



A Framer Reads the News: Pre-K a Waste of Money? A FrameWorks Institute FrameByte

On Friday, March 13, the ABC News program 20/20 aired a segment by John Stossel critiquing the universal pre-K movement. In reviewing this segment, FrameWorks thought it would be useful to offer a brief "*Framer Reads the News*" deconstruction of the frames in play in this piece and some reminders for advocates about how to respond to misleading or inaccurate information in the public arena.

The overarching message of the 20/20 segment can be summed up by the headline posted on the show's website: "Free Pre-K a Waste of Money." More specifically, the three-part argument of the piece was that 1) public monies should not be used to pay for universal pre-K because Government has already bungled the K-12 system; 2) universal pre-K will reduce choice available now to parents in a private system; and 3) evaluation measures show unimpressive results.

This framing was hardly surprising to those of us at FrameWorks who help advocates learn how to talk about Early Child Development.

In a nutshell, the 20/20 segment validates a decade of FrameWorks research on how the public thinks about early childhood. That research has consistently shown that the public lacks a coherent concept of child development, namely, what *is* it that develops, how that development *happens*, and what factors can derail healthy development. Without such an understanding, it is easy to see how some of the false assertions in the 20/20 news segment could go uncontested. In fact, since the source of many of these "pictures in people's heads" is, in fact, the pictures on their TV screens, the news media can serve to remind and recue the public to dominant patterns of thinking on any given issue. What to do?

It is tempting, in the wake of such a distorted story, to fight back with a full throttle rebuttal. But as many of you have learned in FrameWorks trainings, "rebutting is not reframing." In other words, by responding point-by-point to the so-called facts presented by ABC news, advocates put themselves in a defensive position. Moreover, such toe-to-toe rebuttals live within the opposition's frame. Even a methodical "myths and facts" approach can backfire because, as the science tells us, people often misremember the myths as true. As scholars of communications note, messages come in packages and the packaging matters. Don't throw away those fact sheets, but make sure you subject them

to a framing exercise by making sure that you have used everything you know about priming effectively to get people to rethink an issue.

What can replace our unexamined and largely automatic responses to familiar, albeit inaccurate and misleading, information? What we know from many years of testing is that support for early childhood programs and policies is strengthened when the public has a clear understanding of how development works.

Toward this end, Frameworks Institute, in partnership with the National Scientific Council on the Developing Child, has created an overall “core story” of child development. This Core Story is summarized in the “How to Talk About Early Childhood Development” MessageBrief

(<http://www.frameworksinstitute.org/assets/files/PDF/ECDMessageBrief.pdf>).

This document offers a summary of the research and a set of communications recommendations that advocates can refer back to when facing the media or speaking in any public venue. Specific Values, Simplifying Models and Principles of early child development are enumerated and explained here in a format that should make it relatively easy to fashion a frame-based response to the ABC special, one that will redirect people’s attention, not keep them stuck in the dominant frames.

(For the full slate of research reports and the comprehensive Message Memo, please visit: <http://www.frameworksinstitute.org/ecd.html>)

Remember: it’s not that the public doesn’t “get it,” rather, that intentional framing can fill the holes in the public debate. In the domain of early childhood, a better understanding of child development will enable the public to see how programs and policies that support children--wherever they are—will lead to a brighter future for our communities and our country.

About FrameWorks Institute: The FrameWorks Institute is an independent nonprofit organization founded in 1999 to advance science-based communications research and practice. The Institute conducts original, multimethod research to identify the communications strategies that will advance public understanding of social problems and improve public support for remedial policies. The Institute’s work also includes teaching the nonprofit sector how to apply these science-based communications strategies in their work for social change. The Institute publishes its research and recommendations, as well as toolkits and other products for the nonprofit sector at www.frameworksinstitute.org. All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted, in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording, or otherwise, without the prior permission of FrameWorks Institute.

Please follow standard APA rules for citation, with FrameWorks Institute as publisher. FrameWorks Institute (2009). A Framer Reads the News: Pre-K A Waste of Money? Washington, DC: FrameWorks Institute.