



Accelerating Policymaker Accountability for U.S. Kids' Well-Being:

**Charting the Course &
A Call to Action**



February 2019

What Others Are Saying About This Report and Kids Impact Initiative

“This report makes a real contribution to the child advocacy field by highlighting the urgent need to build political muscle now. Thank you for lifting up this huge challenge and suggesting a course forward. I hope this report will harness support for new forms of advocacy that can make a measurable difference for low-income children.”

- Swati Adarkar, President & CEO, Children’s Institute

“I’m glad to see these successful advocates putting their expertise to work on behalf of the whole child advocacy cause. The time is right.”

- Carol Larson, President and CEO, The David and Lucile Packard Foundation

“Research spanning the biological, behavioral, social, and systems sciences – along with common sense – tell us what every child and family needs to flourish. But we need new tools and more effective strategies to hold ourselves and our policymakers accountable for acting on this knowledge. Kids Impact has given us a lot to think about and act on.”

- Laudy Aron, Senior Fellow, Urban Institute

“This work is a powerful contribution to the work of ensuring all of our children are thriving. I’m looking forward to sharing it with our network and moving ideas in the report that will bring greater equity for all children and families across the country.”

- Michael McAfee, President, PolicyLink

“Accountability is in between inspiration and consequences. Something has to be at stake like a job, money or power. But we also need something that moves hearts and minds.”

- Yolie Flores, Advisor to Kids Impact Initiative
and Chief Program Officer, The Campaign for Grade-Level Reading

“I long for the days when facts would move the hearts and influence the behavior of policymakers. But, we are not there. When I reflect on the significant victories for kids across the country, they are normally focused on policymakers and require sustained campaigns that use science, community support, stories, and persuasive media to energize movements.”

- Dennis Campa, Associate Director of Policy Reform and Advocacy,
The Annie E. Casey Foundation

“It’s tougher for children’s advocates than for advocates for other priority areas because the agenda is very broad. By contrast, with seniors, accountability translates into strong Social Security and Medicare. But kids have a moral authority we should use. We ought to be able to make kids everyone’s second issue.”

- Celinda Lake, President, Lake Research Partners

“How we talk about what kids need matters for policymaker accountability. Chronic absence resonates broadly because no one will argue against getting kids to school so they can learn. Focusing on common sense shared ideas can create room for coalition building across partisan lines. Equally important, the data help call attention to systemic barriers that require policy solutions.”

- Hedy Nai-Lin Chang, Executive Director, Attendance Works

“Kids Impact Initiative is playing a uniquely valuable role supporting leaders for children and philanthropy—asking the hard questions and pointing the way to high-impact approaches for making kids’ well-being a higher priority in this country. Their Paul Revere-like warning in this report about the dangers kids face ought to light a fire under all of us who are funders and nonprofit leaders to take stock of what we’re doing to strengthen policymaker accountability and to do more. We cannot miss this opportunity to do much better for children.”

- Peter Long, President and CEO, Blue Shield of California Foundation

Accelerating
Policymaker
Accountability
for U.S. Kids'
Well-Being:
Charting the Course &
A Call to Action

By [Wendy Lazarus](#)
with [Laurie Lipper](#)

About Kids Impact Initiative

Kids Impact Initiative is a California-based nonprofit project founded in 2017. Our mission is to improve the lives of the nation's 74 million children by strengthening public- and private-sector accountability and by helping develop and support the next generation of advocacy for children. Kids Impact works both nationally and in California, which is home to 9.1 million children.

Kids Impact's purpose is to develop and promote strategies to support and strengthen the child advocacy field as a whole. We are a team of seasoned advocates who have stepped away from the day-to-day running of organizations. Kids Impact analyzes trends and lessons across a broad range of issues in order to reinforce effective efforts already underway and ratchet up accountability and advocacy for children.

Kids Impact Initiative conducts independent research, publishes, develops advocacy strategies, and promotes action on topics relevant to child advocacy in the U.S. today. Kids Impact acts like a think tank to conceptualize and frame issues and then uses a networked approach to spark action—serving as a resource to leaders and networks.

Kids Impact Initiative's work is developed specifically to offer high-impact, actionable ideas and support the diverse set of people and groups working to improve the well-being of America's children.

www.kidsimpact.org

Special Thanks

We are extremely grateful to Carol Larson and The David and Lucile Packard Foundation as well as Peter Long and the Blue Shield of California Foundation for providing funding for this project.

Message from the Founders of Kids Impact Initiative

Welcome to the first report from Kids Impact Initiative.

We are a small, social impact nonprofit founded with the big vision of moving children to a top national priority in the United States and igniting active support for children's issues among the vast number of Americans who care about kids and their future. We do this by exploring strategies that help support and strengthen child advocacy efforts as a whole, looking beyond individual issues or organizational priorities. We amplify the important work and messages of leaders for children across the country, and we call attention to issues and strategies to move our shared goals forward.

This, our first report, tackles the subject of accountability for the well-being of our nation's children. This report underscores that there are new, serious threats to public funding and policies that enable children to get a strong start in life. These risks are on top of already-severe disparities among U.S. children. Our extensive research and analysis have led to the conclusion that strengthening public policymaker accountability for children's well-being offers an especially effective and timely strategy to advance a children's agenda today and is more urgent than at any time in this century.

This report unpacks that conclusion and focuses on ways to intensify policymaker accountability for decisions that promote children's well-being.

As long-time child advocates working closely with hundreds of other leaders for children, we are well-versed in the pursuit of policymaker commitment and follow-through on public policies that benefit children. We are grateful for the many individual policymakers who already stand up for kids.

Currently, however, sweeping political, socio-economic, and cultural realities mean that leaders for children across the country are working in a changed environment. Now, efforts to secure and protect essential public policies and core investments that support families as they raise their children are in serious jeopardy. Polarized politics undercut longstanding, nonpartisan agreements on supporting investments in children.

Thus, we undertook this research and analysis. We hope the findings and conclusions will serve as a bellwether, a baseline, and a call to action. We articulate the current threats and why urgent action is needed. We provide a rich selection of examples and an Accelerator Model to help chart the course and create greater momentum. And, we offer a Three-Part Action Plan that serves as a springboard to action.

We hope the wide array of leaders for children and next-generation young advocates will build upon, evolve, and advance these ideas, and work together to implement them.

We look forward to joining forces with you.

Wendy Lazarus and Laurie Lipper
Founders



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INTRODUCTION AND GOALS

Too many children in the United States today are being robbed of the opportunities and resources to succeed in school and in life. And too many parents rightly fear that their hard work won't add up to a better future for their children. In response to these unacceptable conditions, [Kids Impact Initiative](#) identified a critical opportunity for the child advocacy field. Based on our research, along with input from advisors and colleagues about how best to respond to current times, we identified holding public policymakers accountable for children's well-being as an especially high-impact strategy. It has the potential to change the outcomes for millions of children and is ripe for analysis, innovation, and action. We also believe a field-wide focus on accountability will be helpful to the many policymakers who already are or want to become champions for children and need greater clarity about what success looks like.

We recognize, of course, that families are the starting point for children's well-being. The roles and responsibilities of parents and families are well-understood and accepted. But much less understood or appreciated is the critically important role policymakers play. Policymakers are responsible for the key decisions that help families ensure their children are safe, healthy, and well-educated. Policymakers determine what resources are available to parents and which policies protect and advance the well-being of the nation's future leaders, workers, voters, and parents. Local, state, and federal public officials need to know their constituents expect them to be partners in doing what's best for kids.

We also recognize that private-sector businesses are major players in effecting positive outcomes for children, though they are not the focus of this study.



This report provides, to our knowledge, the first-ever look at child advocacy in the U.S. through the lens of policymaker accountability. It is also the first look across sectors and issues to inform how we might strengthen our collective impact as a field.

“ Policymaker accountability for children’s well-being – including their health, safety, and school readiness – is the most powerful and least understood concept in our field.”

Kim Belshé, Executive Director, First 5 LA,
former Secretary of California Health
and Human Services



To surface the most effective and timely strategies worthy of investment, Kids Impact undertook a year of research and development, which included interviews with dozens of colleagues inside and outside the children’s field; review of more than 100 relevant tools and resources; and the application of our 60+ years of experience creating and implementing accountability strategies. In this report, we present our key findings, useful examples, and a model for accelerating accountability for kids’ well-being. We also provide a Three-Part Action Plan, our recommendations for moving forward. (See the Resources section of this report for more about our research approach and resources used.)

We hope these ideas are useful to various leaders for children: advocates on the front lines; foundations and individuals who invest in improving outcomes for children and youth; influencers and organizers across fields who can contribute to the solution; and local, state, and federal policymakers, themselves.

Goals of This Report

1. Call attention to the dire situation facing today’s children—fueled by circumstances our country hasn’t experienced before—and to the heightened importance of policymaker accountability;
2. Define the gap between an agreement on what children need to thrive and motivating policymakers to support the necessary policies and resources;
3. Identify and draw on promising accountability approaches inside and outside the child advocacy field;
4. Put forward working definitions and a model for accelerating policymaker accountability for children’s well-being; and
5. Offer actionable recommendations, both immediate and longer-term.

Scenarios for Stronger Accountability

- ▶ **What if . . .** the children’s advocacy field had cogent, succinct goals that could be monitored and organized around in every community across the country—the way “clean air and water” have provided the focus for the environmental movement to press for progress?
- ▶ **What if . . .** the quality of life for children in a community were made a highly visible issue that influenced family decisions about where to live and provided ammunition for leaders who want to improve family life in their community—just as reports on the quality of local schools can—producing economic outcomes that incentivize local leaders to improve conditions for children?
- ▶ **What if . . .** there were consequences for policymakers when they neglect children’s needs—if our elected officials were rated on decisions they made that hurt kids, not just on their positive leadership? Or if the children’s agenda were so important in an election that it significantly affected whether an official got re-elected?

These are just a few scenarios, using incentives and consequences, for achieving shared goals for children.

WHY NOW: The High Stakes for Children Today

Starting with the first White House Conference on Children in 1909, leaders working to make sure all children can reach their full potential have used a host of tactics to hold decision-makers accountable. Many—like report cards on children’s well-being, special legislative caucuses, children’s budgets, and local engagement campaigns—have been extremely valuable. But the conditions in which child advocates operate have changed. And it is imperative that the field increase our effectiveness with regard to policymaker accountability for a number of reasons.

1 First, and most concerning, is an impending, substantial decline in federal resources for children and the broader community supports that help them thrive.

Unless major changes are made, children will be disproportionately harmed as a result of the growing deficit and debt, reduced revenues from the recently enacted tax policies, and the way children’s programs are funded in the federal budgeting process (as many are discretionary). According to the [Urban Institute](#), over the next decade, every category of federal spending on children (education, income security, health, etc.) will decline relative to gross domestic product (GDP). The children’s share of the federal budget is projected to decline over the next decade from 9.4 percent to 6.9 percent—a drop of more than a quarter. This analysis also points out that by 2020 the federal government will spend more on interest on the national debt (the past) than on children (the future). Equally concerning, it is projected that children’s programs will get only one cent out of every dollar of increased federal spending over the next decade.



Today, these fiscal factors place U.S. children at greater risk than at any time in this century with regard to their health, income security, nutrition, safety, clean environment, child care, and high-quality education. Public investments in all of these areas determine whether children can thrive. It will take powerful interventions, including greater community mobilization, to redirect this dangerous course.

2 Second, children and their futures are disproportionately affected by new threats and challenges that dominate today’s news.

Concerns about school safety, climate change, the opioid epidemic, technology’s impact on mental health, and hostility toward immigrant families are prompting public conversations and new policy proposals. So far, though, these concerns have spurred little action in terms of policy change that benefits kids. [Many parents understand the jeopardy their children are in and feel increasingly helpless to protect them](#) from these new societal and structural realities.

3 Third, in the current toxic political environment, children’s needs are less likely to have the advantage of being treated as nonpartisan.

For example, funding for the federal Children’s Health Insurance Program—which has enjoyed bipartisan support since its enactment in 1997—was allowed to lapse in late 2017 for nearly four months. Instead of being protected, children’s health became a bargaining chip in larger negotiations over the federal budget and immigration. This would have been unimaginable in past years. Such loss of common ground, along with increased public cynicism about government’s ability to get things done, undercut the belief that our nation will come together when it really matters for kids.

4 Fourth, the large federal disinvestment in children threatens to turn back years of progress made by government and philanthropy to give kids a strong and healthy start in life.

Major gains in areas such as children’s health coverage and reduced teen pregnancy were made possible by a combination of supportive public policies and targeted private, philanthropic investments in research, communications, and advocacy, which increased the potential and pressure for policy changes. Philanthropy is not in a position to backfill even a portion of these lost federal investments. Investing in children and their families cannot be the responsibility of the private sector and local and state governments alone.

5 Fifth, the social sector, including child advocacy, is undergoing a leadership transition from one generation to the next, which offers both risks and tremendous opportunities.

With [an estimated 75 percent of nonprofit leaders planning to leave their positions in the next five to ten years](#), a new generation of leaders is beginning to spearhead advocacy for U.S. kids. These younger leaders are facing an especially difficult set of realities in their advocacy as this report underscores. But their ideas and lived experience, which are different from that of the leaders entering retirement, can open up new ways of working, framing the agenda, and advocating on behalf of children.



6 Sixth, in the world of unlimited political contributions ushered in by the Supreme Court’s decision on Citizens United, children have not had enough deep-pocketed champions to compete with other, well-financed interests.

The policy successes of the finance sector, the gun lobby, and the pharmaceutical industry, for example, demonstrate the critical role that paid lobbyists and political contributions play today in motivating policymakers to act and then holding them accountable. When you add the fact that children lack the other most effective accountability lever—the ability to vote—kids are increasingly disadvantaged in today’s policymaking environment.

What makes these new threats even more of a wake-up call is they **come on top of income, health, and educational disparities that already result in millions of children being denied the opportunity for a healthy and productive future.** The disparities along racial and ethnic lines are especially dramatic and growing. One powerful indicator that things are seriously off track is that poverty—a primary predictor of children’s health and well-being later on—disproportionately stacks the deck against children of color and low-income kids. [The poverty rate for Black and Latino children is more than double that of White children*](#). And although reading at grade level is the most important predictor of high school graduation and career success, [82 percent of fourth-graders in low-income families are not proficient readers.](#)

** For consistency, we use the terms White, Latino, and Black throughout this report, though some of the sources we cite use different terms and forms of capitalization.*



FINDINGS

Where We Stand Today: State of Play on Policymaker Accountability

Our interviews and research underscored the tremendous amount of activity underway to raise the visibility of children’s needs, promote supportive policies, and attempt to hold policymakers accountable. At the same time, leaders for children recognize the field currently lacks sufficient clout to motivate policymakers to do what’s right for kids. We found widespread interest in finding ways to ratchet up our collective effectiveness.

- ▶ **Accountability strategies are viewed as valuable and hold significant potential to improve outcomes for children.**

We were struck by the level of interest in this area. Many leaders for children are actively using accountability tools and approaches they have developed and are highly attuned to the need for greater impact. Leaders consistently expressed interest in learning about promising strategies that can be deployed at the local, state, and national levels.

- ▶ **There is not a shared understanding of what policymaker accountability for children means.**

The term “policymaker accountability for children’s well-being” means different things to different people. For some, it connotes spending public money wisely; for others, it is about improving program performance within public agencies; and for others, it is a way to hold elected officials responsible for policy and budget decisions. Several people we interviewed recommended using different words altogether. Although we did not



find any shared definition of what a comprehensive accountability strategy should include, good work being done within particular fields such as [child welfare](#), and internationally regarding the [rights of children](#), offers valuable starting points.


► **Many good tools are in use, but there is no consistent strategy or set of indicators.**

Our research identified 12 types of accountability activities in use. We examined those in use by advocates and leaders for children as well as some used by other advocacy movements that could be relevant. These include report cards and indexes, oversight hearings, children’s bills of rights, policymaker recognition programs, and dedicated funding and other budget-based efforts. (See page 9 for the 12 types.)

Some initiatives—like [Maryland’s “Results-Based Accountability™ framework”](#) and [Santa Clara County’s Bill of Rights for Children and Youth and Children’s Agenda](#)—are operated by government in partnership with external stakeholders and generate [detailed annual progress reports](#). Others are led by outside organizations, like [the KIDS COUNT organizations in many states](#), and employ various kinds of accountability tools. (See the Resources section of this report for additional examples of accountability tools.)

Amidst many valuable activities, the U.S. lacks an integrated approach to accountability across communities, states, and nationwide. People we interviewed recognized that while children’s needs and resources vary across communities, the field could have greater impact with more widely and consistently used approaches. There was also consensus that conditions in local communities define the starting point for advocacy, and that local strategies ought to be tailored to community circumstances while also allowing community leaders to participate in more unified efforts nationwide.

Leaders for children recognize the field currently lacks sufficient clout to motivate policymakers to do what’s right for kids.



Bipartisan Group of Experts Shows How Federal Budgeting Reforms Can Increase Accountability to Children

In a [recent analysis](#), a bipartisan group of former leaders of the federal budget process reported on why the nation’s children get shortchanged in budgeting and how children will be affected if changes are not made. They look both at the severe funding reductions in the pipeline for kids as well as the increasing debt with which our children will be saddled. Most relevant to accountability, they offer 12 specific ways to put children on more equal footing. Their ideas range from sending parents annual debt and interest statements, to establishing a children’s appropriations subcommittee, to estimating children’s spending when budgets are proposed. Many of these ideas could also be put into place in states, counties, and cities. Taking action along the lines of these concrete and credible recommendations for increasing children’s clout in the policy process could help both accelerate and sustain progress for kids.

► **Advances in technology enable new tools to accelerate accountability.**

New technologies and tools for using information open up new ways for parents, advocates, and researchers to increase impact with regard to accountability. Tools like geographic information system (GIS) mapping provide easy access to extensive data in the cloud. And social media, including texting, enables swift, public responses to developments affecting kids, as demonstrated by the young people who organized protest events and lobbying within days of the Parkland tragedy. Texting also allows constituents to give direct feedback to policymakers and parents to provide real-time information about their children’s health and well-being.



The recent [growth in the production of hyperlocal news](#), enabled by the Internet, also provides new opportunities. Hyperlocal news (coverage of events and topics on a very small, local scale) is a valuable new asset for communities to become more informed about conditions for children in their community, how well their needs are being addressed, and how to get involved in local activities to improve the situation.

▶ **There is consensus that accountability strategies should reflect the complementary roles parents, families, educators and policymakers play.**

Repeatedly, we heard that effective accountability must address the reality that while parents or guardians are children’s “home base,” a range of adults and institutions also help shape every child’s life. Most children’s early lives are centered in the family, but from their beginning, they are also part of a larger community. There is wide agreement that families as well as community institutions—through faith-based, athletic, health, community service, educational, and other channels—have important roles to play in nurturing and supporting children to reach their full potential. For families to do their part, they need access to reliable, high-quality, and safe community institutions. These complementary elements in children’s lives must be incorporated into next-level accountability strategies.



Child advocates also recognize that our field needs to better engage and empower parents and community residents to be involved in policymaker accountability. Though not sufficient in their reach, there are valuable efforts underway across the country to train, support, and compensate parents and other community members for participating in accountability activities, as well as to develop and share more open and equitable approaches to implementing accountability strategies. It’s especially important that families facing the greatest challenges to providing and caring for their children are part of the accountability process as full participants.



Cincinnati: How One Policymaker Is Focusing on Kids & Asking Constituents to Hold Him Accountable

Valuable efforts are underway across the country to tap into the uniquely important perspectives of parents and community stakeholders in setting expectations for policymakers, monitoring progress, and advocating for kids. One unusual approach is being tried in Cincinnati, Ohio, where City Council Member Greg Landsman has made children’s well-being his top priority. To ensure he and his team stay focused on his campaign promise about kids and to get broader input from the community, he set a goal of increasing from 51 percent to 90 percent the time spent meeting with constituents each week who are aligned with the campaign promise. With careful planning and execution, the 90 percent target was met within the first two months of this initiative and has been maintained since that time. (Vanessa White, Chief of Staff, Office of Council Member Landsman.)

12 Types of Accountability Activities

In our scan of the many accountability efforts underway, we identified 12 main types, which are listed below. These include examples from child-centered efforts as well as from other social movements. The Resources section of this report includes additional examples along with links for further information.

1

Data-driven efforts

Indexes, report cards, recognition and certification programs, rankings



7

Family and children's impact statements

Santa Clara County, California, and New Zealand's Child Impact Assessment



2

Budget-focused efforts

Children's budgets, dedicated funding for children



8

Youth voice

UK Youth Parliament, youth boards and organizing efforts



3

Governing structures and oversight roles

Legislative committees, offices for children, ombudspersons, public hearings, children's commissioners, inspectors general



9

Investigative journalism

Marguerite Casey Foundation's Journalism Fellows, ProPublica



4

Local engagement

Marches, demonstrations, campaigns like Healthy Eating Active Living, recognition initiatives like STAR Communities Sustainability Initiative



10

Voter approaches

Lower voting age, ballot measures, 501(c)(4) organizations, PAC and Super PAC activities



5

Rights

United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, San Luis Obispo County Bill of Rights for Children



11

Litigation

Americans with Disabilities Act enforcement, lawsuits to secure safe drinking water for children, civil rights enforcement



6

Government and inter-government initiatives

Sustainable Development Goals, Federal Interagency Children's Data



12

Policy incentives and consequences

Restaurant grading systems that can lead to closures, cap and trade for carbon dioxide emissions to secure clean air



▶ **A shared view of what we as a society want for children—a “True North”—ought to guide policymaker accountability.**

Consistently, we heard that accountability for children’s well-being needs to be guided by a shared, cogent, and easily understood goal—a “True North.” “True North” is a clear articulation of what we as a nation want for all children, based on a shared statement of our core values, such as opportunity, equity, and community. This is an asset that other movements have but the children’s field currently lacks.

[Recent advances in brain science related to child development](#) provide a strong basis for agreeing on shared goals. There is now evidence-based consensus that healthy development starts before birth and requires supports from both families and community institutions during the early years. Likewise, research is documenting the [impact toxic stress has on children](#) throughout their lives and clarifying the supports kids and families need to prevent and address trauma. Our field can now, with both moral and scientific authority, set about defining for policymakers what “True North” for children means.

The question of what ages of children an accountability strategy should focus on came up frequently and needs to be addressed. There are pros and cons to focusing on a narrower age group, in contrast to one that extends from the prenatal period into young adulthood. How this question is resolved will significantly influence which policies, service systems, and key players are most relevant for effective accountability.

“ We can’t hold policymakers accountable until our field agrees on a crisp vision of what we’re after—what this report calls our “True North.” We need a core vision that’s measurable, and we need to map everything to that.”

Meera Mani, Director
Children, Families and Communities Program,
The David and Lucile Packard Foundation

What’s Missing: Defining Gaps and Challenges

Our findings also shed light on how leaders for children can increase our collective impact. Following are highlights of the gaps and challenges.

▶ **Data-driven tools can’t do it alone: There is a big gap between metrics and effective pressure on policymakers to address children’s needs.**

Amidst the wide mix of accountability tools in use, there was consensus that metrics (whether indexes, rankings, ratings, or scorecards) are essential—but insufficient by themselves. Advocates and funders alike recognize that data without other essential ingredients have not brought about the changes that children need. The focus now should be on addressing the gap between compelling use of data and effective pressure for change. Other essential elements include, for example, clear expectations of policymakers, incentives for progress, voting and other kinds of civic participation, and corrective action where needed.

▶ **Equity is not adequately addressed in policy or policymaker accountability.**

To have meaningful impact, next-level accountability strategies must place greater emphasis on equity—giving all children a fair and equal chance of being successful. All U.S. children need certain resources and opportunities to thrive. At the same time, large groups of children face disproportionate challenges and need more targeted and intensive support to succeed in school and in life. Consider the impacts of the dramatic disparities, today, in [math and reading proficiency](#): 8th-grade math proficiency for Black and Latino children is less than half that of White children; the same is true with 4th-grade reading proficiency. We must close these structural equity gaps—usually correlated with income, race, ethnicity, and [sometimes geography](#)—to reach our shared goals for kids. [John Powell’s work on “targeted universalism”](#) is especially helpful in laying out this approach and framing it for policymaking and accountability.

Equity considerations must be incorporated into all aspects of accountability for kids. The most effective single step policymakers could take to promote child equity is to address widespread child poverty. The recently elected Governor of California has proposed measures to do exactly that, making this a promising effort to watch. In addition, diversity and equity priorities must ensure inclusion of all voices in shaping accountability strategies. And equity considerations should help guide how our leaders are chosen—including policymakers and public-sector administrators, like school superintendents and chiefs of child welfare, health, and juvenile justice.

Data and reporting tools must flag disparities. We ought to make maximum use of and build on valuable resources like the [National Equity Atlas](#) (produced by PolicyLink and the University of Southern California’s Program for Environmental and Regional Equity), [diversitydatakids.org](#) (produced by the Heller School at Brandeis University), and the [Opportunity Atlas](#) (a project of the Census Bureau with partners at Harvard and Brown Universities).

► **The U.S. lacks consistent oversight to protect and advance children’s well-being.**

There are lessons to learn from countries around the world whose records are better than ours in achieving positive outcomes for children. Every other country has established in policy that children have rights as defined by the [UN Convention on the Rights of the Child](#). The U.S. stands alone as the only country that has not ratified the Convention. Also in contrast to the U.S., many countries have created special entities whose job it is to safeguard and advance the rights of children. Some have established children’s commissioners or ombudspersons who, for example, respond to complaints when policies are not followed, proactively serve as watchdogs to make sure kids’ interests are addressed when new programs and policies are put in place, and use their bully pulpit to call out emerging needs and solutions.

In the U.S., policymakers have been unable to agree on a basic set of children’s rights. And, with few exceptions, advocacy and oversight roles that governments or independent entities play in other

countries are not being filled in the U.S. today. The lack of consistent oversight for children’s well-being is holding back progress in several ways: in other countries that have oversight mechanisms in place, residents have a place to go when children are not getting basic needs met; policymakers have guideposts to know whether children’s interests are being met through current and new programs; and children have better outcomes on many measures than in the U.S.



New Zealand’s Child Focus Is Carried Out Through Government and an Independent Commissioner

New Zealand—one of the 196 countries that ratified the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child—uses multiple strategies to protect children’s interests and meet their needs. Its Office of the Children’s Commissioner, an independent entity, “[advocates for the interests, rights and wellbeing of children and young people on law, policy and practice](#)” and monitors New Zealand’s implementation of the Rights of the Child. Its vision is to make New Zealand a place where all children thrive by being “child-centered . . . [which means] respecting that children have rights and knowing what they are; working out what’s in children’s best interests; considering how . . . decisions (policies, processes, designs) can impact on children; taking children’s views into account; and, finally, using all of this information to make a decision that upholds children’s rights and does what is best for them.”

In complementary work, a central government agency—New Zealand’s Ministry of Social Development—coordinates the country’s implementation of the Rights of the Child, which includes working across agencies and reporting progress regularly to the UN. Its newest tool is the [Child Impact Assessment Tool](#), which is designed to help officials understand the impacts of their policies and legislation on children, including unintended impacts. (See example in the Resource section, page 32.)

▶ **Better-orchestrated strategies are needed at the community, state, and national levels.**

In refining what an accelerated strategy should look like, our interviews suggest accountability strategies need to address local, state, and federal policy because action at each level is essential. Interviewees also underscored that activity at one level can support progress at another and that multilevel actions can take place simultaneously. Even though there is tremendous energy for change at the local level, we heard cautions about relying too heavily on local accountability alone. Local leadership and resources can't meet kids' needs by themselves, and geography should not determine the opportunities available to children. We heard a level of excitement about what could be accomplished if, over time, consistent goals, metrics, messages, and organizing are used across regions, states, and nationwide as opposed to "letting a thousand flowers bloom."

▶ **Difficult challenges unique to children must be called out and addressed head-on.**

It's a fact that high-impact advocacy for children faces certain formidable hurdles—many unique to this cause—that need to be recognized and dealt with in a holistic way.

Virtually everyone we interviewed believed the most challenging barrier is the fact that, over time, *children in the U.S. have come to be seen increasingly as the private responsibility of their parents and family, rather than a shared responsibility.* This is not the case for children in many other developed countries and, at least to some degree, for senior citizens in the U.S. We need to find ways to reverse this move toward increasing isolation of children and their parents and build a greater sense of shared responsibility for all children.

A close-second barrier is that *there is no one locus of responsibility on which to focus accountability efforts.* Responsibility for policies and resource allocation related to children is spread across many public agencies and sectors (schools, housing, health, parks and recreation, child welfare, employment, law enforcement, and more) at local, state, and national levels, as well as many private actors, such as families and faith-based organizations.

We also heard that unlike issue areas where one or two program initiatives matter most, *children need multiple supports, making it more challenging to agree on what "True North" for kids ought to be* and the most important policies to achieve it.

In addition, *the "return on investment" (ROI) in kids typically takes a number of years to manifest.* It's harder to convince elected officials to make kids a priority knowing they may no longer be in office to enjoy bragging rights when the ROI comes in.

Also, *leaders for children have, with some exceptions, stayed away from calling out specific enemies to progress for kids.* Like leaders of the environmental movement who pressure certain polluters as "bad actors," leaders in the children's field may need to more boldly name and shame. Advocates have been willing to point a finger at certain companies that make products that hurt children—like soda products and, more recently, vaping products. Similar tactics could make sense in additional areas where behavior that harms kids takes place, including harmful policymaking.

And finally, although child advocates have tried various approaches, *the field has struggled to find a message and mechanism that truly motivates and engages* large numbers of people around a broad children's agenda in ways that require decision-makers to pay attention.



Tapping Traditional and Emerging Allies

This is an especially promising time to increase the field's focus on policymaker accountability because of the powerful allies that could be tapped to advance a kids' agenda. There is tremendous potential to join forces with a number of movements that have major impacts on children—like women's rights, immigration reform, gun safety, criminal justice reform, and the environment. In addition, the millions of Americans now engaging in activism for the first time include large numbers who currently work with children or are raising them. They clearly have a strong interest in kids that can be tapped.

▶ Parents

Parents came up repeatedly as an inadequately supported resource for kids—both in their capacity as the most important influence in their children's lives and as a powerful constituency to hold their policymakers accountable. (We include grandparents acting as guardians as well as other guardians when we refer to “parents” in this report.) The stresses and worries common among parents today may help bridge differences of race, ethnicity, and income. [Regardless of income, half of all parents](#) are concerned that their children could be bullied or face depression or anxiety at some point in their lives. Despite very significant differences in family circumstances—including but not limited to the effects of structural racism—parents today may share enough interests and concerns to find new, inclusive ways to hold policymakers accountable.

▶ Activists

Many of the people now engaging in activism—for example, women and teachers—have children's well-being high on their priority list. Anecdotally, some report they have become active for the sake of their own or the country's children. In addition, there are new groups, like young men, who care a great deal about children and may be especially ready to engage.

▶ Youth

Gun violence, inequities in the justice system, immigration, and climate change—among other issues—have galvanized many young people to become active on policy matters. Many are natural

leaders, and they have valuable ideas about what policies and programs affecting children are broken and how to advocate for better ones. They are bringing fresh ideas about solutions and about using social media to organize politically. Their desire to protect themselves and advance their own interests can add tremendous heft and creativity to advocacy and accountability efforts for kids.



Youth Leadership Gets Results with Fresh Accountability Tactics: #NeverAgain

Student organizing after gun violence killed 17 students and staff at Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School is the most high-profile among multiple initiatives where young people are using new voices and approaches to hold policymakers accountable. Starting on social media with the hashtag #NeverAgain, student leaders set about changing laws and encouraging young people to use their vote to change gun policy. They are promoting a very specific agenda that includes [nine reforms to gun policies](#). They have worked with partners like Everytown for Gun Safety to mobilize marches all over the country (March for Our Lives), calling attention to gun violence and the remedies they support, followed by town halls in key congressional districts. Voter registration of students has also been a major focus of activity. [They have proactively worked to include people of color within their movement](#). They have played a crucial part in convincing a number of large corporations to revoke NRA sponsorships and discounts for NRA members. And within a month of the shooting, they had already achieved results, [with Florida's governor signing into law a bill with many of the gun reforms included in their “manifesto.”](#)

▶ Local Leaders

The renewed energy now focused on making change at the community level—in cities, counties, and neighborhoods—also offers an important opportunity. While federal policymaking and many states are in gridlock, people are seeing how much local leaders can accomplish when they work together, and they are pushing for more. As examples in this report show, children are already the focus of successful advocacy in a number of cities and counties, and in many other communities, perhaps they could be. Finding ways to engage local communities and their leaders ought to be a high priority in ratcheting up accountability for kids.

▶ Women in Elective Office

In 2019, more women are serving in Congress than ever before, and nine states will have women governors. Many of these leaders made kids and families a priority in their campaigns. And women already in office have disproportionately championed issues that matter most to kids and families and achieved policy changes that are seen as family-friendly. This growing group of elected women holds tremendous potential to provide stepped-up leadership for children.

▶ Philanthropy

Finally, philanthropy is a natural ally. It has an especially big stake in finding ways to increase the impact of advocacy aimed at stemming harm and promoting progress for children. Unless there is a major course correction, the significant projected reduction in federal investments in children will undercut years of philanthropic investments in improving children's health, education, equity, and safety. Philanthropic leaders are well-positioned to play a much-needed leadership role in moving an accountability agenda forward. Although there are legal limitations on what foundations can do, the vast majority of the leadership activities and resources needed today fall well within the range of clearly [allowable activities](#).

Useful Examples

We didn't find an off-the-shelf model for strengthening policymaker accountability to kids. But there are a number of instructive examples of progress achieved through integrated accountability activities. Various examples of accountability strategies with promising elements are featured throughout this report.

In the environmental movement, the components of an integrated strategy start to emerge:

- ▶ A shared vision of “True North”—clean air and water as a start—that builds momentum and guides accountability;
- ▶ A common-sense and achievable policy agenda that includes reducing car emissions by measurable amounts;
- ▶ Strong support from an influential segment of the business community;
- ▶ Regular reporting to the public on progress (or lack of it);
- ▶ Strong advocacy organizations with engaged grassroots support;
- ▶ Incentives for decision-makers to earn a positive reputation on the environment because it translates into endorsements, money, votes, and, in the case of the private sector, customers; and
- ▶ Disincentives or consequences in terms of loss of voter support, customers, etc.

Right now, the clean air and clean water efforts are experiencing major setbacks (as any field does over time), but the critical elements this movement has built up over decades can help provide focus and clout as doors open again to improve the environment.

CHARTING THE COURSE: The Policymaker Accountability Accelerator Model

Our research and analysis identified several essential and complementary elements involved in developing an accelerated strategy for greater policymaker accountability for children’s well-being. These elements fit together in the Policymaker Accountability Accelerator Model. They are designed to inform and support action at any level—whether local, state, or national—as leaders for children take stock of current efforts and ways to strengthen their impact. (For a visual depiction of the Policymaker Accountability Accelerator Model along with a description of each element, see pages 16 and 17.)

Starting Points

A Clear Articulation of the Goal – “True North”

The integrated strategy starts with a “True North,” a clear articulation of what we as a nation want for all children. “True North” sets our destination and orients us about where we are and where we need to go. It is both aspirational and achievable, such as the following:

“All children have the opportunities and support to succeed in school and in life.”

“True North” for children ought to be translatable into a short and motivating summary of the outcome we want. Like “clean air and water” or “safe schools” or “marriage equality,” this phrase would motivate us and serve as a shared rallying point. There are various phrases now being used—including “all children thrive,” “children have a bright future,” and “children get a healthy start, a head start, and a fair start.” But no single message, today, is driving well-orchestrated advocacy and accountability, as is the case with other movements.

Shared Language and Working Definitions

Shared language and definitions can help diverse groups and individuals work together to agree on goals for children and accelerate policymaker accountability for



achieving them. Such language and working definitions emerged from our research. We hope they provide a common frame of reference as leaders for children build on accountability tools now in use to ratchet up their efforts.

We suggest the following working definitions:

Policymakers: We define policymakers as leaders who hold decision-making authority related to budget and policy. Elected officials meet this criterion. High-level staff in government and legislative bodies can also be public policymakers if they have the authority to make important decisions that affect children.

Policymaker accountability: Webster defines “accountability” as “an obligation or willingness to accept responsibility or to account for one’s actions.” We believe that policymaker accountability for children’s well-being exists when policymakers are clear about and highly incentivized to promote policies, practices, and budgets that help children thrive, and mechanisms are in place to ensure shared expectations for children are met.

Success: Successful policymaker accountability exists when policies and resources are in place that enable all children to reach their full potential. Interim successes include changing public attitudes to treat children as a top priority, establishing oversight structures for children, motivating other movements to make children an explicit priority in their agendas, and increasing voter support for candidates who make children their priority (as well as voter opposition to elected officials who don’t).



The Four Accelerators

There are four accelerator strategies that work together towards reaching “True North,” and all are necessary for accountability to have maximum impact. Each is achieved through specific activities that are summarized below.

1 Culture Shift to Kids as a Priority

Policymaker accountability for kids will remain limited unless there is a shift in cultural values: Children must become a shared, top priority for the broad public.

This culture shift would be reflected in an active partnership between parents, government, and employers working together to improve the situation for kids. For this culture shift to be successful, it will need to be informed by parents, youth, and community residents representing various beliefs and backgrounds—and based upon solid research with compelling and heart-warming messages. Culture shift requires strategic and frequent communications that will motivate the public to care and become more engaged on a sustained basis.

2 Clear Expectations of Policymakers

Policymakers need to know what they are being held accountable for—what it means to “do right for kids”—in clear and concrete terms.

That requires common-sense, actionable policy priorities that are grounded in science and research, and communicated in simple, salient ways. This policy agenda ought to be centered on equity, address the whole child, and provide specific ways that progress will be monitored and measured, including how resources are allocated. Individual policy priorities may need adjusting as circumstances change, but they will always point directly toward “True North.”

3 Civic Participation

Parents, youth, child advocates, and the broad public are the accountability “enforcers” for kids’ well-being.

Their voices, votes, organizing skills, and consistent activism can motivate policymakers to do what’s right for kids. Involving other influential allies (e.g., business, faith, labor) and movement influencers intensifies that

motivation. And providing acclaim when policymakers meet expectations reinforces decision-making that leads to progress. Civic participation can range from showing up at protests to asking questions at town halls, and from retweeting praise for a policymaker’s positive action to voting for a “kid-friendly” slate. In the 24 states and certain localities that have an initiative process, ballot measures provide an additional channel for organizing and civic participation.

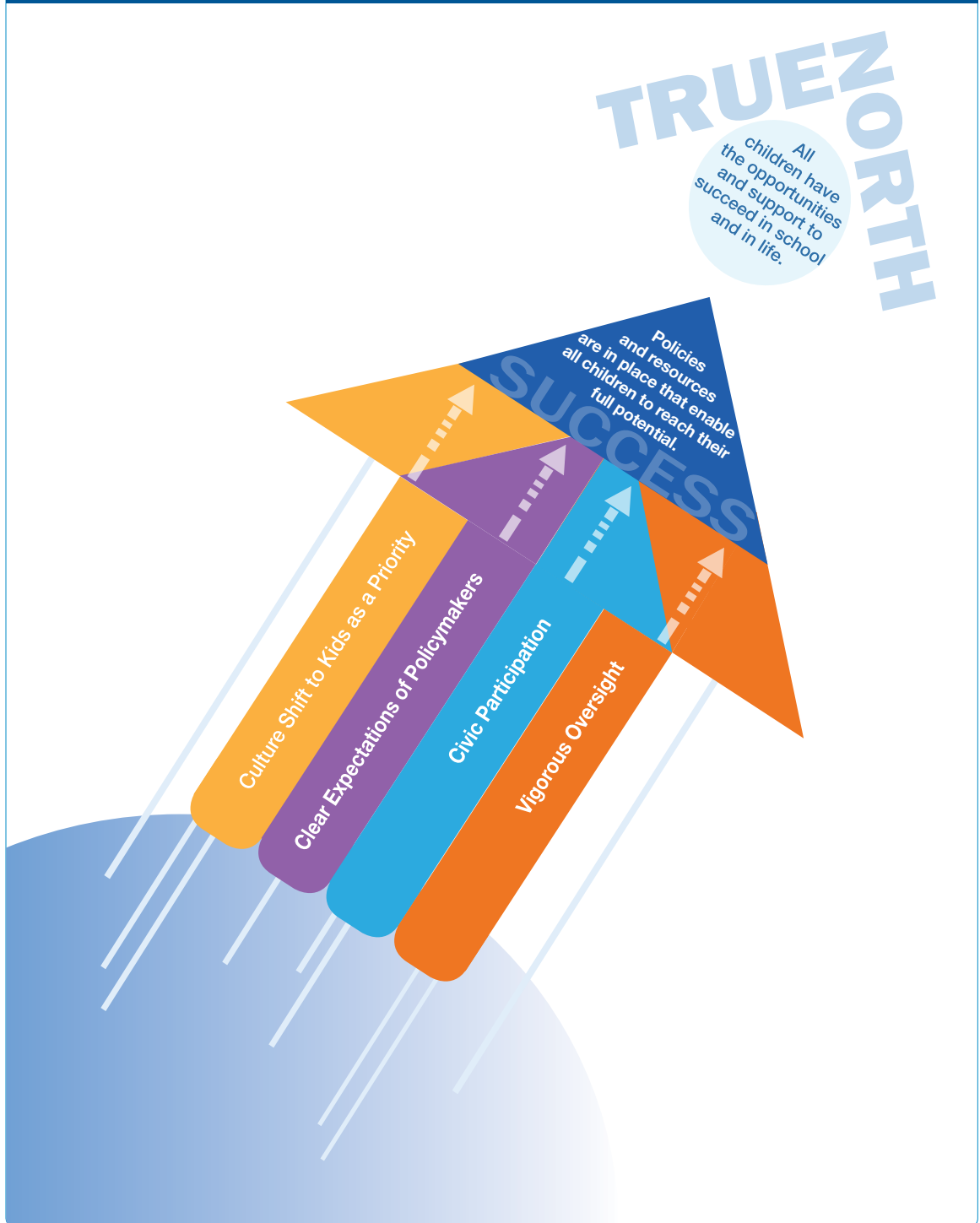
4 Vigorous Oversight

Using clear expectations for progress and reporting on them publicly and consistently show policymakers that their decisions have consequences, both for kids and for their own reputations.

Independent and transparent oversight is especially important because children themselves lack political clout: They can’t vote, and they can’t make political donations. So long as oversight activities operate on a continuing basis and with full independence, the oversight role may be housed within a government agency or be quasi-governmental, like an appointed commission. Oversight from child advocates adds a crucial perspective. Investigative journalism and social media also provide powerful ways to monitor and publicize both progress and failings. In addition to the exposure that oversight can bring, there must be more direct consequences when a policymaker’s performance is inadequate. To complement those consequences now being used (e.g., elections, litigation, and negative press), research and development is needed to identify altogether new tools for corrective action tailored to the unique challenges in advocating for children.

The Policymaker Accountability Accelerator Model

Reaching True North Through Four Accelerators



ACCELERATING POLICYMAKER ACCOUNTABILITY: Three-Part Action Plan

With so much at stake for children over the next few years, there is an urgency to intensify the focus on children’s well-being. We are putting forward an action plan to accelerate policymaker accountability because, as advocates, we know the value of having a starting roadmap to guide the work ahead. The Three-Part Action Plan we are recommending uses the Policymaker Accountability Accelerator Model to build on and leverage many available assets, some of which are currently being tapped, while others are not. It includes the following:

- ✓ **Priorities Between Now and the 2020 Election;**
- ✓ **Ongoing Efforts to Build Strong Engagement; and**
- ✓ **Capacity-Building for Success.**

Our collective expectations about the work ahead should be realistic and recognize that the activities and resources to carry them out successfully must be sustained over many years. A [recent analysis](#) of 15 social movements that “defied the odds and achieved life-changing results”—including tobacco control, hospice care, and marriage equality—found it took decades to achieve true



breakthroughs, with many wins, losses, and adjustments along the way. Leaders for children are definitely not starting from scratch, and the more we do now to increase our impact, the more we can accomplish for kids in the near future and the long term.



Action Plan: Part One

Priorities Between Now and the 2020 Election

The two-year window between now and the 2020 election offers a motivating and realistic timeframe in which to make measurable progress on each element of the Policymaker Accountability Accelerator Model. Following are the priorities for action.



Reframe Our Messages

At this time of extraordinary shifts in public attitudes and the political environment, leaders for kids want to better understand how to engage a broader public base. We need in-depth public opinion, language, and message research to help us tap into shared values and effectively communicate a kids' agenda that resonates across political affiliations and interest groups.

Our research for this report surfaced some especially important questions to address:

- ▶ What core values and messages motivate a wide public not only to care about kids but also to take actions that influence policy and elections?
- ▶ In these polarized times, how can focusing on kids' well-being bridge differences of ideology, race, geography, and class?
- ▶ What is most motivating for parents and grandparents?
- ▶ How do voters understand the concepts behind equity, and what are the most effective ways to talk about equity for kids?
- ▶ How can supporters of other movements that affect children see value in making kids an explicit priority?
- ▶ What is the best way to convey the meaning and value of policymaker accountability when it comes to children?

Certain allied organizations, such as the newly formed Leading for Kids, FrameWorks Institute, and various public opinion research firms, are already working on aspects of this framing and culture shift piece. More systematically tapping the best pollsters, cultural linguists, and issue-based communications experts will enable leaders for children to tease out what makes

this era unique and determine how best to maximize the opportunities it presents. Because this research provides the foundation for many of the other needed activities, it ought to be undertaken immediately and completed as soon as possible.



Mount Sustained Communications to Make Children Top of Mind

We recommend that the findings from this public opinion and message research be used to mount a broad and sustained communications campaign that taps hearts and minds and inspires a broad public to press for what's good for children. To accelerate policymaker accountability, ubiquitous, motivating messaging needs to tie to a clear action agenda and use multidimensional outreach—including video, social media, and other channels—to reach those activists and voters most likely to engage.

Noteworthy successes underscore the difference this communications component can make with policymakers and voters alike. Consider the brain research discussed earlier, for example. Sustained communications about key scientific breakthroughs over the past 15 years have reshaped the public's understanding of what young children need. These messages have provided advocates and policymakers with a new and compelling case for investing in early learning experiences for young children, resulting in greater investments by communities, states, and the federal government.

Too often in the past, communications campaigns on specific issues related to children haven't been adequately funded or sustained. This communications work will require a long-term commitment of resources to assemble and support the most effective team of issue-based communications experts, cultural linguists, and political strategists. Adequate and patient funding will enable them to craft cogent messages, deploy the most effective platforms and tools, enlist effective partners, target the right audiences, and adapt as circumstances change.

✓ Organize Around Shared Values, Goals and Messages

Many organizations are already mobilizing large networks to benefit children and have tremendous reach in thousands of communities. These networks provide a powerful base for building toward greater collective impact. Other movements—whether for lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and questioning/queer (LGBTQ) rights, Black Lives Matter, the environment, and most recently #NeverAgain—have demonstrated how advocates increase their impact with policymakers and candidates when they raise their voices in unison around shared goals and messages. Leaders working on particular issues continue their focused campaigns while also joining under a broader tent to advance the overarching cause.

As a first step, consensus must be built around a unifying vision for all children—the “True North.” Leaders of large advocacy networks, along with experts in relevant fields like brain science and economics, are well-positioned to determine the overarching goal and work with communications professionals to message it. To spur discussion, we have suggested, “All children have the opportunities and support to succeed in school and in life.” Many other phrases are used today as well. Once network leaders and experts in relevant fields define “True North,” they would translate it into specific expectations for policymakers.



To begin amplifying messages around shared goals, organizations such as the following can provide a wide and deep base: [Alliance for Early Success](#), [America’s Promise Alliance](#), [American Academy of Pediatrics](#), [The Aspen Institute](#), [The Campaign for Grade-Level Reading](#), [Child Welfare League of America](#), [Children Now](#), [Children’s Defense Fund](#), [Children’s Hospital Association](#), [The Children’s Partnership](#), [Common Sense Kids Action](#), [Council for Exceptional Children](#), [Council for a Strong America](#), [Every Child Matters](#), [First Focus](#), [The Forum for Youth Investment](#), [KIDS COUNT](#), [MomsRising](#), [National PTA](#), [Partnership for America’s Children](#), [PolicyLink](#), [Save the Children](#) and [Save the Children Action Network](#), [Stand for Children](#), [State Priorities Partnership](#), and [ZERO TO THREE](#). National associations of child-serving professionals—including early childhood educators, social workers, and teachers—also add greatly to the reach.

Advancing the LGBTQ Movement Via Marriage Equality: Insights for Accountability

The movement for LGBTQ rights chose marriage equality as its goal for a nationwide, unified campaign. [Over a 20-year period, the number of U.S. states that legalized same-sex marriage grew from none to all 50. And public approval of marriage equality grew from 27 percent to more than 60 percent.](#) To further underscore the magnitude of progress, in 2006, 50 percent of states actually had anti-marriage laws on the books. Movement leaders call out a handful of attributes as especially important. First, [“like every other successful civil rights movement, the marriage movement needed to see itself as a long-term campaign with a focused affirmative goal and a sustained strategy.”](#) Movement leaders jointly developed their playbook (“The Road to Victory”) with three essential tracks: changing the law in a critical number of states, building majority public support, and ending federal marriage discrimination. [Legally permitted foundation funding was critical](#) to developing and [carrying out the strategy](#), including its communications component, which effectively shifted the framing to the compelling message of “love is love.”

✓ Organize Across Movements and Large Groups

Between now and the 2020 election, leaders for children can expand the kids' constituency exponentially by [finding common ground with other movements](#) whose work directly affects children, like women's rights, gun safety, criminal justice reform, and the environment. By encouraging activists in these movements to learn about and incorporate the values needed for kids to thrive and specific kids' issues into their platforms, a children's agenda can become more central in the political process. Moreover, a focus on lifting up children as a priority could resonate as a way to get our nation back on track when so many people feel like we have lost our way on important values and commitments.

In addition, there are a handful of very large groups of Americans who have a strong interest in children, many of whom are also likely voters. These include 65 million grandparents ([10 percent of whom live with a grandchild](#)), the millions of personnel who work in schools and other child-serving organizations, and parents. These segments of the population are well-positioned to register to vote, to cast a ballot, and to urge people

running for office to make kids their agenda. There is also an opportunity to expand the kids' constituency through conversations with networks that have become especially active in organizing events, such as women's march organizations, faith-based groups, and new organizing groups springing up in local communities and online.

✓ Support Vigorous Nonprofit Advocacy

Although many nonprofit organizations engage in some form of advocacy for children, a large percentage don't currently carry out certain important activities recommended in this report, either because of insufficient time and staff or because they are not aware of the relevant laws that define what activities are permissible using their 501(c)(3) funding. By providing nonprofits with training and staff support between now and the 2020 election, funders that care about kids can equip the sector to have greater impact in their advocacy and accountability efforts. Alliance for Justice's [trainings and materials](#) are an invaluable resource for nonprofit organizations interested in advocating more vigorously for policies affecting kids while staying in compliance with the rules that govern tax-exempt nonprofits.



✓ Invest in the Political Process: 501(c)(4)s, PACs, and Super PACs for Kids

Leaders promoting nearly every cause raise money and invest it in the political process because that's where critical decisions are made. While a few efforts like [Every Child Matters](#) have had some success, it has been particularly challenging to raise political funds for a children's agenda. Donations to such vehicles are not tax-exempt and have been viewed by some potential donors as risky or tainted. As a result, investments to date have been too small to really test out to what degree policymakers would focus on kids' needs if incentivized through political contributions. And the emergence of Super PACs has raised the bar on the amount of funds needed if kids are to be represented effectively in the political process.

This is a challenge worth taking on. [Recent election results](#) suggest that championing children might actually help candidates win elections—while those who ignore or harm children may find themselves losing. There is plenty of experience to draw upon in deciding how best to invest. Movement leaders and political consultants who have been involved in electoral activities using private, unrestricted funds can help guide decisions about investment vehicles, how best to target resources, and the activities and messages most likely to have an impact. Fortunately, there is also the potential to substantially increase private investment in the political process thanks to the new wealth of many entrepreneurs—some of whom are young parents or have focused their investing in children in other ways—who are eager to give back in areas that reflect their passions. To promote the bipartisan nature of the kids' cause and avoid any appearance of partisanship, it will be extremely valuable to recruit investors across parties and ideologies.

Accountability Through Direct Democracy

Direct democracy—in the form of citizen-initiated budget and/or ballot campaigns for children—has also proved successful as a model for achieving accountability in certain U.S. communities, though these campaigns have sometimes required multiple attempts. Following the lead of San Francisco's successful effort in 1991 to create a [Children's Fund](#) by securing a portion of local property taxes for children in each year's city budget, other local communities have organized to dedicate revenues for children. In 2002, voters in Miami-Dade County, Florida, created [The Children's Trust](#), which continues to fund children's initiatives from property tax revenues. As interest grows in taking local action on behalf of children, a relatively new venture, [Funding the Next Generation](#), is now providing strategy advice and technical assistance to interested community leaders.





Action Plan: Part Two

Ongoing Efforts to Build Strong Engagement

The priority actions recommended in Part I of this plan will strengthen our impact between now and 2020 and must continue beyond 2020. The following actions, though longer-term by nature, ought to begin as soon as possible.

Engage with Young People and Policymakers

Our research suggests that creative new strategies might emerge from focused conversations with two groups that are central to accountability. Young people (including those who are already activists and those not yet engaged) are disproportionately affected by many of today’s most pressing policy challenges. And they bring diverse backgrounds, leadership styles, and skills to a field that is undergoing its own generational change. Policymakers (including those who are champions for children and those who are not) know first-hand what forms of accountability are most helpful and effective. The investor community might consider commissioning interviews with these key players or hosting convenings, using the findings in this report as a springboard.

Develop an Equivalent for Children of the Air Quality Index

The hyperlocal focus of activism makes this an ideal time to develop community-level engagement strategies that can improve conditions for children and enlist residents as key players. The local [Air Quality Index \(AQI\)](#), a composite measure of five pollutants regulated under the Clean Air Act, offers one example of an informative and simple tool that is engaging across geographic regions, education levels, and political affiliations. Its visually attractive, color-coded graphic signifies the level of health concern and can be easily brought up on a smartphone or other digital device.

The AQI can be accessed for any locality and can help drive family decisions about where to live. As states like California head into year-round fire season, AQI’s utility in helping parents protect their children’s health and as an organizing tool for environmental justice is more salient than ever.



A tool with some of these attributes that depicts progress on kids’ well-being at a very local level could be a powerful way to motivate larger numbers of residents to tune in to how kids are faring and spark healthy competition among localities. Unlike data on air quality, which can be updated daily, new data on children become available less often. Nonetheless, there would be tremendous value in having a widely used summary index on children’s well-being that could be updated periodically, available by local community. To have maximum impact, this local engagement tool would need to be used across the nation. The Child Opportunity Index offers a useful starting point. (See spotlight story on page 24.) There are other relevant efforts in early stages of development as well.

Create Accountability Structures That Protect Children and Advance Their Interests

Structures that provide independent oversight and leadership for kids ought to be explored and put in place in the U.S. at the local, state, and federal levels. Their responsibilities could include, for example, analyzing the impact on children of relevant policy proposals, reporting regularly to the public on the well-being of children, investigating problem areas and setting out needed remedies, and raising the voice of children to policymakers and the public. To carry out these responsibilities effectively, a framework that articulates the goals for children is necessary.

There are activities upon which we can build. At the federal level, various efforts such as special congressional committees on children have been tried. Today, additional approaches are being proposed, including [establishing an independent Commissioner for America's Children and creating a National Commission on Children](#). Solutions will vary at the state and local levels depending on circumstances and existing structures. As a starting point, [most states today have some form of youth-coordinating body for children](#)—such as a children's council or children's cabinet—that collects certain data and undertakes cross-agency planning. However, generally, they are not tasked with doing oversight and often were not created with the independence needed for effective oversight. In addition, [the majority of states have some form of children's ombudsperson](#), although most are focused on child welfare rather than the broad needs of children. And numerous counties in California (including San Mateo, San Luis Obispo, Merced, Napa, and Santa Clara) have led the way in enacting a children's bill of rights and monitoring and reporting on progress.

Hold Ourselves Accountable Through Advocacy Audits

As we work to create greater policymaker accountability, each of us can also hold ourselves accountable for doing our part—whether through an organization or coalition, or as an individual. We can each ask the question:

- ▶ Are we using our voice and our vote to the maximum and getting our family and friends to do same?
- ▶ Do we join under a broad enough tent to support overarching goals and messages? Do we track policymaker performance for kids according to these expectations?
- ▶ Is there more we can do to join forces with allies across our community, state, or nation? Is there additional advocacy our organizations can do within existing legal parameters to ratchet up the pressure?
- ▶ Are there more ways we can ensure leaders experience meaningful consequences when they don't act in children's best interests, like getting voted out of office and replaced by a champion for kids?

We will only succeed if we, as those most focused on kids' well-being, start making the changes we can—now.

Child Opportunity Index Motivates Policymakers in Albany to Act

The Child Opportunity Index, a relatively new research tool that helps residents and policymakers understand neighborhood conditions through an equity lens, spurred policymakers in Albany, New York, to revitalize the city's parks and playgrounds. When the Mayor of Albany and its Commissioner of Recreation, Youth & Workforce Services saw Albany listed in a report of worst cities in the country for equitable neighborhood opportunities for healthy development of Latino and Black children, they joined forces to do something about it. [Three years into their five-year capital campaign, the city has redone 11 parks, many with intergenerational features.](#)

The Child Opportunity Index stands out as particularly relevant to accountability efforts because it can analyze where children of various racial and ethnic backgrounds live in relation to neighborhood opportunities. It provides information for 47,000 neighborhoods (i.e., census tracts), which comprise the 100 largest U.S. metro areas and are home to nearly two-thirds of U.S. children. Furthermore, it offers a composite picture of these neighborhoods, incorporating 19 measures of educational, health and environmental, and social and economic opportunity. Placing its emphasis on “child equity” (meaning “all children have a fair and equal chance of achieving healthy development”), the Child Opportunity Index offers an online platform with interactive mapping tools. Data can be compared across large school districts, large cities, counties, and states.

Action Plan: Part Three Capacity-Building for Success

A key to success for any ambitious nationwide accountability effort is to identify the structures and supports necessary to sustain it. Partners and participants are more motivated to get and stay involved when they see there is a way to work together that is inclusive, strategic, and efficient.

The recommendations in this report require new ways of working together and some additional resources, but not necessarily new organizations. Various models for getting the work done are worth considering. One model is to have one or two host organizations serve as “lead” in involving many players. [Collective Impact Forum](#), which is jointly administered by The Aspen Institute and FSG, is an example. Another approach is to carry out the work through a more flexibly organized network of partners that share decision-making and responsibilities, as is the case with many issue-driven coalitions or collective efforts. A third is a consortium of foundations that facilitates the activities, like the [Convergence Partnership](#), [Civil Marriage Collaborative](#), and [California Funders for Boys and Men of Color](#). And

there are other approaches. Some may be best suited to certain stages of a movement’s development, and sustaining success may require change over time. In deciding on the best structure, there is extensive experience to draw on among foundations, advocacy organizations, movement leaders, and management experts who have tried various models.

“Children’s advocates welcome ways we can amplify our efforts to motivate policymakers to do what’s right for kids. Kids Impact Initiative has identified a number of powerful strategies that need to be supported, expanded, and used consistently at the federal, state, and local levels.”

Deborah Stein, Network Director
Partnership for America’s Children



IN CLOSING

Giving all children the opportunities to succeed in life is something that most policymakers would say, and believe, they want to do. It has moral weight, even though what it means is not yet well-enough defined for effective accountability. In addition to the reasons for urgency described at the beginning of this report, there is another potentially powerful incentive for policymakers and the public to focus on children: Demographic changes are making the well-being and productivity of every child even more important. The ratio of children to the aging population is shrinking. Relative to the growing number of older people, the population of young people—on whose earning potential older people depend—is smaller. [A recent analysis](#) by demographer Dowell Myers found that “each child—regardless of gender, ethnicity, geographic residence or economic background—is virtually twice as important to society as ever before.” It ought to concern us all that according to Pentagon estimates, [70 percent of all young adults in the U.S.](#) would not qualify for military service today in large part because they do not meet the minimum education or health requirements.

Kids Impact Initiative is committed to working as a thought partner with leaders for children, players in related movements, researchers, and funders to increase the impact of accountability efforts as part of overall child advocacy. We invite today’s leaders for kids, along with the next generation of child advocates, to build on these ideas and work together to implement them. We hope that foundations and other investors in effective advocacy will provide resources and add their knowledge about what works. Kids Impact Initiative will continue to offer research, strategy suggestions, and an evangelical voice urging leaders for kids to stay focused on this crucial aspect of advocacy.

We look forward to joining forces with colleagues and allies who believe that we can and must improve the situation for children and avert the tremendous harm that could otherwise take place.



Research Approach and Resources

This assessment draws on the authors' six decades on the front lines of child advocacy as well as input from colleagues, project advisors, and funders. It reports on three initial research forays into the topic of policymaker accountability for children's well-being:

1. Interviews with thought leaders in the children's field and in other fields (see Acknowledgments);
2. A high-level review of literature about holding decision-makers accountable for a variety of social policies; and
3. A scan of accountability strategies currently in use by children's leaders and those in other fields.

Kids Impact Initiative then analyzed the findings from this research to identify opportunities available to the children's field to strengthen policymaker accountability and a suggested path forward. We also sought out and incorporated feedback from reviewers on two prior drafts of this report.

Annotated Resources

Relatively little has been published or put together on accountability for children's well-being as Kids Impact Initiative is defining it. By accountability we mean that public policymakers are clear about and highly incentivized to promote policies and practices that help children thrive, and mechanisms are in place to ensure shared expectations for children are met.

What follows are some of the resources we found especially useful in our research and analysis because they address one or more of the components of an accountability strategy for kids. Some resources from other fields are included that might offer insights for children.

At the end of these annotated resources is a bibliography of selected additional resources we reviewed in our research for this report. NOTE: The links are current as of January 29, 2019, but may have changed since then.

International Focus

Éloi Laurent's *Measuring Tomorrow: Accounting for Well-Being, Resilience, and Sustainability in the Twenty-First Century* (2018) provides a forward-looking analysis of what societies should measure, how these measures can be used to develop new policies, and includes case studies from around the world. See <https://press.princeton.edu/titles/11136.html>.

Judith Kelley's *Scorecard Diplomacy: Grading States to Influence Their Reputation and Behavior* (2017) presents new research suggesting that in an international setting—and under the right conditions—countries can be motivated to action by appealing to their reputation. Grading countries on human trafficking—supported by practical assistance from government, expanded publicity, and indirect pressure from

third parties—resulted in improved policies. See <https://www.scorecarddiplomacy.org/>.

Save the Children's "The Many Faces of Exclusion: End of Childhood Report 2018" dramatizes outcomes for children by ranking 175 countries based on when "childhood ends." The rankings incorporate rates of early death, malnutrition, abbreviated education, entering the workforce, early marriage, early childbirth, or extreme violence. See <https://www.savethechildren.org/content/dam/global/reports/2018-end-of-childhood-report.pdf>.

UNICEF's "Accountability for Children's Rights" (2015) discusses different kinds of accountability, with a focus on "social accountability (people-led accountability initiatives)" and its potential to achieve results and equity for children. See <https://www.unicef.org/policyanalysis/rights/files/Accountability-for-Childrens-Rights-UNICEF.pdf>.

United Nations' "Sustainable Development Goals" is a set of 17 goals that have been adopted by nearly 200 countries and are designed to achieve shared outcomes related to economic development, health, and sustainability over a 30-year period. Nations are expected to meet more specific targets, which are stipulated under each goal. In many countries, state governments and philanthropy have directed policy and resources to support success toward meeting these goals. For example, under the broader goal of "Good health and well-being," one of the target 2030 goals is to "reduce the global maternal mortality ratio to less than 70 per 100,000 live births." Despite uneven progress across countries and goals, the first half of the initiative has brought major successes. See <http://www.un.org/sustainabledevelopment/>.



UK Youth Parliament has provided opportunities for 11-18 year-olds to use their elected voice to bring about social change since 1999. Members of Youth Parliament take part in an annual debate in the House of Commons chamber, chaired by the Speaker of the House of Commons, and debate five issues chosen by a ballot of young people from across the UK. The youth then vote to decide which two issues should become the UK Youth Parliament's priority campaigns for the year ahead. See <http://www.ukyouthparliament.org.uk/>.

WORLD Policy Analysis Center at UCLA's Fielding School of Public Health focuses on laws, policies, and programs that countries have in place which are tied to positive outcomes for children (such as paid parental leave and free and compulsory primary education.) Rather than using numerical measures, this analysis uses policy metrics to analyze various countries' performances and compares them to others. Anecdotal evidence suggests that this focus on rights and policies associated with better outcomes holds promise to help motivate action by certain governments. See <https://worldpolicycenter.org/topics/childhood/policies>.

U.S. Focus

The Annie E. Casey Foundation's "KIDS COUNT Data Book" analyzes national trends in overall child well-being and ranks states according to four domains: economic well-being, education, health, and family and community. The report, published annually since 1990, uses a variety of sources, including data from governmental agencies, reports from foundations and nonprofits, and other studies. See <http://www.aecf.org/databook>.

Child Welfare Information Gateway's National Technical Assistance and Evaluation Center for Systems of Care offers the resource "A Closer Look: Accountability" (2010), which defines accountability and discusses challenges and strategies for implementing accountability in the context of the child welfare system. See <https://www.childwelfare.gov/pubPDFs/accountability.pdf>.

Federal Interagency Forum on Child and Family Statistics, a clearinghouse established by executive order in 1997, annually issues its report "America's Children: Key National Indicators of Well-Being." It presents 41 key indicators on important aspects of children's lives, grouped in seven categories: family and social environment, economic circumstances, health care, physical environment and safety, behavior, education, and health. The data are culled from federal agencies and analyzed with input from foundations, academic researchers, and state and local service providers. See https://www.childstats.gov/pdf/ac2018/ac_18.pdf.

First Focus Campaign for Children's "Champions for Children 2017" tallies up actions that members of Congress take related to making children a top priority, presenting a list of 40 U.S. Senators and 80 members of the House who are Champions and Defenders for children. See <https://campaignforchildren.org/resources/report/champions-for-children-2017/>.

Forum for Youth Investment's "2017 State Policy Survey: Child and Youth Policy Coordinating Bodies in the U.S." (Elizabeth Gaines) provides the nation's only survey of state child and youth policy coordinating bodies (i.e., children's cabinets, commissions, P-20 councils, and early childhood advisory councils). The report reviews their decisions, lessons, and experiences in hopes these can help inform other state leaders and coordinating bodies. See http://forumfyi.org/files/ccn_survey_report_2017.pdf.

National Conference of State Legislatures' "Children's Ombudsman Offices/Office of the Child Advocate" reviews what children's ombudsman offices are, the functions they typically provide, and the various types that exist. It also provides a state-by-state summary of ombudsman services. See <http://www.ncsl.org/research/human-services/childrens-ombudsman-offices.aspx>.

Urban Institute's "Kids' Share 2018: Report on Federal Expenditures on Children Through 2017 and Future Projections" (2018) is the 12th edition of an annual report that analyzes federal spending on children from 1960 until the present. These reports also project the proportion of federal expenditures spent on children in the future. See <https://www.urban.org/research/publication/kids-share-2018-report-federal-expenditures-children-through-2017-and-future-projections>.

State & Local

AirNow's "Air Quality Index" (AQI), originally created in 1968, is updated daily and available by zip code. The Environmental Protection Agency regularly reviews the pollutants it deems hazardous to health. The AQI is based on the five "criteria" pollutants regulated under the Clean Air Act: ground-level ozone, particulate matter, carbon monoxide, sulfur dioxide, and nitrogen dioxide. AQI provides a number from 1 to 500, with corresponding color code to signify the levels of health concern. See <https://airnow.gov/index.cfm?action=aqibasics.aqi>.



The Campaign for Grade-Level Reading, which operates through voluntary arrangements in 350 communities across 43 states, focuses on one major goal: improving third-grade-level reading proficiency. The campaign, which partners with nonprofits, business, philanthropy, and government, is embarking on a network-wide data platform called the Learning for Impact and Improvement System (LIIS). The new platform will help communities learn from each other about what works and will promote greater accountability for getting to population-level change and closing gaps for children from low-income families. See <http://gradelevelreading.net/>.

Children Now's "2018-19 California County Scorecard of Children's Well-Being" is an interactive, online report that presents a picture of children's condition in each of California's 58 counties. This report provides county-level data visualizations, tracking 30 key indicators of child well-being across counties, over time, and by race and ethnicity. Viewers can see all indicators for a given county or see one indicator across all counties. Rankings indicate how a county stacks up vis-à-vis other counties. See <https://www.childrennow.org/portfolio-posts/2018scorecard/>.

The Children's Trust's "The Billion Dollar Bet On A Community's Future: How the Children's Trust persuaded the 2.4 million residents of Florida's largest county to tax themselves during an economic downturn" (Martin Merzer) examines and analyzes the planning and implementation of a campaign in Miami-Dade County to reauthorize hundreds of programs that serve children in the areas of health care, education, and safety. See https://www.thechildrenstrust.org/sites/default/files/kcfinder/files/The_Childrens_Trust_Case_Study_032409b.pdf.

Common Sense Kids Action's "California Legislative Scorecard 2018" rates legislators in the California Assembly and Senate based on 56 key "For Kids" and "Against Kids" bills in the 2017 legislative session. The bills address early life, family life, school life, and digital life. Legislators who scored above 90% were awarded a "For Kids" star. See https://www.common sense media.org/sites/default/files/uploads/kids_action/legislative_scorecard_release_webready.pdf.

Maryland Governor's Office for Children on behalf of the Children's Cabinet's "Maryland Child Well-Being Scorecard" has been issued annually for more than 15 years by the governor's office. The tool tracks results from areas known to affect a child's ability to grow up healthy and secure. The governor's office describes the scorecard as a "Results-based accountability framework to focus planning, decision-making and budgeting on desired results and outcomes." This initiative now links with local management boards that exist in each county and the city of Baltimore to serve as a planning and coordinating hub for children and family services. See <http://goc.maryland.gov/reportcard/>.

Santa Clara County's "Child Impact Statements" were approved by the County Board of Supervisors in 2011 to ensure that children's needs are taken into consideration in all

county decision-making. The county's Bill of Rights for Children and Youth and the goals of the Children's Agenda are the basis for assessing impact. The Bill of Rights and Children's Agenda also form the basis for a detailed annual report of progress by Kids in Common. See <http://www.kidsincommon.org/storage/3283/Data-Book-2017.pdf>.

STAR Communities' "Community Rating System" aims to address the needs of U.S. cities, towns, and counties seeking a common framework for sustainability. The initiative is a voluntary, menu-based certification program designed for communities to evaluate their progress against a set of standardized sustainability objectives and evaluation measures. Its seven goal areas and 21 leading indicators were developed in partnership with volunteers representing 50 cities and counties, state and federal agencies, nonprofit organizations, national associations, universities, utilities, and private corporations. Leading indicators are organized into an online platform where U.S. cities and counties can annually report key sustainability metrics. Communities of all sizes and experience can use the leading indicators to benchmark annual performance and compare their progress with participating communities. See <http://www.starcommunities.org/>.

Women's Foundation of California's "California Women's Well-Being Index" (2016) is a web-based interactive tool that shows data and rankings, by county, for how California's women are faring. The 30 measures encompass health, personal safety, employment and earnings, economic security, and political empowerment. The stated goal is to help provide a basis for policy solutions to advance women's well-being. See <http://womensfoundca.org/well-being/>.

Messaging Related to Children's Well-Being with Implications for Accountability

ASO Communications (Anat Shenker-Osorio) developed reports for early childhood funders in California that examine the use of a variety of techniques from the field of cognitive linguistics (which is dedicated to how people process information and communicate). These reports examine how people formulate judgements and come to conclusions about resources for young children's development. See http://earlychildhoodfunders.org/pdf/ASO_Brief_Minding_Our_Words_final.pdf (2016); and http://earlychildhoodfunders.org/pdf/Anat_Language_Analysis_Minding_Our_Words_final.pdf.

Frameworks Institute publishes messaging analyses on various subjects that relate to children and have implications for accountability. See the following examples: <http://www.frameworksinstitute.org/jacksonville.html>; http://frameworksinstitute.org/assets/files/ECD/south_carolina_qualitative_research.pdf (2006); http://frameworksinstitute.org/assets/files/ECD/children_in_ks_state_house.pdf (2006); and <http://www.frameworksinstitute.org/children.html>.

Additional Resources

We reviewed over a hundred reports, indexes, scorecards, and other resources as background for this report. A sampling is included here.

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The Annie E. Casey Foundation, “KIDS COUNT Data Center.” See <https://datacenter.kidscount.org/>.

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Collective Impact Forum. See <https://www.collectiveimpactforum.org/>.

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Freedom to Marry, “The Roadmap to Victory.” See <http://www.freedomtomarry.org/pages/Roadmap-to-Victory>.

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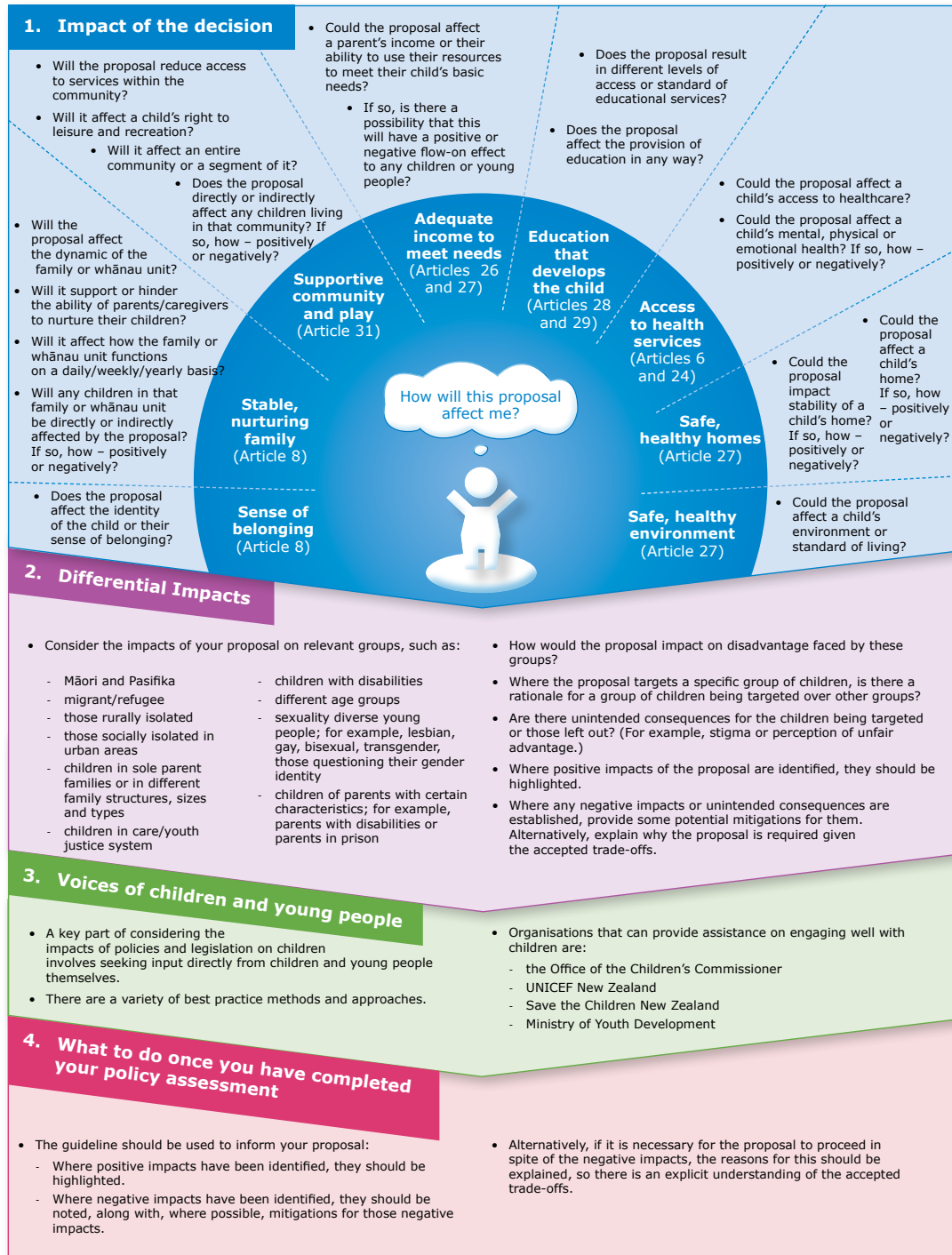
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The graphic below was produced by the New Zealand Ministry of Social Development. For more information, see <https://www.msd.govt.nz/documents/about-msd-and-our-work/publications-resources/monitoring/uncroc/uncroc-guideline-a3-.pdf>.

Child Impact Assessment: Best Practice Guideline

This tool has been designed to offer guidance to you as policy makers in New Zealand on how you can improve practice to consider the impacts of your advice on children and young people. The guideline has been designed in a way that makes it applicable to a range of policy settings and should be used in the way that is most appropriate for you and your organisation.



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