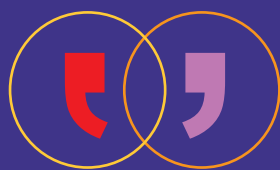


**The  
Workshop**

# How to Talk About **Child and Family Wellbeing** *A Short Guide*

---



**Version 1.0 October 2019**  
[www.theworkshop.org.nz](http://www.theworkshop.org.nz)

Written by Marianne Elliott  
& Dr Jess Berentson-Shaw



This content is published by The Workshop under a [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-ShareAlike](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-sa/4.0/) licence.

# About this toolkit

**This toolkit is based on** research conducted by The Workshop funded by the Peter McKenzie Project.

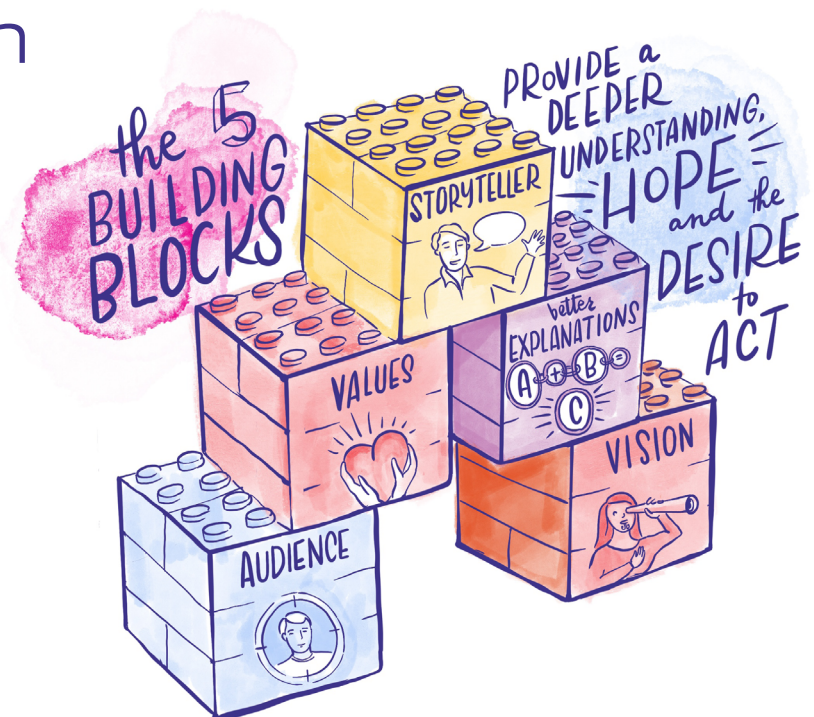
**It is designed for** people working to achieve meaningful action to reduce poverty and increase child and family wellbeing.

**Its purpose is** to help us use more effective strategies to create hope, improve people's understanding of the causes and solutions to poverty and motivate people to act in meaningful ways.

## Components of evidence-led communication

**At The Workshop, we have developed a framework for communicating research and science and inspiring action in relation to the big issues of the world.**

This draws on theoretical and applied research undertaken by many people across multiple disciplines. We use this framework to discuss our findings on child and family poverty.



# Why is this hard?

Many people have spent a lot of time and energy trying to motivate others to take effective collective action on poverty. It has proven to be challenging. Even where we've seen levels of public awareness of and concern about poverty going up, we haven't necessarily seen a matching increase in effective collective action.

## Why is it SO hard?

Both our in-built cognitive processes and our information environment can conspire to narrow our thinking about complex issues such as poverty. As experts who communicate on poverty, we also play our part.



- Our **fast-thinking brain** uses many shortcuts to cope with the vast amount of information in the world and protect our existing beliefs.
  - » These shortcuts mean we grasp the concrete and shy away from the abstract.
  - » This makes it hard to have a productive public conversation about complex issues like poverty.



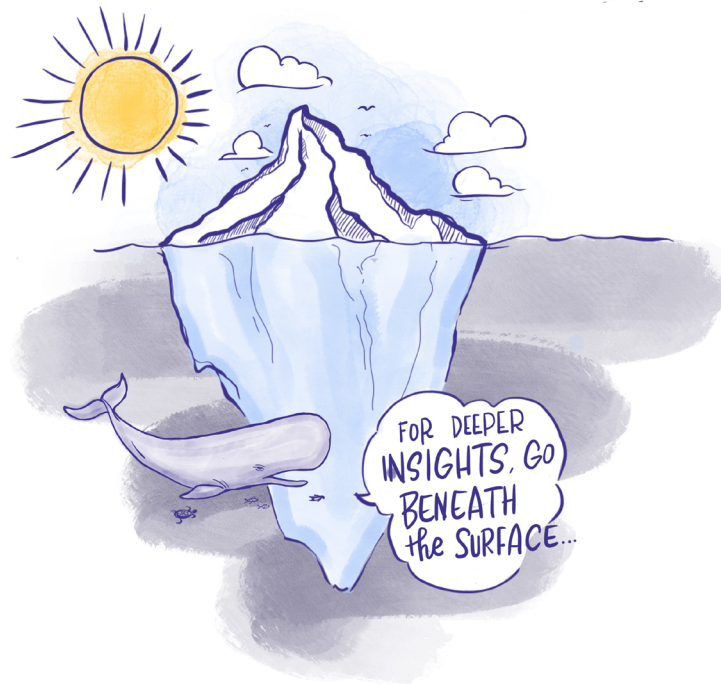
- At the same time, we are **overloaded by information**, including a lot that is poor quality.
  - » The digital age has brought new, faster and more targeted ways for us to be exposed to unproductive explanations about complex systems issues.
- As experts, we often assume that, if we fill people up with good information, they will understand and act accordingly.
  - » This is known as the 'information deficit' model, and the evidence is clear that it is ineffective in deepening how people think.
  - » Another common strategy is to tell compelling personal stories.
  - » If our stories don't engage people in more productive understandings, we will fail to achieve the systems and structural shifts we need.

**The combination of cognitive shortcuts, an overloaded and often misleading information environment and experts focused on filling people up with information can reinforce dominant cultural narratives that are overly simple or simply wrong.**

---

## What does this mean for building public support for effective action on poverty?

- On many complex issues, including poverty, public understanding of the causes of the problem is shallow.
- This makes it hard to build support for effective but complex solutions.
- However, cultural narratives are not monolithic.
- Alongside dominant shallow understandings of complex issues like poverty, other more nuanced but recessive understandings also exist.



### Dominant narratives are ones that:

- » show up most often in the public discourse
- » are readily available to people, i.e. they are often the first thoughts that someone will have when asked their opinion on an issue
- » are simple and easily accessible by our fast-thinking brain.

### Recessive narratives are ones that:

- » show up less often in the public discourse
- » are harder for people to access, i.e. they are not necessarily the first thought someone might have on the issue
- » often require slower thinking, i.e. more time to reflect on the issue.

### It is possible to change the dominant narrative:

- » Over time, through consistent careful communication across a field of practice, recessive narratives that support more helpful evidence-based understandings can become more dominant in the public narrative.
- » If dominant narratives change in this way, over time, the public appetite for new solutions can also change.



# Moving from individual to collective action

---

To get the kind of changes that good evidence tells us will reduce poverty and ensure family wellbeing, we need collective action calling for changes at the policy, structures and systems level.

---

## Helping people see upstream factors:

- When we talk to the public about poverty, we need to help them see they can act collectively to demand that national and local governments build systems and structures that promote family wellbeing.
- We want to help people look upstream to focus on structural factors like tax or welfare policy rather than focusing on the downstream impacts, for example, on personal choices about household budgets.



---

## How do we move people from individual action to collective and systems change?

- The three things people need to understand in order to motivate collective action are that:
  - » change is possible
  - » the most effective action will happen at a systems and structures level
  - » by acting together with others, they can motivate systems-level action.
- Stories about individual action, therefore, need to be framed as a stepping stone to collective action, i.e. inspiration for people to act collectively and demand that their governments create better infrastructure for family wellbeing.

# Audience: who should you communicate with?

---

## Generally speaking, there are three main groups of people to consider:

- People who are already persuaded (the base).
- People who don't yet have a fixed view or who have mixed and sometimes competing views on the issue (the persuadables).
- People who are firmly opposed.



---

## Some key principles on audience:

- Focus on finding effective ways to communicate with persuadable people.
- Don't spend your time and energy trying to persuade the firmly opposed.
- Test your messages first on people who are persuadable as well as your base.
- Don't only test your message on the base. They are already persuaded and will usually agree with and share any message – even ones that don't work with persuadable people.
- Don't measure the effectiveness of a message by how the firmly opposed respond to it. Don't be afraid of messages that are unpopular with people who are fixed in their opposing views.
- A good message is one that will activate your base and convince people who are open to persuasion.

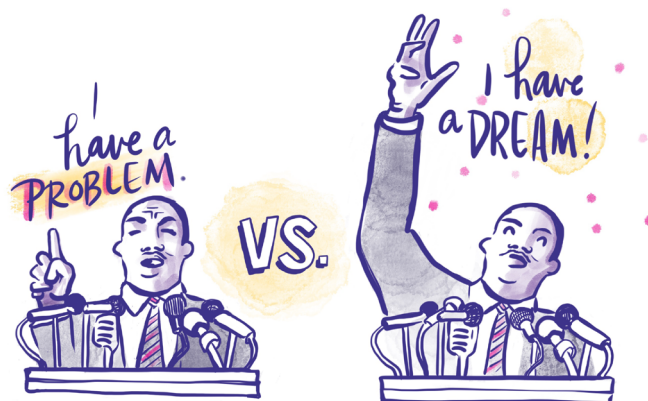
# Constructing a good message

---

## Key principles:

### → Lead with a vision.

Give people a positive vision – one that is clear and concrete about the better world that is possible. Start with your vision before you start listing the barriers or problems.



### → Be clear on who can make the change.

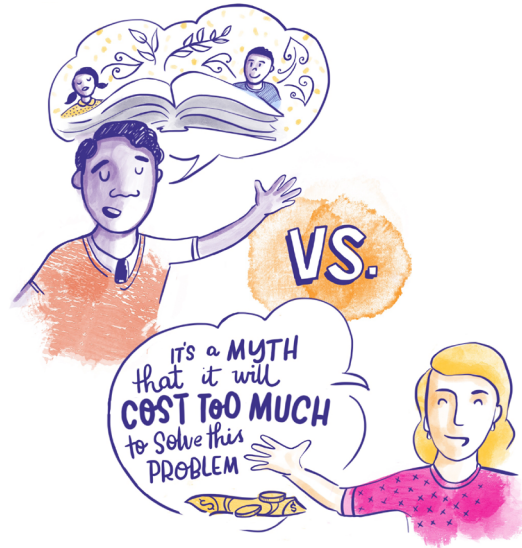
Emphasise the potential for humans to solve this problem by being clear about the human agents who are creating the problem and who can solve it.

Focus on the bad choices and behaviour of an agent instead of labelling agents as “bad people”. Make it clear that the agent could make different choices to solve the problem.



→ **Avoid negating or myth busting.**

Repeating myths or opposing stories in order to negate them just reinforces them in the minds of some persuadable people. Don't spend your precious energy and time doing that. Instead, focus on telling your positive story for action and reframe the debate.

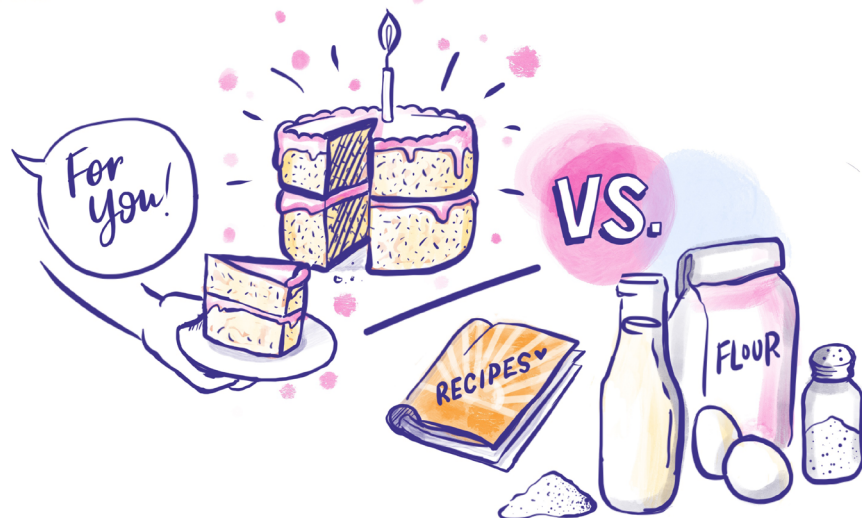


→ **Sell the cake, not the ingredients.**

Tell people how the proposed change will make a positive, tangible change in the lives of people.

Don't lead with the technical or policy details of how to get there. Avoid leading with facts.

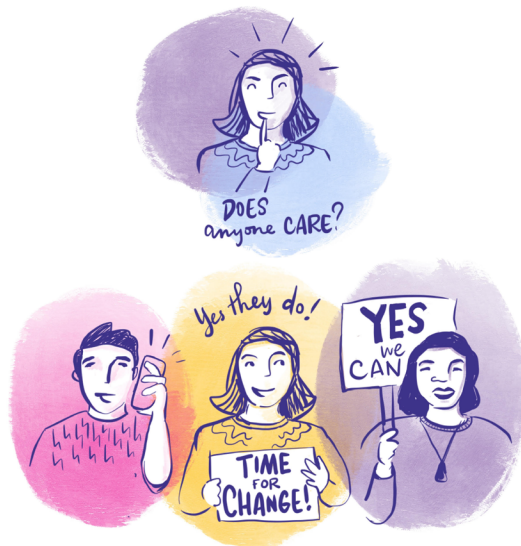
SELL the CAKE (NOT the INGREDIENTS!)



→ Show people they are not alone.

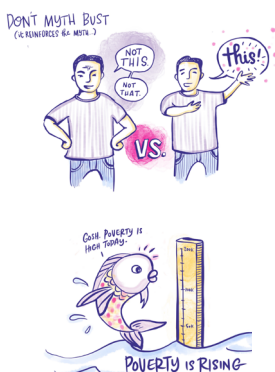
Let people know that they are not alone in wanting a better world for all. Establish social proof by showing the many people who care and are taking action.

Avoid focusing on lack of action. Talk about what needs to be done, and highlight people who are already doing it.



→ The overall structure of your communications should be **vision, barrier, solution and action**.

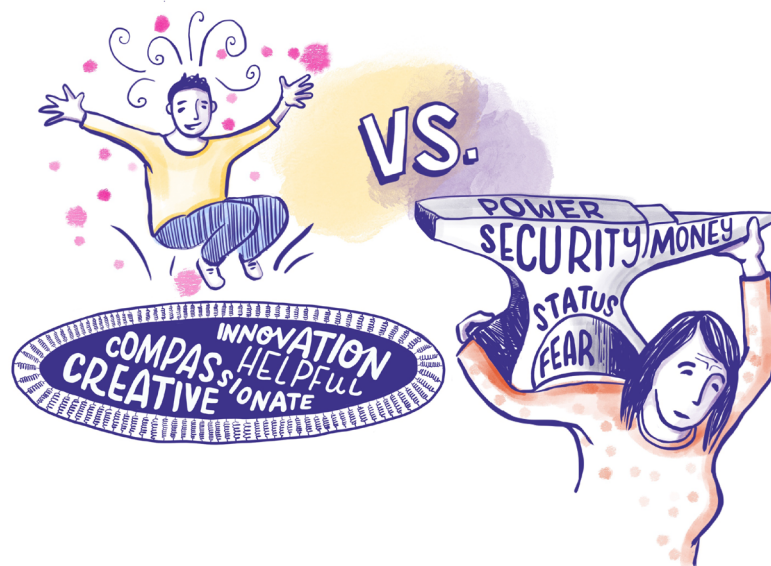
Avoid	Replace with
Leading with the policy ask.	Leading with the better life or world that will result.
Leading with facts.	Leading with a positive concrete vision and shared helpful values.
Myth busting or negating someone else's inaccurate information or story.	Staying focused on your accurate information and telling your story.
Using passive phrases and not identifying agents, e.g. "poverty has risen", "children fell into poverty".	Naming human agents, e.g. "people in successive governments have chosen economic policies that led to low wages".
Labelling politicians or institutions as corrupt, evil or dispositionally broken.	Naming the problematic behaviour and/or naming the new behaviour required.



# Values

Values are what matters most to us in life. They are at the heart of human motivations. Values are why we come to believe certain things about what causes poverty and we support (or don't support) specific actions to address it.

We need to improve the likelihood that people will act on big collective issues like poverty. A growing body of research shows that, to do this, we need to engage all people with our shared helpful values. These are known as intrinsic values – when what matters most to us are things that are important and valuable in and of themselves. Examples of intrinsic values include taking care of each other and the environment, and setting and reaching our own goals. Loving our family, pursuing peace, protecting the environment or pursuing our creative gifts are inherently rewarding. We do not value them for any external reward or benefit we will receive for doing so.



## Researchers suggest we:

- » move away from individualistic motivations towards those that encourage people to act collectively as citizens to find solutions
- » focus on shared, intrinsic values like compassion and justice
- » appeal to people's shared sense of responsibility and community to inspire action
- » explore different intrinsic values for different audiences
- » avoid appealing solely to economic values like cost-effectiveness or value to the economy.

**There are different options for selecting which intrinsic values to engage with a persuadable audience. These depend on time and resources available:**

- » If you don't have time to segment and test, focus on identifying intrinsic values. Any intrinsic value is a better choice than an extrinsic value.
- » Segment audiences and find specific intrinsic values that appeal to each.
- » Combine different types of intrinsic values, e.g. combine compassion with responsibility for the wellbeing of others.

---

## **Some tested values for family and child wellbeing**

**Our research shows we should:**

- ➔ use the values of compassion and justice – these two values tested well in the UK to move a broad audience of people to seeing poverty as real and being more likely to take political action
- ➔ engage the value of shared responsibility.

**Here's an example of a values-based message:**

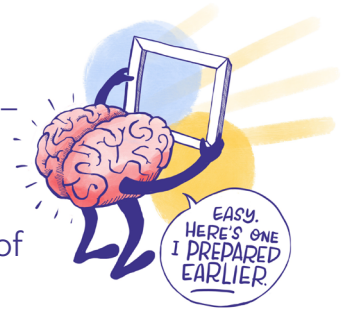


*“As New Zealanders, we believe in justice and compassion. We want everyone in New Zealand to have the opportunity to thrive, but right now, hundreds of thousands of people in our country are living in poverty. Despite our differences, we share a responsibility to make sure everyone in our country has a decent standard of living and the same chances in life.”*



# Frames

Frames are part of our fast-thinking brain system – mental shortcuts we take to make sense of information quickly. Research on communicating about poverty gives some guidance on the types of frames to use and to avoid.



Unhelpful frames to avoid	Helpful frames to use
<p><b>The personal responsibility frame</b> Avoid overemphasis on individuals. Avoid talking about choices without also talking about the constraints that social conditions place on people’s choices. Also avoid the deserving rich/deserving poor frame.</p>	<p>Focus on external factors and stressors that constrain people’s choices and explain the wider conditions that create and sustain poverty. Be as concrete as possible, e.g. talk about high rents not cost of living.</p>
<p><b>The market realities/market forces frame</b> Avoid talking about social conditions in terms of market forces. Avoid any reference to the market without being clear that humans can and do control the settings of the market.</p>	<p>Be clear about the human agents who make decisions about the rules and settings that determine how our economy works, including in relation to social conditions like employment and housing.</p>
<p><b>Economic naturalism</b> Avoid talking about the economy in ways that make it seem like a natural force, e.g. “cycles of poverty”.</p>	<p>Talk about poverty as a function of structures and systems that have been designed, e.g. tax policies to benefit some, educational policies and social networks. Make it clear that humans can and do control our economy.</p>
<p><b>The basic needs versus wants frame</b> Avoid talking about poverty in terms of basic needs or subsistence – food, shelter, clothing, heat and sanitation.</p>	<p>Self-determination: talk about the systems-level resources and support people need to do well and determine their own path in life, e.g. sufficient income support.</p>
<p><b>Culture of poverty</b> Avoid the idea that, in certain communities, there is a culture that perpetuates poverty. Avoid phrases like “benefit families” or “broken families”.</p>	<p>Opportunity: talk about poverty as a function of opportunity or lack of it, e.g. good education or strong social networks.</p>
<p><b>The family bubble</b> Avoid overemphasis on the role families can play in creating conditions for children to thrive. Also avoid the self-made child frame, which places the emphasis on autonomy over interdependence.</p>	<p>Context of stress: focus on how external stressors affect parenting and point to the role of environments and external factors (see <i>Metaphors</i> below on how to do this).</p>
<p><b>Benefits as the problem</b> A common public belief is that benefits are part of the problem (e.g. causing dependency). Avoid leading messages by talking about problems with the welfare system (e.g. “broken system”) as it can activate this unhelpful frame.</p>	<p>Poverty as the problem, benefits as the solution: lead with poverty as the problem, and frame benefits and welfare as a solution to that problem.</p>

# Metaphors

Metaphors, like frames, are another way our brain takes shortcuts to grasp complex and abstract ideas quickly. A metaphor takes something we understand on a practical everyday level and connects it to the abstract or complex to make sense.

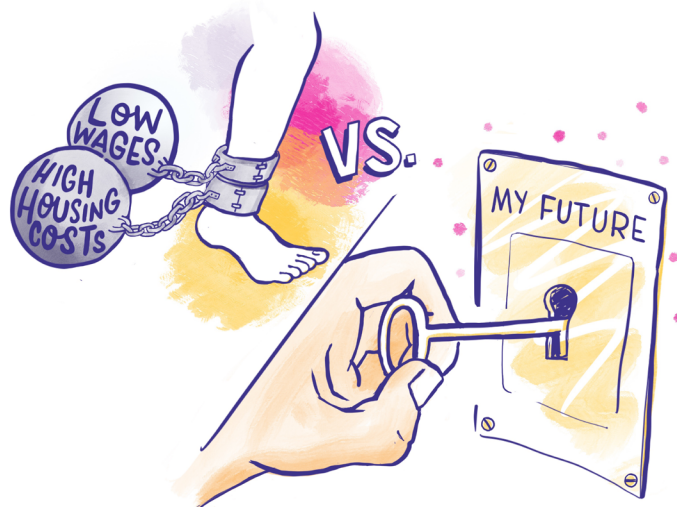
## General principles:

- » Use metaphors with care and consider what ideas and beliefs they might engage.
- » Use tested metaphors. Avoid untested and unhelpful metaphors where possible.
- » Images often contain metaphors – test images before use.

## Helpful metaphors

### → Restrictions and constraints

This approach compares poverty to a constraint and talks about people being locked in by the constraints of poverty, e.g. “the constraints of poverty lock people out of opportunities and make it impossible for them to create a different future”. The solutions (e.g. benefits) work by unlocking those constraints, e.g. “increasing benefits can unlock opportunities for those doing it hardest” or “strengthening benefits would help people escape the constraints of poverty”.



## → Overloaded

This approach helps people understand the impact of parents carrying too much weight or too many burdens on their ability to care for their children. It's a way of drawing people's attention to the external factors that contribute to family hardship using the metaphor of load or burden, e.g. "the weight of things like poverty and violence can overload a person's mental and emotional capacity to manage stress and give care and attention to their children".



## → Toxic stress

This approach helps people understand that chronic, severe stressors can cause a response that is toxic to the developing brain and has long-term effects on health and wellness. This metaphor has been shown to redirect unhelpful thinking like the 'family bubble', personal responsibility and myths about resilience.

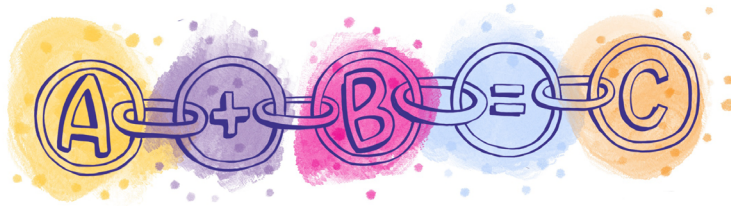
## → Economy as a computer system

Describing the economy as a computer system has been shown to work to counter the economic naturalism (nothing can be done about the economy) frame, e.g. "our economy is like a computer program that's been poorly designed – we need to redesign the system so the economy works for everyone".

Avoid	Replace with
Metaphors that reinforce ideas about the inevitability of poverty, e.g. "poverty cycle". Avoid any metaphor if you are unclear of what it evokes.	Productive tested metaphors, e.g. restrictions and constraints, economy as a computer system.

# Facts and causal stories: better explanations

- 
- Use facts to frame necessary action not just to describe the problem.
  - Ensure that the facts used serve a productive purpose, i.e. to help explain causes or point to solutions.
  - Employ explanatory chains. Start with cause, lead people through effects and end with solutions. Combine this with value-led messages about why it matters.



- Provide a complete explanatory chain rather than trying to break a link in an existing chain.
- If you just break a link, for example, by replacing a bad fact with a good one, people will replace the link and keep the same chain.



## Here's what researchers recommend when we use explanatory chains:

- » Identify the cause of the problem upfront.
- » Provide general conceptual accounts of the mechanisms that cause the problem.
- » End with broad repercussions.
- » Clearly identify agents when explaining the cause and effects.
- » Use facts judiciously to advance the explanations you are providing.

Avoid	Replace with
Leading with facts about the existence of poverty.	Leading with values or metaphors.
Using many facts.	Using facts that have concrete meaning.
Using facts on their own.	Using facts that highlight a systems story.
Using prevalence facts.	Naming human agents, e.g. “people in successive governments have chosen economic policies that led to low wages”.
Labelling politicians or institutions as corrupt, evil or dispositionally broken.	Using lived experience facts, preferably trends, e.g. use of food banks.

## Messengers

The messengers who convey messages about poverty and family wellbeing also matter. Research on messengers and trust is complex, but findings suggest we should use:

- a wide range of messengers
- messengers who are well qualified to comment on the context of the message
- unexpected messengers who may align with persuadable people’s values.

# Putting it all together

Use this framework to construct your communications:

## WHO

- Decide the characters and agents – the characters in your story. This could be the reader, the writer, a child, a politician, even a system.

## WHAT

- Articulate a vision, a better future. Be specific and concrete, e.g. “we all want children in New Zealand to experience a thriving happy childhood”.

## WHY

- Identify helpful intrinsic values. Why does this matter? What are the helpful values? e.g. “as New Zealanders, we believe in justice and compassion”.

## BARRIERS

- Specify the barriers to achieving the vision – attributing cause and effect based on evidence, with agents named. There may be multiple causes, barriers and effects so try to keep it simple, e.g. “people in government have underinvested in key services like public housing and income support that help the lowest-income families”.

## HOW

- Solutions – attributing better outcomes based on evidence of the cause, e.g. “by providing good income support that gives real options in life, the government can make it possible for everyone to do well”.

## ACTION/RESOLUTION

- This needs to be in proportion to the size of the problem you have described. Be specific, e.g. “strengthening benefits would help people escape the constraints of poverty”.



**Graphic Design:** Catherine Adam  
Wonderbird Photography & Design Studio  
[www.wonderbird.nz](http://www.wonderbird.nz)

**Illustrations:** Megan Salole  
[www.salole.co.nz](http://www.salole.co.nz)

