DANA Disability Advocacy Network Australia

AUSTRALIAN PROGRESS

BY US, FOR US

Disability Messaging Guide

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Introduction

This guide contains messaging tips that past research has shown to be effective in building public support for progressive change, including disability rights. These tips can help advocates make the case for increased resourcing of disability services in the 2024 Federal budget and beyond.

Developing this messaging guide has been a collective effort by many people experienced in working on disability advocacy and persuasive messaging, including disabled people. It will continue to evolve as a collective effort.

The project is led by a steering committee of people with disability, disability advocates and messaging experts. It is supported by Disability Action Network Australia (DANA), Centre for Australian Progress and Common Cause Australia.

The message guide is intended as an introduction to values-based messaging for those unfamiliar with the approach. It is a tool we can use to shift attitudes and build public support amongst persuadable people who are currently unsure about supporting us (see Messaging principles, below). Future phases of the project may involve testing specific messages through focus groups, dial surveys and public polling, as well as providing training workshops for advocates.

Note that the example messages in this guide are provided for illustration and can be adapted to fit different contexts and strategies. We acknowledge that language in disability advocacy has a long history, with meaning and identities assigned to particular words. This guide simply presents words and phrases that research has shown to be persuasive on various topics, which some disabled people and advocates are already using and you may also like to try.

Summary and Easy Read versions of this guide are available here.

A NOTE ON HOW WE REFER TO OURSELVES

In this project, we often use the term “disabled people” to highlight that we have been disabled by others’ decisions – by how they’ve set up the world and how they treat us. However, we recognise people’s right to choose the terms they use to describe themselves and their communities. We also note that equally, some people prefer the person-first language of “people with disability”. In this guide we therefore use a mix of “disabled people” and “people with disability”.

Messaging Principles

OUR AUDIENCES

On any issue, we can divide our audience into three groups: base, persuadables and opponents.

The base are people who already strongly support us. When we share compelling and inspiring messages with our base, they become motivated to share those messages with their persuadable friends, family and colleagues. This is how together we can reach and persuade the vast majority of the public.

The persuadables are the majority of people in the middle who don't have a firm view one way or the other. They toggle between conflicting ideas – what we say and what our opponents say. The ideas they hear the most often and the most persuasively, are the ones they tend to believe.

Opponents are people who oppose us - they will never support us and we don't need them to. Messages that alienate our opponents are powerful, because they help show up the distance between opponents and the majority. When our opponents actively oppose our messaging it can help move persuadables to us.

The tips in this guide can help us inspire the base, persuade the persuadables and alienate the opposition.

OUR VALUES AND FRAMES

Generally, people do most of their reasoning at a subconscious level. At this subconscious level, there are multiple ways we can think about any one issue. In messaging, we can identify and tap into the most helpful of these perspectives so that people will support us. We call these perspectives **frames.**

One way to decide which frame is the most helpful is to consider which **values** are within it. Values are the deep motivations that shape our attitudes and behaviours. Values shape both the emotions we feel, the decisions we make and ultimately, what we see as 'common sense'. Frames that contain so-called **intrinsic values** such as love, equality or self-direction are helpful when building support for progressive policy change to create a more just, equitable and sustainable society. Frames that contain **extrinsic values** like power over others or wealth tend to reduce support for these causes.

The messages and tips provided in this guide are based on a values-based messaging approach to communications. This approach is based on evidence from decades of research in the fields of social psychology, cognitive linguistics and behavioural economics.

For more information on values-based messaging, see commoncause.com.au.

SPEAKING FROM OUR FRAME

Sometimes it can be tempting to repeat our opponents' frames when talking about disability. We do this because we think we can defeat their arguments with logic and facts, or because we get pulled into discussions that use opposition framing.

However, by associating our community with something we're 'not', we're doing the opposite of what we intend. We are reinforcing the opponent's story and giving it more attention. Instead, we need to learn the craft of **reframing**, so we're always speaking from our frame.

For more about staying in our own frame, see Tip 4: *Tell our story, not theirs* later in this guide.

CREATING BOLDER MESSAGES

Hedging means adding unnecessary words like 'try to', 'aim to' and 'strive towards' throughout our messages. Hedging language waters down our messages and undermines confidence in what we are saying. It makes us seem untrustworthy at worst, or wishy-washy at best.

For example, 'when we set our own course' is more assertive and inspires more confidence than 'when we strive towards setting our own course'.

Hedging is easy to remove, and makes our messages shorter and more compelling.

Overarching themes for talking about disability

Two overarching themes stood out from existing disability communications and the disability advocate interviews and workshops undertaken for this project.

THEME 1: SELF DETERMINATION

Disabled people and communities want a genuine say over what happens to us, including through leadership and exercising power over our lives. Self-determination principles and asks include:

- "Nothing about us, without us", or "nothing without us", or "everything about us, led by us".
- Disabled people need to be trusted to shape our own lives and make decisions about the policies that affect us.
- Decision makers should enable us, then get out of the way.

Message examples:

FROM	TO
Disabled people must be consulted about NDIS reforms. OR: Disabled people must have a seat at the table.	***Disabled people must lead the redesign of the NDIS. Between us, we have an enormous range of expertise in disability policy and beyond. We are also the experts in our own lives. All of these forms of expertise are vital to good decision making.***

Where inclusion is all that's realistic (e.g. Parliament), emphasise that our knowledge and expertise as essential – i.e. use inclusion messages that lean into our strengths and the need for self-determination.

"[Parliament makes / We all make] better decisions when everyone's in the room."

"We are the best problem solvers, because we solve problems and overcome challenges every day. That's why shared decision-making works better than decision-making behind closed doors."

THEME 2: DIVERSITY

Our messages should showcase the diversity and size of the disabled community:

- Not everyone discloses: 1 in 5 Australians are disabled
- Describe the experiences of people with visible, invisible, physical and intellectual disability
- No one-size--fits-all approach. Avoid generalisation: disabled people are individuals with diverse lives, talents, ambitions, appearances – just like all people.

> Note: Messages should also be aware of **intersectionality**. For example, we can emphasise that diverse identities like cultural background, gender and sexuality don't just add to a disabled person's experience, they fundamentally change that person's experiences in all aspects of life.

Top tips

1. VISION-BARRIER-ACTION STORY STRUCTURE

We recommend using the **Vision-Barrier-Action structure** for every message. This structure has been proven to help people understand the benefits of change for everyone, and build a believable story with the right amount of detail.

This structure helps situate stories about disability in a fuller narrative, combining necessary truth telling with positive solutions. If we want to persuade, we need to paint a picture of the world we want and avoid leading with the problem.

This story structure leads with a clear **vision** of what we want and the values at stake, the problem or **barrier** to achieving that vision, and the **action** or solution required.

Vision	**Barrier**	**Action**
Describe an **attractive vision** - a positive outcome that you and your audience would value	Point to **what** stands in the way of that vision, and **who** is responsible	Describe **the action required and who needs to act**, to remove the barrier and achieve the positive vision

A general format for disability advocacy messages could be:

Vision	Barrier	Action
We all want X [good thing] in life	*But [name people or organisations] are denying disabled people X*	*Disabled people in charge can put things right so we have X.*

The Vision-Barrier-Action story structure works for shorter as well as longer messages. When providing longer messages to the media, if you are concerned about the action being lost or the media focussing too much on the problem, add a strong title that encapsulates the vision and action. One example of this is “Same classroom, same opportunity”.[1]

Message examples:

Everything about us, led by us

Vision	Barrier	Action
When decisions need to be made about an issue, it’s the people most affected who know best what to do. It’s just common sense that they should take the lead.	*But when it comes to decisions affecting people with disability, those in power often leave us out of the process, ignoring us or including us in a tokenistic way. This isn’t fair and it doesn’t lead to good outcomes for anyone.*	*When disabled people are in charge, we can create places and policies based on our skills and experience. That way we can create a community that works for all of us, not only some of us.*

Include disabled classmates

Vision	Barrier	Action
Every child should be able to thrive at school and make happy memories in the classroom – as well as friends for life.	*But right now, education departments don’t allocate enough funds to schools to make sure teachers can include disabled kids in everything their class does.*	*With the right resources, schools can provide facilities like adapted IT and sports equipment and classroom support workers to make sure every child with disability*

[1] ‘Same Classroom Same Opportunity’, Family Advocacy

		enjoys and benefits from their school years alongside their non-disabled classmates.

Young disabled people just want to live their lives

Vision	Barrier	Action
Most young adults look forward to living independently, sharing a house with flatmates or getting a place of their own where they can socialise with friends.	*But the NDIA doesn't provide enough accessible housing, so young disabled adults are often forced into group homes with no choice over their own living situation. They end up feeling lonely and left out. Even worse, sometimes the staff running homes abuse disabled people and force them to live in appalling conditions.*	*When a young person with disability gets the support they need to live independently, they can take control of their living situation and enjoy life - as everyone should.*

Dialling the barrier up or down

Depending on what suits our strategy and context, we can 'dial up' the barrier by making it stronger and more obvious, or we can 'dial down' the barrier by only implying or hinting at it.

The following example shows how we can translate our background thinking into a dialled up and dialled down message.

Background thinking before we write our message:

- **Vision:** All children get a good education, and value and respect each other
- **Barrier:** Disabled children are excluded, put away into separate 'special ed' schools
- **Action:** Phase out special ed schools, convert them into schools for all children.

Here is a dialled-up message with an explicit barrier, naming who's responsible:

"We all want every person to be valued and respected, and every child to get a good education. But right now, [X Education Minister / X state education department] is shutting some disabled children out of mainstream schools, and allowing segregation

within mainstream schools. Giving all children great opportunities to learn and to appreciate and respect others means opening up all schools to all children."

A dialled-down message with an implicit barrier:

"We all want every person to be valued and respected, and every child to get a good education. Schools play a huge part in helping children learn to appreciate and respect others, and that can only happen when we bring kids together in the same classroom. Making sure no one is left out means opening up all schools to all children."

2. THE DESIGN FRAME

This frame has been tested very successfully with the public and captures a similar idea to the social model of disability. This way of thinking about disability says:

- Our society should work for everyone, not just some people
- Whether intentionally or not, non-disabled people have designed the world we live in today to suit themselves and no-one else
- This must change: we need to redesign our society together so it works for everyone.

Use active not passive language

In the barrier part of our message, if we fail to say **who is doing things,** audiences believe those things just happen naturally or randomly, making them impossible to change. Always assign a human agent to the problem. This action could be through a deliberate action or unintentionally. It could be historical or in the present day.

FROM	**TO**
We are disabled by inaccessible environments and ableist attitudes.	***We are disabled by the people currently in power, who create buildings, towns and workplaces to suit themselves and not people with disability. We are also disabled by people who lock us out of job opportunities and leave us out of social events/ because they don't know how to meet our needs or don't respect who we are.***

One easy way to flip from a passive to an active message is to use verbs (doing words) instead of nouns (things). For example:

FROM	TO
Disabled people experience discrimination and exclusion in the health system.	***The people currently in charge of health services often discriminate against disabled people and exclude us from essential services that we can't physically access or that don't meet our needs.***

For some organisations, it may be strategically tricky to assign a specific person or 'agent' to the barrier. In this case, it may be possible to use historical people or agents such as 'past governments' or 'successive governments'. The key is then to identify who can take action now.

"Everyone deserves good quality healthcare. But for decades, successive [NSW/insert other state] governments have failed to listen to disabled people when setting up health services. This means that often, disabled people aren't provided with the care we need. The [Minns/insert other] government now has an opportunity to redress that by working with disabled people to make sure all health centres get the training and resources they need to properly serve everyone in the community."

Avoid bare facts – add the 'who' and 'why'

Facts need to be part of the story, not the story on their own. Providing only the bare facts means that audiences supply their own 'who' and 'why'. In response to the FROM statement below, public audiences will likely assume there is something inherent to disabled children that leads them to drop out of school.

FROM	TO
Disabled children are x% more likely to drop out of school than non-disabled children.	***When education departments and teachers don't design class activities so disabled children can take part, it leads to x% more disabled children dropping out of school than non-disabled children.***

3. STRENGTHS LANGUAGE

Being clear about current problems and injustices is important, but in telling our truth, using **deficit** language has been proven to reinforce negative stereotypes and reduce public

support. Deficit language is any language that suggests there is something wrong or lesser about people with disability.

In contrast, using **strengths** language has been found to increase support for our messages from the public. Strengths language highlights the many and varied strengths of disabled people.

Strengths language says:

- People with disability must be valued and respected for who we are.
- Disabled people are creative, innovative and excellent problem solvers. With the right supports, disabled people lead and succeed in all walks of life.
- Within the disabled community we have a history of powerful advocacy and solidarity.
- People with disability are proud of all we've achieved and find joy in our own lives.

Take care to describe universal relatable strengths (no 'inspo porn' or 'supercrip'):

FROM	**TO**
For many people with disability, just getting to the shops is a superhuman achievement.	***Many people with disability are making a big difference by running local community groups and taking action on social causes.***

How to describe current problems, while avoiding deficit language

Our messages should convey the wrongs being done to disabled people by governments, workplaces and schools. That's their failing, not ours.

A good test is to ask yourself whether your message suggests there is something inherently wrong with us (deficit), or something wrong with how others are treating us. In the FROM statement below, if we don't spell out that other people are doing things to make us feel lonely, powerless, excluded and angry, audiences will fill in the blanks and assume the problem lies with us.

As we found in the Passing The Message Stick research, another key ingredient in communicating our pain and anger is to pair truth with action – to help move people past guilt or defensiveness to solutions.

FROM	**TO**
(Deficit + charity): *Many disabled people are lonely and powerless and feel excluded from schools, workplaces and*	**(Strength + justice):** ***Many people in the disabled community connect and support each other. But in wider society, people often exclude us from schools, workplaces and social groups – or worse, violently***

social groups. It's time for everyone to do more to include disabled people.	***abuse us. That makes us feel lonely and powerless and angry about the injustice of how we are treated. It's time for everyone to respect disabled people and recognise we can and must lead the changes required.***

4. TELL OUR STORY, NOT THEIRS

Research has shown that repeating misinformation or incorrect statements only reinforces them in the minds of our audiences.

Negation is when we say what something is NOT rather than what it IS. We do this especially when we feel forced to rebut or 'mythbust' opponents. Mythbusting and negation don't work because people tend to remember the myth we're busting or the thing we're negating. They forget small words like 'not'.

Instead, we should state our truth clearly and avoid repeating lies and misinformation.

Message example:

FROM	TO
It's a myth that many people rort the disability support pension and disabled parking bays.	***Disabled people are as diverse as any other group and you can't always see disability. The disability support pension and disabled parking bays ensure disabled people get some of the supports we need to get by in daily life.***

5. BRING THE NDIS BACK TO VALUES AND BENEFITS

We are often in a position where we need to ask for resources or improvement to a system (like the NDIS). In these communications, it's important to keep firmly focused on intrinsic values like equality, social justice and human wellbeing. Adequate funding is then *how we get what we need*, not *why we care*.

Our opponents have made the NDIS all about money: questioning value for money and asserting that increasing costs are 'unsustainable'. In this context, we are best placed by bringing the NDIS back to why it matters: it is lifesaving and life changing, allowing people to do what they need to do in life.

Recent public opinion research tells us that the public strongly supports the NDIS, thinks of it as an essential public service on par with Medicare, and wants the focus to be on what's best

for people with disability who use the NDIS.[2] As these views are already grounded in intrinsic values, disability advocates are in a very strong position – if only we use this position well and don't compromise it by jumping into our opponents' frame (see tip 4).

In addition, we can and should reject our opponents' scarcity frame: the assertion that there is not enough money to go around to support all disabled people. We say, governments make decisions all the time about who and what to fund, and if we so choose there's enough for everyone, enough to properly support all disabled people. When referencing funding, we should also go broad – emphasising our inclusion in all public services, not just the NDIS.

In summary:

- Make human wellbeing the reason for our asks. Funding or resources are only there to enable this.
- Avoid framing the NDIS as a failure, which may lead audiences to decide it should be abolished. Instead frame it as an essential public service that needs some redesigning to improve it and safeguard it for the long term.
- Avoid using terms like 'taxpayers' money' or 'return on investment', which can prime extrinsic values.
- Avoid benefits to the economy as the reason for our asks.
- Focus on safeguarding the NDIS for the future (a vision), rather than talking only about companies profiteering (a problem).

Message examples:

FROM	**TO**
The NDIS costs $X bn a year, so we need to make sure it delivers value for money.	***Just like roads and Medicare, the NDIS is an essential public service. It means that people with disability can have control over their own lives. It provides essential supports so people can get out of the house, whether that's to go to school, to work, or to the footy.*** ***But the NDIS needs redesigning to make sure companies can't use it to profiteer. Disabled people know how the NDIS should be redesigned so that we have control of our lives.***
We need to reform the NDIS as there's a lot of wastage and rorting.	***The NDIS needs to be made fairer so that people with disability can decide on the supports they need.***

[2] 'NDIS is as popular as Medicare, study shows', Financial Review, 13 March 2024

6. BUILD EMPATHY WITH RELATABLE HUMAN STORIES

UK research found that building empathy with relatable human stories was the most effective messaging tactic to shift public attitudes about disability[3]. Rather than attempting to stir **sympathy** about the plight of disabled people, which risks othering us and falsely portraying us as needy victims, it's more effective to create **empathy** by creating a shared connection with the audience. The UK research found that being left out is something public audiences can strongly identify with. In other research in Australia, human stories that build empathy have been found to be more convincing than references to laws or international conventions.[4]

Message examples:

FROM	TO
Workplace discrimination against disabled people prevents participation and leads to poor mental health.	***Sahani loves working in HR. She works hard and gets great feedback. But often she is not invited to social events with the team just because she's disabled. Understandably, this makes her feel lonely and isolated – to the point where she now wants to leave her job.***
The NDIS provides essential supports such as accessibility devices and support workers.	***The NDIS provides essential supports and support workers, so that a sport-loving kid like Jasmin can play with her mates, and an older man like Todd can get to the bowls club to connect with people his age.***

7. SHOW CHANGE IS POSSIBLE

Messaging research shows that people like solutions far more than they like hearing about problems. We can tap into this tendency in our messaging by:

- Providing a timeline of change – this shows that people with disability have won massive change already. We know it's possible: but we are nowhere near where we need to be.
- Using historical wins to show that change requires effort and resources – it's not inevitable.
- Covid provides a good example: the pandemic made us realise how fast we could adapt.

[3] 'Changing attitudes towards disability: What works', Scope UK

[4] Research on messaging about human rights legislation and people seeking asylum has found that public audiences in Australia are not persuaded by references to international laws and conventions.

Message examples:

FROM	TO
The NDIS is a costly failure and a broken system.	***Ten years ago we got together and invented the NDIS to ensure disabled people could get what they needed to live good lives. We should be proud of our society for starting the NDIS, but now, just like any system, it needs adjusting with the benefit of experience.***
Many workplaces make it extremely difficult for disabled people to work there.	***When Covid happened, we moved fast and adopted practices and technology to make sure many people could work from home and maintain physical distancing. This shows that it's equally possible to make sure jobs are made suitable for disabled and non-disabled people.***

Metaphors

We use metaphors in nearly every sentence – to simplify language and help our minds grasp abstract concepts. When talking about disability, we can replace abstract ideas like 'self-determination' with more familiar and tangible words like 'in control' and 'led by us, for us'.

Metaphor	Use when we're talking about	Examples
Journey	Improving policies and programs; taking society to a better place	*Next steps, barriers, roadmap*
Build	Creating something good or something better	*Build a society that works for everyone*
Lead	Self determination	*Disabled people must lead NDIS reform*
Support	Paid or government assistance	*Support people to thrive*
Blueprint	We know how to fix something: we've put in the work already	*The NDIS Review is a blueprint for change*

Words to embrace and replace

Embrace	Replace	Why
Led by disabled people	A seat at the table	Replace inclusion and tokenism with self-determination
Collectively, disabled people have so much expertise in so many fields	Disabled people are vulnerable and powerless	Replace deficit language with strengths language
We have been clear about what's needed, but [the government/others] are not listening to us	Disabled people have no voice	Replace deficit language with strengths language
[Organisation] is discriminating against and excluding disabled people	Disabled people experience discrimination and exclusion	Make passive sentences active – identify who's causing the problem and who needs to act
The [policies / processes / language] of [organisation / government / decision maker] enable their staff and others to commit violence against people with disability	People with disability experience violence	Make passive sentences active - identify who is causing the harm, and who needs to act to resolve it
Barriers put in place by [organisation or decision maker], alongside harmful community attitudes, have a major impact on the wellbeing and day to day lives of disabled people - they are exclusionary and often result in disabled people being denied autonomy to make decisions about their own lives	The burden of disability / people with disability	Replace deficit language with strengths language, and make clear who is causing harm and therefore who has the ability to change it

Essential public service, lifesaving/life changing, giving us control over our lives	Value for money, return on investment, taxpayers' money	Focus on why things matter to people's wellbeing, rather than economic benefits
The NDIS is an essential public service that needs redesigning/reforming	The NDIS is broken The NDIS is a failure	Show the NDIS needs redesigning, not reducing or abolishing
Over the years, disabled people have led and won huge changes	Systems/workplaces are broken and impossible to fix	Show change is possible