

Action Ideas for the Children's Sabbaths Weekend and Throughout the Year



The actions that you plan for the Children's Sabbath weekend and for the year that follows are an essential part of the Children's Sabbath. As important as the worship experiences and educational sessions are, it is vital to plan actions that will help translate that prayer and inspiration, that awareness and information into new hands-on service and justice-seeking advocacy to ensure every child a strong start in life through nurturing early childhood development and to end poverty and give families the tools and support for economic security and well-being.

The ideas that follow provide suggestions for actions that can be taken on the Children's Sabbath weekend itself and actions that can be carried out throughout the year to come to make a lasting difference for children.

This Action Ideas Section provides:

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- Resources for Action, reproducible resources to photocopy and share:
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Tips for Planning Activities

As you plan activities for the Children's Sabbath weekend and for the year to come, keep the following tips in mind:

First, offer a range of activities focusing on raising awareness, hands-on service, and advocacy. Making a difference for children requires all three kinds of effort! It also enables people to choose activities based on their particular skills and interests. The action ideas below are organized in these three categories, so try to select one or more from each.

Second, plan some activities that can be completed on the Children's Sabbath weekend (such as assembling care packages for children going into foster care) **and some that will lead people into long-term commitments** (such as signing up volunteers to do outreach and enrollment for children's public health coverage programs or work with a mentoring or after-school program once a week).

Third, plan activities that will engage all ages. For example, if there is a table to write letters to elected officials, provide crayons and markers so that young children can draw pictures to enclose, or have them dictate their letters to an older child or adult.

Fourth, use the Children's Sabbath to reinforce existing congregational programs that serve children, particularly programs that promote justice and early childhood development and work to end poverty (for example, you could highlight accomplishments, recruit new people to help, or solicit donations) New opportunities to serve children and families, seek justice, protect children, and lift up the next generation.

Finally, be sure you are prepared to guide people in the activities so that they understand the connection between the worship and the action. You may want to provide a preview of the activities on a bulletin insert or during the announcement time in worship. During the activity period, it works best to have several people at each activity who are prepared to explain and guide participation.

Please Note: The kinds of activities that are appropriate and permissible at various points during the Children's Sabbaths weekend vary depending on the religious tradition of a place of worship. As you read through the suggested activities, you should select those that are appropriate for your tradition or modify the actions to make them so. Remember that the whole weekend, from Friday morning through Sunday night, is part of the National Observance of Children's Sabbaths celebration, so some activities that would not be appropriate immediately following your time of worship could be planned for another day or time during the weekend. Additionally, activities can and should be planned for the year to follow, so you can plan accordingly. You know what is best for your place of worship.

Action Ideas

Learn More and Raise Awareness:

- **On the Children’s Sabbath weekend or after, host a community forum to learn more about the need to invest in early childhood development and learning.** Invite a range of speakers, ideally those who can describe the problem first-hand (such as a family who has had a difficult time finding affordable, high-quality child care or a child care provider), someone who can provide information about the “big picture” or extent, cause, and effects of not investing in early childhood development and learning in our community, state, and nation, and someone who can outline solutions (such as changes in policies and programs) and what individuals can do to help address challenges and assure all children have the strong start of positive early childhood development.
- **For the Children’s Sabbath weekend, create a “prayer garden”** where people gather in your buildings after prayers or services. Prepare a long strip of mural paper. At the top, write a heading such as “God, help us nurture and protect our children so that each may bloom and grow.” Then draw flowers along the bottom edge. In the middle of some flowers, glue or tape photographs of children’s faces — some photographs supplied by your members, others cut from magazines or newspapers. Then supply markers and invite people to add their prayers for children.
- **Arrange a visit to a child care program serving children from low-income families, a Head Start program or a preschool in the weeks before or after the Children’s Sabbath weekend.** Arrange a time to talk with the teachers and parents, if possible, to learn about the program’s strengths as well as the existing barriers to its effectiveness. Find out what individuals and places of worship can do to support the program and the children it serves.
- **Organize a “listening team” to discern the needs in your community.** Plan to have team members talk with people in your place of worship and in the broader community. What challenges do they see facing children and families? What do they think needs to be done? How do they think places of worship could improve circumstances facing children and families? Have the listening team members jot down notes from the conversations and develop a collective impression of the problems facing families and what your place of worship could do to help. Be sure to talk to teachers, students, and school administrators to find out how your place of worship can be most helpful in helping all children learn and succeed. Decide what is feasible to take on and plan steps to follow through. You could launch the listening team on the Children’s Sabbath weekend, or you could organize it in the months leading up to the Children’s Sabbath so that on the Children’s Sabbath weekend the team could share with your place of worship some of what it has learned so far.
- **Share the faces and stories.** If your place of worship houses a child care, Head Start, or preschool program, or it if has an affiliated school, help your members learn more about the children it serves. Before the Children’s Sabbath, designate a bulletin board and post photographs of the children (with parents’ permission) and staff members. Following the Children’s Sabbath, invite the program staff to post a monthly note describing what the children are doing and perhaps display some of the artwork and projects. You could also invite them to post requests for needed items on the bulletin board. When your place of worship has family-friendly activities and outings, invite the families served by the weekday child care, Head Start, or preschool program to join in.

Reach Out:

- **Help connect individuals to volunteer with early childhood development and learning programs serving low-income children and families, such as voluntary home visiting, Head Start and Early Head Start, child care programs or preschool.** On the Children's Sabbath weekend, you could publicize opportunities or have representatives from programs available to meet with members and describe their work and invite those interested to sign up.
- **Donate needed items to early childhood development and learning programs serving low-income children.** Before the Children's Sabbath weekend, ask the program staff what is needed most, whether books, puzzles, and educational toys or practical items such as toothbrushes, tissues, or clothing. Publicize those needs in advance so that individuals can bring their contributions on the Children's Sabbath weekend to be delivered afterward. In the months following the Children's Sabbath weekend, keep members updated as new needs arise.
- **Have a "Book Buddies" sale.** Arrange with a local book store to sell children's books during the coffee hour or another appropriate time on the Children's Sabbath weekend. Urge those who buy books to buy two of the same book — one for their child and one to be donated to a child care, Head Start or preschool program. The parent or child can inscribe the book to be donated.
- **Forge a partnership between your place of worship and an early childhood development and learning program to provide various forms of support — volunteers, material items, and financial support.** You could announce the new partnership on the Children's Sabbath weekend and introduce the director to your place of worship. During the social time or an adult education time, the program director and a representative from your place of worship could provide further information about the partnership, the children served by the program, and how your place of worship and individuals within it can help in the coming year.
- **Consider housing a weekday early childhood program** in your building's classrooms.
- **Start or expand community "story times"** by partnering with the local library and community programs serving young children to hold Read Aloud story times in a location most convenient to low-income children.
- **Partner with a public school** to provide needed support, such as classroom supplies or classroom volunteers. This partnership could be planned in the months before the Children's Sabbath weekend, formally launched on the Children's Sabbath, and then continued throughout the year.
- **Ensure that your community has adequate Summer Food Service sites** so that children who qualify for free and reduced price lunches during the school year continue to have access to nutritious food every day during the summer. On the Children's Sabbath weekend you could announce this as a commitment and gather a task force of interested individuals. In the coming months, they can research what is available and, if there are not adequate sites in your community, lay the groundwork to serve as a site or partner with a new site for the coming summer. For more information, visit <http://www.fns.usda.gov/sfsp/summer-food-service-program-sfsp>.
- **Provide space for "play groups"** where parents with infants and toddlers can gather for conversation and connection. This can be an ongoing way that your place of worship can be welcoming and supportive of families even if they do not belong to your place of worship.

- **Set up a parent resource lending library**, with books and DVDs on parenting, child development, and related topics. Or, set up a toy-lending library in your place of worship or in an organization serving children from low-income families. Invite members of your place of worship to donate new or gently used toys — especially those that encourage learning and imaginative play, such as puzzles, books, and costumes. Contact local Head Start, child care and preschool programs serving low-income families to advertise the service. Families may “check out” a set number of toys for a certain length of time. Periodically, have the youth group or a religious school class clean and repair the toys. You could announce the lending library before the Children's Sabbath weekend and invite people to bring in initial donations that weekend, or you could launch the lending library after the Children's Sabbath weekend.
- **Open your doors during the week to be a “Homework Central” for school-age children who need a safe, quiet, organized space to do homework after school.** As you are able, provide computers, supplies, and volunteers to support the children's school work and offer a healthy snack. If your place of worship is not well located for the children to access, partner with a place of worship close to a school. Such a program could be launched on the Children's Sabbath weekend, or you could use the momentum and interest generated by the Children's Sabbath to initiate a planning committee to prepare for such a commitment to begin the following school year.
- **Organize a Read-a-Thon** to raise funds to benefit an early childhood program or to set up a scholarship fund to help parents who cannot afford child care. Perhaps the youth in your place of worship will take the lead but engage all ages — young children to adults — in gathering pledges. Donors would commit to paying an amount for each book read over a certain period of time (perhaps one month) by the Read-a-Thon participant they sponsor. Kick off the Read-a-Thon on the Children's Sabbath. Be sure to let your place of worship know the total amount raised when the Read-a-Thon is over.
- **Invite families from the community to join in free and low-cost activities hosted by your place of worship** on the Children's Sabbath and throughout the year.
- **Offer access to your place of worship's playground, if you have one.** Family child care providers and playgroups comprised of at-home parents and children may not have access to a safe playground. Invite them to use your place of worship's playground, if it is safe and insured. Have a staff member or volunteer from your place of worship schedule the visits and perhaps have volunteers to help play with the children.
- **Create a Resource and Referral Booklet.** Compile a booklet that provides families with information about where they can turn for support to deal with concerns including depression, mental health needs, substance abuse, and family violence. Include information about prenatal and other health care services available to low-income families, such as voluntary Maternal, Infant and Early Childhood Home Visiting, and nutrition support like the Special Supplemental Nutrition program for Women, Infants, and Children (WIC). In addition to making sure that individuals and families are aware of and can access them, encourage members of your place of worship to donate time, money, or items to support these resources and services. Make the list available to congregation and community members.

- **Partner with a Child-Serving Organization.** Identify an organization serving children and low-income families in your community or one nearby (if the need is greater there), and commit your place of worship to a sustained partnership through which your place of worship provides a range of assistance such as financial support, donation of goods, and professional expertise in fundraising, promotion, or management, in addition to other forms of volunteer service. Regularly publicize needs and opportunities for involvement so that many members can contribute in ways that best suit their time, gifts, and interests.
- **Arrange to have Volunteer “Pew Parents.”** Volunteer “pew parents” sit in a designated pew with children during the worship service so that an exhausted parent or caregiver can sit on their own on occasion and use that time for renewal. If children attend your place of worship unaccompanied by adults, this can also provide them with an important sense of connection. Publicize the availability of pew parents so that visitors and new members know they are available.
- **Sponsor a Parents’ Night Out.** Give parents and other caregivers a chance to recharge their batteries by offering a monthly or quarterly evening when their children are cared for by responsible adults or teens in your place of worship. Publicize it to the community at large so that any stressed, short-handed parent can take advantage of the respite.
- **Start a support group for single parents or Kinship Care* families.** Publicize the support group to the community beyond just your congregation. Check out the helpful resources for each state at www.grandfactsheets.org and other resources available through CDF to help your place of worship support grandparents and other relatives caring for children.
- **Give youths and others a leg up in the work world.** Provide internships, year-round and summer job opportunities, or job-shadowing experiences and guidance for families and youths in need. Partner with other places of worship, community organizations, and area high schools to pool the opportunities and to identify those who might benefit from them.
- **Host “Families Care” days.** One of the best ways for children to learn compassion, generosity, responsibility, and other positive values is to see adults put them into practice and to do the same. One weekend a month (or quarterly), arrange an opportunity for all ages to work together to meet a need in the community. This may be preparing a meal in a community kitchen for people who are hungry, helping build a Habitat for Humanity house, cleaning up a playground, or painting over graffiti.
- **Host a CDF Freedom Schools® program.** The *CDF Freedom Schools* program provides summer and after-school enrichment that helps low-income children fall in love with reading, increases their self-esteem, and generates more positive attitudes toward learning. Children are taught using a model curriculum that supports children and families around five essential components: high quality academic enrichment; parent and family involvement; civic engagement and social action; intergenerational leadership development; and nutrition, health and mental health.

*those headed by a grandparent or other relative

- **What Difference Does a CDF Freedom Schools Site Make?** In summer 2014, CDF Freedom Schools partners will serve more than 12,500 children in 87 cities and 28 states (including Washington, D.C.). CDF Freedom Schools sites work hard to ensure each child is equipped with the necessary skills to succeed in life. Our program boosts student motivation to read, generates a more positive attitude towards learning and connects the needs of children and families to the resources of their communities. In 2013, a five-year study of children enrolled at Charlotte *Freedom Schools* conducted by the University of North Carolina, Charlotte found that over 90 percent of participating children showed no summer learning loss, and 65 percent showed gains in reading. In June 2011, the Harvard Family Research Project released a report in which the *CDF Freedom Schools* program was one of 14 innovative national programs highlighted as having “demonstrated success in providing quality learning opportunities for youth.” In 2008, a three-year study conducted for the Kauffman Foundation reported that students enrolled in Kansas City, Missouri *CDF Freedom Schools* programs demonstrated significant improvement in reading.

Learn more about the program and the application process to become a partner site at www.freedomschools.org.

- **A Day in the Life of a CDF Freedom Schools Program Site** As children enter a *CDF Freedom Schools* program site, they are greeted and served a **nutritious breakfast or snack** by caring adults. The children and young adults move on to *Harambee!*, a time of informal sharing when children and staff come together to celebrate themselves and each other. In the classroom where servant leader interns facilitate classes of no more than 10 students, children are engaged in reading and theme-based, hands-on activities as outlined in the **Integrated Reading Curriculum (IRC)**. Reading is a cornerstone of the program. Servant leader interns lead the children in reading excellent books throughout the summer or after school. These books feature heroes, heroines, and settings that reflect the children's cultural images and encourage them to think about how they can make a difference in their own lives. Classroom activities related to the day's reading use a variety of teaching models, including cooperative learning, role playing, group discussions, read aloud, paired reading, creative writing, and visual arts. The range of activities ensures that children with diverse experiences, talents, and levels of confidence in reading and verbal expression are actively engaged.

During the summer program as the morning draws to a close, **Drop Everything And Read (D.E.A.R.)** time is announced and shared by everyone. To emphasize the importance and joy of reading, children and adults alike “Drop Everything And Read” silently for 15 minutes, choosing from a rich selection of reading material available from the *CDF Freedom Schools* site library. At lunchtime the feeling of family and community spirit continues as the children join adults to eat a **nutritious meal**. After lunch, children participate in *CDF Freedom Schools* program **afternoon activities**. These are well-planned music, dance or other culturally enriching activities that are related to the themes presented in the Integrated Reading Curriculum, including field trips that expand the children's horizons. The children also may engage in social action projects and rehearse for the summer finale that is performed for parents, friends, and members of the community.

Once the day has ended for the children, *CDF Freedom Schools* program staff will meet for the daily debrief to process the day's activities, discuss the day's successes and challenges, focus on site logistics and planning, and re-energize for the next day.

CDF Freedom Schools sites are making a difference for children and families:

- In Newark, N.J., 81 percent of parents attended parent-teacher conferences and 96 percent brought home materials for their child to read.
- In Rochester, N.Y., the number of children physically fighting decreased by 26 percent.
- Although children in New Orleans maintain relatively high levels of depression symptoms, the number of children experiencing positive mental health indicators increased. The number of children stating 'I felt like I was just as good as other children' (26.2 percent) and 'I had a good time' (5.7 percent) increased. By the end of the program, 85.7 percent of the children reported they felt happy.
- In a Washington, D.C. site that serves homeless children, fewer children reported feeling like they couldn't pay attention and 100 percent of younger children reported feeling happy (a 21.4 percent increase).

Learn more about the *CDF Freedom Schools* program at www.childrensdefense.org/programs-campaigns/freedom-schools/participate/.



Freedom Schools Charlotte

**Reform Judaism Magazine
What Works: Ideas & Initiatives**

Changing Lives in Charlotte



Shalom Park Freedom School scholars playing chess, Charlotte, North Carolina.

Picture this: 50 summer campers, mostly Hispanic and African-American elementary school children, are eating a kosher breakfast served by a Chabad Lubavitch rabbi. The campers are reading books in a Conservative temple's religious school classrooms. Jewish volunteers are leading afternoon activities. The program is being coordinated by an African-American Pentecostal preacher. And more than half of its expenses are underwritten by a Reform congregation, Temple Beth El in Charlotte, North Carolina.

Welcome to the Shalom Park Freedom School in Charlotte.

A national program of the Children's Defense Fund, Freedom Schools® offer nearly 10,000 low-income children in the U.S. intensive literacy education in a summer camp environment: two-and-a-half hours of reading and literacy in the morning, complemented by traditional camp activities in the afternoon, plus breakfast, lunch, and a healthy snack. Whereas over the summer most low-income students lose two or three months of reading ability, more than 50% of the "scholars" (as the children are called) typically gain a full year of reading comprehension at the 15 sites in Charlotte operated by a local nonprofit, Freedom School Partners.

In 2010, Rabbi Judith Schindler of Temple Beth El sought to create the first CDF Freedom School program sponsored by a Jewish community. She reached out to eight Jewish agencies in Shalom Park, a 54-acre campus home to Temple Beth El, Temple Israel (Conservative), Charlotte Jewish Day School, Levine Jewish Community Center, Jewish Family Services of Greater Charlotte, Levine-Sklut Judaic Library, the Jewish Federation of Greater Charlotte, and the Foundation of Shalom Park. Everyone signed on. Coordinating logistics among eight agencies was complicated, but in the summer of 2011 the Shalom Park Freedom School opened its doors.

On a typical day, the 50 scholars eat breakfast in the Charlotte Jewish Day School cafeteria, use the school's playground, gather in the Shalom Park Foundation's assembly room, receive literacy instruction in Temple Israel's religious school classrooms, participate in the Levine-Sklut Library's story time, and carry well-stocked backpacks supplied by the Jewish Federation's Lions of Judah.

The program also resonated with the larger Charlotte Jewish community. So many volunteers signed up, an overflow of callers had to be referred to other Freedom School sites. Among the volunteers were unaffiliated Jews who connected to the Shalom Park community for the first time because of their commitment to social justice.

Last July, Children's Defense Fund President Marian Wright Edelman visited Charlotte for Jubilee, a gathering of 1,800 scholars and 600 community leaders from North and South Carolina, and witnessed the strength of the Shalom Park program firsthand. She later wrote, "I hope that many other communities will be inspired to follow this example."

Congregations interested in establishing such a program in their Jewish community are encouraged to contact Temple Beth El member Judy Seldin-Cohen: [judyseldin@yahoo.com](mailto:judyeldin@yahoo.com).

Read the article: <http://reformjudaismmag.org/Articles/index.cfm?id=2942#Bat>

- **Start or support a tutoring program in your congregation.** Arrange to connect volunteers from the congregation with an existing tutoring program in another congregation or the community or one that your place of worship creates. If you start your own program, look for a particular need to fill. For example, are there students with learning disabilities or other special needs for whom you could provide qualified tutors? Are the tutoring needs greatest for younger children or teens in your schools? Could you set up a foreign language tutoring program to help children with French or Spanish classes, or are there many students who speak other languages that need extra help with English?
- **Start or provide volunteers for a mentoring program.** Provide one-on-one supportive friendships for children and youths. Big Brothers/Big Sisters of America at (215) 567-7000 is a national organization that supports mentoring.
- **Provide free tax filing assistance to low-income working families.** Before the Children's Sabbath, find out about Volunteer Income Tax Assistance (VITA) sites in your community or other places that are conducting outreach and enrollment efforts to help low-income families receive the benefits for which they are eligible. On the Children's Sabbath, sign up volunteers for these existing outreach projects. To find a nearby VITA site:
 - Call the IRS at 1 (800) TAX-1040 or 1 (800) 849-1040.
 - Visit The AARP's website (<http://www.aarp.org/money/taxaide>) or call their toll-free hotline for information: 1 (888) 227-7669.
 - Visit the American Bar Association's website at <http://www.abanet.org/tax/sites.html>.
 - Ahead of time, arrange for a trainer to come and train members as VITA volunteers to work at local VITA sites to assist eligible families in getting the Earned Income Tax Credits they are due.

Bridge to Benefits (www.bridgetobenefits.org) is a multi-state project run by Children's Defense Fund-Minnesota to improve the well-being of families and individuals by linking them to public work support programs and tax credits.

To see if you or someone else may be eligible for public work support programs, users click a "start" button on the website home page to use the Eligibility Screening Tool. Bridge to Benefits will ask a few simple questions but will NOT ask for information that identifies the user. It's easy, confidential, and free!

Partner with Other Places of Worship and Community Organizations to Combine Resources, Meet Needs, and Build Connections.

Working through the appropriate staff and committees in your own place of worship, assess the interests, resources, needs, and partners available for a new or expanded effort to improve the lives of children:

- 1. Interest:** What is your congregation already doing to serve or advocate on behalf of children? How are their needs included and met through your place of worship? What past or current efforts have been most successful? Why do you think that is? What past or current efforts were not successful? Why do you think that is? What methods, programs, and events have been most successful in motivating and empowering members of your congregation to act on behalf of others?
- 2. Resources:** What resources are available in your congregation to meet the needs of children and families? What resources are already committed to children and social justice? What are potential resources that might be committed? In addition to financial resources, consider your physical resources — buildings, vans, playground, audiovisual, and the like. Think about your people resources. What kinds of skills, experience, contacts, time, and interests do your members have that could be contributed to an effort to help children and families?
- 3. Needs:** What are the needs of children and families in your community, state, and nation that your congregation might feel called to help meet? There are many resources to help you develop an understanding of urgent unmet needs your congregation might address. Those that touch members themselves are powerfully motivating. There are also needs that are evident through the media and others identified by community organizations. Conversation with community members is a vital way to learn what problems are pressing on others but about which your members might be unaware.
- 4. Partners:** Who in the community might become your partners in a new effort or join you to strengthen an existing effort? Concern for children is a powerful unifying force. Make the most of this opportunity to build relationships with other places of worship and with community organizations and leaders to improve the lives of children. Develop a list of effective organizations, agencies, and programs in the community that might welcome a partnership with your place of worship. Develop another list of other places of worship that might be good partners. Each partner might bring something different to the relationship — varied interests and resources, different reach into communities that would benefit from the new services or effort, unique perspectives on the problems and what is needed. Invest time in listening to and learning from each other, and developing a shared plan in which all feel ownership.

Tips on Writing a Letter to the Editor

*(Adapted from Reclaiming Our Democracy:
Healing the Break Between People and Government by Sam Daley-Harris)*

- 1. Respond to a recent news story or editorial.** A good letter might begin, for example, “Your recent article, “Employment Falls and Poverty Rises,” underscores the urgency of investing in early childhood development. Ensuring that children, especially children from low-income families, enter school ready to learn and succeed is the best poverty-prevention strategy we have to break the cycle for the youngest generation.”
- 2. Make your letter short.** Check your local paper for submission criteria; a letter should contain 100-200 words. Provide a few striking facts that might surprise an editor or a reader. For example, “In our rich nation, over 1 in 4 children under the age of 5 is poor. Only 48 percent of poor children are ready to learn at the age of 5, compared to 75 percent of children from middle- and upper-income families.” The Children’s Defense Fund’s website, www.childrensdefense.org, is a good source of information.
- 3. Use descriptive words that communicate your passion about the issue.** Don’t be dry. For example, “Could we imagine looking into the innocent eyes of a baby or the curious eyes of a toddler or the hopeful eyes of a preschool age child, and saying that they are not worth our nation’s investing in a safe, high quality early childhood program so they will enter school ready to learn? Every child is equally valuable and all children deserve our investment in their earliest, vital years of development.”
- 4. Offer a solution to the problem.** For example, “Members of Congress must work together to pass the Strong Start for America’s Children Act which will invest in the early childhood development of our nation’s most vulnerable babies, toddlers, and preschoolers. Ensuring that all children enter school ready to learn and succeed is the best poverty prevention strategy we have. Investing in early childhood development is the right thing to do and the smart thing to do.”
- 5. Review your letter.** Re-read your letter and check for any spelling and grammatical mistakes before you submit it. Include your address, email, and day and evening phone numbers; editors often verify the identity of the writer before they print the letter.

Tips on Writing Letters to Your Elected Officials and Members of Congress

- **Be brief.** Address only one issue. A letter need not be longer than four or five sentences.
- **Be specific.** If you are writing about specific legislation, include its bill number or title.
- **Write your own letter,** adapting a sample letter as appropriate. Form letters do not receive the same attention as individually written letters.
- **Be positive and constructive.** Try to say something complimentary in the first paragraph. It is just as important to thank members of Congress for voting the right way as to criticize them for voting the wrong way.
- **Say in your own words** why the legislation matters to you and to children. Clearly state your reason for supporting or opposing the bill or issue you are writing about.
- **If you have a personal story about children in poverty, without health coverage, or in the pipeline to prison, consider sharing it.** These personal stories are the most effective way for your legislator to truly understand the issue and the impact it has on real lives.
- **If you have particular knowledge or expertise, describe it.** Relating the bill to local or state conditions is especially effective.
- **If you wish, feel free to include a copy of a report, a newsletter story, or a local survey to support your arguments.** Don't presume that the legislator is aware of such information, even if you think it is common knowledge.
- **Be sure to sign your name legibly and include your address and telephone number** so your representative or senator can respond.
- **If possible, fax the letter** (since postal mail may be delayed by screening procedures) or **send the letter electronically.** Your legislator will likely have a link on his or her website directing constituents to "contact us." To find the contact information for your legislator, visit www.congressmerge.com.

Sample Email on the *Strong Start for America's Children Act*

Background: High-quality early childhood development and learning interventions serve as a buffer to the negative effects of poverty and provide a foundation for future success with lifelong benefits, particularly for the poorest and most vulnerable children. Studies have shown that children enrolled in high quality early childhood programs are more likely to graduate from high school, hold a job, make more money and be less likely to commit a crime than their peers who do not participate.

The Strong Start for America's Children Act invests in and encourages expansions of high quality home visiting programs, Early Head Start, Head Start, child care, pre-kindergarten (pre-K) and quality kindergarten programs to reach poor and low-income children birth through age 5.

Sample Email Message for Senators and Representatives:

Message line: Co-Sponsor the Strong Start for America's Children Act

Dear [*name of your Senator or Representative*],

I urge you to co-sponsor the Strong Start for America's Children Act. The legislation invests in and encourages expansions of high quality home visiting programs, Early Head Start, Head Start, child care, pre-kindergarten (pre-K) and quality kindergarten programs to reach poor and low-income children birth through age 5.

These investments are the right thing to do and the smart thing to do. Studies show that for every dollar invested in early childhood, society receives an annual 7-10 percent return throughout a child's life. We all need to contribute to make it happen. We all stand to benefit.

Sincerely,
[Your Name]
[Your Address]
[City, State ZIP]
[Your Email]

Step-by-Step Sample Letter

(Please note: The examples written in the parentheses are meant as examples only. Please feel free to write your letter in your own words to reflect your concerns, experience, and perspective.)

The Honorable _____
United States Senate
Washington, DC 20510

Or:

The Honorable _____
United States House of Representatives
Washington, DC 20515

Dear Senator _____: or Dear Representative _____:

- 1. Introduce yourself.** (My name is Janet Doe and I am a member of Mytown Congregation in Mytown. I appreciate your commitment to public service and desire to do the right thing.)
- 2. Share your concern for children.** (One in five children under age 5 is poor — nearly 5 million children in our rich nation. Many children in low-income families do not have access to high quality early childhood development and learning opportunities, putting them at a disadvantage from the start. Only 48 percent of poor children are ready to learn at age 5, compared to 75 percent of children from families with moderate and high incomes.)
- 3. Share your vision for children.** (Every child has equal value and all children should enter school ready to learn and succeed. High quality early childhood development and learning opportunities effectively prepare children to succeed in school and in life, and provide a substantial economic return to society. A safe, nurturing, stable and stimulating environment is crucial to ensuring that a child's brain develops appropriately during these earliest years of rapid development. I am committed to seeing our nation realize the potential of all of our children and believe it is time to invest in the success of our most vulnerable children.)
- 4. Talk about solutions and urge action on them.** (I urge you to co-sponsor the Strong Start for America's Children Act. The legislation invests in and encourages expansions of high quality home visiting programs, Early Head Start, Head Start, child care, pre-kindergarten (pre-K) and quality kindergarten programs to reach poor and low-income children birth through age 5. I urge you to co-sponsor the legislation.)
- 5. Thank the member of Congress and ask for a reply.** (Thank you and I look forward to hearing how you will take leadership on this vital concern.)

Sincerely,

Your name

Your address

Your telephone number

How to address your envelope:

The Honorable _____
United States Senate
Washington, DC 20510

Or:

The Honorable _____
United States House of Representatives
Washington, DC 20515

Meeting with Your Legislators

Before Your Visit

Begin planning for your visit. Don't worry if you have butterflies in your stomach at the thought of meeting with your legislator for the first time. It would be unusual if you didn't. Know that the best way to communicate with your legislator is to make a personal visit. You probably will enjoy the experience — and the legislator will appreciate the time you spent communicating your views. So, take a deep breath and begin planning! First, decide on the issues you want to discuss.

Make an appointment. When making an appointment, explain what issue you would like to discuss. If the legislator is unavailable, the aide who deals with your issue often will be knowledgeable and influential in helping to form the lawmaker's views. Don't feel slighted if you end up meeting with the aide. He or she can be very influential and, if your meeting goes well, may also encourage your legislator to meet with you in person the next time.

Do your homework. Study the legislator's voting record on a number of issues, using CDF's nonpartisan Congressional Voting Record, cdfactioncouncil.org and other sources, so you can comment on something positive, if possible, and know if the particular issue is one on which the legislator tends to agree or disagree with you. If there is a bill that interests you, know its status and whether your legislator has taken a position on it.

Remember the experts! Parents, grandparents, service providers, educators, religious and business leaders, police officers, doctors and nurses, and others who witness children's needs on a daily basis are children's best advocates. They really are the experts when it comes to how bills and policies will affect children, and it's important that policy makers have a wide variety of people to call upon when they have questions about their work's impact on children. Children's advocacy groups often seek out these everyday experts to present the most compelling information during legislative visits. Talk about personal experiences you have had, if possible, to illustrate your point.

Be prepared. Before meeting with the legislator or aide, plan and organize your presentation, and practice what you are going to say. If you are going with other people to the meeting, get together beforehand to make sure that you all have the same purpose. Take along helpful information to back up your arguments: newspaper articles about the problems children face, statistics, or a fact sheet (CDF can provide some of the information you need. Visit CDF's website at www.childrendefense.org).

During Your Visit

Make your message concise. You may think your meeting is for 30 minutes and then arrive to find the legislator's schedule so tight that you get only five minutes. Know exactly what you want to say and be prepared to say it quickly, if circumstances demand that.

Present solutions. People often feel overwhelmed by problems they consider too massive and diverse for corrective action, so don't just talk about the problem. Share one or two concrete ideas for ways to improve the lives of children in your community. Tell your legislator what it will take to ensure that no child is left behind.

Talk about what works. Using success stories of real children and families who are being helped by Head Start, child care, job training, or health insurance will strengthen your argument and counter claims that all government programs are ineffective.

Search for common ground. Don't be exclusive or judgmental. Keeping in mind the wide range of viewpoints in Congress and in every community and state legislature, frame your messages carefully to include words and themes that will reach new audiences and persuade them to become new allies. Children's advocates care as much as anyone about efficiency, accountability, fiscal responsibility, and personal responsibility. Use themes like these to frame your message.

Be honest. It's fine to say you don't know the answer to a question and to promise to provide information later, by phone, fax, or e-mail. This also gives you another opportunity to contact the office.

Following Your Visit

Build a relationship. The better your communication, the more seriously you will be taken, and the more willing the representative and his or her staff will be to rely upon you and your judgments.

Follow up your visit with a letter thanking the legislator for the time spent listening to your concerns. Enclose any documentation you had agreed to provide to bolster your position, and briefly restate your views.

Provide additional information. Send articles, write letters with further information, or offer assistance in thinking through solutions that could work in your community.

Call periodically with updates.

Invite them to speak. Invite the representative or the staff person who handles children's issues to speak before your congregation or a community group in which you are involved.

Invite them to a site visit. Invite the legislator to visit a successful child-serving program with which you work, such as an after-school program, conflict resolution program, or Head Start class.

Show broad support for your concerns. If your legislator or aide disagrees or is noncommittal, don't threaten or argue after you have made your case, because it is counter-productive. A better strategy is to plan another visit with others to show more community support for your position, to put together a bunch of letters from constituents, or to think of another tactic such as a letter to the editor. Persistence often pays.

Watch how your legislator votes and respond. If the legislator votes with your position on the issue, recognize that vote with a written "thank you." Such recognition may influence his or her next vote on children's issues. It also lets your legislator know that you are watching closely. If the legislator votes against your position, write or call to express your disappointment, and urge reconsideration of the issue the next time it comes up for a vote.