

What have we learned from experience?

Key lessons for those pursuing FCHW policy changes

- 1 Build a strong foundation** – Build a core team or network organized around a progressive, shared vision for the health and well-being of children and families that is clearly and consistently articulated.
- 2 Align and activate around a common cause** – Present evidence and the voice of those affected to make the issue visible. Unite and widen the alliances of different constituencies around the shared vision
- 3 Demonstrate, deliver, and protect policy change** – Bring technical expertise, community and practitioner inputs to build consensus around policy options. Demonstrate, deliver and monitor changes to change mindsets by showing the feasibility of and benefit from options.
- 4 Seize short-term opportunities, nurture long-term processes.** Be prepared to invest the time and effort to build relationships, nurture, and institutionalize change over years. But, also be ready to make the most of immediate, sometimes unexpected opportunities.

AROUND THE WORLD, societal attitudes and norms regarding the rights of children are shifting. In the United States, children's wellbeing historically has been considered the private purview of their families, and public policies have been largely reactive, attempting to address their most basic needs only when families break down. In many other countries, however, children and families are the focus of policies that seek, instead, to uphold the rights of children, ensuring their health and wellbeing through public investments in early childhood development, family supports, and related services.

In the United States, the health and wellbeing of many families with children are surprisingly poor given the high level of spending on programs and supports, particularly health care. While these outcomes vary considerably across states, children and families living in low-income and low-resource communities suffer persistent health and social disparities that are in no way reflective of America's status as a wealthy nation. Given that policy investments and outcomes related to family and child health and wellbeing (FCHW) are improving in places outside the U.S., an obvious question is: *What can the United States and other nations learn from those where attitudes, norms, practices, and policies targeted to children and families are changing for the better?*

Answering this question was the focus of a two-year project on *Fostering Policy Support for Child and Family Health and Wellbeing: Learning from International Experience*, which was coordinated by the Training and Research Support Centre (TARSC) in partnership with the University of Aberdeen and funded by the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation Global Ideas Fund at CAF America. The project analyzed FCHW policies from 13 low-, middle-, and high-income countries (Australia, Brazil, Chile, Ireland, Japan, Kenya, Norway, Peru, Rwanda, South Africa, Sweden, England and Vietnam) where positive changes have occurred since 2000.

This brief provides an overview of the what was learned from the effort while complete project details—from background to methodology to more information on lessons learned—are available in a [full report](#). Fourteen case studies from the 13 countries surveyed are available on the TARSC and [Shaping health](#) sites.

What is changing for children and families?

All of the countries studied are shifting toward holistic, affirmative and multi-sectoral policy approaches to improve the health and wellbeing of children and families. Systemic and structural policy changes are being made that demonstrate: 1) increased public and policymaker concern and support for FCHW; 2) increased support for and implementation of specific FCHW improvements; and 3) increased investment in FCHW, in line with social need.

Examples of the ways in which things are changing for children and families (detailed in the full report) include:

- Children are being recognized as individuals with rights.
- Children are contributing to policy discussions.
- Previously hidden, stigmatizing issues are being addressed publicly.
- Families are being supported in efforts to balance work and wellbeing.
- Key services are being provided holistically, universally, and equitably.
- FCHW investments are being increased, sometimes significantly.



What is enabling FCHW policy changes in some countries?

Commonalities in the 13 countries' experiences yielded insights into what supports policy change.

Respond to conditions that enable change. While the contexts were diverse, there were several features of the conditions in the 13 countries that helped to create fertile ground for change.

- Poor FCHW outcomes and burdens that are perceived as unfair and poorly addressed, such as child poverty, high youth suicide rates, or the hidden extent of gender-based violence.
- Catalytic shocks and major political changes, including, as a result of changing demographics such as Japan's lowest ever recorded birthrate in the 1990s, to positive examples, such as progressive political changes, rights-based constitutional reforms, and growing social expectations.
- International and national actions directed toward children's rights, including: the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, UNICEF's human-rights approach to child wellbeing, Nobel Prize-winning economist James Heckman's ideas on the economic benefits of investing in early child development and the Millennium Development Goals.

These conditions alone, however, did not and do not create policy change; instead, they either generate or extinguish opportunities for change. It then becomes necessary for those interested in change to make it happen. The country experiences highlighted the actions that raised awareness of the need for change, built confidence in the possibilities for change as well as political support to introduce new policy approaches.

Raise awareness of need/opportunity for change.

Key FCHW stakeholders in the 13 countries studied were able to capitalize on particular conditions for change because broad-based coalitions as well as individual champions were ready to advocate for children. They were ready with clear messages backed by credible evidence that people could understand and relate to. They also were ready with effective messengers, including community members, who amplified and spread their messages through traditional and social media as well through high-profile national and international forums. In Kenya, for example, courageous women recounted their experiences with gender-based violence in political forums. And in Norway, the Ombudsman for Children—an agency charged with promoting the interests of children—provided a safe space for children contribute directly to policy discussions by sharing their personal experiences with sensitive topics such as sexual violence, having parents in prison, and living in refugee families.



Young girl in Vietnam carries her brother on her back while their parents work.
© Danny Bach, Photoshare, 2017

Build confidence in and support for policy options. But while these things help raise awareness of the issues, they also do not on their own create policy change. A range of technical and social actors and innovators helped to identify and consult around options for addressing policy concerns. Formal statutory bodies, academic institutions, and civil society interacted with coalitions to suggest, consult on, and help build support for different policy options. Agreeing upon shared principles early in the process helped manage competing interests on options. Timely and strategic evidence, and local and international experiences informed and built confidence in what was being proposed.

The policy options were selected because they were technically, politically, and logistically feasible and addressed concerns arising from affected communities, from policymakers, and in some cases from opponents. Demonstrating the feasibility of policy options through local pilots and incrementally rolling out new practices through existing systems as well as supporting and drawing on implementers' knowledge and experience helped to show their benefits, especially to communities.

Many countries, for example, drew on international experience to inform local options. In Brazil, the Secretary of Health in Rio Grande do Sul followed by political leaders in a range of municipalities introduced home visiting and other interventions for early childhood development, demonstrating that the model could be adapted locally. In Vietnam, the Asian Development Bank and the World Bank supported community-based innovation in early childhood education, implementing models that had been successful in other low-income countries. In some cases, including in Brazil, Chile and Sweden, successful models spread within countries, from early-adopter communities to others elsewhere in the country.



Children participating in play with their parents, Família que Acolhe, Brazil
Source: A [Mariot, Prefeitura Boa Vista](#), 2019

Engage in political processes. The credibility that comes from authentic relationships and interactions is another key to successful FCHW policy change. The country experiences showed, for example, that activity around FCHW policies occurred among people—policymakers, technical consultants, advocates, community members, etc.—who had built longstanding relationships over many years. Similarly, high-profile, widely trusted political champions can help keep the focus on and advance FCHW policy issues, while interactions with directly affected community members—particularly children and youth—can have significant impact on policymakers. In South Africa, for example, parliamentarians' direct engagement with children in formal hearings and in community-based settings helped turn some policymakers into policy champions.

The researchers also noticed that parliamentary networks and caucuses helped sustain political interactions and policy focus over time. In Kenya, the cross-party Kenyan Parliamentary Association mobilized female policymakers from different political parties in support of policy reforms around gender-based violence.

Link strategies, actors, processes to generate policy change. The policy change process is messy and complicated, with many moving parts. The policy analysis conducted for this project necessarily breaks a complex process down into smaller fragments that may, as a result, look a bit like steps in a linear process. This is not the case. The convergence of the different strategies, actors, and processes around a shared goal, that diverse actors could relate to, is often what provided the impetus for policy change. Different individuals and institutions played an important role in making this happen. They invested in the relationships, interactions and feedback between the different processes and people involved in policy change. For example, in the debate on a new Children's Act in South Africa, the Children's Institute co-ordinated civil society networks and their members to share evidence and link them and supported them to bring their input into legal and parliamentary processes.

The country case studies showed all of the above as well as other factors (described in the full report) as important contributors to successful FCHW policy change—with some essential features shown overleaf.

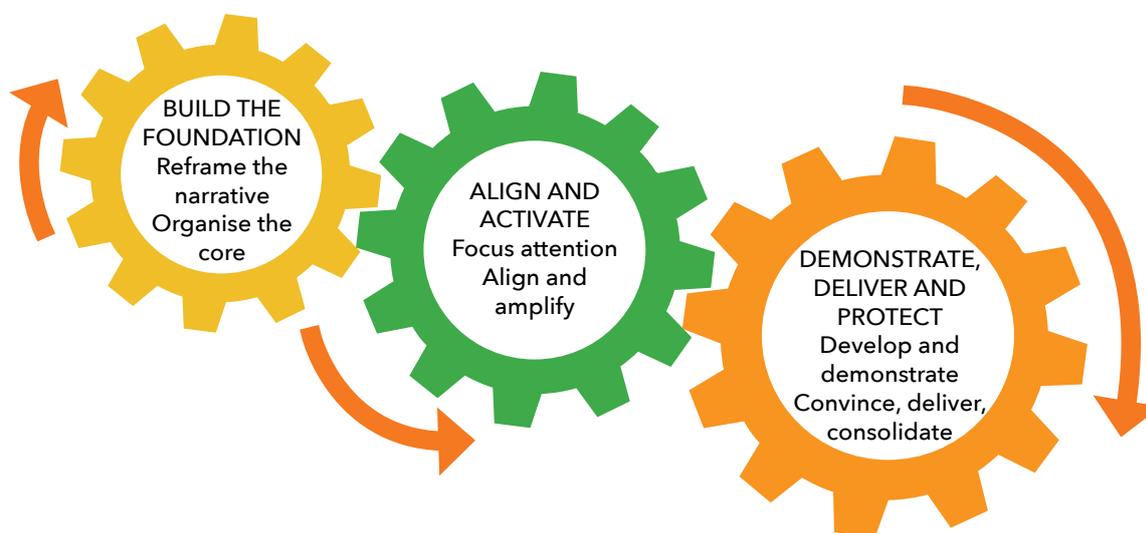


Youth climate strike iLightbox gallery, undated

Key lessons for those pursuing FCHW policy changes

Despite the very diverse circumstances and approaches identified in the 13 countries studied, the following activities appear critical to successful FCHW policy changes.

Drivers of policy change



1. Build the foundation—A strong foundation is needed on which to build policy change efforts. This requires a shared vision that is clearly and consistently articulated. The vision must have a progressive concept of children and families at its heart. It needs a well-organized core team or network of people to carry it forward.

2. Align and activate around a common cause—Take advantage of enabling conditions. Present diverse sources of strong evidence, including personal stories from affected communities, families, and children. Employ messages that resonate with and activate different constituencies and widen alliances around a common cause. Show the costs of not acting, and the pros and cons of different approaches. Use all available methods to spread and amplify messages, including traditional media, social media, training activities, electoral pledge campaigns, high-level forums.

3. Demonstrate, deliver, and protect policy change—Use inclusive, consultative processes guided by agreed upon principles to unify and build consensus across different constituencies on policy options. Use evidence to guide policy choices toward options that have a greater chance of success. Demonstrate new policy approaches in local innovations and share accessible messages on proposed changes to build confidence and support from communities and political actors. Understand and address the motivations and concerns of politicians. Think beyond single electoral cycles.

Equally critical while pursuing the above actions is seizing short-term opportunities and simultaneously nurturing long-term processes. Effective FCHW policy change calls for brokers that build links between constituencies. It combines longer-term strategies that build the understanding, relationships, practice, and evidence for change over time with efforts to activate immediate strategies when windows of opportunity open. These two approaches are not mutually exclusive, and both are essential.

This brief is drawn from Loewenson R (2020) Building policy support for family and child health and wellbeing: What have we learned from experience? Training and Research Support Centre, a synthesis report of the case study work in the project on *Fostering policy support for child and family wellbeing - Learning from international experience*.

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