



Children's Mental Health Toolkit: Frequently Asked Questions

This document is not intended to provide "the right answers" to questions you might be asked, but rather to offer illustrations of how to work with values and models that FrameWorks research has proven to be effective in improving understanding of children's mental health. In the following Q and A, we demonstrate how an advocate might think about turning unproductive frames embedded in questions into opportunities to advance a more effective message. Communicators will find their own ways of putting these principles into practice.

Q: Can kids really develop mental illnesses?

Less Effective Response:

Yes, kids can develop mental illnesses. Some kinds of mental illnesses are more common in kids, while other kinds, such as schizophrenia, are more common in adults. But there is no absolute dividing line. Mental illnesses do not discriminate.

Analysis:

- Triggers the dominant cultural model of "children are small adults;" – children can have mental illness but it is not as complicated as adult mental illness.
- Leaves the audience thinking that mental illness is genetic because no alternate model is provided.

More Effective Response:

Children's brain architecture is being built from infancy on, in a process similar to building a house. Just like in building a house, that process can run into difficulties along the way, perhaps from a shaky foundation or from unexpected or undue stress to the structure. So yes, children do sometimes experience psychological problems, including mental illness. That's why it is so important that we provide access to the professionals who can screen and

assess for problems early on, when effective interventions are available to prevent more serious problems from developing later.

Analysis:

- Uses brain architecture simplifying model to explain that children's brains are built from the bottom up, and to establish that children are different from adults.
- Avoids extreme or distracting examples of specific conditions.
- Includes a solution to overcome sense that mental illness is inherited and, therefore, unchangeable.

Q: What causes mental disorders in children?

Less Effective Response:

Mental health disorders in children and adolescents are caused mostly by biology and environment. Examples of biological causes are genetics, chemical imbalances in the body, or damage to the central nervous system, such as a head injury. Many environmental factors also put young people at risk for developing mental health disorders, such as exposure to lead, violence, sexual abuse, or loss of important people through death or divorce.

Analysis:

- Interaction of genes and environment will not be understood.
- Biology/genetics will trigger dominant models of mental illness (i.e., that illness is caused by genes and cannot be prevented) and environments will trigger dominant models of mental health (i.e., that stress makes you stronger, can't be avoided, and the solution is to learn how to overcome the impact of negative events).
- Doesn't address belief that "stress is good for you."

More Effective Response:

Some children are exposed to chronic, extreme stressful conditions, which lead to what scientists term *toxic stress reactions in the child's brain*, which disrupt developing brain architecture. This can lead to lifelong difficulties in cognitive, social and emotional functioning. It is important to distinguish among three kinds of stress. We do not need to worry about positive stress (which is short-lived stress, like getting immunized), or stress that is made tolerable by the

presence of supportive relationships, like a strong family when a loved one dies. But toxic stress lasts longer, occurs without consistent supportive relationships, and leads to lifelong problems in learning, behavior, and both physical and mental health. As a society, we can and must develop environments for children that will both reduce exposure to toxic stress, and create buffers of support to make stress more tolerable.

Analysis:

- Uses Toxic Stress simplifying model to explain how certain types of chronic and extreme experience cause stress reactions that can damage the developing brain.
- Effectively neutralizes “stress is good for you” and begins to shape an understanding that external events can materially impact the brain and children’s functioning.

Q: What can be done to help children with mental health problems?

Less Effective Response:

If parents or other caregivers notice repeated symptoms of mental health problems in their child or teen, they should make a list of the behaviors that concern them, speak to the child about their concerns and let the child know they will help them work out their problems. It is important to talk with the child’s health care provider, and look for a mental health professional trained in working with children and adolescents. People who are not satisfied with the mental health care they receive should discuss their concerns with the provider, ask for information, and/or seek help from other sources.

Analysis:

- Reminds the audience of the “family bubble.”
- Encourages the idea that mental health problems are controllable by the individual and consist of “working out” problems.

More Effective Response:

There is a lot we can do, because we understand what the problem is and what the solutions are. Children’s mental health is like the levelness of a piece of furniture – and that levelness can depend on the furniture itself, the floor it’s

on, or both. Many states have instituted effective programs that provide these children the attention they need from experts who understand levelness and stability. These programs have solved a range of problems in early childhood and showed significant long-term improvements for children. Our task is to bring such innovations to scale for all children and families in need.

Analysis:

- Begins by saying solutions are possible.
- Uses the simplifying model of Levelness to illustrate the causes of children's mental illness and show that interventions can address that "levelness."
- Ends with the value that ingenuity and innovation can fix these problems in early childhood.

Q: What caused the [recent violent incident involving children in the news] and how could we prevent this from happening again?

Less Effective Response:

Certainly, what happened was just horrible. I think it really exemplifies what happens when you have a child in pain who has been isolated and alone and has a lot of rage. I think our society is moving faster and faster, kids are bombarded with more pressures from all sides to look perfect, to be perfect, and so many kids are simply overscheduled today. What I'm trying to get at is there are a lot of kids who, despite all the activity of their lives, feel very isolated, and as much as there has been an emphasis on kids getting into college and being more competitive in the world, we haven't taught the basic skills of emotional health, which is learning how to identify problems, solve problems, how to soothe yourself in a healthy way.

Analysis:

- By not asserting a counter narrative, it effectively blames parents.
- Focuses on external behaviors, and mental health as "feelings."
- Doesn't present solutions; offers a fatalistic explanation.

More Effective Response:

Tragedies like these are an opportunity for us to put our heads together and figure out how we can invent and replicate those policies and programs that will support children's mental health. It is important to remember that as children's brains develop, they are developing in different environments; some develop with support from families, in communities with easy access to resources. Much like a table needs a level floor to function well, children need this kind of level environment. But some children develop in an unbalanced and uneven environment, where their development is not well supported, and as a consequence they experience mental health problems. What we need are the kinds of interventions that can "level the table" and "smooth the floors" for these kids.

Analysis:

- Redirects the conversation from what's wrong, to what's possible to solve by using the value of Ingenuity.
- Uses the simplifying model of Levelness to explain 1) how mental health problems can develop, and 2) that positive mental health can be achieved by interventions that address these causes.