



## Early Child Development Toolkit: Answers to Frequently Asked Questions

*This document is intended to help guide your responses to questions you might be asked in media interviews and other formats by illustrating how to incorporate effective frame elements to increase support for policies that advance child well-being. In the following questions and answers, 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: Aren't most children in this country doing just fine?**

#### *False Start:*

Most kids are doing just fine. But many are not. The U.S. ranks 20th among 21 rich democracies in child well-being. Three million are abused or neglected. 14 million are alone after school. Eight million have no health insurance. 13 million live in poverty. It doesn't have to be this way. Government spending on kids keeps getting less, but we need to invest in children in order to make progress. If we fail to make these new investments, we'll have trouble caring for an aging population, and we will have failed the generations behind us. We have to do better.

#### *Analysis:*

- Relies on statistics to make the case, rather than addressing underlying assumptions and beliefs.
- Doesn't explain how these conditions affect children.
- Doesn't have a "can-do" attitude about solving problems, but rather focuses on the dire consequences of not doing the right thing.

#### *Reframed Response:*

It is critical that we respond to the very real problems facing our children today so that our country continues to be prosperous and successful into the future. We now know that toxic stress in early childhood, caused by things like extreme poverty, abuse or severe maternal depression, 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), 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:*

- Begins with a value of Prosperity so that the reader understands the importance of this issue for everyone.
- Uses the Toxic Stress simplifying model to explain how bad situations negatively affect children.
- Reminds the audience that we can reduce and buffer toxic stress exposure.

**Q: Do early childhood programs really benefit all children, even those who aren't poor?**

*False Start:*

Yes. According to information from Pre-K Now, in a 1998-1999 early childhood longitudinal study, 49 percent of children who do not know the alphabet as they enter kindergarten are from middle or higher income families. Additionally, the most rigorous study of pre-k programs found that all children benefit regardless of family income bracket. Further, a 2002 report published by the Economic Policy Institute showed that the gap in reading skills between middle-income children and their more affluent peers is greater than the gap between middle-class and low-income children.

*Analysis:*

- Uses data to make the case without addressing underlying, problematic ways of thinking.
- Focuses on early childhood programs as being about academic preparation and not development.
- Places responsibility for children's literacy solely within the family.

*Reframed Response:*

If we want a prosperous future, we must attend to the needs of children today. The development of the brain's architecture is not different for higher income or lower income kids – all children's brains are constructed through an ongoing process that begins before birth and continues into adulthood. Like the construction of a home, the building process begins with laying the foundation, framing the rooms and wiring the electrical system in a predictable sequence. Early experiences literally shape how the brain gets built; a strong foundation in the early years increases the probability of positive outcomes. A weak foundation increases the odds of later difficulties. That's why we want these early experiences to be top-notch for all children.

*Analysis:*

- Tells the audience why these programs are important by using the value of Prosperity.
- Explains brain development via the Brain Architecture simplifying model so that the need for these programs for all children is clear.
- Avoids reinforcing the idea that parents are the only ones responsible for children's development.

**Q: Aren't we asking the state to make up for what parents are not doing? Isn't it better for parents to take care of their own kids rather than send them to child care?**

*False Start:*

No. We're not asking government to replace parents. We know that high-quality child care, whether provided by parents or by child care providers, helps kids learn and grow, and gets them ready for school. Regardless of how we might feel about parents being home full-time with their kids, the reality is that most families don't have that choice. That's why child care for those families should be as high quality as possible.

*Analysis*

- Restates the opposition's argument which reinforces the dominant cultural models in people's minds.
- Turns the discussion into a debate about working parents and parent choice.
- Limits the potential benefits of early childhood to school success.

*Reframed Response*

Innovative states have been able to design high-quality early education programs for children – programs that have solved problems and shown significant long-term improvements for children. They work because children grow up in an environment of experiences and relationships, and science tells us that the interactive influences of genes and experience literally shape the developing brain. The active ingredient is the interactive nature of children's engagement in relationships with their parents and other caregivers in their family or community, like "serve and return" in games such as tennis and volleyball. If a child is put in a day care center with caretakers who are overwhelmed by too many children or by their lack of training or unfamiliarity with these particular children, that has consequences for the "serve and return" process that is the basis for child development. We have to make sure that all children have access to the innovations that we know work.

*Analysis*

- Begins with the value of Ingenuity.
- Acknowledges a role for parents but includes community.
- Refuses to "take the bait" with a focus on working parents.

- Explains why relationships matter to children’s development by incorporating the “serve and return” simplifying model.

**Q: Isn’t it true that data show that early childhood programs aren’t very effective in the long-term? They cost a lot, but children still don’t do well in school later on.**

*False Start:*

The early childhood years are the most productive years for new educational investment and the long-term impacts of early education on social and emotional development may be the most important consequences of early education. Numerous studies have shown that benefits from quality early childhood education experiences carry over into the first years of school and even well into adulthood. These benefits include increased academic achievement and school success and improvements in social-emotional development, behavior and conduct. While some research has indicated that the effects of pre-k on children's IQ scores decrease over time, there are other studies that show a huge impact. For example, children who did not attend preschool were 70 percent more likely to be arrested for a violent crime by age 18 than their peers who had been pre-k participants, and pre-k can lower rates of teen pregnancy.

*Analysis*

- Over-reliance on data to make the case without helping the audience understand development.
- By noting that some research has shown no long-term results, it repeats the negative message, and by suggesting “other studies show” different results, it turns the discussion into “dueling research studies.”
- Conjures up images of delinquent and pregnant teens, which defaults to parent responsibility.
- The programs are explained as benefiting individual children, but not society as a whole.

*Reframed Response:*

We can design the kinds of innovative programs that lead to long-term successful outcomes for children and a prosperous future for our communities. These early childhood development programs are important because children’s brain architecture is built from the bottom up. Early experiences lay the groundwork for all of the development that follows. Trying to change behavior or build new skills on a foundation of brain circuits that were not wired properly when they were first formed requires more work and is less effective. Remedial education, clinical treatment and other professional interventions are more costly and produce less desirable outcomes than the provision of nurturing, protective relationships and appropriate learning experiences earlier in life.

*Analysis:*

- Begins with the values of Ingenuity and Prosperity to remind the audience of why this is important for everyone.
- Emphasizes the importance of addressing brain development early in life, without cueing up unhelpful stereotypes.
- Addresses the issue of cost by emphasizing the advantages of investing early on.

**Q: We've been investing in child care programs for many years. Why haven't we seen more progress in educational outcomes?***False Start:*

We *have* made progress. Studies show that children who have been in high-quality child care settings do better in school. We need to increase our investments precisely because we know it does work and many kids are still not getting the high quality of care they need. Every \$1 invested in high-quality pre-k saves taxpayers up to \$7. Pre-k results in savings by reducing the need for remedial and special education, welfare and criminal justice services, according to a number of studies.

*Analysis:*

- Stays within the frame of school success as the only goal of early childhood programs.
- Doesn't explain why quality care matters.

*Reframed Response:*

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 development of capacities. Social and emotional development are inextricably intertwined with learning. Simply put, you can't develop one part and ignore the others, and expect a good outcome.

To get these good outcomes, we must require the application of the most rigorous program evaluation science to new children's programs. This is what researchers call effectiveness factors, and we can use them to make smarter decisions, investing in and replicating programs that can be proven 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.

*Analysis:*

- Broadens the outcome to social and emotional development as well as learning.
- Uses the concept of effectiveness factors to support the case for wise investment.