



Framing and Reframing Child Nutrition

A FrameWorks Research Report

Diane Benjamin and Kate Vaughan, FrameWorks Institute
for the W. K. Kellogg Foundation

August 2008

Copyright © 2008 – Frameworks Institute

Introduction

In 2004, Congress passed the Child Nutrition and WIC Reauthorization Act, reauthorizing, restructuring and expanding many child nutrition programs and policies important to child health and wellness. The following report is an analysis of frames used by advocates during the time of the reauthorization (January-December 2004) and to communicate about child hunger and nutrition programs in subsequent years. These materials are analyzed in light of FrameWorks' research and communications recommendations about a number of related public issues, including early childhood development, food systems, food and fitness, race, and the role of government. Materials by over 30 national, state and local organizations were examined to gather information for this report. Organizations were chosen for review by searching the internet for terms "Child Nutrition Reauthorization Act," "Child Nutrition Reauthorization 2004," "Child Nutrition and WIC Reauthorization Act" and "child hunger." Additional websites and materials were found through links to sites found with the original search terms. (See appendix I for a list of these organizations.)

This report is distinct from, but complemented by, FrameWorks' examination of frames in the news media, as summarized in "Through A Glass Narrowly: Media Coverage of the Child Nutrition Act and Related Issues - A FrameWorks Research Report," August 2008, and "A Catalog of Potential Reframes for Child Nutrition." All three reports are supported by the W. K. Kellogg Foundation.

Several dominant themes and communications practices emerge repeatedly from this analysis and are addressed in this report. These include:

1. Emphasizing individual behavior and choices
2. Frequent use of the terms "food insecurity" or "food security"
3. Portraying government as incompetent and programs as a "safety net"
4. Linking childhood hunger and obesity
5. Using unframed data
6. Using an overly divisive tone

These frame habits are not effective in advancing systemic reforms or improvements to America's food system and, in these pages, we explain why with reference to FrameWorks' body of research. We include both observations of advocates' materials and recommendations for how to improve their effectiveness.

1. Emphasizing individual behavior and choices

FrameWorks has found that Americans have a strong tendency to focus on individual character, behavior and choices as the cause of many social problems from health care access to poverty. In the case of children, the responsibility is assigned to their parents. This tendency hides roles for government, community non-profits, schools, foundations and other civic institutions in creating solutions. Also obscured by this approach are the economic and social forces that limit or constrain individual choice and an overall sense of civic engagement.

FrameWorks' research on how Americans think about race and poverty highlights this problem vividly. The research showed that people generally tend to think of success and failure in individualistic terms—success and failure is largely explained by personal action or inaction. Racial inequality is especially prone to being viewed through this frame (e.g. minorities, especially blacks, struggle to achieve in American society because of perceived deficiencies of values and character). Similarly, discussions of poverty often focus on bad choices that individuals made in dropping out of school, becoming a young parent, etc. This way of thinking makes it difficult for people to see an issue like hunger as a public problem instead of one of individual responsibility.

Observations

Individual behavior and responsibility are often inadvertently reinforced in advocates' materials, as highlighted in the examples below. When the key factor causing childhood hunger is portrayed as un-enrolled or non-participating families, or the emphasis is placed on the *choices* that families must make, it will be difficult for the public to understand the issue as anything other than a failure by the family to make better choices.

*All of these programs are key threads in our nation's safety net to help keep children from going hungry. But so many children and families are still falling through the cracks. **If all eligible families knew about and participated in all available food programs**, they could have more money left over each month to pay for critical things like rent, utilities, clothing, and other essentials.*

(Children's Defense Fund Child Watch Column, Federal Food Programs: Spreading the Word)

*Every day in the United States, **many families have to make difficult choices** when it comes to the basic necessities of food, shelter, healthcare, and childcare.*

All too often, sacrifices have to be made that not only affect the health and development of families but also take a toll on their quality of life. (America's Second Harvest Statistics on Low Income Families)

***Low-income families faced with high home heating costs are often forced to choose between heating or eating.** Not being able to do both simultaneously threatens children's health. (C-SNAP, Protecting Children from Hunger and Food Insecurity in 2005-2006)*

*Family poverty is the most universal cause of childhood hunger. **Families living in poverty are constantly forced to trade one necessity for another:** cupboards filled with healthy foods for rent, utilities, transportation and healthcare. Their neighborhood stores aren't stocked with fresh foods at affordable prices. And many families have limited knowledge of the food and nutrition programs available to them. (Share Our Strength, *Share Our Strength's Plan to End Childhood Hunger in America*)*

This focus on individual responsibility is additionally reinforced around the issue of food by a dominant Consumer frame. To the degree that food is a commodity and people identify themselves as consumers, the food system and its role in their daily lives is largely invisible beyond the shopping decisions made at the grocery store. In addition, when food is viewed solely as a consumer good, it logically leads to the belief that not everyone has access to a given consumer good because they haven't earned enough to afford it, leading back to issues of effort and choice. In other words, if you really want to buy something, you do what it takes (saving, working hard) to buy it. And, by the logic of the Consumer Stance, if you don't have a particular good, it's either because it wasn't a priority for you or it was a luxury beyond your means. Public thinking about food is particularly prone to consumerist thinking.

Recommendations

FrameWorks recommends that advocates ground all communications in commonly held values that actually serve to advance considerations of the public good, as opposed to unproductive frames of charity, crisis and individual responsibility that do not advance policy-thinking. By emphasizing the values of Ingenuity and Practical Problem Solving, for example, rather than focusing on the dilemmas faced by individual families, FrameWorks' research demonstrates that advocates can move people to: endorse program and policy-oriented solutions, resist blaming the victims, and reduce zero-sum thinking.

Here's an example of how the value of Ingenuity can set up a different kind of conversation about school meal programs:

Our country was built on our ability to produce common-sense solutions to everyday issues. In this era of rising costs of fuel and food, these solutions continue to help keep our communities healthy and strong today. The National School Lunch and Breakfast programs were created to ensure that all children have access to healthy meals. Today, these essential programs continue to enhance the health of school children and help to grow tomorrow's citizens.

A few advocacy materials reviewed by FrameWorks reflect an underused value which has proven effective in communicating about children's issues in many arenas. The value of Future (closely tied to Prosperity) also merits further investigation as a strong value in advocating for children's nutrition programs.

*A strong Child Nutrition **Program is critical to the health of our nation** and we support your efforts to promote such a program. (American Dietetic Association letter to chairs of the Senate Agriculture Committee May 18, 2004)*

*The problem of childhood hunger is not simply a moral issue. Scientific evidence suggests that **hungry children are less likely to become productive citizens**. A child who is unequipped to learn because of hunger and poverty is more likely to be poor as an adult. As such, the existence of childhood hunger in the United States **threatens future American prosperity**. (America's Second Harvest Child Hunger Facts)*

***Feeding our future** with 275,000 meals each summer. (Page title, Sodexo Foundation website)*

Such a reframing strategy highlights the public benefits of interventions (programs and policies) because it establishes the pre-requisite value of Interdependence. Worthiness and Charity frames do not achieve these outcomes, and in many cases exacerbate race and class-based thinking.

2. Frequent Use of the terms “food security or “food insecurity”

One frequent communications challenge is translating the concepts and terms that experts use into something that helps advance public understanding. It's easy to short-circuit this process, and assume that others share an understanding of how complex issues work. Without an adequate explanation, however, people default to their existing understanding of an issue. There are two concerns with the term “food insecurity,” which is used in some advocacy materials. The first concern is that it is insufficient to explain the condition to the public and does nothing to address their underlining dominant frames about the causes and solutions to the problem of childhood hunger and nutrition. Those who are “insecure” are those same individuals who did not make the right choices or exert sufficient effort to achieve. In this way, the renaming of the problem does not dislodge the overall narrative of individual responsibility. The second concern is that the term “security” brings to mind issues related to terrorism. It is likely that these associations will serve to diminish the salience of hunger, not elevate it. Put simply, once you remind people of the spectre of global terrorism, even important issues are deemed secondary to these threats.

Observations

In the materials that FrameWorks reviewed, there were many examples of the term “food insecurity.” (Definitions vary, but the USDA defines food security as, “the limited or uncertain availability of nutritionally adequate and safe foods or the limited or uncertain ability to acquire acceptable foods in socially acceptable ways.”)

*Millions of people throughout the United States live in a state of **food insecurity**, not knowing when or where they'll find their next meal. The numbers are shocking, and the statistics are often confusing. (MAZON, Domestic Hunger Facts)*

***Food insecurity** is a complex, multifaceted phenomenon that varies along a continuum of successive stages as it becomes more severe. A scaling tool developed by the USDA provides an important approach being used increasingly to assess food security and hunger among households. (America's Second Harvest, Food Insecurity and Hunger)*

*The government uses two main terms to describe the levels of hunger problems we typically face in the United States. **Food security** is a term used to describe what our nation should be seeking for all its people – assured access at all times to enough food for an active, healthy life, with no need for recourse to emergency food sources or other extraordinary coping behaviors to meet basic food needs. In a nation as affluent as ours this is a readily achievable goal. Food insecurity refers to the lack of access to enough food to fully meet basic needs at all times due to lack of financial resources. There are different levels of food insecurity. (FRAC, Hunger and Food Insecurity in the United States)*

Recommendations:

Throughout its work, FrameWorks develops *simplifying models* to introduce new, user-friendly conceptual pictures that guide and organize reasoning in more constructive ways. Using a simplifying model would help improve the public's understanding of the problem and subsequent support for policy solutions.

For example, the Simplifying Model of the Food and Fitness Environment is particularly useful in trying to direct people toward more systemic thinking about child health, food and nutrition:

Being healthy and fit in adulthood is largely determined by the communities that we live in as children. The decisions made in our neighborhoods and municipalities about whether and where to site a supermarket, create mass transit options or maintain a neighborhood park affect our children's development. Where children live, play and go to school, or their food and fitness environment, is one of the most important things determining whether they end up fit and healthy or not. When children do not have access to a healthy environment, they have worse health and a lower quality of life. When we improve the food and fitness environment, the health of the children who live there improves as well.

This simplifying model explains the cause of the problem, the mechanism of the problem, and the importance of addressing the problem. It helps people think structurally and systemically, and it directs people to think about collective solutions. This is the type of model that needs to be used when talking about childhood hunger and nutrition.

3. Ineffective Portrayals of Government

Social policy advocates have long suspected that even the best model program or policy solution falls on deaf civic ears because the locus of solution – government – is immediately suspect. Without careful reframing, this dominant frame of government incompetence can easily overwhelm messages about the success of government programs.

FrameWorks’ research on how Americans think about government also explored how people thought about the frame of “government as a safety net.” Government should not be in the handouts business, said the informants. When government is seen as doing things ‘for’ people, Americans tended to judge this as irresponsible and inappropriate, dampening private initiative. They see government as “safety net” as a last option for people who are down on their luck, not a viable and integral part of what a society should provide. When these programs are framed as a “safety net”, this risks marginalizing food programs as less important or foundational to the overall role of government than the many other ways that the government spends money.¹

Observations:

When advocates focus on the deficiencies of existing government programs as the primary contributor to the problem of hunger, this seriously undermines the message that government is capable of becoming a capable and efficient contributor to the solution.

*Not one of our national nutrition programs is reaching all of the people who are eligible for services. Perhaps the **most shocking example** of this gap between need and services is the Summer Food Program. **Administrative barriers prevent over 80 percent of the eligible children from getting a nutritious lunch during the summer.** (Bread for the World, *Child and Adult Nutrition*)*

*In testimony before the House Appropriations Committee, USDA Under Secretary Eric Boost estimated that 500,000- 600,000 children not currently participating but eligible for reduced price meals would take advantage of the nutritious school meal program if **the cost barrier were removed.** (School Nutrition Association Press Release, *Congress Passes Child Nutrition Legislation*)*

Advocates’ materials also frequently position government food programs as a “safety net”. It becomes a story of “taxpayers” supporting undeserving “others” with no clear depiction of the shared outcome or benefit.

*Taken together, the 15 Federal nutrition assistance programs- along with private and local efforts- **form a nationwide safety net** to support the efforts of families*

¹ The complete set of research and recommendations on “How to Talk About Government” is available on the FrameWorks website.

*and individuals to avoid hunger and obtain healthy, nutritious diets. The programs administered by the Food and Nutrition Service (FNS) touch the lives of one in five Americans over the course of a year and account for nearly one-half of USDA's budget. In fiscal year 2003, taxpayers invested about \$42 billion to support the FNS mission. (USDA Food and Nutrition Service, *The National Nutrition Safety Net: Tools for Community Food*)*

Recommendations:

The role of government needs to be carefully reframed in order for people to support preservation and expansion of government food programs for children. Some possible reframes that could improve the discussion of government's role include:

- Reinforcing the notion of shared fate, in the form of the common good or quality of life, which gives rise to government in the first place.
- Offering a persona for government more in keeping with democratic ideals: responsible manager, protector, or long-term planner. This also extends to the need to monitor, reform, repair and sustain existing infrastructures that support the common good.
- Connecting the role of government to values that the country as a whole embraces such as planning for a prosperous and healthy future for all, stewardship, and the building and preservation of community.

By bringing government into the discussion in a more effective way, people's existing beliefs about incompetent government and government handouts will not be reinforced, and the critical role of government programs toward reducing childhood hunger will become obvious and essential.

4. Linking Hunger and Obesity

Discussions about obesity tend to be imbued with the frame of Health Individualism. As FrameWorks found in its research about food and fitness, when viewed through the lens of Health Individualism, it's up to each individual to make choices about food and exercise, and the consequences of these choices do not extend beyond the individual and his or her immediate family. When people are reasoning from a Health Individualism frame, disparities in health between groups of people are acknowledged, but the cause of these disparities is attributed to lack of knowledge about good health practices, lack of character to make better choices, and the influence of pop culture. This pattern of thinking clearly shuts out any notions of what FrameWorks has termed "linked fate," or the idea that what happens in one community affects the society as a whole. Rather, people's definition of health as personal choice further limits the responsibility of society to affect those choices.

Observations:

The hunger obesity paradox is expressed throughout advocates' materials. Researchers and advocates alike have observed that, in the United States, poor people are more likely to be obese than rich people, sometimes termed "the hunger/obesity paradox." However, precisely because it IS a paradox, this likely prove "hard to think" for most people. And because there are such dominant, entrenched frames about obesity, it's likely that simply talking about this paradox will be insufficient to help people overcome these unhelpful dominant frames.

If the strategy of talking about the hunger obesity paradox is an attempt to link a lower-priority issue (hunger) to a higher one (obesity prevention), advocates should be aware that the salience of obesity did not overcome default thinking in FrameWorks research. When questioned, respondents expressed the opinion that people were overweight solely due to their lack of character, will power, discipline, or, in the case of children, poor parenting. They are unlikely to believe that expanding WIC programs, for example, will lead to better nutrition and less obesity.

Households without money to buy enough food often have to rely on cheaper, high calorie foods to cope with limited money for food and stave off hunger. Families try to maximize caloric intake for each dollar spent, which can lead to overconsumption of calories and a less healthful diet. (FRAC, The Paradox of Obesity and Hunger)

Low-income families stretch their food money as far as possible. Low-income families may consume lower-cost foods with relatively high levels of calories per dollar to stave off hunger when they lack the money to purchase a healthier balance of more nutritious foods. The greater the economic constraints, the harder it will be for families to achieve the nutritional quality of foods they desire. This in turn affects the overall energy density of the diet. (Center on Hunger and Poverty, Executive Summary, The Paradox of Hunger and Obesity in America)

Myth: It's Impossible for child hunger to exist when obesity is a growing national concern.

Reality: Obesity has become a serious public health problem among American kids. The problem affects children from upscale suburbs to inner cities to remote, rural areas. At the same time, hunger is still a very real problem for children in our country. In fact, the same year that a study estimated that 15% of children and adolescents ages 6-19 years are overweight, the federal government found that nearly 13 million American children were food insecure. (America's Second Harvest, Issue Brief No. 3: Child Hunger)

Recommendations:

One way to avoid the Health Individualism frame is to direct people to thinking about the food system and food environments that surround individuals. By making visible systems and environments, such as using the food and fitness environment model described above, policy solutions begin to make sense. The public is not left with trying to get obese individuals to eat smarter and exercise more, but can begin to consider how public policy can serve as a lever to improve food environments and make the food system work for everyone.

5. Use of Unframed Data

Repeated work with respondents in focus groups and individual cognitive interviews has shown, “If the facts don’t fit the frame, it is the facts that are rejected, not the frame.” In other words, facts alone are insufficient to make the case for social change. This type of communication produces 1) compassion fatigue, or the sense that there are just too many problems that deserve attention; 2) an intractability interpretation, defined as the conclusion that the problem is so entrenched that nothing advocates promote can possibly work; or 3) an us vs. them response, in which middle class folks who are struggling with their own financial limitations become resentful of help to others.

Observations:

In the materials that FrameWorks reviewed, data are presented as isolated facts without context, and are expected to make the case for the suggested programmatic or policy solutions. They emphasize the size and overwhelming nature of the problem, and are not used to bolster support for effective policies and programs.

Over 29 million American children eat a federally-funded school lunch each school day; 60% of these lunches- 17.4 million- are free or reduced price. 552,000 more low-income students participate in the school lunch program this year than last. Children in 11.5 million food-insecure households participate in the free or reduced price school lunch program. (Share Our Strength, Facts on Hunger)

Over 35 million Americans, including 12 million children suffer from hunger or live in the edge of hunger. 17.2% of children in the U.S. live in hungry or food insecure households. 4% of U.S. households experience hunger. 10.9% of American households are food insecure at least some time during the year. Meaning 1 in 10 Americans homes are at risk of hunger.... 80% of households that receive food stamps contain children and 1/3 of households that receive food stamps contain seniors and disabled individuals. (MAZON, Domestic Hunger Facts)

Recent research shows young children from food insecure families are 90% more likely to suffer from poor or fair health and experience 30% higher rates of

hospitalization than children in food secure families. (C-SNAP, Protecting Children from Hunger and Food Insecurity in 2005-2006)

Recommendations:

Data should be used strategically to support new frames, especially when they are used to show causality, explain mechanisms and support solutions. Here are some examples:

Original:

Over 29 million American children eat a federally-funded school lunch each school day; 60% of these lunches- 17.4 million- are free or reduced price.

Revised to demonstrate causality:

Sixty percent of all school lunches are subsidized through the free or very low cost federal school lunch program. When schools are able to offer affordable, nutritious lunches each day, all students are better nourished and their health and education improves.

This paragraph directs attention to the free and reduced price school lunch program, and helps the reader understand how this investment impacts students.

Original:

Over 35 million Americans, including 12 million children suffer from hunger or live in the edge of hunger. 17.2% of children in the U.S. live in hungry or food insecure households. 4% of U.S. households experience hunger.

Revised to add context:

Reducing hunger in the United States will help improve the life chances of more than 12 million children, and help build a future where all children grow into healthy, contributing members of society. Because approximately 1 in 6 children in the US lack access to adequate food and nutrition, public programs such as WIC, free and low-cost school lunches and breakfasts and summer meal programs build a critical infrastructure of nutritious food, resulting in children who are well-nourished, healthy and strong.

Instead of a list of facts, the above paragraph emphasizes a value (future), places food assistance programs for children in context, and offers an outcome for these investments.

6. Use of a rhetorical, partisan tone

Tone is an important element of the message frame of any particular issue. Many of the materials FrameWorks reviewed took an overly divisive, or rhetorical, tone. A rhetorical

tone is one that is partisan, ideological, or opinionated. When social problems are communicated in a rhetorical tone, audiences tend to respond with skepticism regarding the messenger's motives, believe that the communication is about politics and factionalizing, and be less open to new information and solutions-based thinking.

Observations:

In some advocates' materials, we observed a tendency to speak in an overly rhetorical, or even sarcastic tone. This kind of tone is quite alienating to potential supporters, and unlikely to increase understanding and attention to solving the problem of child hunger because it makes it difficult to hear the rest of the communication.

***But some Americans won't have the privilege of complaining about "too much food" at Thanksgiving or any other time of the year.** (Children's Defense Fund, Child Watch Column, Federal Food Programs: Spreading the Word)*

*The United States is the largest and most efficient food producer in the world. Yet, each year nearly 35 million Americans are threatened by hunger, including 13 million children.... Despite our abundance and charitable spirit, **we have failed to assure that every American is adequately fed.**" National Anti-Hunger Organizations (NAHO) *A Blueprint to End Hunger**

*After Katrina struck, the President spoke clearly about our nation's obligation to address poverty and the deprivation it causes. If he meant this seriously, he must speak now on how he will attack hunger in America, and **he must speak out against Congressional action that will further impoverish low-income Americans, including Katrina victims.** (FRAC Press Release, Number of Hungry and Food Insecure Americans Jumps to 38 Million in 2004, October 28, 2005)*

*Our leaders must view the child nutrition programs, the Food Stamp Program, WIC and the other assistance programs as health investments, instead of grudgingly bestowed handouts. If we do not do this, **we are condemning millions of our children to permanent "school unreadiness" and inevitable failure.** Is that really the kind of world we want for ourselves, our children, and for future generations? (Hunger filled with dire consequences, John T Cook and Deborah A. Frank; The Seattle Post-Intelligencer Op-Ed, March 21, 2004)*

Recommendations:

Using a reasonable tone promotes a collective approach and a can-do attitude. It builds a bigger tent by refusing to remind people of their ideological orientations, and thus is more effective at increasing public support for policy change. When people are presented with a reasonable discussion of the problem, its causes and potential solutions, they are much better equipped to understand and process new information. People begin to think about how to solve the problem rather than how to identify the agendas of the

messengers. Beginning communications with a strong value is good, because it helps people see that this is a universal issue rather than a partisan one. However, if that value is imbedded in inflammatory, blaming, or unnecessarily harsh language, it will be lost.

Conclusion

Creating a better conversation about child hunger and nutrition is a vital task, essential to the goal of creating a prosperous and thriving future for all children. By correcting some common framing habits and undertaking some new framing practices, advocates can improve their communication about this important issue, and increase their progress toward this important goal. The six frame habits identified in this report constitute a good starting point for advocates who wish to become more intentional framers of the public narrative about child nutrition.

About the Institute

The FrameWorks Institute is a national nonprofit think tank devoted to framing public issues to bridge the divide between public and expert understandings. Its work is based on Strategic Frame Analysis™, a multi-method, multi-disciplinary approach to empirical research. FrameWorks designs, commissions, publishes, explains and applies communications research to prepare nonprofit organizations to expand their constituency base, to build public will, and to further public understanding of specific social issues – the environment, government, race, children’s issues and health care, among others. Its work is unique in its breadth – from qualitative, quantitative and experimental research to applied communications toolkits, advertising campaigns, workshops, FrameChecks, and Study Circles around the country. See www.frameworksinstitute.org.

Diane Benjamin and Kate Vaughan

FrameWorks Institute

© FrameWorks Institute, June 2008

Standard rules for protection on intellectual property and citation apply. Citation should read: Benjamin, D. and Vaughan, K. “Framing and Reframing Child Nutrition- A FrameWorks Research Report,” Washington, DC: FrameWorks Institute, 2008.

Appendix I: Advocate Websites and Materials Examined

1. America's Second Harvest
2. American Academy of Family Physicians
3. American Academy of Pediatrics
4. American Dietetic Association
5. Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development
6. Bread for the World
7. Catholic Charities
8. Center on Budget and Policy Priorities
9. Center on Hunger and Policy
10. Chicago Anti-Hunger Federation
11. Child and Adult Care Food Program Sponsors Association
12. Children's Defense Fund
13. Children's Sentinel Nutrition Assessment Program
14. Coalition on Human Need
15. End Hunger Network
16. Food Research and Action Center
17. Healthy Schools Campaign
18. Heifer International
19. House Committee on Education and the Workforce
20. Hunger NY State
21. MAZON
22. Migrant Legal Action Program
23. National Anti-Hunger Organizations
24. National Association for the Education of Young Children
25. National Conference of State Legislatures
26. National Council of La Raza
27. National Parent Teachers Association
28. National WIC Organization
29. ONE Campaign
30. Oxfam International
31. RESULTS
32. School Nutrition Association
33. Share Our Strength
34. Sodexo Foundation
35. The Food Bank for New York City
36. USDA Food and Nutrition Service
37. US Senate Agriculture, Nutrition and Forestry Committee
38. World Hunger Year
39. Zone Health 4 Schools