

# **3** SIMPLE QUESTIONS

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TO GUIDE OUR  
COMMUNICATION  
ON BEHALF  
OF CHILDREN,  
YOUTH, AND  
FAMILIES

A man was walking along a sandy beach. In the distance, he noticed a figure bending down, picking something up, and throwing it into the ocean.

A young girl came into focus as he approached.

“Excuse me,” the man asked the child, “but what are you doing?”

The girl replied, “I am saving the starfish.”

The man looked around and squinted into the distance. He saw that he and the girl were surrounded by stranded starfish that stretched for miles up the shoreline.

“My child,” the man asked kindly, “there must be thousands of starfish here; what difference could you possibly make?”

The girl picked up another starfish and tossed it into the waves.

“I made a difference to that one.”

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*Adapted from an essay, The Star Thrower, by Loren Eiseley.  
Published in 1969 in The Unexpected Universe*



The starfish story symbolizes both the opportunities and the challenges of communicating on behalf of children, youth, and families.

Like the child, those of us who are communicating on behalf of children are deeply committed to our causes. Yet we often face an audience who, like the man in the story, is skeptical of either the importance or the efficacy of individual or collective action.

The child in the story believes that her simple act is worthwhile. Her reply, “I made a difference to that one,” delivers a strong counterpoint to the jaded question of the adult. By focusing on each starfish instead of the thousands on the beach, the child symbolizes the conviction that one person can make a difference even in the face of overwhelming problems.

## MAKING GOODNESS ATTRACTIVE

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In discussing how communicators can help make goodness attractive<sup>1</sup>, Fred Rogers wrote:

“I am not that interested in ‘mass’ communication. I’m much more interested in what happens between *this* person and the *one* person watching.”



If a children’s television program broadcast daily to millions of viewers can be conceptualized in terms of *one on one* communication, we can also go about making children’s issues compelling by understanding what happens between our communication materials and the *one* person who is reading or listening. This is an important task for any “communicator” who speaks on behalf of children, whether that person is a non-profit leader, a teacher, a philanthropist, a social worker, a marketing specialist, a parent, a community organizer, a mentor, or even just a neighbor.

Focusing on *one on one* communication invites the communicator to consider how we meet the needs of the *one* person whom our communication is trying to reach. We propose three hypotheses about the fundamental needs of our audience and the question that each hypothesis poses for the communicator.

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*Hypothesis: A person feels an inherent need to care for others.*

**Question 1: Does the communication express and evoke care?**

*Hypothesis: A person needs to feel hopeful to sustain caring.*

**Question 2: Does the communication inspire hope?**

*Hypothesis: A person needs to know that he or she has something worth giving to others.*

**Question 3: Does the communication help you to find something worth giving within yourself?**

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*Note: In this piece, we are using common “mass” communication mailers and brochures as examples to illustrate how communication is or is not meeting the needs of the audience. We hope our exploratory attempt here invites many more conversations about the relevance of these questions across the broader range of communication activities on behalf of children, youth, and families.*

## QUESTION 1: DOES THE COMMUNICATION EXPRESS AND EVOKE CARE?

*Hypothesis: A person feels an inherent need to care for others.*

We believe that this hypothesis is the essential distinction between communicating for humanitarian causes and for consumer marketing. Whereas the latter has to manipulate a connection between a material product (e.g., shampoo, cell phone) and the consumer's emotions, the former can build on a natural connection between a cause and a compassionate response.

If we start with the notion that our audience naturally cares about children, then the primary task of the communicator is to *avoid* placing barriers in the way of caring, rather than manipulating our audience's emotional responses. Let us explore one such barrier.



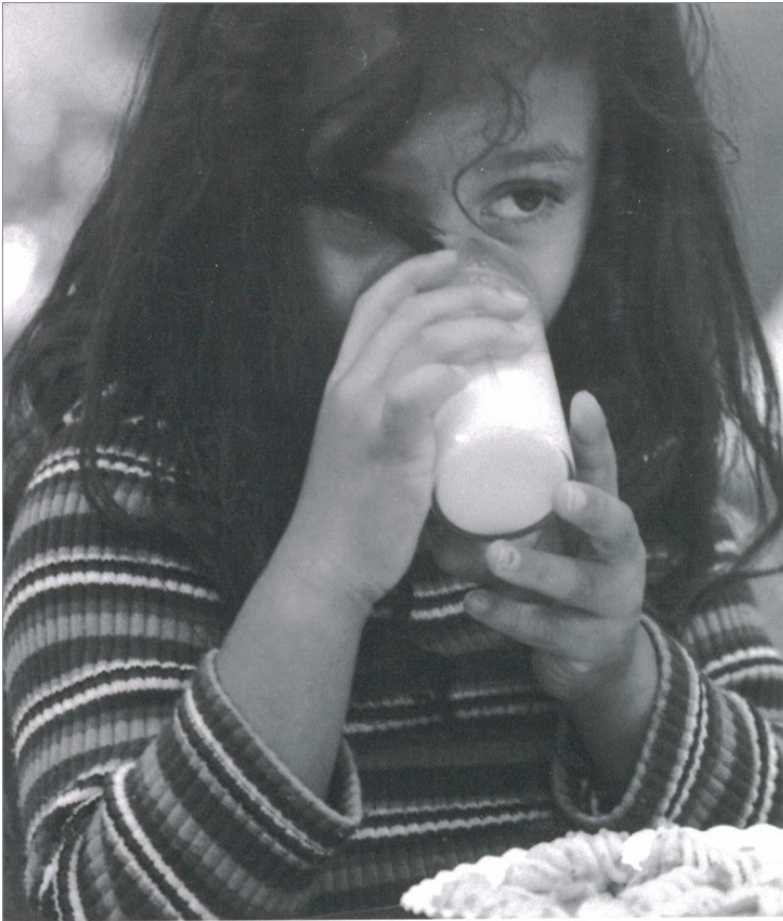
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Would you feel more caring if the number was 400,000 or less caring if the number was 200,000?

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Mother Teresa said, "If I look at the mass, I will never act. If I look at the one, I will."

When is a statistic too massive to evoke caring? Researchers have consistently found that people cannot easily "wrap their minds around" large numbers<sup>2</sup>. In multiple studies, participants gave more money to a single identifiable victim than any other numerical grouping of victims (from 2 to millions of children). In one illustrative experiment<sup>3</sup>, participants were presented with the image of an African child along with statistics to remind them that 3 million more children are suffering from food shortages. Participants actually gave less than they would have if they had been presented with just one child.



**End hunger in your lifetime.  
More importantly, end it in hers.**

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This is an example of a fundraising flyer that avoids statistics. Instead it personalizes the social issue using the image of a single child.

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Despite (or maybe because of) efforts by advocacy groups and news media to use statistics to draw attention to social issues, people grossly misunderstand the current state of social issues impacting children. In a recent study<sup>4</sup>, researchers found that, across two-dozen child-related issues (e.g., youth crime, teen pregnancy), the American public's perception of the problems was far worse than the actual statistics. Therefore, the actual statistics relating to problems facing our children are unlikely going to surprise the public or to draw the desired attention.

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The communicator has the responsibility of informing the public — with images, stories, and statistics — of the depth and breadth of problems and needs. But sustainable caring and engagement demands something deeper than numbing statistics.

## QUESTION 2: DOES THE COMMUNICATION INSPIRE HOPE?

*Hypothesis: A person needs to feel hopeful to sustain caring.*

Our compassionate response to others' suffering can be spontaneous and immediate. But without a continuing sense of hope, this response is often short-lived.

Crisis and disaster often bring a flurry of communication and advocacy efforts. Vivid imagery and massive statistics that convey the enormity of a problem can sometimes shock and compel individuals, large foundations, or even nations into action. However, most of us have difficulty staying attentive or engaged in issues and causes that either never seem to improve or seem to worsen all the time.

For example, in the first week of the Haiti Earthquake, there were numerous international, national, and local efforts to raise relief funds. The American Red Cross, via a text message campaign alone, raised over 7 million dollars within the first 24 hours. But by the end of the second week, CNN was already reporting that donations to the Red Cross dropped by more than 50%. Commenting on compassion fatigue and cynicism one month after the earthquake in Haiti, TIME columnist Nancy Gibbs wrote, "I don't believe people get tired of helping – only that they get tired of feeling helpless."<sup>5</sup>

Inspiring hope is a particularly important challenge to communicators who advocate on behalf of persisting social issues such as hunger, poverty, and lack of educational opportunities. This requires striking a balance between credibly conveying a need and its pragmatic solution.



In northern Haiti, [redacted] and her family live in a shack surrounded by swamp waters. Discarded strainers and baskets litter the area. Although these instruments are commonly used for preparing and serving food, it's cruelly ironic that here they serve a different purpose: the starving family uses them to scour the polluted waters for something to eat.

With no other source of nutrition, [redacted]'s children use the strainers and baskets as they wade through the water each day, searching for tiny crabs to eat.

Because the crabs are so small, [redacted] adds salt to the children's meager catches and concocts a makeshift soup. But even with something to fill their empty bellies, the health of her young ones is at risk. The swamp waters and the crabs are infested with parasites, so [redacted]'s children are often dangerously sick. In the heart of a desperate mother, however, illness is better than starvation.

The [redacted] family is surrounded by polluted swamp waters and exorcuculating poverty. Forced to hunt for tiny crabs to eat, the children suffer from severe malnourishment and intestinal parasites.

Please be a loving neighbor to suffering families like [redacted]'s by acting as an instrument of God's love and mercy. By simply sharing our blessings with those in need, our collective Christian charity has the power to save countless lives. 🙏

In this example, the vague description of the solutions is outweighed by the detailed explanation of the desperate conditions.

**Escalating violence in Somalia:** Conflict and displacement continued to plague the Somali people in 2009. In the first half of the year, our teams conducted 376,114 outpatient consultations, provided 22,000 women with prenatal care, and performed more than 3,000 surgeries, 1,975 of them for violence-related injuries. As one of the few humanitarian organizations remaining in Somalia, our services are critical.



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This text and image excerpted from an international relief agency's newsletter makes the solution tangible and credible. The use of statistics in this example focuses on the positive results while implying the extent of the need.

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Hope opens up the heart and the mind to the possibility that something can be done to alleviate suffering. Hope is a necessary condition for sustained caring, but is not sufficient to empower the individual past helplessness. People need to know that they *themselves* can play active roles and are not alone in their endeavors. This is the pathway from sustained caring to sustainable action.

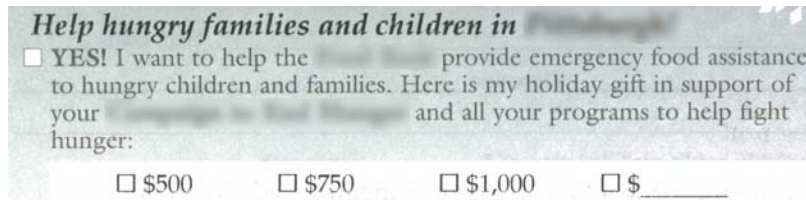
### QUESTION 3: DOES THE COMMUNICATION HELP YOU TO FIND SOMETHING WORTH GIVING WITHIN YOURSELF?

Hypothesis: “Every one of us – no matter how much money we have – needs to know that there’s something about us that is worth giving.” – Fred Rogers<sup>6</sup>

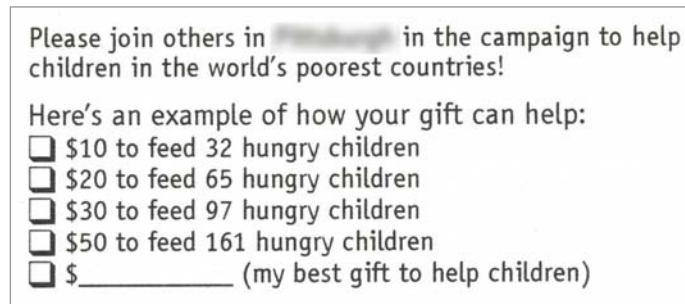
Examining communication materials that either solicit monetary donations or volunteering, there are three common approaches to engendering the feeling of “something worth giving” – making the impact concrete, forming a personal connection, and building a community.

#### MAKING THE IMPACT CONCRETE

When we are asked to give money, it is difficult to understand how our individual giving impacts large-scale social issues.



However, the sense that even a small contribution makes a concrete difference helps people to feel that they have something worth giving.



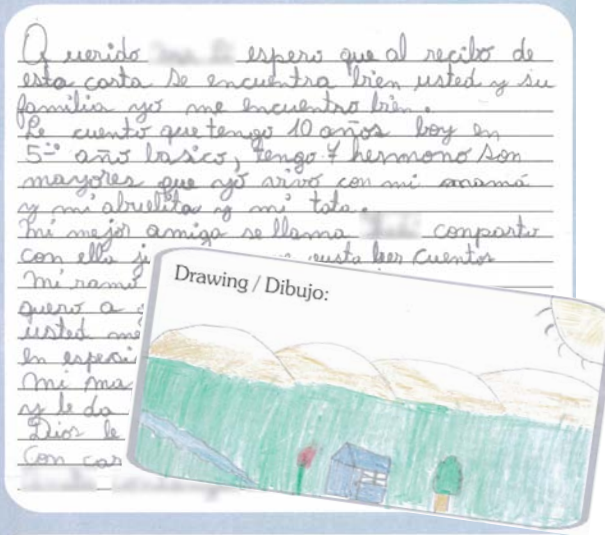


## FORMING A PERSONAL CONNECTION

Regardless of how much money we can afford to give, few of us believe that giving money alone can solve the myriad of challenges in society. When asked to choose one action that would do the most to improve life in their community, less than 1 out of 10 Pittsburghers chose donating money or goods<sup>7</sup>. However, 2 out of 3 chose “more people volunteering” and “people working more closely on community problems.”

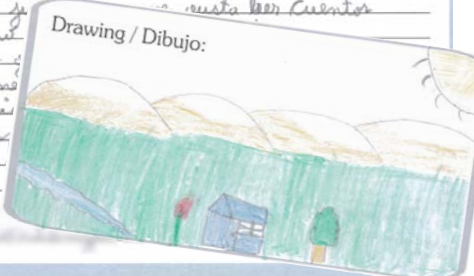
Volunteers who mentor or tutor children often speak of both giving and receiving in this kind of personal context. Volunteer organizations like Pittsburgh Cares have developed sophisticated training and matching processes that go beyond simply adding headcounts to the volunteer pool. Rather, they match individuals’ talents and skills to the particular needs of organizations. Volunteers.org and GreatNon-profits.org are national organizations pursuing similar efforts.

Even in situations where direct volunteering is not feasible for most donors, the communicator can still help to establish a sense of connection between the person who is giving and the person who is receiving. Here is a collection of materials from international sponsorship programs where each donor is matched with a specific child with whom the donor can communicate through letters, photos, birthday cards, and holiday gifts. This approach filters a large-scale problem through a personal lens. Non-profits, like Family Links, that match giving families with needy individuals during the holidays for donations of food and gifts take a similar approach.



Querido \_\_\_\_\_ espero que al recibir de esta carta se encuentre bien usted y su familia yo me encuentro bien. Le cuento que tengo 10 años voy en 5<sup>o</sup> año básico, tengo 4 hermanas son mayores que yo vivo con mi mamá y mi abuelita y mi tía. Mi mejor amigo se llama \_\_\_\_\_ con ella yo \_\_\_\_\_ gusta leer cuentos. Mi mamá \_\_\_\_\_ que yo \_\_\_\_\_ en español. Mi mamá \_\_\_\_\_ le da \_\_\_\_\_ con car \_\_\_\_\_

Drawing / Dibujo:




Translation (Traducción)

Dear Sponsor \_\_\_\_\_  
I hope this letter finds you and your family well. I'm great. I'm 10. I'm in 5<sup>th</sup> elementary grade. I have 7 older siblings. I live with my mom, grandma, and granddad. My best friend is \_\_\_\_\_. We play together. I like reading stories. My favorite subject is nature. I want to thank you for helping me. It's very important to me. My mom says hi, and thanks you for the benefits. God bless and protect you.

Goodbye from your sponsored child,  
\_\_\_\_\_

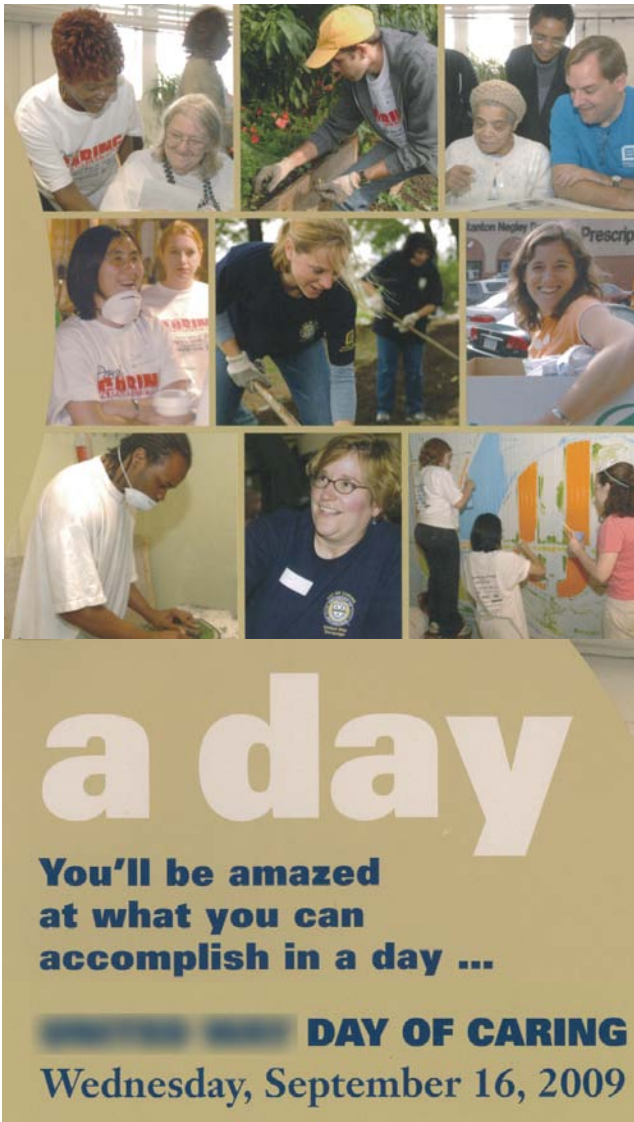
Acct # _____	<b>FAMILY RECORD</b>	Child ID# _____
Date Completed <u>June 8, 2009</u>	Project _____	Sub-Project _____ Country <u>Dominican</u>
<b>INFORMATION ABOUT YOUR CHILD:</b>		
1. Child's Full Name: _____		
First Name _____	Last Name _____	
Age <u>17</u> Sex <u>M</u> Date of Birth: Month <u>February</u> Day <u>24</u> Year <u>1992</u>		
Height: <u>5</u> Feet <u>5</u> Inches Weight: <u>117</u> Pounds Hair Color: <u>Black</u>		
2. Attends School: <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No (specify): _____		
3. Favorite School Subjects: <u>Social Studies, Science, Grammar</u>		
Favorite Pastimes: <u>Playing with friends, Playing basketball</u>		
Chores at Home: <u>Running errands, Taking out the trash, Washing dishes</u>		



## BUILDING A COMMUNITY

Even with tangible impact and personal connection, the problems facing a single child or a larger population of children can still seem overwhelming to the *individual* helper, both financially and emotionally. It is important to know that each of us is not working alone. The conviction that we *collectively* have something worth giving is best sustained in a community of people who are giving of themselves. Within such a community of like-minded and like-willed individuals, the scale or depth of the challenges seems more manageable to each donor or volunteer.

There are various efforts that attempt to create a sense of community among volunteers, donors, and organizations to engender sustained and community-oriented approaches to giving and caring. Many of these are event-based, such as setting aside one day per year for volunteering efforts, or organizing walks or races to fundraise. Some are more enduring, such as the long-term partnerships between churches or schools with community food banks or meals-on-wheels programs.



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Finding something about ourselves that is worth giving through establishing personal connections and becoming part of a serving community paves a concrete pathway towards sustainable action to improve the lives of children, youth, and families.

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## WHAT WE ARE ASKING OF EVERY COMMUNICATOR

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Whenever we are communicating on behalf of children — designing a fundraising mailer or newsletter, giving a speech or media interview, or just engaging in conversation with a parent or neighbor — we can guide ourselves with three simple questions:

- » **Does it express and evoke care?**
- » **Does it inspire hope?**
- » **Does it help you to find something worth giving within yourself?**

What difference does this make?

These three questions can focus all of our communication on behalf of children, across diverse organizations or causes, into a consistent and coherent message: *Through simple yet powerful acts, we can all make a difference in a child's life.*

By helping our audience establish a sense of personal connection and contribution, our communication can become an active ingredient in building such a caring, hopeful, and giving community for children.

## WHAT WE ARE ASKING OF YOU

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The University of Pittsburgh Office of Child Development is developing a community-wide initiative to improve our communication on behalf of children, youth, and families. We are collaborating with partners across many different areas of expertise, including professional writing and design, youth media, psychological and social decision research, and the non-profit organizations that serve children and families. Over the summer and fall of 2010, we will be working actively with our partners to further develop the concept and hope to launch the initiative by the end of 2010.

We sincerely invite you to join in this collective effort of developing creative and concrete ideas to spread a message of care, hope, and giving.

To be a partner or participant, and to share your comments and ideas, please contact our project coordinator, Stephanie Groark, at 412. 244.7089 or e-mail [skg24@pitt.edu](mailto:skg24@pitt.edu).

## REFERENCES

- <sup>1</sup> Rogers, F. "How Do We Make Goodness Attractive?" Speech at the Academy of Television Arts & Sciences Television Hall of Fame. 27 Feb. 1999.
  - <sup>2</sup> Slavic, P. (2007). If I look at the mass I will never act: Psychic numbing and genocide. *Judgment and Decision Making, 2(2)*, 79-75.
  - <sup>3</sup> Small, D., Loewenstein, G., & Slovic, P. (2005). Sympathy and callousness: The impact of deliberative thought on donations to identifiable and statistical victims. *Organizational Behavior and Human Decision Processes, 102*, 143–153.
  - <sup>4</sup> Guzman, L., Laura Lippman, L., Anderson Moore, K., & O'Hare, W. (2009). Accentuating the Negative: The Mismatch Between Public Perception of Child Well-being and Official Statistics. *Child Indicators Research, 2(4)*, 391-416.
  - <sup>5</sup> Gibbs, N. (2010, February 22). There's No Point in Doing Good Badly. *TIME*.
  - <sup>6</sup> Rogers, F. "Something Worth Giving: Reflections from Our Favorite Neighbor." Speech presented at the 2002 Grantmakers for Children, Youth and Families Annual Conference. 9 Oct. 2002.
  - <sup>7</sup> Do They See What I See? (2004). *Tropman Reports. 3(1)*.
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## ABOUT THE AUTHORS

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## ABOUT THE ORGANIZATION

**The University of Pittsburgh Office of Child Development (OCD)** is a university-community partnership dedicated to improving the lives of children, youth, and families. Through interdisciplinary collaborations across research, practice, and policy, we strive to turn knowledge into action and respond creatively and collaboratively to challenges facing children here in Pittsburgh and around the world.