



Building a Country Fit for All Children: Starting the Conversation

In the absence of a clear, easy, feel-good answer to what we need to do so that all children can live out their God-given potential, the below model offers a place to start, re-energize and expand how you and your faith community engage in the Children's Movement. The ability to advocate for all our children relies on our capacity to articulate our moral responsibilities, understand our environment, identify the needs of our children and their families, participate in our political process, and create pressure on society to recognize injustice. The power of the Children's Movement to create social change through advocacy increases as we increase our capacity to relate with the Creator and creation as well as organize others to participate in advocacy work. Therefore, we must both work to sustain our own action as well as engage those around us.

1. **Connect with your core faith beliefs about the extent to which you are responsible to care and protect all children.** Pray about, discern and discuss the following questions:
 - A. What specific human rights does God call us to extend to all people simply because we are all children of God (examples include access to health care, housing, education, food, clothing, etc.)?
 - B. How does my child advocacy ministry embody, and how does it fall short of The Golden Rule that calls us to do unto others as we would have them do unto us?
 - C. How can I continue to rely on God's love for me when I am overwhelmed by the hurt and pain our children face everyday?
 - D. To what extent am I called, and is my house of worship called, to work for justice and the health of all children?

Tips:

- Share these questions with your religious leaders, faith community, regional and national religious partners.
- Request that your religious leaders incorporate and respond to these questions in his or her messages, writings, and other communications.
- Raise these questions into educational sessions, prayer groups, meetings, and conversations during social gatherings at your place of worship.

2. **Increase awareness of the issues affecting children through educating yourself and your community.** On your own or in partnership with others in your congregation and community, look for answers to the following questions and others that arise in the process.
 - A. How many children are uninsured in your faith community, city, state and country?
 - B. How does the high school graduation rates compare to the youth incarceration rates at the local, state and national levels?
 - C. What social/governmental/bureaucratic and other barriers keep children from access to needed goods and services?
 - D. What healthy, safe and affordable activities are available for children and youth during the summer and after school?

Tips:

- Work with your local Department of Health and Human Services, schools, other child care providers and other child advocates to answer these questions.

- Schedule visits to local service providers such as area hospitals and schools to see how they work with low-income families.
- Share the information with your faith community through bulletins and small gatherings.
- Write letters to the editor of your local papers and encourage them to investigate and educate the public on these concerns.

3. Get involved in the lives of children and their families.

- A. Establish a personal relationship with children and their families in your faith community and neighborhood so that they know you are available as a caring resource. As you are able, you might offer to assist in taking a child to the doctor or caring for a child who has to stay home sick while the parents are at work.
- B. Donate time, money, and/or other resources to organizations serving the needs of children in your area.
- C. Collaborate with various community organizations and child advocates to host a health fair to ensure all children who are eligible for Medicaid and SCHIP are enrolled. Visit www.coveringkidsandfamilies.org for more information.
- D. Work with your faith community to create and encourage physically, mentally, emotionally and spiritually healthy environments for all children. Free your neighborhoods and homes of trash, guns, drugs, and hate. Fill them with books, toys, nutritious food, creativity, hope and love.

Tips:

- We all interact with children and families in our faith communities and neighborhoods. Talk with these children and their caregivers directly to find out what they need and want to better their lives.
- Take into account different family structures: both parents work, single-parent household, blended families, foster families, and families where children are being raised by grandparents or other relatives.
- Again, work with your local Department of Health and Human Services, schools, other child care providers, and other advocates to care for and protect our children.
- Recognizing that we don't have the capacity to meet all the needs of children immediately, focus on being the best solution you can be one step at a time.

4. Be a voice for children in the democratic process.

- A. Vote in every election based in part on the candidate's priority of improving the health and wellbeing of all children.
- B. Help your elected officials represent you properly by constantly communicating with them about the CDF's Healthy Child Campaign and Cradle to Prison Pipeline® Campaign through e-mail, postal mail, faxes, phone calls, and personal visits.
- C. Establish a relationship with your local, county, state and federal elected officials to a point that they know your name, your faith community's name, and your community's commitment to justice.
- D. Host candidate forums and town hall meetings to talk about the issues affecting children and get candidates and citizens to publicly pledge to work for a healthier tomorrow.

Tips:

- Do not feel like you have to re-invent the wheel. Partner with other advocacy organizations to get updates on future legislative votes, tips on getting your faith community involved, communication tools, talking points, etc.
- Remember that this is a nation "of the people, by the people, and for the people" and YOU ARE THE PEOPLE. Elected officials are eager to hear from you so that they know how to represent you so they can remain in office. Know that there are plenty of special interest groups lined up to talk to your officials if you choose not to take advantage of these opportunities.

- Remember that you don't need to be an expert to speak up for children. You don't need to know all the ins and outs of the legislative process; advocacy organizations can help you figure out who your representatives are, how to contact them, and when your communication will make the biggest difference. When you communicate with your elected officials' staff about how you want them to vote, they don't expect you to be an expert either and they won't ask you "tough questions" if you call to register your opinion; they do want to know how you feel about an upcoming vote, so feel comfortable telling them.
- Hold your elected officials accountable for their votes and actions. Express both your appreciation and/or disappointment.
- In thinking about which form of communication to engage in, the rule of thumb is that the more effort you have to exert, the longer you sustain your efforts and the broader your coalition, the more attention your communication garners and the more effective you will be.

5. Protest

A. After other negotiation methods fail and when the political system is not enacting justice fast enough, organize and participate in marches, sit-ins (pray-ins), consumer boycotts, hunger strikes, work strikes, refusal to pay taxes or other actions of non-violent civil disobedience.

Tips:

- Before selecting a specific action, be able to clearly articulate how the action connects with the intended target and his/her/its motivation for continuing the status quo.
- Create a clear message and media plan for your protest to ensure it gets as much publicity for your cause as possible.
- Protest can be about moving policies toward justice, ending a particular social or business practice, pulling the public out of complacency, and/or capturing the public's attention on a particular issue.
- Be aware and prepare for the possible negative responses to your selected actions, such as public shunning, imprisonment, violence, etc.

Helpful Reminders to Sustain Yourself and Your Community in the Children's Sabbaths Movement

1. **Manage expectations.** Recognize that this work is hard and requires commitment and consistent efforts. Injustice has existed for thousands of years. The Blessed Community will not be created in a day. The keys are to find God and joy in the struggle and focus on being the solution you can be.
2. **Engage in advocacy in ways that reflect your skill level, interests, and availability, and remember that every step, regardless of how small the step, is important and worthy of celebration.** The Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. affirmed, "If you cannot fly, drive; if you cannot drive, run; if you cannot run, walk; if you cannot walk, crawl. But keep moving." You are the one you've been waiting for! Take on more responsibility as you achieve and celebrate success. Feeling overwhelmed and/or frustrated are indications that you need to take a step back or bring in some additional help.
3. **Remember that you are not alone!** We will only get there if we get there together. Join or create coalitions among people of faith, service providers, and staff or supporters of advocacy organizations to share the load, encourage each other, and celebrate together. Also, be in contact with the national, regional, or local staff, committees, or programs for justice, social concerns, and children and families within your faith tradition.
4. **Treat everyone as a child of God.** Everyone you come in contact with (children, volunteers, religious leaders, elected officials, celebrities) is human and is faced with difficult choices. All of us have the desire to love and be loved, as well as the capacity to act against God and neighbor. To be the best we can be, we need to answer God's call to always choose love. There are always ways of expressing ideas and beliefs so as not to dehumanize others; sometimes it takes extra creativity and patience.