

Action Ideas for the Children's Sabbaths Weekend and Throughout the Year



The actions that you plan for the Children's Sabbath weekend and for the year that follows are an essential part of the Children's Sabbath. As important as the worship experiences and educational sessions are, it is vital to plan actions that will help translate that prayer, inspiration, awareness, and information into immediate and long-term hands-on service and justice-seeking advocacy so that we leave no child behind and ensure every child a healthy start, a head start, a fair start, a safe start, and a moral start in life.

ACTION IDEAS FOR CHILDREN'S SABBATHS WEEKEND AND THROUGHOUT THE YEAR

Be sure to plan for action from the start of your Children's Sabbath planning process.

- Develop a vision for the kinds of outreach and justice actions you hope to include in the Children's Sabbath and what long-term responses you hope to generate. What kind of difference do you want to make?
- Include necessary decision-makers in the process, whether it is a social action committee or other committee, religious leaders or others depending on your place of worship.
- As you plan, tap into people in your place of worship and community who are already involved in organizations, programs and agencies that help children and families living in poverty. They can help you develop your action plan. Even more importantly, take time to listen and learn directly from those who are most directly impacted by poverty or the other concerns that you hope to address, to ensure that new actions will address the deepest needs with resources in a relationship of respect and partnership. (See p. 6 about conducting Listen and Learn Family Suppers or Lunches in your community.)
- If your past Children's Sabbath celebrations have mostly focused on the service of worship or prayers, be prepared to explain to leaders or members why it is important now to be broadening the Children's Sabbath to include action.

The ideas that follow provide suggestions for actions that can be taken on the Children's Sabbath weekend itself and actions that can be carried out throughout the year to come to make a lasting difference for children.

This section is written to be “evergreen” instead of updated annually, so Children's Sabbath planners can print it once and refer back to it each year. In addition, CDF will post a special Children's Sabbath action sheet on the website each year highlighting just a few actions that are especially urgent and tie-in to that year's Children's Sabbath theme. Be sure to look for and print out this short supplement each year.



Tips for Planning Activities

As you plan activities for the Children's Sabbath weekend and for the year to come, keep the following tips in mind:

- 1. Offer a range of activities focusing on raising awareness, hands-on service, and advocacy.** Making a difference for children requires all three kinds of effort! It also enables people to choose activities based on their particular skills and interests.
- 2. Plan some activities that can be completed on the Children's Sabbath weekend** (such as assembling care packages for children going into foster care) **and some that will lead people into long-term commitments** (such as signing up volunteers to do outreach and enrollment for children's public health coverage programs or work with a mentoring or after-school program once a week).
- 3. Plan activities that will engage all ages.** For example, if there is a table to write letters to elected officials, provide crayons and markers so young children can draw pictures to enclose, or have them dictate their letters to an older child or adult.
- 4. Use the Children's Sabbath to reinforce existing congregational programs that serve children, particularly programs that promote justice and help to end poverty, and highlight new opportunities** to serve children and families, seek justice, and improve the lives of children in the congregation, community, and nation.
- 5. Be sure you are prepared to guide people in the activities so that they understand the connection between the worship and the action.** You may want to provide a preview of the activities on a bulletin insert or during the announcement time in worship. During the activity period, it works best to have several people at each activity who are prepared to explain and guide participation.

Please Note: The kinds of activities that are appropriate and permissible at various points during the Children's Sabbaths weekend vary depending on the religious tradition of a place of worship. As you read through the suggested activities, you should select those that are appropriate for your tradition or modify the actions to make them so. Remember that the whole weekend, from Friday morning through Sunday night, is part of the *National Observance of Children's Sabbaths* celebration, so some activities that would not be appropriate immediately following your time of worship could be planned for another day or time during the weekend. Additionally, activities can and should be planned for the year to follow, so you can prepare as needed. You know what is best for your place of worship.

Children's Sabbath Actions

The *National Observance of Children's Sabbaths* is about more than worship—even though worship is central to the occasion. The weekend, with the insight and inspiration from the experience of worship, aims to generate powerful, faithful *sustained action* to improve the lives of children. Places of worship will use the Children's Sabbath weekend to introduce, reinvigorate, or expand a wide variety of efforts to improve the lives of children through raising awareness, reaching out directly, and speaking up for justice. Those important efforts reflect the unique needs, resources, traditions and commitments of places of worship and the communities in which they are situated. A menu of possible actions follows, grouped in the following sections: Learn More and Raise Awareness; Reach Out with Care; Speak Up for Justice. Choose those that are right for your place of worship.

Learn More and Raise Awareness

Host a Discussion at Your Place of Worship or a Multifaith Discussion with Others from Across Your Community. One discussion model to try is the World Café Method described below. More information about this method of hosting a conversation is available at their website: www.theworldcafe.com. Please take time to familiarize yourself with the process and the resources there.

In brief, the World Café method conversations are organized around three questions. Participants are grouped at tables with 4-5 persons per table. The first question is announced and participants at each table will discuss it for 20 minutes. Then, participants change tables and once seated are given the second question. Participants change tables once again, and the third question is announced and discussed. Sheets of paper on the tables with pens offer a chance for ideas to be recorded (in words, drawing, doodles!) as the discussions unfold. Additionally, at the end of each conversation period, people can offer aloud to the room some of the key insights that emerged.

Depending on how it goes and interest level, you might then host conversations the following weeks on the other concerns, or host follow-up conversations the next week to do even deeper on the same topic, or host a follow up conversation another week on the same topic but broadening the invitation to include additional participants.

Sample Questions: An example of three questions on ending child poverty follows. You can adapt the questions to address another concern related to children and justice.

For a World Café conversation on Ending Child Poverty:

Question 1: Why do you care about ending child poverty?

Question 2: What is a hopeful or promising approach to ending child poverty?

Question 3: What can we do to work for an end to child poverty?

World Cafe Method (downloaded from <http://www.theworldcafe.com/key-concepts-resources/world-cafe-method>)

Drawing on [seven integrated design principles](#), the World Café methodology is a simple, effective, and flexible format for hosting large group dialogue.

World Café can be modified to meet a wide variety of needs. Specifics of context, numbers, purpose, location, and other circumstances are factored into each event's unique invitation, design, and question choice, but the following five components comprise the basic model:

1) Setting: Create a "special" environment, most often modeled after a café, i.e. small round tables covered with a checkered or white linen tablecloth, butcher block paper, colored pens, a vase of flowers, and optional "talking stick" item. There should be four chairs at each table (optimally) – and no more than five.

2) Welcome and Introduction: The host begins with a warm welcome and an introduction to the World Café process, setting the context, sharing the Cafe Etiquette, and putting participants at ease.

3) Small Group Rounds: The process begins with the first of three or more twenty minute rounds of conversation for the small group seated around a table. At the end of the twenty minutes, each member of the group moves to a different new table. They may or may not choose to leave one person as the "table host" for the next round, who welcomes the next group and briefly fills them in on what happened in the previous round.

4) Questions: each round is prefaced with a question specially crafted for the specific context and desired purpose of the World Café. The same questions can be used for more than one round, or they can be built upon each other to focus the conversation or guide its direction.

5) Harvest: After the small groups (and/or in between rounds, as needed), individuals are invited to share insights or other results from their conversations with the rest of the large group. These results are reflected visually in a variety of ways, most often using [graphic recording in the front of the room](#).

The basic process is simple and simple to learn, but complexities and nuances of context, numbers, question crafting and purpose can make it optimal to bring in an experienced host to help. Should that be the case, professional consulting services and senior hosts are available through [World Cafe Services](#) and we would be happy to talk with you about your needs.

In addition, there are many resources available for new World Cafe hosts, including a free [hosting tool kit](#), an online [community of practice](#), and World Cafe [Signature Learning Programs](#).

Hold a Children's Sabbath Forum at your place of worship or in the community. Invite speakers who can help participants understand the impact of child poverty or other problems children face and how those gathered can help ease its worst effects through direct service and, most importantly, help end it by working for justice and policy changes. Such a forum could take place during the customary time for adult education or other programming for your place of worship, or you could plan an alternative date and time, especially if you want to host such a forum in partnership with other places of worship.

If possible, invite “experts by experience”—those who have first-hand experience of the problems that your place of worship wants to help solve and who can help guide your members into the most helpful responses. Also be sure to highlight opportunities not only for immediate, direct-service responses to the challenges but also to the ways that members can work to change the policies and systems that create or continue the problem.

The format for an hour-long forum could be a five-minute introduction to the event by a moderator, ten-minute presentations by three invited speakers, and twenty minutes for Q & A with the audience, and five minutes at the end for the moderator to invite each member of the audience to consider what action they will take in response to what they have learned, followed by thanks to the speakers.

Conduct Listen and Learn Family Suppers or Lunches in your community. To help our action be most appropriate, effective, and ensure that it addresses the deepest need with our most useful resources, we can start by listening and learning from those who are most directly affected by poverty.

Listen and Learn Sessions involve a “Children's Action Team” from your place of worship (or from several places of worship) going into community settings, in strong partnerships with service organizations or other groups and with an authentic sense of respect and humility, to hear firsthand from people affected by poverty and economic injustice. The goal is to learn about what challenges people are facing, what the daily struggles are, what the community resources and assets are, and what they feel others can do to be most helpful in partnership and support.

These Listen and Learn Sessions should then be followed up with discussions within the action teams to synthesize and absorb what was learned and discern what sort of active response is appropriate.

The Listen and Learn team, in partnership with the service organizations and people they heard from, can consider planning a town hall meeting of sorts, some kind of public event where people with formal power are invited to come hear from people who are facing poverty and economic injustice. The goal of the forum would be to help bring these issues and concern to the attention of those with formal power in the community and to provide an opportunity to discuss potential solutions.

If your place of worship is interested in learning more about and then planning a Listen and Learn Session, please send an email to Dr. Janet Wolf, Director of CDF Haley Farm and National Director of Nonviolent Direct Action Organizing for the Children's Defense Fund, at JWolf@childrensdefense.org. This will help us identify the communities in which Listen and Learn sessions are happening and also to offer additional resources and support for your planning. Please also refer to the Family

Suppers manual, prepared by Dr. Wolf and CDF's Nonviolent Direct Action Organizing Team, as an additional resource and sustained action you and your community can take.

<http://www.childrensdefense.org/library/2015-sabbath-manual/family-suppers.pdf>

Organize a Child Watch Guided Site Visitation to take community leaders and others to sites where they can see first-hand the problems facing children and families as well as to sites that point to solutions. Along the way, participants will learn from those being served and those who are working with and for children and their families.

For many of us, including our nation's and community's leaders, reports and statistics alone are not enough to move us to act on behalf of our children. If seeing is truly believing, then the way to convince ourselves and our leaders that our nation is in the midst of a crisis is to see first-hand what is happening to our children. The Child Watch Visitation Program provides those first-hand experiences and adds life to the seemingly endless stream of statistics and reports.

The three major components of Child Watch are: on-site visits to programs serving children and families; briefings by policy experts; and written background materials. They combine to serve as a comprehensive tool to educate our leaders about children's concerns and motivate them toward action.

The Child Watch model is based on the belief that seeing is believing, and that facts, figures, and statistics tell only a part of the story. Keeping this in mind, there are three major components to a successful Child Watch program:

1) Written Materials — these are important for several reasons. The hope, of course, is that participants read these materials prior to beginning the program, but even if they do not, the written materials are a tangible, lasting record of the Child Watch program. Statistical information, issue papers, and background newspaper and magazine articles are valuable reference materials for course participants as they begin their work on behalf of children.

2) The Policy Briefings — Behind every child's story and every program visited, there exists a maze of public policy issues. Policy briefings set the stage for site visits and allow course participants to ask pertinent questions of service providers and make the critical connection between the services they see and the budget and policy issues that affect them. Policy briefings also allow course coordinators to point out the many places in which issue areas intersect. Government employees, child advocates, and service providers can all make excellent policy briefers, and a mix of these individuals provides for a well-rounded program.

3) The Site Visit — This most crucial of course components is what sets Child Watch apart from other programs. You can offer course participants a guided tour through facilities in your city that are serving children and families. You can take participants out of a conference room and into the community to see what our children and parents must face every day of their lives. They will meet the service providers who are engaged in a constant struggle to provide quality services to children in spite of overworked staffs and inadequate budgets. Participants will learn, by seeing success first-hand, that they can make a difference in the lives of our most vulnerable children.



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Planned well by a coalition in your community, a Child Watch program can achieve nine goals:

1. *To personalize child suffering.* While many people read about the serious difficulties faced by poor children and families, it is often not until individuals can see and feel these struggles for themselves that they become ready to work for change.
2. *To create a new cadre of leaders and influential citizens who are concerned about and personally aware of children's needs.* The pool of Child Watch participants could include members of Congress, state legislators, their spouses and staffs, business and foundation executives, local public officials and senior agency staff, reporters and editors, religious leaders, leaders of racial/ethnic organizations, elderly and civic leaders, and child and youth services staff members.
3. *To create a sense of urgency about children's needs and a climate for change.* Children cannot wait forever for policy makers and community leaders to recognize the extent and urgency of their needs, and America cannot afford to lose a single child.
4. *To help a critical mass of community leaders make the connections between the child suffering they see and local, state, and federal budget priorities and policies.* It is essential to help decision makers and those who can influence decision makers understand that they have not only the ability but also the responsibility to make the choices that will benefit our most vulnerable children and families.
5. *To show participants that there are positive alternatives and steps they and others can take to correct or alleviate the problems identified.* The complex nature of the multiple crises faced by today's youths can seem overwhelming. A Child Watch program includes visits not only to sites that illustrate the range of problems faced by children and families but also to sites that send a message of hope about the solutions to those problems.
6. *To keep participants involved in an action network.* Child Watch "graduates" can stay connected to the Children's Defense Fund and state and local advocacy organizations to mobilize for a variety of actions depending on the level of commitment, desire, interest, and ability of participants. Action activities can include volunteering, advocacy, philanthropy, and program development.
7. *To affirm good local program providers whose fine work is often frustrated by funding struggles, isolation, and lack of a support network.* A Child Watch visit can not only give service providers much needed recognition but can also provide them access to networks that could produce funds, board members, volunteers, and other types of support.
8. *To build relationships with and among a wide variety of providers and child advocates through a shared understanding of mutual benefit.* Too often the good work of community groups on behalf of children and families is as fractured as the service delivery system. Planning a Child Watch is most often done by a coalition, and by working together on a joint project, groups are encouraged to share both information and resources.
9. *To create a constituency for preventive and early intervention investments.* Child Watch can help overcome the pervasive myth that "nothing works" by introducing opinion leaders to effective programs and agencies. An additional benefit may be the introduction of business, media and religious leaders to effective nonprofit leaders.

Planning and conducting a good Child Watch program takes time, thought, and good coalition work with community partners. While a Child Watch program could be conducted as part of your Children's Sabbath weekend, alternatively the Children's Sabbath weekend could serve as the kick-off to forming a Child Watch planning committee that can then take adequate time over the coming months to ensure a strong and effective program that will make a significant contribution to achieving the nine goals above.

Download the Child Watch Visitation Manual here http://diglib.lib.utk.edu/cdf/data/0116_000050_000237/0116_000050_000237.pdf to learn more about planning a Child Watch program.

Reach Out with Care

Almost every place of worship is engaged in directly meeting the needs of children and families who are impoverished or experiencing other injustices and struggles, serving them with compassion and care. The Children's Sabbath is an important time to celebrate and generate fresh support for the ways that your congregation is already meeting the immediate needs of children and families with direct, caring services. It is also a vital opportunity to make connections between the direct service you provide and advocacy or justice work that is needed to prevent or lessen children's needs from arising in the first place and to end child poverty and other injustice in our rich nation.

While we are working for systemic change, here are some of the ways that faith communities can help meet family income, housing, nutrition, and early childhood development needs and contribute to closing gaps and ending child poverty.

Income, Jobs and Benefits:

- Provide internships and job-shadowing experiences for youths and young adults in need. The guidance, experience and connections can be invaluable.
- Provide year-round and summer job opportunities for families and youths in need. Partner with other places of worship, community organizations and area high schools to pool opportunities and identify those who might benefit from them.
- Provide space for or host a "job seekers" support group where those who are unemployed can gather for support, encouragement and to discuss job search and interview strategies.
- Provide a resume workshop where community members seeking employment can come get help polishing their resumes. Or, provide job search mentors to help job seekers develop internet job search skills, complete internet and paper job applications and improve interview and communications skills.
- Collect donations of work-appropriate clothing for men and women who are job seekers and newly employed.
- Create a transportation fund to give the newly employed subway or bus fare cards or gasoline cards to help with expenses while transitioning into the workforce.
- Provide free tax filing assistance to low-income working families. Serve as a Volunteer Income Tax Assistance (VITA) site, so that low-income families can get help filling out their tax forms and receive any Earned Income Tax Credit refunds they may be eligible for.



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- Provide volunteers for an existing VITA site. To find out more, visit <http://irs.treasury.gov/freetaxprep/>.
- Publicize the availability of the Earned Income Tax Credit so low-income families don't miss out on this valuable help. Include notices in bulletins, newsletters, and around your buildings.
- Model just employment practices, and ensure those employed by your place of worship are paid a fair wage, with a minimum of \$10.10/hour and more in some cities.

Housing:

- Create a Housing Emergency Fund to help families in crisis with rent, utilities, security deposits and other housing needs.
- Volunteer at a shelter for children and families who are homeless; for instance, read to children or provide help with homework.
- Donate needed items to shelters for children and families who are homeless, such as books, clothing and personal care items.
- Participate in a congregation-based shelter project, if your community has one, through which places of worship take turns sheltering families and providing meals for a month at a time.
- Explore partnering with other places of worship to buy housing to rent at affordable rates to low-income families.
- Give "Welcome Home" gifts to provide needed items and support for families transitioning from homelessness to housing, such as kitchen items, bedding or gift cards to an accessible home goods store.
- Provide volunteers for a Habitat for Humanity build.
- Organize a service corps combining ages, skills and experience to repair housing for low-income families or kinship care families in which a grandparent or other relative is caring for children. Work with congregational leaders or community service agencies to identify families who would welcome such help.
- Arrange to meet with parents and children who live in low-income housing to find out what they think would improve their housing situation and how your place of worship could help, whether working to install a playground, fix up a community room, provide books for children or provide support for their advocacy for systemic change.
- A high percentage of older youths who "age out" of foster care experience homelessness. Recruit one or more families in your congregation with a spare room to offer temporary housing to a young person leaving foster care.

Nutrition:

- Sponsor a food pantry to help meet emergency food needs of low-income families, or donate food and volunteer time to community food pantries.
- Provide volunteers or food for community kitchens (soup kitchens). Encourage volunteers to engage in meaningful conversation with clients.
- Find out if there are summer feeding sites in your community where school children can receive federally funded breakfast and lunch during the long summer months when many children go hungry. If there are, provide volunteers. If not, find out how your place of worship can host or support one this summer.



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- Find out if the local schools are taking advantage of the federally funded school breakfast program. If not, work with local school leaders to offer that important resource so all children can start the school day well fed and ready to learn.
- Make information about SNAP, the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program commonly known as food stamps, and WIC — the Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children, available for families at your place of worship.
- Participate in a “blessings in a backpack” program to provide backpacks filled with food for the weekend so that children who qualify for free or reduced price lunches during the school week don’t go hungry over the weekend.
- Get a taste of eating on a SNAP budget. Challenge members of your place of worship to spend a week preparing food using \$1.40 per person per meal—the average SNAP benefit. At the end of the week, find time for discussion about the experience, what was learned, and steps your place of worship might take to help those for whom hunger is an ongoing challenge and reality, not an exercise.
- Partner with schools or community groups to plant vegetable gardens to provide fresh produce to children and families on low-incomes.
- Cook and Play: Offer a monthly session at your place of worship where parents can come to cook and children can come to play. Provide volunteers to engage the children in play and activities while the parents work together in the kitchen to prepare meals to take home to be eaten later in the week. Provide ingredients and a healthy, family-friendly recipe, as well as disposable containers for the finished meals to be taken home in. If your place of worship is not well positioned to provide this service, partner with a place of worship that is.
- Explore ways your place of worship can assist low-income families in urban or rural “food deserts” without easy access to well-stocked grocery stores. Consider providing a monthly transportation service or other assistance so they can purchase healthy foods.

Early Childhood Development:

- If your congregation has unused space during the week, consider housing a child care program to provide more affordable, accessible, good quality child care for low-income families.
- If your place of worship already houses or runs a child care program during the week, look for new ways to keep the congregation aware of the program and the children it serves, lift up needs that the congregation could fill whether financial donations, items, professional expertise, volunteer time, and make appropriate connections so that your faith community recognizes how helping such a program is an extension of its values.
- Raise money to create a child care “scholarship” fund to help low-income families pay for child care.
- Maintain a list of emergency babysitters who could be contacted at no cost to help a family with a sick child who cannot be taken to a child care program. Many low-income families have jobs with no flexibility to stay home in such circumstances.
- Donate books and other needed items to child care programs serving low-income children.
- Help fix up a child care program serving low-income children, perhaps helping to paint classrooms, create a vegetable garden, or make minor repairs.



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- Run an after-school tutoring or mentoring program so that children have a safe, nurturing place to go after school while their parents are at work.
- Support after-school programs run by other places of worship to serve low-income children by providing volunteers, money, or needed items.
- Start a Book Buddies program that matches children in your place of worship with children in a child care program. Once a month or every two months, children in your place of worship can donate a new or gently used book to their “book buddy.” Plan to bring the children and their “book buddies” together periodically.
- Sponsor or support a Children’s Defense Fund Freedom Schools® program in your place of worship or community during the summer and/or after school. For more information, visit: www.freedomschools.org.
- Set up a toy lending library in your place of worship or in an organization serving poor children. Invite congregation members to donate new or gently used toys—especially those that encourage learning and imaginative play such as puzzles and costumes. Families or child care providers may “check out” a set number of toys for a certain length of time.

Speak Up for Justice

Develop Relationships and Communicate Regularly with Your Elected Officials

Election years are rife with promises on the part of candidates—but too often the promises are not about meaningful change for children and even when they are the promises are too rarely kept after the election is over. Citizens are often very focused on their roles and responsibilities during an election year, but after the votes are cast and winners declared, too many of us relinquish our continuing roles and opportunities in the democratic process—or resort to on-line petitions and occasional protests. To develop champions for children in Congress—across the aisle—requires building on-going relationships with elected leaders of every party. By communicating with them regularly, people of faith can educate elected leaders about children’s concerns and the policies that will protect children from harm and help to end child poverty, convey expectations for their leadership, and hold them accountable—praising them when they take steps to protect children and letting them know we notice and care when they don’t.

First: Ask elected officials at local, state and federal levels what specific steps they will take to end child poverty and close opportunity gaps for children in family income, early childhood development, and education. Be clear with the members of your place of worship that these actions are *not* about a religious congregation working in a partisan way but working for leaders of every party to put children first.

- a. Publicize opportunities when elected officials will be accessible, such as town hall meetings or call-in programs.
- b. Provide contact information for elected officials’ offices so that members can call to ask for information about the legislators’ positions and promises on these concerns.
- c. Encourage members to visit elected officials and to take their older children with them when they do. Children can be powerful advocates in their own right. Prepare them for the occasion so they can communicate their own ideas about what will help to protect children and end poverty.



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- d. Set up a letter-writing table or computer station for sending emails to elected officials. Provide sample letters and email messages, but encourage people to write their own letters, putting their concerns and requests in their own words. This will have the greatest impact. You can also provide background fact sheets and other materials provided by the Children's Defense Fund and by many religious groups' Washington offices and social justice offices.

When Members return from Washington, D.C., to their districts, this may also be an opportunity to attend town hall meetings and speak up about the need to end child poverty in your community. You may consider attending town hall meetings as a group, with t-shirts or other clothing that identifies you as members of a congregation to show that a group of you are committed to pressing for change to end child poverty.

Be ready to talk about how poverty, lack of good quality child care and early childhood development, lack of affordable health care and housing, and unequal educational opportunity harm children.

Having Members of Congress at home may also provide an opportunity to have your Representative or Senators attend your Children's Sabbath celebration or speak at an educational event or forum before or after the Children's Sabbath service. If the invitation is to speak at a forum or educational event, you might want to team up with other places of worship to increase the audience size and appeal of the invitation. Be clear in the invitation that you are inviting the Member of Congress to address ending child poverty and closing other opportunity gaps and the leadership they have provided and will provide to help end it.

Second: *Work with others to follow up with elected officials to ask them what they are planning to do to keep those promises.*

Encourage members to communicate with elected leaders by email or phone to express their expectations for strong leadership on behalf of children to end child poverty.

If members have experiences that point to the impact of child poverty on children, families, and the community, encourage them to share them in correspondence with elected leaders.

If your place of worship houses or supports a program that is helping to end child poverty or ease poverty's worst effects while we're working to end it, invite elected officials to come visit to see first-hand what works.

Stay connected with the Children's Defense Fund and its reports and action agenda.

Meeting with Your Legislators

Before Your Visit

Begin planning for your visit. Don't worry if you have butterflies in your stomach at the thought of meeting with your legislator for the first time. It would be unusual if you didn't. Know that the best way to communicate with your legislator is to make a personal visit. You probably will enjoy the experience—and the legislator will appreciate the time you spent communicating your views. So, take a deep breath and begin planning! First, decide on the issues you want to discuss.

Make an appointment. When making an appointment, explain what issue you would like to discuss. If the legislator is unavailable, the aide who deals with your issue often will be knowledgeable and influential in helping to form the lawmaker's views. Don't feel slighted if you end up meeting with the aide. He or she can be very influential and, if your meeting goes well, may also encourage your legislator to meet with you in person the next time.

Remember the experts! Parents, grandparents, service providers, educators, religious and business leaders, police officers, doctors and nurses, and others who witness children's needs on a daily basis are children's best advocates. They really are the experts when it comes to how bills and policies will affect children, and it's important that policy makers have a wide variety of people to call upon when they have questions about their work's impact on children. Children's advocacy groups often seek out these everyday experts to present the most compelling information during legislative visits. Talk about personal experiences you have had, if possible, to illustrate your point.

Be prepared. Before meeting with the legislator or aide, plan and organize your presentation, and practice what you are going to say. If you are going with other people to the meeting, get together beforehand to make sure that you all have the same purpose. Take along helpful information to back up your arguments: newspaper articles about the problems children face, statistics, or a fact sheet (Children's Defense Fund can provide some of the information you need. Visit CDF's website at www.childrensdefense.org).

During Your Visit

Make your message concise. You may think your meeting is for 30 minutes and then arrive to find the legislator's schedule so tight that you get only five minutes. Know exactly what you want to say and be prepared to say it quickly, if circumstances demand that.

Present solutions. People often feel overwhelmed by problems they consider too massive and diverse for corrective action, so don't just talk about the problem. Share one or two concrete ideas for ways to improve the lives of children in your community. Tell your legislator what it will take to ensure that no child is left behind.

Talk about what works. Using success stories of real children and families who are being helped by Head Start, child care, job training, or health insurance will strengthen your argument and counter claims that all government programs are ineffective.

Search for common ground. Don't be exclusive or judgmental. Keeping in mind the wide range of viewpoints in Congress and in every community and state legislature, frame your messages carefully to include words and themes that will reach new audiences and persuade them to become new allies. Children's advocates care as much as anyone about efficiency, accountability, fiscal responsibility, and personal responsibility. Use themes like these to frame your message.

Be honest. It's fine to say you don't know the answer to a question and to promise to provide information later, by phone, fax, or e-mail. This also gives you another opportunity to contact the office.

Following Your Visit

Build a relationship. The better your communication, the more seriously you will be taken, and the more willing the representative and his or her staff will be to rely upon you and your judgments.

Follow up your visit with a letter thanking the legislator for the time spent listening to your concerns. Enclose any documentation you had agreed to provide to bolster your position, and briefly restate your views.

Provide additional information. Send articles, write letters with further information, or offer assistance in thinking through solutions that could work in your community.

Call periodically with updates.

Invite them to speak. Invite the representative or the staff person who handles children's issues to speak before your congregation or a community group in which you are involved.

Invite them to a site visit. Invite the legislator to visit a successful child-serving program with which you work, such as an after-school program, conflict resolution program, or Head Start class.

Show broad support for your concerns. If your legislator or aide disagrees or is noncommittal, don't threaten or argue after you have made your case, because it is counter-productive. A better strategy is to plan another visit with others to show more community support for your position, to put together a bunch of letters from constituents, or to think of another tactic such as a letter to the editor. Persistence often pays.

Watch how your legislator votes and respond. If the legislator votes with your position on the issue, recognize that vote with a written "thank you." Such recognition may influence his or her next vote on children's issues. It also lets your legislator know that you are watching closely. If the legislator votes against your position, write or call to express your disappointment, and urge reconsideration of the issue the next time it comes up for a vote.

Tips for Writing a Letter to Your Members of Congress and Other Elected Officials

- Be brief. Address only one issue. A letter need not be longer than four or five sentences.
- Be specific. If you are writing about specific legislation, include its bill number or title.
- Write your own letter, adapting a sample letter as appropriate. Form letters do not receive the same attention as individually written letters.
- Be positive and constructive. Try to say something complimentary in the first paragraph. It is just as important to thank members of Congress for voting the right way as to criticize them for voting the wrong way.
- Say in your own words why the legislation matters to you and to children. Clearly state your reason for supporting or opposing the bill or issue you are writing about.
- If you have a personal story about children in poverty, without health coverage, or in the pipeline to prison, consider sharing it. These personal stories are the most effective way for your legislator to truly understand the issue and the impact it has on real lives.
- If you have particular knowledge or expertise, describe it. Relating the bill to local or state conditions is especially effective.
- If you wish, feel free to include a copy of a report, a newsletter story, or a local survey to support your arguments. Don't presume that the legislator is aware of such information, even if you think it is common knowledge.
- Be sure to sign your name legibly and include your address and telephone number so your representative or senator can respond.
- If possible, fax the letter (since postal mail may be delayed by screening procedures) or send the letter electronically. Your legislator will likely have a link on his or her website directing constituents to "contact us." To find the contact information for your legislator, visit www.congressmerge.com.

Sample Letter Step by Step

Please note: The examples written in the parentheses are meant as examples only. Please feel free to write your letter in your own words to reflect your concerns, experience, and perspective.

The Honorable _____ OR
United States Senate
Washington, DC 20510

The Honorable _____
United States House of Representatives
Washington, DC 25105

Dear Senator _____ OR

Dear Representative _____

1. **Introduce yourself.** (My name is Janet Doe and I am a member of Mytown Congregation in Mytown. I appreciate your commitment to public service and desire to do the right thing.)
2. **Share your concern for children.** (Today, millions of children are living in poverty in the richest nation on earth. Growing up impoverished takes a terrible toll on children's health, development, and well-being.)
3. **Share your vision for children.** (Every child's life is sacred. I believe every child should grow up with their needs met for food, housing, and other essentials. Our nation should invest in children not only because it will save us money in the long run but also because it is the right thing to do.)
4. **Talk about the solutions and urge action on them.** [Visit the Children's Sabbath Action Page at www.childrensdefense.org/childrenssabbaths after October 1 for the latest information on legislation and needed action and an updated sample letter."]
5. **Thank the Member of Congress and ask for a reply.** (Thank you and I look forward to hearing back from you about this urgent issue.)

Sincerely,
Your name
Your address
Your telephone number

How to address your envelope:

The Honorable _____
United States Senate
Washington, DC 20510

The Honorable _____
United States House of Representatives
Washington, DC 20515

Tips on Writing a Letter to the Editor

(Adapted from *Reclaiming Our Democracy: Healing the Break Between People and Government*, by Sam Daley-Harris)

1. **Respond to a recent news story or editorial.** A good letter might begin, "Your article, 'Toddler Caught in Crossfire Dies,' on the recent shooting in our city was heartbreaking but not surprising. A child or teen is killed or injured by a gun every 30 minutes in our nation."
2. **Make your letter short.** Check your local paper for submission criteria; a letter should contain 100-200 words. Provide a few striking facts that might surprise an editor or a reader. For example, "The number of children under 5 killed by guns last year was greater than the number of law enforcement officers killed in the line of duty that same year." The Children's Defense Fund's website, www.childrensdefense.org, is a good source of information.
3. **Use descriptive words that communicate your passion about the issue.** Don't be dry. ("Imagine walking into a classroom of 20 hopeful, eager students. In just three days, more children and teens will be killed by guns than all the children in that classroom.")
4. **Offer a solution to the problem:** For example, "Congress must work together to pass gun safety legislation that protects children, not guns."
5. **Review:** Re-read your letter and check for any spelling or grammatical mistakes before you submit it. Include your address, day, and evening phone numbers; editors often verify the identity of the writer before they print the letter.