

**Reframing Youth Issues
For Public Consideration and Support**

A FrameWorks Message Memo

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I. Preface

While significant time and research has been directed at understanding the way Americans think about children's issues, little of this work has directly addressed youth. The question of whether Americans think differently about young children than they do about teenagers has long plagued children's advocates in such mundane ways as choosing between images of children for promotional materials or policy campaigns. While images of little kids might invite sympathy and protectiveness, it was reasoned, pictures of teens may incite fear and harsh judgments. The simple answer of using categorical monikers – children, kids, etc. – obscures the different needs of adolescents, making it hard to introduce programs that relate to sexuality and work, for example, without their sounding like a non sequitur. Sooner or later, in order to understand the opinion climate that determines how youth issues will be greeted by the public, communications research on youth images had to be undertaken.

This report, supported by a grant from the David and Lucile Packard Foundation, is one small step in that direction. It summarizes a series of research endeavors undertaken in 1999 and 2000 to discern what Americans think about youth, why they think what they do, what consequences this has for youth advocates, and how we might best engage Americans in a discussion about positive youth development. This body of research was supported by the W. T. Grant Foundation, as part of a multi-year grant to apply the perspective of strategic frame analysis to youth issues, and supplemented by six focus groups supported by the Packard Foundation.

The research base upon which this Message Memo relies includes:

(1) a summary and analysis of recent survey research related to the public's attitudes concerning adolescents, and six related issue areas: education, sex, substance abuse, violence, the influence of media, and juvenile justice (Margaret Bostrom, "The Twentieth Century Teen: Public Perception and Teen Reality, A Summary of the Public Opinion Data, Washington, D.C.:FrameWorks Institute, April 2000).

(2) an analysis of the conceptual frames that ordinary people use to reason about teenagers, based on a series of in-depth interviews (Axel Aubrun and Joseph Grady, "How Americans Understand Teens: Findings from the Cognitive Interviews," Washington, D.C: FrameWorks Institute, February 28, 2000).

(3) a content analysis of the representation of adolescents in television entertainment programming for the period September 20 - November 21, 1999 on the six broadcast networks (Katharine E. Heintz-Knowles, Images of Youth:

A Content Analysis of Adolescents in Prime-Time Entertainment Programming, Washington, D.C.: FrameWorks Institute, April 9, 2000).

(4) a catalogue of framing options, derived from cognitive/cultural analysis (Axel Aubrun and Joseph Grady, *Reframing Youth: Models, Metaphors, Messages*, Washington, D.C.: FrameWorks Institute, April 4, 2000).

(5) a summary of six focus groups conducted with parents in three cities in early 2000 (Margaret Bostrom, "Teenhood: How Americans Think About Today's Youth," Washington, D.C., FrameWorks Institute, May 2000).

(6) a content analysis of the representation of adolescents in TV news programming for the period September 29 - October 24 and November 28 - December 5, 1999 on ABC, CBS, NBC and CNN evening network news and on local evening news on three broadcast affiliates in each of six cities (Los Angeles, Chicago, Boston, Seattle, and Columbia, South Carolina), resulting in a sample of 9,678 news stories (Daniel R. Amundson, Linda S. Lichter, S. Robert Lichter, Center for Media and Public Affairs, "What's the Matter With Kids Today?: Television Coverage of Adolescents in America," Washington, D. C., FrameWorks Institute and the Center for Communications and Community, September 2000).

These papers will be published together as "Reframing Youth Issues," Working Papers of the FrameWorks Institute and the Center for Communications and Community, UCLA, 2000. While this Message Memo draws from this collection of work, the conclusions are solely that of the author, and are meant to invite, not supplant, a closer reading of the original research. Readers should refer to original manuscripts for primary sources.

II. About Strategic Frame Analysis

Strategic frame analysis is an approach to communications research and practice that pays attention to the public's deeply held worldviews and widely held assumptions. It was created by a multi-disciplinary team of scholars and practitioners capable of studying those assumptions and testing them to determine their impact on social policies. Recognizing that there is more than one way to tell a story, strategic frame analysis taps into decades of research on how people think and communicate. The result is an empirically-driven communications process that makes academic research understandable, interesting and usable to help people solve social problems.

The term "frame," as defined by political psychologist Shanto Iyengar, "refers to subtle alterations in the statement or presentation of judgment and choice problems, and the term 'framing effects' refers to changes in decision outcomes resulting from these alterations" (1991:21). Or as sociologist Sandra Ball-Rokeach (1996: 279) observes, frames are "the linguistic window through which we see or interpret." In short, "[F]rames are conceptual tools which media and individuals rely on to convey, interpret, and evaluate information" (Neuman, Just, and Crigler, 1992: 149). This is significant because how people understand social issues is critical to their support of, or opposition to, particular public policies. Referring to government programs as handouts, for example, brings to bear cultural models of laziness, but not of suffering. Frames tell us how to interpret a message, and even what counts as part of the message and what can be ignored, by evoking particular cognitive models and not others.

This approach is strategic in that it not only deconstructs the dominant frames that drive reasoning on public issues, but it also identifies those models most likely to stimulate public reconsideration and enumerates their elements (reframing). Strategic frame analysis offers policy advocates a way to work systematically through the challenges that confront the introduction of new legislation or social policies, to anticipate attitudinal barriers to support, and to develop research-based strategies to overcome public misunderstanding.

The perspective that informs this Message Memo is that of strategic frame analysis.

III. Findings from the Research

A. Frame Distortion: Conflicts Between Perceptions of Youth and the Reality

There are dramatic differences between the way American adults view teenagers and the descriptive data that should inform our views of what teens think and do. Strategic frame analysis would assert that adults cannot see teens as

they are because the frames that control who we think they are get in the way. When the facts don't fit the frames, the facts are rejected, not the frames.

There are a number of critical areas of distortion. First, adults believe that teens today are "different" than they were in the past. At the core of this concern is a feeling that today's teens have rejected traditional American values. Bostrom reports that "only 16% of Americans say that 'young people under the age of 30 share most of their moral and ethical values.' This puts young adults' values only above homosexuals, welfare recipients, and rich people" (Bostrom, April 2000, p. 4). A Gallup poll found that, when asked what word applied to young people in their teens and 20s today, compared to young people in that same group 20 years ago, adults chose "selfish" (81%) and "materialistic" (79%) for youth today, and "patriotic" (65%) and "idealistic" (49%) for the youth of yesteryears (Bostrom:5).

"While adults have serious reservations about American youth," Bostrom concludes, "the reality is that teens place high value on honesty and hard work, and the vast majority are thinking and planning seriously for the future" (Bostrom:6). Among those values teens say they rank highest are "being honest" (8.6 on a 10 point scale), "working hard" (8.4), "being a good student" (7.9), and "giving time to helping others" (7.6%). And majorities of teens say they volunteer, attend church or synagogue weekly, read the newspaper regularly and attend cultural events (Bostrom:7).

And, "while the public tends to blame parents, the reality is that most parents have open, trusting relationships and a solid bond with their teenage children," Bostrom concludes. Indeed, when asked who they most rely on for making important decisions or for facing problems, parents are the top choice, with 63% of teens saying they rely on their parents a "lot." There has been an important shift in responsibility, she notes. "While in 1997, the public was equally likely to blame kids' problems on social/economic pressures as well as irresponsible parents (41% and 44% respectively), in the improved economy, they are more likely to blame parents (37% blame social/economic pressures, 49% parents)" (Bostrom:10).

In fact, James Youniss has shown that, on virtually every social indicator, "youth today are at least as healthy or healthier than their parents' generation" Drawing from national data bases and trend analysis, Youniss shows that "the percentage of youth who work part-time has remained constant or risen a bit 1970 to today" and "SAT scores have remained constant since 1970." The proportions of high school students who volunteer have not changed since 1975, and the proportion of high school seniors who say religion is very or quite important in their lives has remained high and constant from 1975 to the present.

What's going on here? Are adults simply "misinformed" about the lives and attitudes of today's youth? Can a simple recitation of the facts set the record straight? Using data provided by James Youniss, we tested parents' reaction to a news story that presented positive data about the status of adolescents today.

Over the course of six focus groups with parents, we observed astonishing unanimity in the way adults discounted positive statistics about youth. Confronted with what was presented as a "true news story" about recent trends among teenagers, adults consistently overlooked the positive data (which dominated the story) and focused instead on the few negative trends. When asked to re-examine the story and to explain why they thought it was indeed negative when there were so many positive trends, they first said they thought the numbers were not correct. When informed that they were indeed correct, they often found ways to re-interpret the numbers in order to result in a decline or a "not good enough" conclusion.

"The title of this story is, Some Kids Doing Better, Others Fall Behind. For the most part it is a very positive article stating that basically school achievement has stayed on par with what it was in the 70s for the state of Virginia... We have a 40 percent of all youth that is now volunteering in programs. Overall, a kind of positive article. We're wondering...."

"It's too positive."

Moderator: "What particular pieces of it made it seem not true for you?"

"Well, 40 percent of youth involved in community service. That seems awfully high..."

Moderator: "Ok, If you had made a guess on what percentage of teens volunteer, what percentage would you have guessed?"

"Ten, twenty."

"Twenty."

"Fifteen."

"Way under twenty."

"Did it say volunteer community service because that..."

"Can be criminal."

Moderator: "What else in there other than the percentage of volunteering seems unrealistic?"

"The chance of being involved in a teenage violent crime is about as high as being hit by a meteor. Either they are not reporting incidents. That is highly possible. You can get beat up by another kid and not tell anybody because he is embarrassed or whatever, or it is a lie I think. I don't see how that ratio could be true."

Moderator: "If you were reading this in your newspaper at home, what would you do with it?"

"It would lead you to believe that your children are safe and things are good."

Moderator: "But the tone of your voice sounds a little cynical. You don't believe that."

"I would think that the state was getting ready to do something legislatively...."

"They are going to cut something because we're doing so great or they are going to take something away. I would think that this was not something that was written independently by some reporter who just had this observation He was either paid, robbed, or given the information."

"The flip side of that, we were talking earlier where it is just not reported as often that good things that teens – that young people are involved in. Maybe that is why the number would shock you so bad because you just don't hear about it. So when you see this really big number that just seems completely impossible, maybe it is true. We just don't hear enough about it because we're hearing more about the violence and the drug use and the drinking and driving, the races on the streets and kids are hitting poles and getting killed. You hear about that...Why do they do this? You don't hear about the community volunteers all the time, so when you do get this big outlandish sounding number, it takes you by surprise."

"Well, you don't see it...Where do you know outside of church groups where your youth are actually going out in the community and doing something? Where? Where are they?"

"I see kids in hospitals, Candy Stripers."

"I was going to say personally I wouldn't know because I haven't volunteered to do it. I see them at church because I go and I'll see them in the mall because I go. But perhaps if I went and served at a soup kitchen, I might see it jack full of teenagers. Because my butt is at home eating my soup in front of the TV, I don't see them."

"How did they do this poll?"

Mothers of Young Children, Richmond, VA

“It says the school achievement is measured by the national assessment of education progress. Most people don’t know what that is. They say national. Does that come out of Washington? Is that an organization run by whatever party is in power to cook the books of the stats to make it look like hey, we’ve done a great job when maybe we haven’t.”

“Kids today use marijuana less than their parents did. Maybe. Maybe not but it doesn’t mention anything about other substances. Alcohol. I know amphetamines....”

Fathers of Teenagers, Richmond, VA

“Where did they get the statistics from?”

“That’s what I’d like to know, because it’s not my neighborhood.”

“Not the kids I know. Usually they are working to help themselves be able to buy one of those things.”

“Video games. But I can’t name a kid who works to help his actual family situation.”

“Me neither.”

Mothers of Teenagers, Riverside, CA

Where, then, are Americans getting the views that fly in the face of reality? What accounts for a distortion so powerful that it “trumps” all incoming data or reconfigures it to fit within the negative stereotypes?

B. The Pictures in our Heads: Images of Youth in the Media

“Television is a cultural storyteller,” says Katharine Heintz-Knowles, in explaining the importance of entertainment programming in shaping the attitudes and beliefs of viewers. Its dual role, she asserts, is as both a reflection of currently held belief systems and an influence on newly forming belief systems. “Even when viewers recognize that the content they are viewing is fictional, its messages and images gradually shape expectations and beliefs about the real world.”

To identify the stories we are being told about teenagers today through entertainment television, Heintz-Knowles examined one episode of each prime-time entertainment series aired during Fall 1999 between September 20 and November 21 on the six broadcast networks (ABC, CBS, NBC, Fox, WB, UPN). Those with youth characters (defined as between the ages of 13 and 21) were analyzed according to a set of codes which sought to measure youth activity and concern on TV against real world data. In brief, this study shows adolescent characters on television are not connected to a wider community, including even their own family. TV teens are seen as independent and isolated, living in an adolescent world whose problems are mainly social in nature. They do not require anyone’s help beyond their small immediate peer group, and in fact their parents are often portrayed as ineffective or as causing problems. This FrameWorks report concludes that TV reinforces the notion of today’s teens as self-absorbed and interested only in trivial matters. Key findings from Heintz-Knowles’ report are as follows:

- TV youth are most often shown dealing with problems relating to romantic relationships, friendships/popularity, and family issues. In the sample, there was not a single instance of a youth character involved in a conflict or problem that was societal in nature (homelessness, poverty, environmental concerns).
- In programs with a primarily youth cast, adolescents are often shown as capable of solving their own problems without adult help.
- In programs with a primarily adult cast, youth characters often act as catalysts creating problems adults must fix.
- TV parents are most often shown as absent or ineffective, although some programs feature supportive and effective parent characters. Many youth characters exist in a world void of parental involvement. In some instances, parents are identified as the root of youth characters’ problems. In other cases, while they may not be the cause of their children’s problems, they are shown as ineffective or uninvolved in their children’s

lives.

- The most common activity identified for youth characters is socializing - at school and elsewhere. They were twice as likely to be shown socializing at school than engaging in academic work there. Twelve percent of youth characters were shown to participate in some form of school-oriented extracurricular activities.
- The second most common activity was “hanging out,” defined as socializing behavior off school grounds. Just under ten percent of youth characters were shown doing chores at home or working at low wage employment.
- When discussing youth, adult characters most often use terminology that sets adolescents apart as young and childlike.

Among Heintz-Knowles’ conclusions is the speculation that current television programming “reinforces a common stereotype of teens as self-absorbed.” And, “while the portrayal of youth as self-reliant sends an empowering message to youth viewers, it can also convey a sense that youth do not need connections to their families or the larger community.” Finally, “youth are talked about in terms that set them apart from adults.

In their parallel analysis of television news, the Center for Media and Public Affairs found, overall, a paucity of news reporting about youth; only one out of every 12 stories on local newscasts, and only one out of every 25 stories on network news dealt with young people. These stories were “overwhelmingly episodic in nature, focusing on particular events and discrete occurrences, without providing any thematic context or otherwise linking them to broader trends or issues.” Indeed, only 7% of the local coverage was deemed thematic. The three most frequently reported topics of youth news on the local stations were crime victimization, accidents involving young people and violent juvenile crime, accounting for nearly half (46%) of all coverage of youth. Five other frequently reported topics were also negative: property crimes committed by juveniles, domestic violence or sexual abuse, alcohol abuse, individual health problems, and other at-risk behaviors. “Together, these eight topics, which all emphasize the dangers and negative outcome associated with youth, accounted for nearly 60 percent of all discussions” of youth, concludes this study.

An analysis of the visual backdrop to news reports about youth found the local news emphasized school settings. The criminal justice system accounted for one out of every four visual backdrops in local news. “When not shown in school, youths were most likely to be seen as part of community activities or in a crime-related or other socially dysfunctional setting. A mere two percent of (young people) were portrayed in the home, while just one percent were shown in a work setting.”

To chart the implications for policy solutions, we asked the Center for Media and Public Affairs to count the instances in which a reporter or source specifically voices some concern about the risks or dangers that are faced by young people. The 242 soundbites that resulted were concentrated in two areas: violence (33%) and other at-risk behaviors (31%), such as drug and alcohol use and dangerous driving. “Only about one in three expressions of concern were accompanied by any discussion of the locus of responsibility for solving whatever problem was indicated. And, of these assignments, parents and youth themselves accounted for 37% of the responsible agents, followed by schools (30%) and government (26%).

Our study sample was limited to television, leaving us open to criticism that more influential publics may be more reliant on newspapers for their information and, therefore, exposed to more thematic and policy-oriented coverage of adolescents. The work of other researchers would refute this hypothesis. Recently, the Berkeley Media Studies Group studied three California newspapers over the course of a year to determine what kind of attention was being paid to young people with what probable policy consequences. They found that “two topics dominate youth coverage: education and violence,” and “no other topic receives even a third as much attention. Education received 26% of the coverage. Violence stories comprised 25% of all youth coverage. Thus, these print media show violence as a factor in young people’s lives as often as schools. As these researchers point out, “only 3 young people in 100 perpetrate or become victims of serious violence in a given year” and “treating violence and education nearly equally exaggerates the frequency of violence.” Finally, “in the yearlong sample, about half the youth stories focus on a problem; many fewer describe a solution.” The most often cited solution is greater law enforcement. The study concludes that “the relative absence of solution frames reinforces the notion that violence is inevitable.”

There are a number of older content analyses that support and extend these conclusions. Content analyses of the depictions of youth by the media have consistently revealed a bias toward negative coverage in which youth are most likely to be featured in the context of crime stories (Kunkel, 1994; Berkeley Media Studies Group, 1995, 1997; Woodruff 1998; Dorfman and Woodruff, 1998; Berkeley Media Studies Group, 2000).

During the month of November 1993, Dale Kunkel examined coverage of children’s issues in five major newspapers (Atlanta Constitution, Chicago Tribune, Houston Chronicle, Los Angeles Times, New York Times) as well as nightly newscasts on three major TV networks (ABC, CBS, NBC). He found (Kunkel, 1994) that coverage of violence accounted for nearly half (48%) of all TV coverage of children, with only slightly less (40%) in the newspapers. By contrast, the issue of children’s health accounted for only 11% of the stories in each media. Only one in three stories addressed any public policy concerns. Kunkel concluded that this imbalance “seems to skew the information the press provides to the public, which in turn diminish the public’s perception of the relative importance of other child-related concerns”(www.childrennow.org, online version).

In a study of “Frames on Children and Youth in US Newspapers” (1995), the Berkeley Media Studies Group studied four major papers during one week and concluded that when children appear in the news, it is most often as victims of violence and crime (p. 4). Moreover, “virtually every time youth or teenagers were used as examples...it was in a negative context...The phrases reflect our stereotypic icons of youth: ‘teenage mothers,’ ‘student athletes on drugs,’ ‘teenagers too embarrassed to ask about sex,’ high school graduates who know ‘less than nothing about computers,’ and ‘troubled teen-agers.’ Writers assert that ‘much violent crime is impulsive, committed by young people,’ and ‘liquor is quicker for youthful consumers’.”

In a 1997 update to their original content analysis, focused on children’s health in three months’ coverage from both national and regional newspapers and National Public Radio, the Berkeley Media Studies Group (p. 6) found that “younger children appear to be far more newsworthy than teens.” Most coverage of children’s health problems presented no solutions at all, and when an approach was discussed, it was most often “in the form of information to parents about what they could do to protect their children.” Children or youth themselves were quoted in only 8% of the pieces, and only one piece quoted a young person talking about a positive program. In reviewing the frames of presentation, BMSG concluded that “parental responsibility is repeatedly stressed, while the public health approach to children’s health and safety appears in a few rare but significant pieces.” In other words, the vast majority of the news coverage of youth is “episodic,” and tends to attribute responsibility to parents and the youth themselves, rather than to institutions or policies.

In a statewide study of youth and race on local TV news, based on 26 California stations (Woodruff, 1998: 43), one analyst found that “violence appears to be particularly newsworthy when it involves children or youth” and more than two-thirds of violence stories did involve youth. Woodruff also found the reverse to be true; “when youth appeared on the news, it was most often as the victim or perpetrator of violence.” Fifty-three percent of all youth stories involved violence. Finally, in order for youth to be portrayed positively, they had to “perform an extraordinary feat” such as flying solo across the country or winning a national beauty contest. Woodruff concludes, “despite the fact that most young people are not violent, local television news draws a direct link between youth and violence, and this likely contributes to cementing negative views in the minds of viewers...(S)stories about productive, nonviolent youth are the exception rather than the rule.”

Additionally, this study of California local TV coverage uncovered important differences in the roles accorded youth of color compared to white youth. More white youth were given opportunities to speak in local news stories. In every violence-related role where youth did speak -- either as a victim, a witness of violence, a criminal or suspect -- youth of color were heard in these roles in higher proportions than their white counterparts. A higher percentage of white youth spoke in the role of victim of unintentional injury. There were also marked differences in the circumstances in which white youth and youth of color were used for "person on the street" interviews, with youth of color being far more likely to be shown in situations related to crime, drug dealing and gangs.

C. Kill the Camera: Public Perceptions of Media's Role

Participants in the spring 2000 focus groups understand that media influences their perceptions of teens. They understand that news is skewed toward the teens "that shot somebody," and that the "bad teens are the ones that make the headlines". They also understand that the opposite is true: good news does not make it on the news. "They (media) don't do these reports on teens that are in poetry contests and win or working in the soup kitchens -- a list of kids that made the honor roll. You don't hear that...So when you think of a teenager, you are automatically going to associate with the bad rap that they have gotten just by a few." And, as one mother of a teen put it, "When you expect and assume that kids are doing everything that they are writing about, what chance do they have? You assume they are already doing it" (Bostrom: 14).

These opinions are stunning in their articulation of the way that media drives reasoning and risk assessment. Yet, while adults know they are "under the influence," they nevertheless continue to reason, to assess risk and to judge policy options on the basis of this distorted media.

The most powerful example of this occurred in focus group participants' reactions to the news story described earlier in this report which put forward positive trend statistics about teens and acknowledged changes in community behavior that accounted for these changes. As the quotations attest, these adults did not believe the statistics, or found technical manipulations in the data, or redefined the statistics as negative. Few could explain why positive trends might exist among today's teens. As Bostrom's report demonstrates, "people reacted to the positive statistics with disbelief and skepticism. They were so focused on trying to fit the statistics into their knowledge of the world that they largely ignored the suggested solution of nurturing communities" (Bostrom: 17).

How does this negative assessment square with adults' own observations of the youth around them? Often uncomfortably. A father of younger children spoke up in one focus group about teens in his neighborhood: "I have some extremely intelligent, articulate, young -- 12 to 16 year olds. Surprisingly, actually, to speak with such perfect English, respectful. Sometimes it shocks me" (Bostrom: 12). When presented with statistics about volunteers, while most participants refused to believe the data, one woman acknowledged that she lacked the information required to make a judgment: "Personally, I wouldn't know because I haven't volunteered...I see them (teens) at church because I go and I'll see them in the mall because I go. But perhaps if I sent and served at a soup kitchen, I might see it jack full of teenagers. Because my butt is at home eating my soup in front of the TV, I don't see them" (Bostrom:17).

As Aubrun and Grady assert, most Americans "tend to resolve this contradiction by judging their own experience to be exceptional, rather than by challenging the media frames. This reflects a broader pattern of Americans' response to the contradiction between what they know at first hand and what media and public discourse tells them" (Aubrun-Grady, February 2000: 2). "The position of the media has the effect of making their own experience and attitudes seem unusual or even aberrant. They tend to discount what does not fit the media frame as exceptional, rather than questioning or challenging the frame" (Aubrun-Grady, February 2000: 3).

In fact, their interviews show that "the same people who are able to articulate this stereotype, and who attribute it to their neighbors, often hold a much more benign view themselves. In fact, they ver often feel more sympathy than resentment toward teenagers" (Aubrun-Grady, February 2000:3).

Aubrun and Grady's interviews demonstrate as well that most adults "are aware (at times) that this negative model is

a negative stereotype rather than an accurate representation of the teens that they know: “You know that there’ve got to be hundreds of thousands of them that are going to college and that have made national honor society or...who are trying to do the right things. But you hardly ever hear about them” (Aubrun-Grady, February 2000:3).

Personal experience does play a strong role in resisting these stereotypes, however, and Aubrun Grady found that “parents of teenagers or those who interact regularly with teenagers are much less susceptible to the media portrayals of teens. These people either reject media accounts outright or concede that they must be true in some abstract sense (or TV wouldn’t be saying so), but not in any practical sense” (Aubrun-Grady, February 2000:6). “The more people’s views are informed by ‘face time’ and the less by the media, the more likely they are to share...the empathic view of teenagers” (Aubrun-Grady, February 2000:20). In an increasingly age-segregated society, however, the prospects are fewer and fewer for adults to countermand media stereotypes of teen monsters and heroes with abundant first-hand knowledge of normal teens, going about the everyday business of chores and school, athletics, arts and volunteering.

In sum, the absence of an experiential base for some adults, and the power of media images to trump personal experience for others leaves most adults with few alternatives to the images provided by their daily feed of news and entertainment. And while they may understand this to be the case, and resent the media for it, they nevertheless will find their reasoning directed by these images.

D. Framed: Deconstructing Elements of the Negative Stereotype

In order to fashion a strategy to “reframe” youth for public support, we need to understand more precisely what aspects of youth culture and behavior are especially important to adults. There are three major problems in adult perceptions of youth that must be addressed:

- (1) their lack of a relationship to work and the values it is presumed to confer;
- (2) the central and exclusive role accorded parents, often with an emphasis on safeguarding youth as effective and appropriate parenting; and, relatedly
- (3) the relatively weak role accorded community and government in supporting youth and families.

Bostrom speculates that, at the core of adult anxiety is the contradiction between “having to grow up too fast to the negative realities without having to shoulder the positive, character building responsibilities” (Bostrom: 2). This combination of fear and concern over the way our world has changed turns teens into the canaries in the mine shafts, first to experience the worst of technology, consumerism, violence, drugs and a culture out of control. As Aubrun and Grady note, “people’s negative attitudes toward teens often seem to reflect anxieties about the direction that American society is taking” (Aubrun-Grady, February 2000:7). Teens become proxies for a whole series of changes — from moms in the workforce to videogames in the bedroom — that Americans do not feel to be improvements in society. In this sense, discussions about “teens today” is as much “about” whether America is on the right or wrong track morally than it is about specific aspects of teen life.

While many adults say teens today are “growing up too fast,” they also believe that they are maturing more slowly. By this, they mean that it takes young people longer today “to develop adult competence and self-sufficiency now than it took their parents and grandparents” (Aubrun-Grady, February 2000:11). Adults believe that teens are coddled and spoiled, and that this experience is detrimental to their development of ideals and acceptance of responsibility:

“The average teenager has a real easy life...They just do what they damn well please, when they want to do it.”

“I think most teenagers probably have more things available to them than we ever did as we grew up, because most families are dual income families. I think because of that they have the opportunity to do a lot more than we ever did. And because of that I think they also take things for granted.”

“I had a lot of responsibilities. Both my mom and dad worked and so I had to do a lot of things.”

“I remember I had responsibilities, too. I was second of eight kids, so I would come home and help mom. Usually

she already had dinner started and stuff, but I had to do my things.”

(Bostrom:7-8)

Given that adults today are rarely exposed to youth performing chores, either at home or work, it is little wonder that the comparison between their own adolescence and that of today’s teens finds the latter sorely wanting, with important consequences. The values adults associate with maturity are, for the most part, values associated with the adult world of work: responsibility, discipline, teamwork, commitment, self-restraint, goal-orientation, etc. “Given the importance of work as a defining American cultural value, teens’ perceived distance from the work world also contributes to the view that they are irresponsible” (Aubrun-Grady, February 2000:12). A logical approach to countering this notion that youth today lack these values would be to demonstrate that youth are indeed working, and learning these values in the process. Indeed, data provided by James Youniss shows “the percentage of youth who work part-time has remained constant or risen a bit 1970-today.” Yet, when focus group participants were confronted with these statistics, they either denied the data or found a way to convert the motivation for working to selfishness and consumerism:

“Not the kids I know. Usually they are working to help themselves be able to buy one of those things.”

“Car insurance.”

“Clothes.”

“Video games. But I can’t name a kid who works to help his actual family situation.”

Mothers of Teens, Riverside

It is ironic that evidence of workforce participation is unable to break through the media frame of irresponsible youth and yet this should not deter us from pursuing other ways to get across the fact that kids do learn these essential positive values from their daily experiences. It is no accident that the recent White House Conference on Teenagers was subtitled “Working to Help Families Raise Responsible Teenagers,” with both core words — work and responsibility — built into the discussion.

The second major issue that requires addressing is that of the parent’s appropriate role in teen development. Aubrun-Grady found “the near-absence of a cultural model that emphasizes teens’ need for mentoring from adults outside the nuclear family...American models...often fail to acknowledge this nearly-universal aspect of human development, in effect reinforcing the widespread idea that the nuclear family bears sole responsibility for guiding the development of youths” (Aubrun-Grady, February 2000:2).

In many of the focus group discussions, adults weighed policy options with specific reference to whether they supplanted parents, leading Bostrom to conclude that many adults are “highly sensitive to what they viewed as any infringement on parent’s rights, including actions by schools.” Parental involvement is often the panacea for all that troubles teens. Indeed, this sense of ownership is so strong that one mother of a teen actually bemoaned the fact that teens might go to other family members for advice, rather than their parents (Bostrom:16). In an exercise that involved discussing the impact of declining numbers of counselors in schools, adults were wary of the notion that counselors might have a role beyond the academic, and would be taking over the role of teaching values that they so firmly believe belongs to them.

In reviewing the photos of teens and commenting on their life prospects, focus group participants often tried to discern the parents behind the teen. Neatness and good grooming demonstrated good parenting — “I think he comes from a good family,” or “I think she has a parent or parents very involved in her life,” (Bostrom:11). Similarly, athletic and volunteer participation implied the guiding hand of an involved parent (see below), who was implied to be present simply because someone had to drive to and from these activities. In sum, as one interviewee expressed this near-universal opinion, “I think everything starts at home” (Aubrun-Grady, 2000:13).

As Bostrom (2) concludes, “adults see no other actor in the equation other than parents and teens, making it particularly difficult to shift people from an assumption of parental responsibility to societal responsibility.” Despite the many cues in the focus groups to look to social solutions, “the only role for communities that most see is

organizing youth activities,” says Bostrom (5). “Because of their strong sense of parental responsibility and their cynicism about politics, focus group participants see few social solutions other than teen centers and a vague sense of community support.”

This leads to the third important issue for youth advocates: trying to find a role for society that does not threaten the parent-child relationship.

While adults may not see a role for government writ large, they nevertheless do look to communities to “provide role models” and mentors, and they want to see teens included in the community, including civic activities (Bostrom:6).

And, as Aubrun-Grady report, adults believe that teens would benefit from being more integrated into the community (17). By exposing young people to older adults, people believe that teens will learn more traditional values like respect and responsibility, and be less subject to peers whom they largely see as negative.

It is instructive and sobering to note that focus group participants faced with a specific call to action that invited them to support other parents who were trying to keep their town from being overrun by bars and liquor advertising did feel compelled to respond. Rather than acting together as a political force, they chose more individualist remedies that reinforced their roles as parents, i.e. educating their kids about alcohol and advertising.

IV. Reframing for Public Support

There are a number of lessons that emerge from these findings that can be tested by youth advocates. At the same time, the FrameWorks Institute will be continuing its work on reframing youth in a series of subsequent research efforts that include media effects tests of these very reframing suggestions to determine exactly what impact they have on policy preferences. While the following should be viewed as suggestions, they are the best research-based suggestions we can offer at this point.

1. Don't use the word “teenager.”

As Bostrom concluded, “the associations are so powerful that ‘teenager’ may be an unsalvageable word for advocates hoping to create a positive or sympathetic view of 13 - 19 year olds.

The terms “youth” or “adolescent” are preferable. Better still is the term “adolescence,” which underscores the fact that kids are in process, passing through a stage, on the way to adulthood. While “adolescence” is a shared experience, and one that can invite empathy from adults, “teenager” is the other, and reinforces assessments of difference.

Moreover, advocates should be proactive in talking about adolescence as a stage we all go through with its common challenges of learning responsibility, commitment, and teamwork.

Aubrun-Grady suggested reminding adults what it was like to be a teenager, the focus groups found that, while this did result in more positive assessments of today's youth (Bostrom:8) but it had negative consequences as well. Comparisons between the world in which today's adults grew up and the one in which they see teens growing up today fuel their fear and make them even more mindful of the need to protect their children. While one might have speculated that it would drive adults to consider more environmental influences on teens, and to push adults into a more societal mindset, we did not see much evidence of this happening. So powerful is the notion of community as external threat, that this comparison incites protection to the exclusion of other considerations. At the same time, this assessment of their own youth compared to today's teens only emphasizes to them the perceived responsibilities they shouldered compared to the spoiled, self-absorption of youth today.

Again, we suggest concentrating on adolescence as a shared stage in the transition to adulthood. “Remind people that teenagers are still in a developmental stage, rather than ...than some special, bad category of person,” say Aubrun-Grady (April 4,2000:10). “What they are today is not what they will be tomorrow.”

Experts should address the challenges of adolescence and attempt to explain the need for youth to be accepted in and

by the community, to be given roles of responsibility, and to be mentored. This advice should be given not as parental advice solely but as advice to the community in how to guide young people toward healthy development, community leadership and citizenship. While many people understand basic tenets of young child development (or think they do), few talk about adolescent development with any confidence. This is an opportunity for experts to shape a vision of healthy youth development that connects to adults' longing for greater responsibility and deeper values among today's youth.

2. Show youth involved in sports, volunteer, and other extra-curricular activities like performance arts.

Assessments of youth shown involved in these activities were universally positive. "When I see a girl in sports, I immediately think she has a chance to succeed in life," explained a father of a teen (Bostrom:13). Reacting to a picture of a young boy volunteering at what appeared to be a soup kitchen, one mother commented, "He is going to be an asset to his community just because he is already at a young age involved in community."

Recognizing that it is going to take a critical mass of positive images to reverse the negative stereotypes, and that these new images will need to be carefully chosen so as not to directly confront the reigning frame, we urge advocates to be aggressive in spotlighting adolescents involved in these kinds of activities. Showcase them on websites, involve them in news conferences, and put them before civic bodies.

When composing photos meant to illustrate "children's issues," expand the age base to include adolescents by using teens in sports dress or clearly identified in volunteer affiliations.

3. Explain what youth are doing in terms that derive from the values associated with work: responsibility, teamwork, commitment, self-restraint, goal-orientation, learning leadership, etc.

One of the most compelling suggestions from Aubrun-Grady is that we emphasize "teens as learners" (April 4, 2000:10). "One aspect of teens that bears constant reinforcing is that they are involved in a learning process. Frames that emphasize this aspect of adolescence strike a positive chord of self-improvement, and suggest that the job of people around teens is to be good 'teachers'."

What they are learning must be made explicit again and again. Adolescents on the field are learning to strive and to struggle against forces that would pull them in the wrong direction. We can help them learn how to stay on track.

Another suggestion is that "teens are searchers." This allows us to stress that they are looking for ways to contribute to their communities, to find their place, to make their mark, and to shape their world. They are idealistic, and it is important that the community find ways to use their idealism, not to shut them out and reinforce their cynicism. If teens are searchers, then we are all guides.

This is a major translation challenge: to connect the images that have the greatest potential for reframing youth in a positive light with the exact attributes that adults want to see them exhibit. Do not let the picture speak alone; interpret for your audience what is being learned on the playing field and on stage. Otherwise, people are likely to toggle back and forth between thinking this is "play," and not connected to the values of "work."

In advocating for work-specific programs, like summer jobs for youth, stress the values they will acquire and the importance of giving young people responsibility and mentors from whom to learn commitment, goals, and responsibility.

4. Use coaches and volunteer leaders to attest to the values and hard work of today's youth.

We need to sanction positive information about youth. One way to do that is to lodge the information in messengers whom the community trusts on these issues. Coaches and volunteer leaders not only fulfill this requirement but, to the degree that they are not acting in their role as parents (a parent of a teen on the team, for example), "they can help to underscore community responsibility rather than reverting to parental responsibility" (Bostrom, May

2000:2).

Moreover, because coaches and volunteer leaders see hundreds of kids, they can make group pronouncements with some authority, “The kids I see coming through these programs are on track for achievement, focused, responsible, and learning what it means to work as a team, as a member of society.” This kind of statement -- describing many kids, not merely the exceptional -- helps balance the equation for the public.

Special technical assistance and training should be given to coaches and volunteer leaders so that they can comfortably make these assessments, and so that they are press-ready for questions. Without this kind of training, they are likely to revert to individualized, human interest accounts that will only reinforce the notion that it is one good teen in a hundred that is performing well.

5. Use older Americans to attest to the value and values of today’s youth.

When a book about today’s seniors entitled “The Greatest Generation” is high on the bestseller list and older Americans are courted on both sides of the political aisle as pivotal to the presidential election’s outcomes, their pronouncements on just about anything are newsworthy.

But older Americans are important to reframing youth in a very singular sense: they convey values. Their endorsement of youth automatically contests the frame of “valueless youth.”

Enlisting older Americans willing to make these pronouncements is often not easy. As we saw in an earlier set of focus groups, the lone senior citizen who asserted that “most kids are OK” was shouted down by her peers. Interestingly, most of these seniors (located outside Phoenix, AZ) had little direct contact with youth, including their own grandchildren. They were almost solely reliant on the media to tell them how youth were faring in their community, and in the country. Direct contact (see below) that leads to positive assessments and a willingness to publicly witness for youth is a prerequisite to this strategy.

But it is not enough. Too often, public interest groups enlist seniors and then instruct them to talk about the importance of youth to their social security. The problem with this teens-as-assets model, as Aubrun-Grady point out (April 4,2000:10), is “that its natural implication is that teens are something to be exploited. This conflicts with the idea that teens are developing and in need of further positive investment from adults, such as mentoring.” Moreover, when teens don’t “perform,” it allows us to liquidate our portfolio.

Using seniors wisely means inviting them to bear witness to the values that they see youth exhibiting in their places of worship, volunteer activities, and in the community. It means engaging them in sanctioning the good talk about today’s youth, and connecting what they see to their own generation’s commitment, sacrifice and teamwork. It means sending a message that today’s youth are not “different” from those of previous generations, a very important point to make! Their call to action, as Aubrun-Grady suggest (april 4,20000:10) can be that elders need to “weigh in” on the side of youth, to see that they are not pulled in the wrong direction. “We have the power to help youth stay on track for achievement,” is a great message coming from a senior. Engaged in this way, seniors can become a very powerful force for reframing youth for the general public.

6. Avoid the “hero youth” model which exceptionalizes the example and casts suspicion on the less accomplished majority.

Past content analysis suggests that teens are most likely to appear in news as “monsters or heroes,” or as victims or perpetrators. Indeed, it is the “exceptional” teen that makes the news in the first place.

There are two problems with using this “human interest” approach to reframe public attitudes about youth. First, as the research of Shanto Iyengar suggests (see *Is Anyone Responsible?*, University of Chicago Press, 1991), the public cannot connect vivid case studies to broader social solutions. The personalization of social issues results not in greater political salience but in a focus on the individual travails of unfortunate and isolate people. Second, as the research of Franklin D. Gilliam, Jr. has demonstrated, the presentation of heroic deeds by young people or by

African Americans does not effectively reverse people's negative stereotypes associated with these groups. To the contrary, Gilliam shows that people "reframe" the hero to correspond to their stereotype (white) and that they feel worse about the group in general, when presented with the triumphant individual. Gilliam concludes that exceptions often serve to reinforce the notion that the group can and should do more to succeed, setting up what has been termed "new racist" reasoning with respect to the African American experiment (see Gilliam, Franklin D., Jr., "The Hero Deputy Experiment: The Role of Valence in Local Television Crime News Coverage," Paper presented at the annual meetings of the Western Political Science Association, Seattle, Washington, March 24 - 27, 1999).

The goal of reframing youth cannot be to exceptionalize them one at a time, to show one or two good kids and to expect the public to make the connection. Nor does the answer lie in presenting people with the facts about teens in America today; as our experiment with the positive news trends strongly suggests, those facts will be rejected. The answer has to be to begin to chip away at the underlying values that lead adults to reason falsely about youth today and to do this by showing groups of kids, by putting forward trusted messengers speaking on behalf of kids, and by connecting up youth group activities to those very values that make youth more like adults and less like aliens.

Avoid the irresistible youth who has organized the entire city's park clean-up and, instead, focus on the group activity: ordinary kids getting together to solve a problem, working together, while doing chores and homework. Try to instill the idea that there are thousands of kids like these in every city and state.

7. Show youth in situations in which their work and volunteer support is altruistic and solves a social problem.

Earlier focus groups we conducted on children's issues found a public hungry for solutions to help kids (see Bales, ed. *Effective Language for Communicating Children's Issues*, Coalition for America's Children with the Benton Foundation, May 1999). To the extent possible, youth should be shown involved in solving community problems, especially in consort with people of other age groups. At the same time, it is important to be careful in this kind of framing so as not to suggest that the youth should solve their own problems, a common adult frame that merely passes the responsibility on to the victim. By showing youth involved in environmental issues, with elderly people, with younger children, the idea of youth "learning to be adults" will be conveyed, and their "difference" from previous generations undermined. We need to move youth from the problem side of the equation to the problem-solver side.

8. Given the invisibility of normal youth on TV news and entertainment, work with local faith and nonprofit groups to include the voices and profiles of youth in as many ways as possible and to expose as many adults as possible to normal, un-newsworthy adolescents; make the point that this is the norm, not the exception. Invite youth in, and draw explicit attention to the fact that these are the norm, not the exception that the media would have us believe.

As one focus group participant said, "Include teens. Not just in sports, but in civic activities."

The more direct contact adults have with youth who are not their own, the better. Previous focus groups (Bales, 1999) found the only venue for this kind of outreach to be adults' places of worship or community centers and clubs.

Take this report to religious leaders and invite them to help solve the problem of Americans' distorted image of today's youth by promoting more age-integrated activities — mentoring, group outings, volunteer days, etc. Do the same with business, professional and civic clubs; invite them into the solution and suggest ways to foster more understanding of today's youth on an ongoing basis.

Do not allow this activity to be portrayed as only involving "good" youth or the "cream of the crop," but rather about educating communities about the everyday lives of ordinary young people in their community. Avoid awards programs and other "exceptional" activities, and substitute the idea of a community assessment of how well we are doing to nurture youth and keep them on track for achievement.

9. Train youth advocates to talk about today's youth as good kids, on track for achievement, learning to be leaders, etc. and to create social acceptance for this observation.

There are many programs in place that bring youth before adults — essay contests, awards programs, etc. It is

important that speech and debate coaches, teachers and other mentors enlist young people in becoming advocates for others. They can do this by talking about the kids they know, the overall trends in their schools, and by de-emphasizing their specialness. They can do this by talking about how they strived to succeed, how hard the competition was, and how many kids deserve credit for hard work. Media literacy programs that help young people understand how they are being portrayed in the media can raise their awareness and energize their activism.

For parents and other adults, it is important that we make it OK to talk about teens as good people. We need to inform our social networks that they should question the media stereotypes more and their own eyes less. We need to stand up for kids in conversations with other adults, to help them sanction their own positive impressions.

10. Challenge your local news media to do a better job of describing the world of adolescence today — including research from experts in adolescence, interviews with coaches, teachers, volunteer supervisors, employers, and older Americans who come in regular contact with kids, and interviews with normal kids.

Aubrun-Grady suggest that we refer to the “silent majority of teens,” who are doing their chores, doing well in school, and not doing drugs (April 4, 2000:10). The “news value” is in revealing the stereotype as just that, and this model invites the investigative reporter into the story.

Brainstorm a series of stories that begin to portray the normal lives of everyday kids — the kids “behind the headlines.” If you have a local newspaper or station interested in civic journalism, meet with editors and publishers to discuss how local media can take on this problem of reframing youth for public support. Provide lists of local experts on youth; and train these experts in advance to talk about teens in ways that open up the conversation to programs and policies, not merely to parent involvement.

Teens are hot just now — with cover stories in *Newsweek* and *U.S. News & World Report*. The trick for advocates is to come up with ideas for series that get context into the news coverage — group stories, trend reports, examples of kids doing civic and team work.

Remember, as Richard Rodriguez has said, “The stories invent us.” Make sure the story you are telling about youth today is one the public can hear, and one that promotes a discussion of how communities can help kids weather the transition from adolescence to adulthood.

Susan Nall Bales
FrameWorks Institute
May 12, 2000

Related Research

Aubrun, Axel and Joseph Grady (April 4, 2000). Reframing Youth: Models Metaphors, Messages. In S. Bales (ed.), *Reframing Youth Issues*. Washington, D.C.: Working Papers, FrameWorks Institute and Center for Communications and Community, UCLA.

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