

USING THE POLICY TOOLBOX FOR EARLY IDENTIFICATION AND INTERVENTION

Margaret Dunkle*



Policy needn't be as hard to understand as most people think. Policy is simply a way to set priorities and allocate resources, such as funding, services and benefits. The approach described here is common-sense rather than arcane, while also being at least as precise as the policy process itself.

While this Policy Toolbox can be applied to any issue, this discussion focuses on early identification and intervention for children – especially infants and toddlers – who have problems of one sort or another.

At least 15% of all kids have special health care needs and more than 11% of school-age kids have problems serious enough to be in school special education programs.** *These numbers mean that early identification and intervention touch **or should touch** almost every family.*

Nonetheless, these issues fly below the radar and generate surprisingly little press or attention.

Why? Because most people simply don't talk about *their child* (or brother, sister, grandchild, nephew, cousin or neighbor) who has a disability, developmental delay, or mental health, behavioral or learning problem.

This lack of talk leads to a stunning lack of action, even though we know early intervention works.

POLICY...

...is the process of setting priorities and allocating resources, such as funding, services and benefits.

Improving policy requires:

- setting clear and meaningful goals,
- having a working knowledge of policy tools,
- understanding how the policy process works, and
- developing practical and effective strategies.

WHAT KINDS OF PROBLEMS ARE WE TALKING ABOUT?

We're talking about kids – very young kids – who:

- stutter or are late to speak,
- move strangely – from being a little clumsy to compulsively spinning,
- act out or melt down for no apparent reason,
- can't sit still or settle down,
- have a health problem, obvious or not,
- have autism or some other neurological condition,
- don't catch on to things as quickly as other kids,
- are always in a funk,
- don't look you in the eye,
- can't hear or see well,
- have a mother who drank or used drugs during pregnancy, or
- have been exposed to lead or some other toxic substance.

Yes, we are talking about a lot of kids...

* Margaret Dunkle is Convener of the Los Angeles County Early Identification and Intervention Group, and Senior Fellow with the Center for Health Services Research and Policy at George Washington University. Special thanks go to the California Endowment for sponsoring the initial development of the Toolbox in Los Angeles County, the Los Angeles Best Babies Network for incorporating these concepts into their work, and the Social Security Administration for providing support to move these ideas to the next level.

** (1) Los Angeles County Department of Health Services, Public Health, *Children with Special Health Care Needs*, LA Health, June 2005. These LA County data, which show that 15% of children have special health care needs, are consistent with national data, which show that 13%-16% of all children have special health care needs. (2) Federal data show that nationwide 11.6% of children ages 6-17 were in special education programs in 2004, the most recent year for which data are available. Assessed on the web on May 16, 2006: https://www.ideadata.org/tables28th/ar_1-13.xls.

AN OVERVIEW OF THE POLICY TOOLBOX

. . . WHAT IT IS . . . WHAT IT CAN AND CAN'T DO . . .

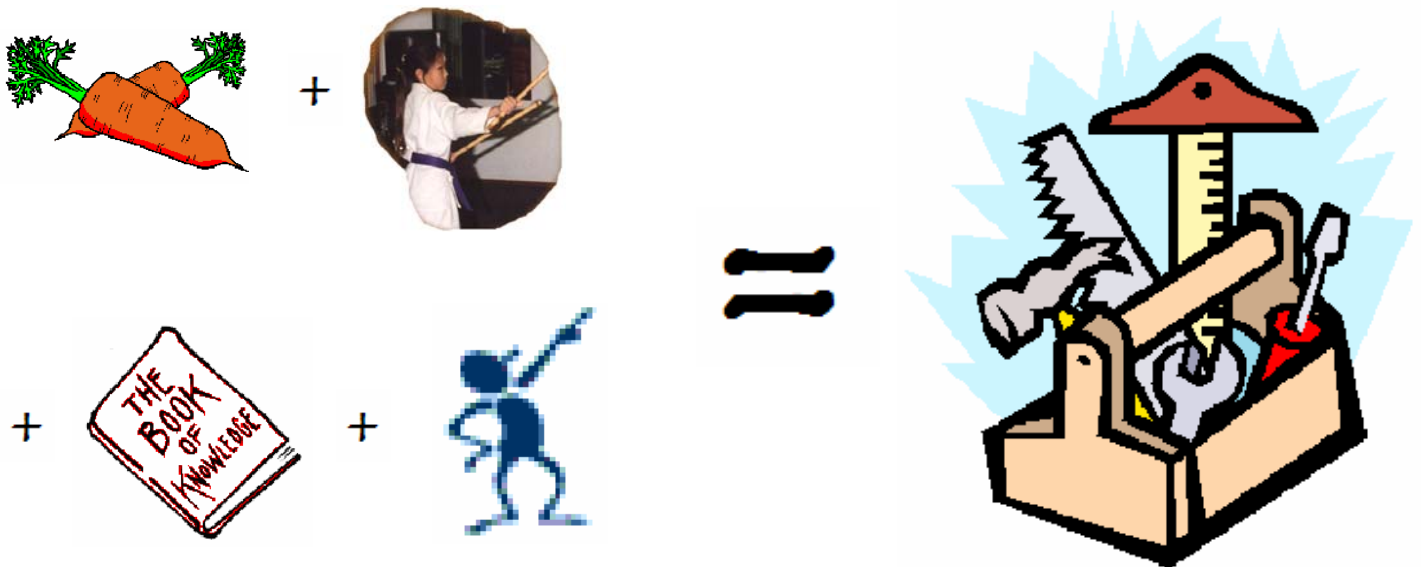
Goals and results reflect core beliefs and values. As such, they shouldn't shift with the political winds. In contrast, choosing a tool to make systems or programs work better, identifying the most promising arenas of action, and applying criteria for moving ahead are *strategic* decisions where flexibility can run rampant.

The Policy Toolbox consists of four basic tools – *carrots, sticks, knowledge and leadership*.

Policy can happen in any or all of several arenas – *federal or national; state; local, city, county, community or neighborhood; and the private and nonprofit sectors*.

Three practical criteria for setting priorities are *impact, opportunity and partners*.

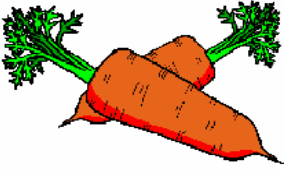
Having a hefty Policy Toolbox won't help you set decent policy goals. But it **will** help achieve goals once you set them. If you understand these tools and arenas of action – and apply the three straightforward criteria to set priorities – your chances of policy success are actually pretty good.



THE POLICY TOOLBOX

...CARROTS...STICKS... KNOWLEDGE...LEADERSHIP...

A well-outfitted Policy Toolbox contains, at a minimum, carrots, sticks, knowledge and leadership.



CARROTS provide services, benefits & supports.

Funding for specific programs or activities are the most obvious carrots. Carrots include, for example:

- Grant programs and funding – for public programs such as Medi-Cal (Medicaid), the Child Health Insurance Program, special education, and income support such as SSI and TANF*; and for private initiatives supported by foundations and businesses; and
- Premiums or rewards of one sort or another to institutions, organizations, employers or individuals.



STICKS prohibit actions, set standards, regulate products or actions, & enforce laws.

Sticks do not provide funding. Rather, they impose requirements, enforce standards or guidelines, and issue prohibitions on institutions, individuals or products. For example:

- A law or administrative mandate requiring that health insurance plans cover certain conditions, such as mental health or autism;
- Standards set by accrediting and licensing agencies, such as identifying areas of competence a person must master before being licensed to practice;
- Lawsuits claiming discrimination on the basis of race, ethnicity, gender or disability; and
- Federal, state or local mandates – often called “unfunded mandates.”

* SSI is Supplemental Security Income (cash payments for low-income people with serious disabilities). TANF is Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (formerly called AFDC or “welfare”).



KNOWLEDGE provides the information policymakers & the public need.

“Knowledge” includes basic research, good data, solid statistics, evaluations of program effectiveness, and practical and clinical experience. Knowledge can also include *sharing* information with the people who need it, knowing the key players and networks, and understanding important laws, policies and programs. For example:

- High-quality studies funded by public or private agencies;
- Data gathered by public and private statistical agencies;
- Documented clinical or classroom experiences;
- The collective experience and wisdom in communities;
- Getting to know policymakers *when there is not a crisis* in order to understand their priorities and build trust; and
- Training parents, teachers, healthcare providers, and others.



LEADERSHIP builds political will & galvanizes action.

For example:

- Executive Orders and proclamations;
- The bully pulpit;
- Campaigns to build public awareness and support for change;
- Creating awards and rewarding achievements;
- Will-building; and
- “Personal” actions by a public figure, such as talking about how his or her child was (or *could have been*) helped by early intervention.

Effective policy initiatives often use several tools – carrots, sticks, knowledge and/or leadership – in combination. For example:

- Softening a mandate (a stick) with grant funding (a carrot); or
- Having a kick-off event featuring the head of the organization (leadership), providing employees with training (knowledge) or special recognition for positive actions (a carrot), and also embedding the actions or results you want in the company’s performance appraisal systems (a stick).

What one person sees as a carrot, another may see as a stick. *For example:* Parents who want their disabled daughter in regular classroom activities (not special classes) may see IDEA (special education) and Section 504 (a civil rights law prohibiting discrimination against disabled students) as a carrot or beacon of hope. In contrast, the school may first see the stick of federal audits or losing federal money when the parents make this request.

Obviously carrots are a lot easier to swallow than sticks. Knowledge and leadership are typically vital ingredients that must be backed up sooner or later by carrots and sticks in order to make meaningful and lasting change.



ARENAS OF POLICY ACTION

...FEDERAL AND NATIONAL...

...STATE...

*...LOCAL, CITY, COUNTY, COMMUNITY
AND NEIGHBORHOOD...*

...PRIVATE AND NONPROFIT...

Policy can happen at any level of government. Policy also happens outside of government – in the private and nonprofit sectors. What the best arena of action is depends on where the power, resources and opportunities are.

First, there is the federal arena, which includes Congress, the President and his Administration (and all of the Departments, from Health and Human Services to Education), and the judiciary. Related to this is the **national arena**, which includes nongovernmental efforts that affect the whole country.

Next comes the state arena, where you have government (the state legislature, the Governor and state agencies, and state courts) as well as statewide organizations.

Third is the local, city, county, community and neighborhood arena, which includes not only government, but also local institutions, religious organizations and community groups. A lot of policy is made locally – for example, by local school boards, county supervisors or commissioners, and mayors. Also, many federal and state policies and programs trickle down to the local level – sometimes working well, sometimes not working well at all. Two examples of trickle-down programs are **Head Start** (where the federal government directly funds local Head Start programs and agencies) and **special education** in schools (which is driven by federal requirements even though most school funding comes from states and communities).

Finally, there are the private and nonprofit arenas – including businesses and corporations, foundations and philanthropy – which both set their own policies and influence policy in the other arenas (federal/national, state, and local). While most of the **cash** (money) for early identification and intervention is in the public sector, the private and nonprofit sectors can provide important **cachet** to galvanize action.

Effective policy efforts often operate in several arenas at the same time – for example, upgrading the provisions of a major **federal** or **state** program or policy while also building public will in a **local community**.

PUTTING THE POLICY TOOLBOX AND THE ARENAS OF ACTION TOGETHER

Any of the policy tools – carrots, sticks, knowledge and leadership – can be used in any of the arenas of action – federal or national, state, local, and private or nonprofit. *Which is to say:* There are a lot of ways to tackle just about any policy goal.

The table below illustrates sixteen possible strategies and arenas of action – from federal carrots in the upper left-hand box, to leadership from the private or nonprofit sector in the lower right-hand box. While this chart is more crisply organized than the real world, it provides a conceptual checklist to identify the tools and arenas of action that will produce the results you want.

<i>ARENAS OF ACTION</i>	<i>POLICY TOOLS</i>			
	<i>CARROTS</i>	<i>STICKS</i>	<i>KNOWLEDGE</i>	<i>LEADERSHIP</i>
FEDERAL & NATIONAL	Federal Carrots	Federal Sticks	Federal Knowledge	Federal Leadership
STATE	State Carrots	State Sticks	State Knowledge	State Leadership
LOCAL, CITY, COUNTY, COMMUNITY & NEIGHBORHOOD	Local Neighborhood Carrots	Local Neighborhood Sticks	Local Neighborhood Knowledge	Local Neighborhood Leadership
PRIVATE & NONPROFIT	Carrots from Private/Nonprofit	Sticks from Private/Nonprofit	Knowledge from Private/Nonprofit	Leadership from the Private or Nonprofit Sectors

For example:

- A **Federal Carrot** might be a program, such as the federal special education program (IDEA, the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act), that provides funding to help at-risk children ages 0-36 months.
- A **State Stick** might be a state requirement that makes discrimination on the basis of disability or a specific health condition illegal.
- **Local-City-County or Community-Neighborhood Knowledge** might be a local study of the characteristics of children with problems.
- And **Leadership from the Private or Nonprofit Sectors** might be a community foundation convening local opinion leaders to build momentum for universally available high-quality developmental screening for all young kids.

SETTING PRIORITIES

. . . CRITERIA FOR ACTION . . .

The goal is clear – to make sure that every child in Los Angeles County has early and often developmental screening, and that those who need help get it right away.

But where does one start? How can one use the tools at hand and the available arenas of action to make the most difference? Three common-sense criteria can point the way to an effective course of action:



IMPACT – THE MOST IMPORTANT CRITERION

What actions and strategies will make the most difference? What changes will do the most to increase the number of young children in LA County who receive high-quality developmental screening, early identification of problems, and effective follow-up?



OPPORTUNITY Is there a window of opportunity – a “moving policy train” to jump on to? A “moving train” might be: a related effort already underway; a law about to be revamped by Congress, the state legislature, the Mayor, or the County Commissioners or Board of Supervisors; or an issue where there is already strong public will or that is already front-page news.



PARTNERS Are there ready allies? Is opposition minimal or, at least manageable?

IN SUMMARY . . .



Policy is not rocket science. It is the process of setting priorities and allocating resources, such as funding, services and benefits. Improving policy requires setting clear and meaningful goals based on your values and beliefs.

Policy also requires having a working knowledge of policy tools – a well-equipped Policy Toolbox of carrots, sticks, knowledge and leadership.

To use the Policy Toolbox effectively, you need to understand how the policy process works, including the arenas of action and how to use the policy tools in each arena – federal or national; state; local, city, county, community or neighborhood; and the private and nonprofit sectors.



Finally improving policy requires developing practical and effective strategies for change by answering three questions:



- ***So what?*** What actions and strategies will make the most difference? What will have the most ***impact?***
- ***Is there a moving train?*** What windows of ***opportunity*** for change are on the horizon?
- ***Who else?*** Do you have ready ***partners*** and understand any opposition well enough to manage it?



COMMENTS?

This Policy Toolbox is a work in progress.
Please send suggestions and reactions to
Margaret Dunkle at 310-441-2345.
mcd729@aol.com, or MargaretDunkle@gmail.com