



## FRAMEWORKS MESSAGE BRIEF: TALKING TO BUSINESS LEADERS ABOUT EARLY CHILD DEVELOPMENT

This message brief recounts and interprets data gathered over the past several years on how business leaders think about early child development. This research was conducted to inform communications strategies for the Center on the Developing Child at Harvard University and supported by the Center. However, it is incomplete without an understanding of FrameWorks' overall research on Early Childhood Development. All research reports and recommendations from this body of research are available on FrameWorks' website, including a summarizing message memo and toolkit with sample talking points and other communication materials ([www.frameworksinstitute.org/ecd.html](http://www.frameworksinstitute.org/ecd.html)). This message brief is intended to draw out the findings relative to business leaders specifically, and will be augmented by ongoing research.

A focus on business leaders was requested by the Center because: disruptions in optimal child development have implications for the future workforce; economists are increasingly favoring economic development focused on early child development; many advocates have asserted that business leaders should be able to see their self-interest in the issue and become strong advocates for a better prepared workforce; and it is widely believed that business leaders would be credible and compelling advocates to legislators. While numerous other child advocacy organizations have expressed interest in mobilizing the business community on behalf of children, there is a paucity of sound research available to those who would engage this important constituency.

In this summary, we provide some of the highlights from FrameWorks' research, the recommendations that result, and some examples of framing decisions that this research helps to clarify.

### Situation Analysis

FrameWorks' research documents several factors that shape business leaders' understanding of early child development and their support for policies that encourage healthy development.

- Business leaders showed little understanding of development as a complex causal process that is influenced by many factors. Their default model is one of natural and automatic development.
- They downplay the importance of environments in favor of a developmental explanation of self-causation. This myth of the self-made person focuses on the triumph of effort and will over circumstance.
- This group had a particularly hard time staying focused on very young children; they tended to "age up" the discussion to focus on children in higher grades and their trajectory into the

workforce. Even when they appeared to be talking about young children, their language revealed considerations more appropriate to youth.

- Their pragmatic business orientation requires evidence that solutions exist, and can be accomplished effectively and efficiently. They are more interested in outcomes than ideas. They will approach this topic with a results orientation. Without tangible data, business people will tend to skepticism, especially as it involves the role of government.
- There was very little that seemed new in most messaging about early child issues to these business leaders. The fact that kids' brains develop early on, that the brain is a complex organ, that lots of different influences make a difference in outcomes – none of these facts proved sufficient to get the business leaders to re-examine the issue. Researchers underscored the need for novel information.

## Key Communications Challenges Based on Insights from Research

There are several framing challenges that must be addressed consistently in all messaging to business leaders about early childhood development. However, it is important to remember that business leaders do not require a “translation” of the Core Story of development into a more factual context or self-interested argument. That said, the style of presentation, such as shorter sentences, more concrete examples, and illustrations, may need to be adapted for this audience.

**Make a developmental, rather than economic or facts-focused argument.** The conventional wisdom about how to motivate this group was not supported by the FrameWorks research. Contrary to folk wisdom in the field, business leaders were less likely to support child development policies when they were exposed to an economic argument or a presentation of the facts affecting child well-being than when they were exposed to developmental explanations that effectively deepened their understanding of the developmental process.

**Business leaders need more than a “just the facts” frame to mobilize their support for early child development policies.** All of the Simplifying Models of early child development worked better to enhance support for early child policies among business people than did a simple factual statement about the need for better child care. Customizing the story for business leaders should be done in the selection of examples to illustrate the Core Story, not in changing the communications to be more factual or more bottom-line.

**Business leaders respond best to new information rather than to a more familiar story.** They were highly affected by one of the most developmental principles in the Core Story – the intertwined nature of social, emotional and cognitive learning. This may be because they needed something new in order to take a second look at the issue of early child development. Similarly, “Skill Begets Skill” – with its inherent notions of sequencing, structure and feedback loop – proved powerful for business people, compared to the simpler and more familiar economic argument about consequences.

Business leaders may respond best when advocates discuss highly tangible and concrete policies. For example, business leaders were consistently attracted to the idea of reducing children's exposure to chemicals. This may be due to the need for “little picture” and highly tangible and concrete policies. This set of policies may also reorient business people to the interaction between child and environment. It is interesting to note that both Toxic Stress and Serve and Return (both models with high interactive content) elevate concern for this aspect of a child's physical environment among business leaders.

## Translating the Challenges into Successful Practice: Essential Elements for Reframing Early Child Issues for Business Leaders

As FrameWorks has written elsewhere, the Strategic Frame Analysis™ approach teaches that communications is storytelling; but the stories we need to tell to encourage policy thinking must have all the elements in place: Values, that orient the audience to the big idea, or to “what this is about;” Simplifying Models, that concretize and simplify complex scientific explanations of how things work; reasonable tone; reinforcing visuals; effective messengers; and thematic stories that include causal chains, or stories that explain the link between cause and effect. We provide, below, some examples of the Values and Models shown in FrameWorks’ research to elevate business leader support for early child development policies. For an overview of the entire Core Story of child development, see *The Science of Early Childhood Development*. (2007) National Scientific Council on the Developing Child. [http://developingchild.net/pubs/persp/pdf/Science\\_Early\\_Childhood\\_Development.pdf](http://developingchild.net/pubs/persp/pdf/Science_Early_Childhood_Development.pdf).

### Values

**Prosperity:** The future prosperity of any society depends on its ability to foster the health and wellbeing of the next generation. When a society invests wisely in children and families, the next generation will pay that back through a lifetime of productivity and responsible citizenship.

#### Explaining What Develops: Brain Architecture Simplifying Model (See Early Child Development summary):

The early years of life matter because early experiences affect the architecture of the maturing brain. As it emerges, the quality of that architecture establishes either a sturdy or a fragile foundation for all of the development and behavior that follows – and getting things right the first time is easier than trying to fix them later.

#### Explaining How that Brain Architecture Gets Built - Serve and Return Simplifying Model:

Scientists now know that the interactive influences of genes and experience shape the developing brain. The active ingredient is the “serve and return” relationships with their parents and other caregivers in their family or community. Like the process of serve and return in games such as tennis and volleyball, young children naturally reach out for interaction through babbling and facial expressions. If adults do not respond by getting in sync and doing the same kind of vocalizing and gesturing back at them, the child’s learning process is incomplete. This has negative implications for later learning.

#### Explaining How Development Can Be Disrupted - Toxic Stress Simplifying Model:

Scientists now know that “toxic stress” in early childhood is associated with such things as extreme poverty, abuse, or severe maternal depression and damages the developing brain. 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). *Tolerable* stress 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.

#### Explaining What Assists With Optimal Development – Effectiveness Factors

We can measure “effectiveness factors” that often make the difference between programs that work and those that don’t work to support children’s healthy development. For 3 and 4 year olds, these would include the level of teacher training, a language-rich environment, and a safe and regulated place that supports a variety of learning experiences. Without these effectiveness factors, some children can spend just as many hours in a program, but not show many positive outcomes.

## Putting It All Together

The future prosperity of our society will be determined by the health and development of our children. The early years of life matter because early experiences affect the architecture of the maturing brain. As it emerges, the quality of that architecture establishes either a sturdy or a fragile foundation for all of the development and behavior that follows – and getting things right the first time is easier than trying to fix them later. And because the brain is a highly integrated organ, you cannot focus on developing just one part of the child without paying equal attention to the other capacities. Social and emotional development are inextricably intertwined with learning. Simply put, you can’t develop one and ignore the others, and expect a good outcome.

What derails development are certain kinds of stressors in a child’s environment. “Toxic stress” in early childhood is associated with such things as extreme poverty, abuse, or severe maternal depression and damages the developing brain. 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). Tolerable stress is made tolerable by the presence of supportive relationships, like a strong family when a loved one dies. But toxic stress lasts longer, lacks consistent supportive relationships and leads to lifelong problems in learning, behavior, and both physical and mental health.

The difference between the effects of various types of stress on the developing child is due to buffering effects that come from a strong and responsive environment of relationships. We now know that the interactive influences of genes and experience literally shape the developing brain, and the active ingredient is the “serve and return” nature of children’s engagement in relationships with their parents and other caregivers in their family or community. Like the process of “serve and return” in games such as tennis and volleyball, young children naturally reach out for interaction through babbling, facial expressions, etc., and adults respond by getting in sync and doing the same kind of vocalizing and gesturing back at them. If a child is put in a daycare center with caretakers who are overwhelmed by too many children or by their lack of training or unfamiliarity with these particular children, they are unlikely to respond in a way that keeps development going well. Pay and benefits are low for childcare workers, so turnover is high. This means the person a toddler learned to trust yesterday may be gone tomorrow. That has consequences for the Serve and Return process that is the basis for child development.

What makes the difference between positive outcomes for the developing child and negative or impaired outcomes? Controlling the environments surrounding our children, for one, and especially the environment of relationships. Scientific evidence indicates that exposure to certain substances during the early years of life can cause significant and irreversible damage to the developing architecture of the child’s brain at levels that appear harmless for adults. This is why, for example, scientists caution against using pesticides at schools and daycare centers, and believe we need to impose new restrictions on environmental mercury. But a child’s environment is also to a large extent an environment of relationships. The disruption of those relationships – such as the removal of a parent’s attentions due to multiple jobs or incarceration – or exposure to violence inside and outside the home can harm the child because they literally disrupt the orderly architecture of the developing brain and weaken its structure for future skill development.

What can we do to make development go well for all our children? First, we can require the application of the most rigorous program evaluation science to new children’s programs. When we pay attention to what scientists call Effectiveness Factors, we can make smarter decisions, investing in and replicating programs that can be proved to work rather than those that don’t. By constantly updating our understanding of what works for children at different stages of development, we can make the best long-term return on society’s short-term investments in children. Without these Effectiveness Factors, however, scientists have demonstrated that some children can spend just as many hours in a program, but not show many positive outcomes. If we want our society to thrive, we need to pay serious attention to how children develop and invest wisely in making that process go well. Fortunately, there is now a strong science base to help us do just that.

Finally, here is the FrameWorks Do and Don’t list for what to avoid and what to include in all communications about early child development aimed at business leaders.

### **DON’T:**

- Assume that business leaders are unresponsive to well-framed messages about child development.
- Craft a completely different message approach for business leaders than for legislators or the general public.
- Use a “just the facts” approach that leaves out the story of how children’s brains develop.

### **DO:**

- Tell the core story of child development.
- Include the simplifying models that are most compelling to business leaders: Toxic Stress, Serve and Return, Effectiveness Factors.
- Offer concrete, specific examples of effective policies.

**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, multi-method 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](http://www.frameworksinstitute.org).

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