and Health+ Studio
in partnership with Connecticut Association for Infant Mental Health

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Introduction

If you are committed to ensuring that babies, families, and communities have what they need to thrive—and you want to help build awareness, understanding, and system-level solutions throughout Connecticut in support of infant mental health—you're in the right place.

This manual is a companion to the [Campaign FrameBrief](#) developed in close partnership with the Connecticut Association for Infant Mental Health. Here, we offer messages aligned with our campaign objectives and framing strategy, organized around three key audiences: (1) practitioners and professionals, (2) policymakers and leaders, and (3) caregivers and community members.

The messages in this manual are designed to help us advance a more forward-looking narrative about infant mental health: one in which mental health starts on day one, supportive relationships and communities matter, and all of us have a role to play in helping babies and families thrive.

Join us! Use the messages in this manual to support infant mental health, across Connecticut and beyond, by adding your voice to our growing campaign.

5 Messages for Practitioners & Professionals

When communicating with infant mental health practitioners and professionals, one challenge is that many people doing essential work to support babies and their families don't necessarily see themselves as part of the infant mental health workforce. Some may not even view the daily activities they perform, which help promote, maintain, and restore infant mental health, as a core component of their professional skill sets and identities. As such, a promising opportunity and important objective of this campaign is to broaden the circle: to help practitioners and professionals, working in a range of fields, recognize the vital role they already play. We want to celebrate the many ways they support infant mental health, help them feel connected to a larger community of practice, and encourage them to see themselves as valued contributors to a collective effort. Fostering that sense of belonging can open the door to deeper engagement, continued learning, and stronger connections across Connecticut's infant mental health community. The following messages can help.

Message #1:

“

You're already part of the big work.

Every well visit, developmental screening, and parent conversation builds the foundation for a child's healthy social, emotional, and physical development.

”

Why This Framing Works:

Comparing the early years in life to the **foundation** of a building helps explain their importance to everything that follows. Using similar words and related metaphorical language—e.g., build, strong, sturdy, depend on—helps audiences think more concretely about infants and toddlers rather than immediately *Aging Up* to older children. Offering **a few examples** of how different professionals actively contribute to early childhood development also counters the common mindset that healthy development simply unfolds on its own (*Naturalism*).

Message #2:

This work has a name and a workforce. You belong to both.

Early care and education. Family counseling. Home visiting. Social work. Every role that shows up consistently for young children is part of the infant mental health workforce.

Why This Framing Works:

We can expand the reach and resonance of our campaign with messages like this that **invite more people into the infant mental health story**. This message also directs attention away from the idea that responsibility rests solely with parents (the *Family Bubble* mindset) and builds greater awareness of the broader caregiving ecosystem. Messages like this, which **emphasize multiple roles** and interconnected contributions, can strengthen support for collective approaches to infant wellbeing.

Message #3:

The field of infant mental health exists because of work like yours.

What you do matters for babies, toddlers, and their families. You're part of a diverse and highly skilled team.

Why This Framing Works:

The notion of a “system of care” can feel pretty abstract to most people, including those who make up the system themselves. We can help make it feel more relevant and real by depicting the people within it, carrying out essential duties, and working together. Reinforcing **interconnection** and **shared responsibility** also allows audiences to see infant mental health as a coordinated effort rather than the work of isolated professions.

Message #4:

“

Getting to know a baby is part of the big work.

Understanding a very young child takes curiosity, an open mind, and close listening.

Every baby is one of a kind.

Every one of them is doing the big work too.

”

Why This Framing Works:

By **showing rather than telling** professionals working in various fields that babies are every bit as complexly human as older children and adults, we can counter assumptions about their needs and development being basic or simply instinctual. Messages like this one also help convey that the work we do to support infant mental health is neither formulaic nor prescriptive. It requires flexibility, patience, knowledge, and skill—and looks different for different babies.

Message #5:

“

We have the expertise. Now let's be the voices Connecticut needs.

Our perspectives are needed in the rooms where decisions get made.

Let's show up. Speak up.

Help people understand the big work.

Every conversation moves the big work forward.

”

Why This Framing Works:

Emphasizing that structural changes are needed and also possible is important for **balancing urgency and efficacy**. To counter *Fatalism*, we want to be direct about the fact that major challenges exist when it comes to supporting infant mental health across Connecticut, but at the same time to instill a sense that even big problems can be solved when we come together. We also want to take every opportunity to **celebrate the deep expertise** and significant contributions to society of the infant mental health workforce.

5 Messages for Policymakers & Leaders

When we're communicating with people in positions of power and structural level decision-making, our goal is to help them see infant mental health as worthy of their time, attention, and effort. The challenge is that they are typically not issue experts and likely don't understand or realize the importance of the matter. Elected officials, in particular, are also prone to viewing any appeal from constituents as being in competition with other priorities—and carrying weight only in proportion to public demand. Our opportunity, then, is to help our policymakers and other leaders see infant mental health not in competition with other critical social issues but in close relation. The following messages do just that.

Message #1:



The issues you champion start in the earliest years.

Family wellbeing, workforce development, and quality health care all trace back to the foundation of lifelong mental health, built in a child's first six years.



Why This Framing Works:

Leading with a positive **big-picture vision** connects infant mental health to issues that leaders already care about. It also counters the *Consumerism* mindset, and associated *Zero-sum* thinking, that assumes advocating “for” a particular issue means being “against” or in competition with adjacent issues. Use of the **foundation metaphor** also helps policymakers appreciate infancy as a critical developmental period rather than an afterthought, broadening their understanding of why very early experiences matter.

Message #2:

“

The big work of early childhood is developing tools for a lifetime of use.

Managing feelings,
building relationships,
exploring the world:
These are the foundations
of lifelong mental health.

”

Why This Framing Works:

By describing **emotional and relational capacities** as “tools,” this message pushes back against naturalism, illustrating that mental health skills don’t simply emerge on their own; they must be actively developed and practiced. Phrases such as “a lifetime of use” and “lifelong mental health” also help policymakers and other leaders appreciate the long-term importance of infancy without resorting to purely economic or return-on-investment arguments associated with consumerism.

Message #3:

“

Strong foundations need solid ground.

When families have stable surroundings such as housing, food, transportation, and care, young children are freer to feel, connect, and engage.

”

Why This Framing Works:

Putting **people in context** is needed to illustrate that healthy development depends not merely on individual effort and household choices but also on **supportive environments and nurturing social conditions**. Shedding light on context in this way can help move system-level decision-makers beyond blaming parents for any shortcomings or negative outcomes (a function of the *Family Bubble* mindset) and instead toward a broader understanding of what children and families need to thrive.

Message #4:



The best way to support young children? Support their families.

Babies and toddlers thrive when the adults raising them have dependable access to resources. Whole families thrive when supports outweigh hardships.



Why This Framing Works:

Messages like this reflect the **relational nature of infant mental health** while broadening responsibility beyond interpersonal caregiving. Emphasizing the interconnected wellbeing of babies, adults, and communities can help elected officials see support for families as a public concern. In addition, naming both positive and negative social factors (e.g., “supports” and “hardships”) is an effective strategy for translating the somewhat elusive concept of **resilience**—in particular, the fact that it can be built up or worn down by circumstances.

Message #5:



The big work needs leaders with vision. That’s you.

Connecticut’s infant mental health system depends on champions who can move policy, direct investment, and bring attention to this issue.



Why This Framing Works:

Adopting an **aspirational tone** that leans into possibility is an effective way to engage people on an emotional level and inspire action. It also counters all-too-common feelings of inevitability or overwhelm. This message navigates the dominant mindset of fatalism by highlighting leadership and collective action as meaningful pathways to change, which helps policymakers and leaders appreciate that stronger systems and supports are both necessary and achievable.

5 Messages for Caregivers & Community Members

When we're communicating with caregivers of all kinds, an important goal is to share practical, science-based insights that can make their jobs a little easier. At the same time, direct caregivers need to know that they aren't alone. A key barrier to supporting infant mental health is the widely held assumption that early childhood wellbeing is solely the responsibility of parents. (This family bubble mindset is implicitly held by parents and non-parents alike, though it carries a different set of implications for each group.) A key opportunity for our campaign is therefore to tell a different story—one in which parents and primary caregivers, rather than operating on their own, play a unique and essential role within a complex ecosystem. The institutions we shape and the collective decisions we make weigh heavily in the experiences and outcomes of infants and families. Likewise, adults who directly care for infants hold valuable firsthand knowledge and lived expertise that can inform our social policies and improve our systems. The following messages highlight this capacity for collective caregiving.

Message #1:

“

Feeling, connecting, engaging: This is the big work, and it starts on day one.

Our earliest relationships lay the groundwork for everything that follows. The sooner the supports, the stronger the foundation.

”

Why This Framing Works:

Highlighting emotional and relational capacities from the very beginning of life helps audiences recognize **babies as active participants** in development rather than passive recipients of care. **Affirming links between mental health and infancy** also offers a positive vision of healthy development that makes infant mental health visible from the very beginning of life. This helpfully shifts thinking away from the aging up mindset and corrects the assumption that mental health is relevant only to older children or adults. (It's also much more productive than debunking myths or explicitly confronting misinformation about infant mental health.)

Message #2:

“

Resilience is built, not just born.

A young child’s ability to weather hard things grows from a supportive environment surrounding the whole family.

”

Why This Framing Works:

Building people’s understanding of infant mental health and related concepts, particularly ones that are complex or frequently misunderstood, requires **plain-language explanation**. By framing “resilience” as something that is actively constructed, and therefore requires effort, coordination, and skills, this message **avoids the widespread misperception that resilience in children is innate** or simply a given.

Message #3:

“

Development isn’t just physical. It’s emotional, too.

Alongside first steps and first words, babies learn to respond to others and express themselves. These skills need to be supported too.

”

Why This Framing Works:

We can further deepen public understanding of early development by using clear, everyday language to illustrate how emotional growth happens in tandem with physical milestones. **Offering a few relatable examples** of what social and emotional development actually entails effectively invites audiences into the conversation. It also avoids the confusion or even alienation potentially caused by technical jargon (for example, words such as “attachment” or “co-regulation”).

Message #4:

“

Building mental health starts long before school.

Healthy connections in the first six years set the foundation for children’s ability to flourish and learn. The big work can’t wait for the classroom.

”

Why This Framing Works:

Many people, including parents and direct caregivers, have the impression that “real” learning takes place in school, and that younger children are simply growing bigger but not really gaining knowledge or building skills. This message draws on **the foundation metaphor** to bring attention to the first six years, help audiences move past the *Learning = School* frame of reference, and build public demand for early learning and other interventions that carry lifelong significance.

Message #5:

“

The big work takes teamwork. None of us can do it alone.

Around every thriving baby is a team of educators, infant mental health clinicians, pediatricians, caregivers, and more, all helping to build the foundation for a lifetime of health and connection.

”

Why This Framing Works:

An effective way to counter the family bubble mindset and illustrate the value of collective caregiving is to demonstrate that **many different people**, organizations, programs, services, and institutions work together to support infant wellbeing. By appealing to **the shared value of social prosperity**, this message activates a sense of collective buy-in and responsibility while reducing individual blame. It also reduces fatalism by reminding us that supporting infant mental health at a community-wide level is not only possible—it’s already happening.

Conclusion

The Big Work Happens Here campaign is an invaluable opportunity to help people across Connecticut see infant mental health differently—and trusted messengers like you are key. Each conversation has the potential to help someone see that mental health starts on day one, that babies develop through relationships, and that communities have an important role to play. By using the messages in this manual consistently—and adapting them with your own voice, experiences, and expertise—you become part of a growing movement to build understanding, strengthen support, and create lasting change.

Together, we're building a stronger future for Connecticut's children and families. Thank you for all that you're already doing, and for your commitment to the big work ahead!