

# Family Science Report: Tips for working with legislators

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More and more of us are being asked to demonstrate why our research or work matters to families—how the research can make a positive impact in families' lives. One way to expand the impact of family science research is to provide research on families to policymakers using an educational approach. To develop a reputation as someone who provides research from an educational approach it is helpful to know how to form trustworthy relationships with policymakers. It also is beneficial to understand how to communicate and what to think about when meeting with legislators. The following are tips on how to begin working with legislators.

## Choose your hat wisely

Two possible approaches to consider when approaching policy are (a) the educational approach and (b) the “big-A” Advocacy approach. The *educational approach* is scientific in nature and provides research-based information to help inform legislators' decisions without telling legislators for which bill or policy option to vote. The *big-A Advocacy approach*, also thought of as *lobbying*, involves asking legislators to vote for specific bills or policy options. (For more information, see my *Report* column in the spring 2015 *NCFR Report*.) Be mindful of the approach you choose when working with legislators, as consequences exist for both approaches (Bogenschneider, 2014). Wearing two hats can be confusing for legislators. Once she or he sees you as an Advocate (i.e., lobbyist), it is very difficult to remove that hat. The legislator will continue to see you as an Advocate, lobbying for specific policy options. Working from the educational approach increases the odds of being able to work with legislators from both sides of the aisle and being invited to testify in Congress (Bogenschneider & Corbett, 2010). If you are interested in working with legislators from an educational perspective, it is best to keep on the educational hat.



## Know the legislator

Learn about legislators through personal websites and social media outlets like LinkedIn profiles, Facebook pages, and Twitter accounts. Familiarize yourself with the topics of importance to the legislator as well as bills she or he has introduced and his or her voting record and committee assignments. Kelly Roberts, from the University of North Texas, wrote about her experience in a personal email (July 2015) to me:

*If there are themes across platforms, these are keys you should commit to heart. You may not be presented with the chance to use the research you've gathered [when eventually meeting with the legislator]. However, responding with a personalized comment such as, "Yes, I noticed agriculture and water resources are salient issues for you. I'd like to talk with you about families who manage the farms, and their children who drink the water..." will take you much further than driving your agenda without regard to the legislator's perspective.*

## Initiate contact

You cannot develop a professional relationship without initiating contact. It is up to you to do this. Pick up the phone to schedule a meeting. Each legislator's contact information can be found online (e.g., the [U.S. House of Representatives website](#); the [U.S. Senate website](#)). Another option is to attend the legislator's listening sessions, town hall meetings, or office hours. (Check out the legislator's webpage for possible details.) Face-to-face meetings are still a very effective method to develop the desired trusting relationship (Wisconsin Council on Children & Families, n.d.).

## Develop a relationship with the legislator

Bogenschneider and Corbett (2010) suggested developing a relationship with the legislator before providing research and policy recommendations. Inviting the legislator to speak in your class, participate in panels or seminars, attend conferences, or other nonpartisan events outside of the capitol can be beneficial. This low-key approach helps create close proximity with the legislator; increase the legislator's knowledge of family research and exposure to other topics; and has the potential to open doors to other legislators—once the legislator trusts you, she or he is more likely to introduce you to other legislators.

## Develop a relationship with the legislative staffers

Be mindful of the fact that legislators are busy. It is quite possible that some meetings will be with legislative staffers or aides. Some staffers serve as gatekeepers of the legislator's schedule. Other staffers have influence over the types of materials the legislators receive and the drafting of bills. Develop a trusting relationship with staffers, because they may be your foot in the door to meet the legislator. "If you overlook [the staffer], or treat them as if they're not important, then you're never going to get the access you want to have" (Bogenschneider & Corbett, 2010, p. 202).

## Learn to speak the language

Legislators and academics live in two different worlds. Your message must be brief, concise, and clear. Avoid jargon and difficult-to-understand statistics, research methodologies, and nuances of findings (Bogenschneider & Corbett, 2010). Legislators have limited time to meet. An eight-minute message is too long. You may have only 30 seconds to present your information, and it must provide the main takeaway message and pass the "So what?" test immediately.

## Attend the meeting

Keep in mind your meeting with the legislator will be short (e.g., 15 minutes or less, according to the Congressional Management Foundation, 2014). The following tips will help make the best use of your time:

- **Dress the part.** "Business dress" is the standard wardrobe during the legislative session in state capitols. Kelly Roberts shared the following:

*[A] Senator or lobbyist has noticed my "nice suit" numerous times, or a comment has been made such as, "...why don't you take these talking points into the hearing? You always look professional." Hall meetings, or "walk and talk" meetings, are taken on the fly; the adage of "you don't get a second chance to make a first impression" reigns supreme in this context. I have actually been given "the floor" because I was wearing my suit jacket. While this may seem shallow to academics, please remember that it's better to remove as many barriers as possible so relationship-building can be more effective.*

- **Be on time.** Arrive at the meeting about 5 minutes before the meeting. Arriving too early can crowd the reception area, and you risk not meeting at all by arriving late. Call ahead if you are going to be late.
- **Introduce yourself.** Start by introducing yourself and your expertise, along with anyone else who is attending the meeting with you. A small group of no more than four—including a constituent of the legislator with whom you are meeting, when possible—is recommended.
- **Follow a pre-established agenda.** Attend the meeting with a clear purpose and objectives; know what you are trying to achieve with the meeting. Have five or six clear talking points planned ahead of time, and stay on topic (Normandin & Bogenschneider, 2006; Wisconsin Council on Children & Families, n.d.). Remember, if you take an educational approach, focus on the research.
- **Include the following elements in your meeting.** State the purpose of your visit. When providing research-based information, use statistics such as means to illustrate your point rather than difficult-to-understand statistics. Provide family implications (Normandin & Bogenschneider, 2006). Legislators like to hear stories, especially from their constituents, about how your message affects their constituents. Never give inaccurate information. Tell the legislator whether the findings are well replicated or if inconclusive results exist in research. Be ready to respond to questions, and listen.
- **Remain positive and nonpartisan.** To work with legislators with varying, and possibly dissimilar, viewpoints from your own it is necessary to keep politics out of partisan beliefs will discredit you as a nonpartisan resource and prevent the development of a trustworthy relationship.
- **Conclude the meeting.** When the meeting is ending, ask the legislator if she or he has any questions for you; ask how you can be helpful to the legislator; and offer yourself as a resource for nonpartisan research-based information (Wisconsin Council on Children & Families, n.d.). Thank the legislator for meeting with you.
- **Provide leave-behind materials.** It is helpful to have a 1- to 2-page fact sheet or executive summary prepared before the meeting to leave with the legislator (Congressional Management Foundation, 2014). The fact sheet or executive summary can provide a summary of the research as it pertains to family policy, a couple of talking points the legislator can use in speeches, and visuals to help him or her digest the data easily. Longer reports are less likely to be read and thus not useful. Keep in mind the legislator has limited time to read research.
- **After the meeting.** Stay connected with the legislator. Send him or her a personalized handwritten thank you note after the meeting. E-mails work, but handwritten notes may have more impact (Wisconsin Council on Children & Families, n.d.). Kelly Roberts shared that, in her experience,

*Some of the most human moments with legislators are when they begin a second meeting by referring to a handwritten note I sent. One Representative pulled a note I wrote out from his top desk drawer while referencing a point I had summarized. Another legislator stated, “You know . . . at the end of a long day in the boxing ring, something like [a handwritten note] is like a good ice pack. They’re rare, but help me get out there and fight again.” A one-paragraph handwritten note including a thank you, summary of 1 to 3 points, and something you appreciated about the meeting will build your legislative relationships in ways you may not expect, but will always value.*

In addition to sending the thank you note, plan to stay connected with the legislator. Be available to answer any additional questions the staffer or legislator may have (Congressional Management Foundation, 2014). Attend other events hosted by the legislator. Maintaining the educational approach during these additional events will further help to build a trustworthy relationship with the legislator.

As Normandin and Bogenschneider (2006) wrote, “The reward of learning the skills to work with policymakers is seeing your research applied.” The tips provided here are not exhaustive; many additional tips can be found in the

References section. Above all, be patient. Working on policy issues takes time and persistence.

## References

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