



# Changing *the* Conversation Around **CHILD ABUSE** *and* **NEGLECT**



**A STAKEHOLDERS ROUND TABLE**



# Introduction

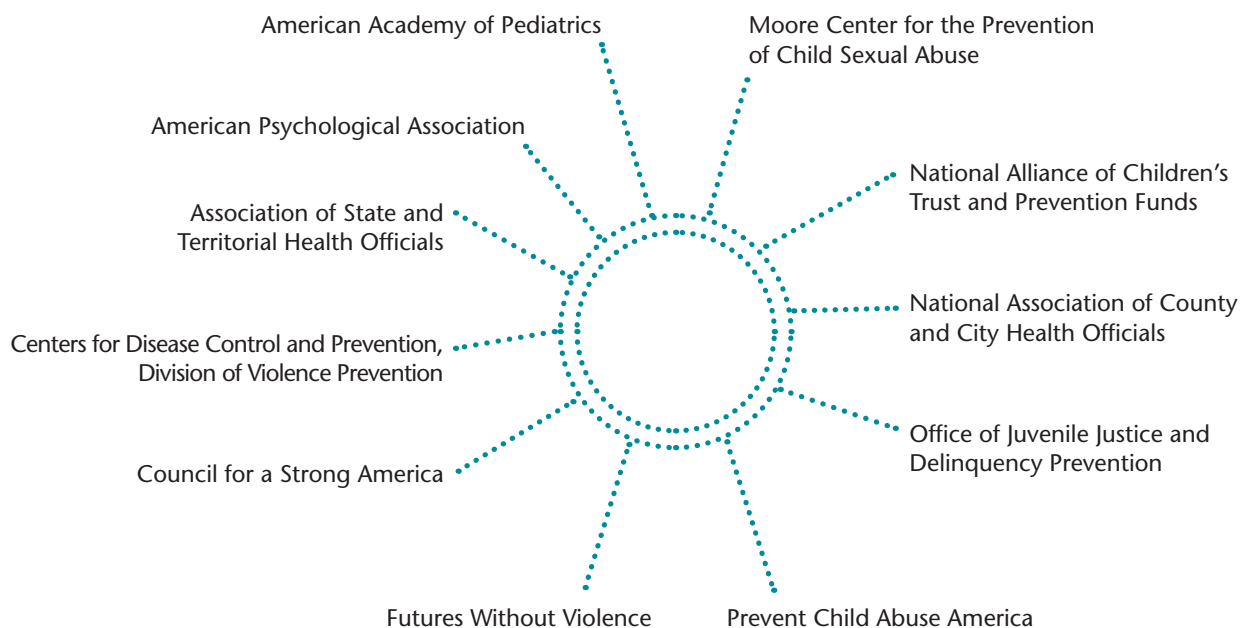
In the United States, an estimated 702,000 children were found to be victims of child abuse and neglect in 2014.<sup>1</sup> Many federal, state, and local public health and national organizations work to prevent child abuse and neglect; however, there is currently not a single collaborative effort to coordinate consistent child abuse and neglect messaging across these organizations. Also, current messaging efforts persistently focus on individual actions rather than a public health prevention approach.

In an effort to address these gaps, the National Association of County and City Health Officials (NACCHO), in collaboration with the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention's (CDC's) Division of Violence Prevention (DVP), convened a small subset of national stakeholders in child abuse and neglect prevention in Washington, DC, on March 29–30, 2016. The goal of this meeting was to

- Identify the landscape of child abuse and neglect prevention messaging activities among participating national partner organizations;
- Increase the group's understanding of message frames to communicate child abuse and neglect prevention messages;
- Identify opportunities to coordinate and cross-promote child abuse and neglect prevention messages to multiple audiences; and
- Inform development of a proposal for a large-scale messaging campaign to address child abuse and neglect prevention.

The meeting also allowed NACCHO to identify gaps in messages for multi-sector audiences and create a framework for a coordinated national communication strategy around child abuse and neglect prevention. Eleven partners, with a total of 20 attendees, participated the roundtable meeting (Figure 1).

**FIGURE 1** | *Child Abuse and Neglect Stakeholder Roundtable Organizations Represented*



Lynn Davey, owner of Davey Strategies, facilitated discussions about the use of more coordinated, evidence-based messaging to improve the public's understanding of the causes of and consequences and solutions to child abuse and neglect. Lynn Davey also led discussions about the frames currently in use in public communications about child abuse and neglect prevention and had participants identify gaps in current child abuse and neglect messages. In addition, NACCHO facilitated a discussion among the stakeholders to identify strategies and actions that would promote collaboration among the national partners.

This report outlines information and discussions that occurred during the roundtable meeting, describes the challenges inherent in creating effective prevention messages about child abuse and neglect, and explores how national organizations can improve public understanding of child abuse and neglect. This report also provides recommendations on developing a national child abuse and neglect message campaign and steps stakeholders can take, together, to disseminate messages about the prevention of child abuse and neglect.

## Framing Primary Prevention Messages for Child Abuse and Neglect

### CHALLENGES OF FRAMING CHILD ABUSE AND NEGLECT PREVENTION

How issues are framed in public discourse influences how people think about the causes of and solutions to those issues. Both media coverage and popular culture portrayals of child abuse and neglect (particularly sexual abuse) have tended to focus narrowly on victims and perpetrators. Further, the media environment tends toward sensationalism and stories of harm. These kinds of widely accessible stories narrow people's focus to victims and perpetrators and leave little room for considering structural causes and solutions. It

is no wonder the public does not readily think that child abuse and neglect can be prevented and tends to blame parents for failing to keep their children safe from harm.<sup>2</sup> Contributing to this narrative is the fact that many national campaigns suggest, at least implicitly if not intentionally, that the causes reside solely in characteristics of the perpetrators, and the solution lies within individual behavior change (including bystander intervention).

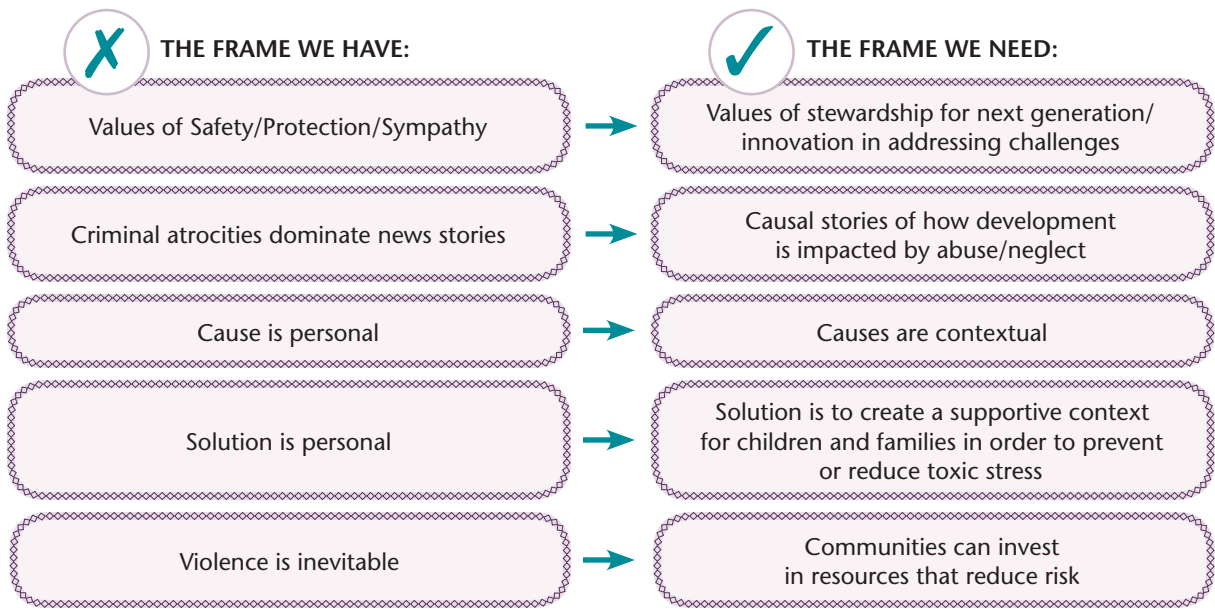
How do we get to a collective understanding that we are all responsible for the conditions each child is in? We **create** the geographies of disadvantage. All children are at risk for child abuse and neglect, but not all children have the same risk.

This presents a challenge for practitioners and advocates of prevention who wish to gain support for community-based and collective solutions to prevent child abuse and neglect. Fortunately, framing research suggests that if we deploy certain framing strategies, we can improve understanding of complex social problems.<sup>3</sup> The messaging recommendations in this document are those that have been shown to significantly improve the public's understanding of

what promotes and derails healthy development in children and how to prevent abuse and neglect.<sup>4 5 6</sup>

As noted, a great deal of public communication about child abuse and neglect is framed in terms of safety and protection of children; focuses on narrow, personal causes and solutions; and often invokes crisis. While these strategies may have worked to raise public consciousness about the seriousness of nature of child abuse and neglect, public health practitioners need different strategies to improve the public's understanding of prevention and promote collective, systemic solutions. Figure 2 summarizes the typical frames used in child abuse and neglect messaging and contrasts them with the evidence-based frames needed to strengthen community understanding of child abuse and neglect.

**FIGURE 2** | *The Frame We Have versus The Frame We Need*



## FRAMING PREVENTION TO IMPROVE PUBLIC UNDERSTANDING

As Mathew Nisbet describes, “Frames are interpretive storylines that set a specific train of thought in motion, communicating why an issue might be a problem, who or what might be responsible for it, and what should be done about it.”<sup>7</sup> The order of this interpretive storyline matters immensely. All communications should explicitly answer the following four questions for audiences, in this order:

- Why does this matter?
- What is the problem?
- How is it solved?
- Who is responsible for solving it?

Many communications begin the conversation with what the problem is, failing to establish what is at stake and why people should be concerned about the issue. It is imperative that framing not leave the audience to decide “why” the issue matters.

Effective issue frames answer these questions in particular ways. They answer, “Why does this matter?” with an appeal to values, and answer “What is the problem, how is it solved, and who is responsible for solving it?” by telling a causal story that connects the dots among these elements.

As Rokeach defines it, a value expresses desirable social and personal conditions.<sup>9</sup> Values are important framing devices because values are “powerful and efficient in shaping audience reasoning as they provide heuristics that guide the understanding of complex policy issues.”<sup>10</sup> If we seek to have audiences understand the public and systemic dimensions of issues, communications must begin by appealing to *collective* values—equal opportunity, interdependence, stewardship, prosperity—in contrast to *individualistic* values such as sympathy, care, or personal responsibility.

Examples of using values and causal stories by intentionally answering these why, what, how, and who questions, with child abuse and neglect prevention as the primary outcome, are provided in Table 1. These are themes that public communications might emphasize and are derived from framing science that has shown this framing strategy to significantly improve support for policies that support the prevention of child abuse and neglect.<sup>4, 5, 6</sup>

For more on causal stories, see *Policy Paradox: The Art of Political Decision Making* by Deborah Stone.<sup>8</sup>

**TABLE 1** | *Examples of Why, What, How, and Who Questions and Public Communication Themes*

QUESTION	THEME
Why does this matter?	Our future prosperity depends on how well we, as adults, foster the healthy development of our youngest generation. Raising healthy, competent children who will lead our communities tomorrow requires smart and innovative thinking today.
What is the problem/challenge?	Recent advances in developmental science provide us with a blueprint for how to ensure children get what they need for healthy development.
	We now know that early experiences literally build the architecture of the brain and that stable, responsive interactions with caring adults at home and in the community are the key ingredients in building a solid foundation for future growth (brain architecture, shaped by interactions with adults)
	We also know that not all children have access to the kinds of experiences that will most benefit their development— some children are exposed to conditions or events that are so severe and persistent that they produce toxic stress responses that damage the brain’s developing architecture (toxic stress that weakens brain architecture)
How do we solve it?*	Providing the kinds of experiences in early care, education, and family settings that support parents and provide sturdy foundations for children’s development can greatly reduce child abuse and neglect.
	Invest in and support the programs that provide the resources and support shown to prevent or alleviate the conditions known to produce toxic stress.
Who can solve it?	Have an “ask.” Explain what your audience can do to be part of the solution.

*\*After setting up the broader child development solution, communicators can then point to an evidence-based solution or set of solutions for which you are trying to improve understanding and support.*

## CONSIDERATIONS FOR CREATIVE DEVELOPMENT OF COORDINATED MESSAGING CAMPAIGNS

The goal of a collaborative messaging effort should be to create coordinated campaigns that are grounded in evidence-based messaging—messaging that has been shown to improve understanding of the causes and solutions to child abuse and neglect and strengthen support for policies and programs.

## RECOMMENDED MESSAGE PLATFORM

The existing framing research on early childhood issues, including framing of child abuse and neglect prevention,<sup>6</sup> has made it clear that explaining both what shapes and derails development is essential to improving understanding of the need for policies and programs that support children's well-being. Specifically, the research cited here provides substantial evidence supporting the following translation tools (i.e., the metaphors of brain architecture, serve and return interactions, and toxic stress) in increasing support for child and family policy and programs. For that reason, the following message platform is recommended for the basis of any campaign:

Our nation's future prosperity depends on how well we provide for the healthy development of the next generation. We know that the brain's architecture is built over time and from the bottom up, much like a house, and that exposure to violence and trauma can cause toxic stress responses that damage brain architecture, with long-term effects on health, learning and behavior. But research also tells us that safe, stable, nurturing relationships and experiences with adults at home and in the community can buffer toxic stress, preventing or reversing its effects. That is why it is essential for communities to put in place strategies that can help prevent such adverse experiences from becoming toxic.

## EXECUTIONAL CONSIDERATIONS

The campaign should stay away from a focus on individual responsibility both in the causal definition, or the solution proposed (the WHAT and HOW questions). Such strategies have been shown to increase the likelihood that the public will attribute responsibility for the cause of and solution to a social problem to individuals portrayed in the communication.<sup>11, 12</sup> These strategies also obscure the public, systemic, and contextual factors that contribute to social problems, rather than illuminating them, which is needed for their resolution.

It would be helpful if organizational partners spent some time identifying thematic stories that could be used in the campaign to highlight effective policies and programs. Thematic stories focuses on trends overtime, and highlighting contexts and environments rather than focusing on the individual or episodic stories (e.g., the personal story of victim, or perpetrator, of abuse or neglect).<sup>12</sup>

The campaign should not simply present but translate developmental and neuroscience using tested metaphors noted in the message platform above.

Visual treatments and overall tone should be positive and engaging, not dark and foreboding. They should be expressive of the framing in the message platform. Crisis frames tend to disengage, not engage people, which is why it is much more effective to adopt a tone that appeals to ingenuity and innovation in solving difficult problems. In sum, the tone and visual elements of the campaign should do nothing to suggest this is a crisis that cannot be solved.

It is important that any final "ask" of the campaign should inspire collective action and community-based solutions to resolve the problem of child abuse and neglect, not solely or primarily interpersonal action. Campaigns with an "ask" of adults to change/improve how they interact with young children are missing an opportunity to build a broader coalition of support and get to lasting societal solutions.

For examples of framing key scientific concepts about child development see the Harvard University, Center on the Developing Child website at <http://developingchild.harvard.edu/science/key-concepts/>

# Child Abuse and Neglect Messaging: Stakeholder Roundtable Perspectives

Public health, social services, and criminal justice sectors have done a lot of work to frame the issue and create public awareness about primary prevention of child abuse and neglect. Through a facilitated process, national stakeholders, including CDC's Division of Violence Prevention, discussed organizational child abuse and neglect prevention messaging activities, gaps in current messages, and identified recommendations for future collaboration on child abuse and neglect prevention messages. This section of the report shares the perspectives of national stakeholders to provide context for NACCHO's recommendations about engaging partners in national messaging campaigns to prevent child abuse and neglect.

Roundtable participants reported engaging in a range of activities to prevent child abuse and neglect; from supporting state and local governmental public health agencies, providing technical assistance to health care providers to address child abuse and neglect, and developing complex messaging campaigns to educate the broader public about child abuse and neglect and the dangers of not preventing the issue. The roundtable participants identified a number of ways the issue of child abuse and neglect is generally framed. Primary issue frames focused on all forms of violence, abuse and neglect (i.e., physical, sexual, and emotional) and included exposure to violence and impact of trauma, damage to the child's developing brain, the lifelong consequences of child abuse and neglect, toxic stress, and, broadly, violence against children.

## EXPLORING OPPORTUNITIES AND GAPS IN CURRENT MESSAGING

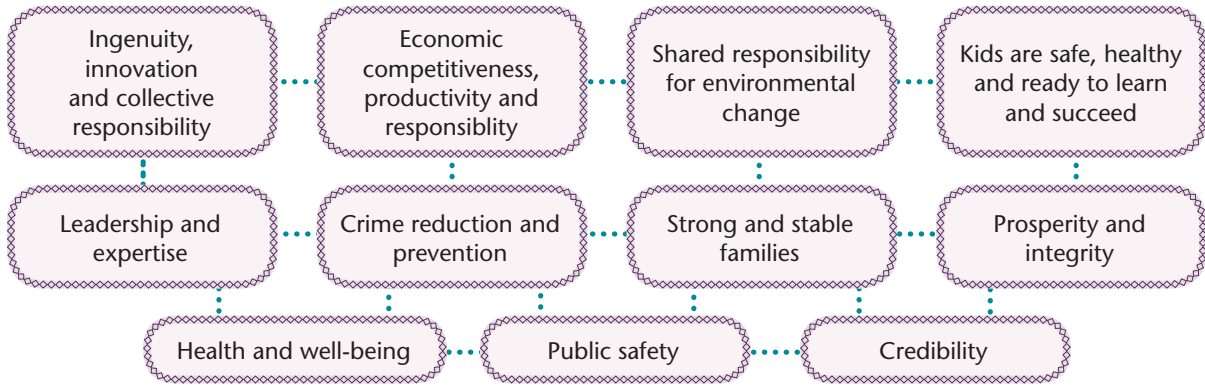
Understanding stakeholders' current messaging (both message strategies and message themes) about child abuse and neglect is a necessary step in identifying potential opportunities to work more collectively on messaging about child abuse and neglect prevention. During the roundtable meeting, attendees participated in a number of activities that analyzed current messaging strategies and themes. First, attendees worked to identify how different organizations are answering the "why" question—what are the values that are being promoted in current messaging, or, in other words, why should the issue be of concern? Second, attendees looked at the different ways current messaging is answering the "what," "how," and "who" questions: What is the problem, how is it solved, and who is responsible for solving it? Below is a summary of the opportunities and missed opportunities or gaps that attendees identified in current messaging.

## DEFINING WHY THIS MATTERS: VALUES IN CHILD ABUSE AND NEGLECT MESSAGING

Understanding the underlying values of child abuse and neglect messages is important to developing effective messages that convey those values. Through a facilitated workshop, roundtable participants identified the core values that should serve as the foundation for child abuse and neglect messaging. Figure 3 outlines the primary values identified by the group.



**FIGURE 3** | *Child Abuse and Neglect Messaging Values*



## DEFINING WHAT THE PROBLEM IS

Effective child abuse and neglect messages should adequately define the problems that need to be addressed, including causal factors that increase risk for child abuse and neglect. Current child abuse and neglect messages follow a number of themes, addressing prevention, economic impact, public safety concerns, and child health and development. Table 2 captures the specific messages that roundtable participants use to define child abuse and neglect.

**TABLE 2** | *Themes and Messages Used to Define Child Abuse and Neglect*

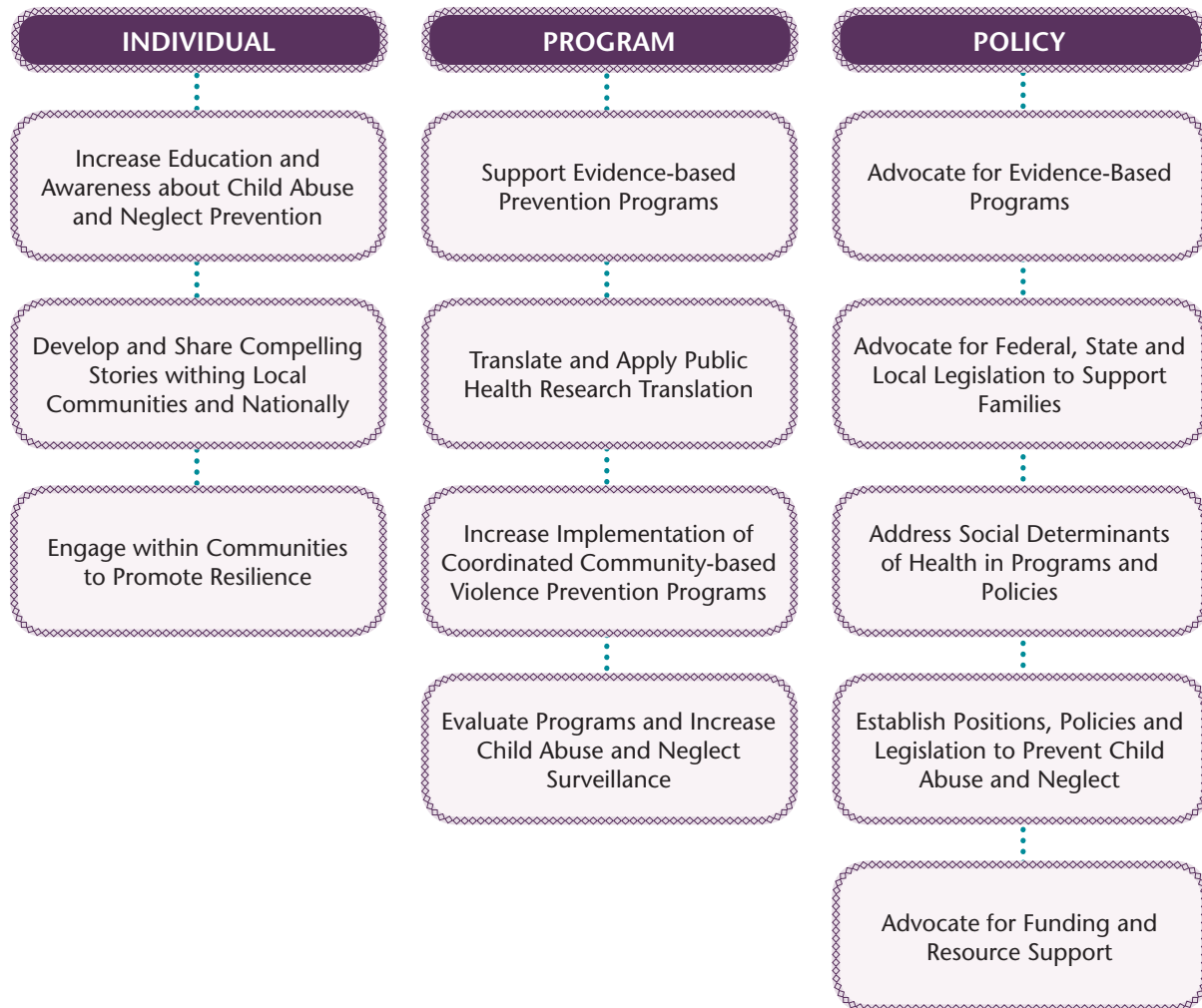
THEMES	MESSAGES
Prevention	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Child abuse and neglect is a preventable public health problem</li> <li>• Child abuse and neglect are preventable and born from lack of knowledge</li> <li>• Violence is a public health issue and preventable</li> <li>• Violence is preventable, but prevention requires structures and resources</li> </ul>
Economic	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Child abuse and neglect hurts our economy</li> <li>• Do not balance the budget on the backs of children</li> <li>• Child abuse and neglect hurts children’s abilities to become productive adults</li> </ul>
Family Impact	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Families cannot do it alone</li> </ul>
Public Safety	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Child abuse and neglect is a public safety threat</li> </ul>
Child Health and Development	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Conditions promote or derail healthy child development</li> <li>• We can stop toxic stress</li> </ul>

In addition to these themes and messages, the roundtable participants indicated that child abuse and neglect messages should broaden the picture of the problem beyond the criminal justice lens. These messages should focus on framing child abuse and neglect as a public health issue, affecting all communities. Also the group felt strongly that the problem should use the decades of work to help to define and refine the problem.

## DEFINING HOW WE SOLVE IT: PUBLIC HEALTH SOLUTIONS FOR CHILD ABUSE AND NEGLECT PREVENTION

A number of factors influence child abuse and neglect. Understanding the complex intersections between these factors allows communities, states, and the nation to better understand the range of factors that increase risk for child abuse and neglect. During the roundtable meeting, participants discussed solutions to address the factors that influence violence. Stakeholders identified solutions by individual, program, or policy strategies that impact child abuse and neglect. Figure 4 provides a broad overview of the solutions identified by stakeholders to address child abuse and neglect in the three strategy areas.

**FIGURE 4** | *Child Abuse and Neglect Solutions for the Individual, Program, and Policy*



You don't have to be everything to everyone; however working together we can reach so many more people. — Stakeholder

Stakeholders also shared that solutions to prevent child abuse and neglect should be targeted at individuals and partners in the private sector (e.g., pediatricians, business leaders, mental health practitioners, and private schools), public-sector (e.g., public health, judiciary, schools, social services, elected officials, and law enforcement), community- and faith-based leaders, and each individual in the community.

## STAKEHOLDER RECOMMENDATIONS FOR CHILD ABUSE AND NEGLECT MESSAGING STRATEGIES

During the roundtable meeting, attendees participated in a facilitated workshop to address the question: “How can we improve understanding and elicit action around the causes and solutions of child abuse and neglect and why it’s important?” Using ToP Facilitation Method®—Consensus Workshop, meeting attendees created a collective response to this question via both small and large groups. The recommendations from this workshop resulted in identification of six priority strategies:

- Prioritize evidence-based solutions to prevent child abuse and neglect;
- Orient people toward collective values;
- Illustrate a clear and comprehensive vision for child abuse and neglect messaging;
- Change the collective narrative that frames child abuse and neglect messaging;
- Develop a thematic story that illustrates the burden of child abuse and neglect and why people should care; and
- Identify and align partnerships to coordinate and collaborate to disseminate shared child abuse and neglect prevention messages.

Table 3 provides an overview of the recommended strategies and actions the stakeholder group can take to achieve them.

**TABLE 3** | *Strategy and Action Recommendations to Support Child Abuse and Neglect Messaging*

PRIORITY STRATEGIES	STAKEHOLDER ACTIONS
Prioritize Evidence-based Solutions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Use CDC’s Preventing Child Abuse and Neglect: A Technical Package for Policy, Norm, and Programmatic Activities to prioritize public health efforts to prevent child abuse and neglect</li> <li>• Catalog child abuse and neglect solutions and activities promoted by stakeholder organizations</li> <li>• Identify crossover and duplication in current/past child abuse and neglect prevention messaging</li> <li>• Select and develop priority child abuse and neglect messages based on current messaging gaps</li> </ul>
Orient People towards Collective Values	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Reframe child abuse and neglect messages to trigger the collective values frames of target populations (e.g., parents, business leaders, and clinicians)</li> <li>• Circulate among partners and the public the values identified in early childhood research</li> <li>• Deepen partner groups’ common understanding of shared values</li> </ul>
Illustrate a Clear Comprehensive Vision	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Using collective impact principles, develop a shared problem statement that addresses creating conditions that promote safe, stable, and nurturing relationships and environments for children and families</li> <li>• Update and clarify current messaging frames to reflect the collective vision of the stakeholder group</li> <li>• Develop strategies to disseminate vision messages</li> </ul>
Change Collective Narrative	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Categorize and test current narrative and language used to describe child abuse and neglect</li> <li>• Continue to develop understanding and build current body of knowledge about developing effective child abuse and neglect messaging</li> <li>• Increase understanding of barriers and challenges of developing and disseminating child abuse and neglect messaging</li> <li>• Engage partners to commit to sharing a collective child abuse and neglect messaging narrative</li> </ul>
Develop a Thematic Story	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Picture of what the system and socio-ecological model look like for the issue</li> <li>• Conduct an environmental scan of child abuse and neglect messaging to reduce duplication of efforts and identify lessons learned</li> <li>• Develop collaborative and “thematic” child abuse and neglect prevention stories and assess whether it resonates with the target audiences</li> <li>• Conduct child abuse and neglect prevention messaging research</li> </ul>

## Next Steps

NACCHO, along with CDC, will reconvene select national organizations to participate in a follow-up in-person, round-table discussion and host a series of virtual meetings on developing shared approaches and messages about primary prevention of child abuse and neglect. Building on current CDC Division of Violence Prevention efforts to prevent child abuse and neglect, NACCHO will do the following:

- Convene national partners to engage in discussion about next steps to creating a shared messaging framework to prevent child abuse and neglect;
- Identify opportunities to share and collaborate on core child abuse and neglect messages; and
- Develop an action plan, building on activities in the previous year, to discuss initiation of a public health shared messaging campaign.

Using guidance from the partner roundtable meeting, NACCHO will enhance recommendations to the CDC to support development a shared communication framework. NACCHO will also consult with the CDC to refine the framework for the messaging initiative. This planning effort will support the design of and work plan for a large-scale shared messaging framework, identify the associated costs, and identify target audiences for primary prevention messages about child abuse and neglect. NACCHO will also develop a shared framework logic model that outlines essential inputs, activities, outputs, and short- and long-term outcomes of the campaign. Logic model development and evaluation measures will be critical to the ability of the CDC and NACCHO to evaluate the success of a fully implemented shared messaging framework.

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