



Anticipate Public Thinking The Swamp

Swamp Glossary for Early Childhood Development and Learning in Alamance County, NC

Understanding how Americans think and talk about early childhood and learning helps you communicate strategically. When you can predict how the public will interpret your communications, you can create messages that engage people in more productive conversations about the following:

- How children develop and learn.
- How environments shape early development and learning.
- How the entire Alamance County community benefits when children are well supported.

In other words, changing the conversation about early childhood in Alamance County starts with knowing what sorts of assumptions the public is in the habit of making about childhood.

FrameWorks' research process always starts with identifying shared patterns of public thinking about social issues. Use this summary of the assumptions that the public makes about children's issues as you develop your communications to avoid using any language, images, or other cues that might crowd out your intended meaning. Each pattern comes with a general recommendation about how to reframe, or give the public a new way of thinking about childhood.

What is early childhood development and how does it happen?

Childhood development is a Black Box: When faced with explaining how development works, members of the public typically fall back on the understanding that children develop “automatically,” following “natural” trajectories of physical growth and maturation. The process of development happens remain largely “black-boxed”.¹ When this model is in play, people are less likely to consider the critical importance of positive environments and experiences and stable, supportive, and responsive relationships. Instead, the assumption is that much of what constitutes “normal” and “good” development happens of its own accord.² When people are using this model, programs designed to *intervene* to promote healthy development are hard to understand and difficult to support. After all, why intervene in something that happens on its own?

Recommendation: Use explanatory tools, including the *Brain Architecture*, *Serve and Return*, *Resilience Scale* and *Toxic Stress* metaphors, to explain the process of brain development. These tools communicate the importance of early experiences and environments as building blocks for positive outcomes.

Aging Up: Brain development starts before children are born, but the public in Alamance County defaults to envisioning older children when asked to think about developmental processes. The tendency to “age up” children in conversations about development reinforces the *Black Box of Development model*; assuming that child development refers to older children means that people are not considering what is happening during what science tells us is a sensitive period of accelerated brain development when young children are rapidly developing new synapses in the brain and would most benefit from support.

Recommendation: Redirect focus to young children and tie descriptions of development to the ages when they occur. Build the public’s understanding of early development to build support for public investments in early learning.

What is early childhood development and how does it happen?

Family Bubble: The *Family Bubble* is the idea that parents are solely responsible for children’s development. When people think with this model, early development happens in the home, under the purview of the parents, and is beyond the influence of outside contextual and environmental factors. The danger of cuing this model is that, once people focus on parenting practices, all of the

other institutions and factors that shape early childhood development disappear from view. The most obvious approach to improving outcomes is “fixing” parents, which very quickly gets stuck in unproductive conversation about good and bad parents.

Recommendation: Break the *Family Bubble* and use a wider lens on development. Point to the range of factors and people who support healthy development (i.e., caregivers, doctors, access to mentors, access to early learning opportunities). Make brain development, and not parents, the central focus of the conversation about children’s outcomes.

Self-Makingness: The ability to “rise above” difficult circumstances and environments is a dominant model in American thinking. Applying this to thinking about development means that children are expected to “pull themselves up by their bootstraps.” *Willpower, grit, and determination* as innate character traits that children need to turn out well are problematic because they focus on the person, and not the process, blocking any discussion of the supports which promote healthy development, including the factors and interventions that buffer children from the effects of harmful environments.

Recommendation: Avoid language that reinforces the “up by the bootstraps” narrative. Replace this way of thinking with the brain science narrative, which focuses attention on how children develop and how environments and experiences shape their wellbeing.

Environments Matter: The public is accustomed to seeing schools, neighborhoods, communities, etc. as important influences on children’s wellbeing. Communicators can build on this shared sense that environments matter in their messages.

Recommendation: Keep the focus on the role contexts play in outcomes. Make sure that messages about childhood describe how a range of contexts and experiences actively support development. Take care to avoid cuing up the *Sponge* and *Family Bubble* models.

How does learning happen in Alamance, and how can it be improved?

Caring Teacher: FrameWorks’ research into public assumptions finds that members of the public equate a “good” teacher with a “caring” teacher, and assume that caring is a quality that cannot be taught. According to this line of reasoning, a teacher either “has what it takes,” or doesn’t. This narrow focus on “caring” obscures the importance of teacher knowledge and training, and the role of institutional supports that provide teachers with opportunities to develop their professional skills.

Recommendation: Address this model by expanding discussions about supporting teachers.

Highlight teachers' technical expertise and need for continued professional development (e.g., access to high-quality tools, mentors, and innovative thinking by school boards, etc.) to support development and learning effectively.

Tangible Triad: Americans struggle to see any actors in the education system beyond what FrameWorks call "The Tangible Triad": Teachers, parents, and students. Each of these actors is defined by their assumed motivation. Teachers are deemed successful if they "care" about their students and not other financial and professional concerns. Parents and students are measured by their ability to exert willpower and discipline in the pursuit of education, which is defined as "hard," or in conflict with one's pursuit of pleasure. This model obscures the roles that school boards, tax payers, school administrators and policy makers play in creating, maintaining, and reforming an education system.

Recommendation: Avoid placing blame on teachers, parents or students. Point out the other parts of the education system that impact student's learning, like policy-makers, school board members, members of the business community, and health providers (including mental and oral health).

Funding = Learning: In the minds of the public, funding is commonly identified as the cause and the solution for problems in the education system. Equating funding with learning means viewing things like a lack of supplies or low salaries for teachers as the sole culprits behind poor educational outcomes, which limits how the public thinks about learning and what supports it.

Recommendation: Fill in details about how investments in education like smaller class sizes, higher quality materials and resources, access to innovative teaching techniques, and professional mentors support learning.

Education System in Crisis: Americans are accustomed to thinking about our education system as irreparably broken and in a constant state of crisis. This fatalistic view gets in the way of thinking about how communities can work to improve educational outcomes.

Recommendation: Avoid crisis messaging about the education system and educational outcomes. To foster solutions thinking, point to ways that the system can be improved to better support learning.

What challenges face the Alamance community?

Normalization: Members of the Alamance community assume that experiences determine what a child will view as normal and acceptable aspects of life. Exposure to positive environments and role models leads children to view these as normal, while exposure to negative experiences are seen as

leading to a cycle of “underachievement.”

Recommendation: Replace this model with a new explanation of how experiences and environments shape outcomes. The narrative about how brains develop provides a compelling explanation for focusing on the environments of experiences in which kids live and how they influence lives.

Race Matters: Participants in our conversations in Alamance see race, class and ethnicity as divisions in the community that can lead to strained relationships. These divisions, along with income disparities, are seen as limits to children’s potential. While acknowledging that race matters, white participants do not see racism as a part of daily life in Alamance. Non-white participants on the other hand describe cases of discrimination. Increasing levels of diversity in the local population is also viewed as a cause for underperforming schools and the failure of the community to live up to its potential.

Recommendation: Focus on making the case for our goal being an Alamance where everyone can do well. This means that quality learning opportunities need to be available in all locations in the community, and that resources need to flow evenly and reliably across the community.

Nostalgia: The public reflects on the past with incredible Nostalgia. They talk about the past as a simpler, safer time, when people were more likely to live up to their moral obligations to one another. While they are nostalgic about the past, they also reason that there is no going back, which results in strong feelings of fatalism and doubt about what can be done to improve the future.

Recommendation: Remind the Alamance community of their sense of social and collective responsibility toward future generations. Use these deeply held and widely shared values to explain why supporting development and learning are important.

Politics as Usual: Local politics in Alamance are seen as part of an ineffective status quo that is unlikely to change. This leads to fatalistic thinking about the future, particularly as it relates to school funding.

Recommendation: In addition to tapping in to the community’s sense of responsibility, move away from featuring funding as the main force behind learning. Communicate how learning happens and how community resources (e.g., caring adults, mentors, community recreation spaces, religious communities) all support learning.

What solutions improve development and learning outcomes?

Keep ‘Em Active: When asked about how children’s lives can be improved, Alamance community

members regularly point to activities like the YMCA, sports, and community groups as a way to expose young people to positive influences, and to supplement the values they learn in the home. The public see activities as important because they “distract” kids from negative influences. This mental model suggests that the public see community resources as an important, positive factor in children’s lives.

Recommendation: Build on this understanding of how communities and community resources shape development. Use brain development to explain how resilience is developed. Resilience depends on adding positive factors to young people’s lives, such as opportunities to learn, that offset negative factors.

Parenting Classes: This cultural model holds that parents will change their behavior if they only have more information and awareness about how to improve children’s wellbeing. This way of thinking is a version of the Family Bubble model that places responsibility for poor outcomes squarely on parents.

Recommendation: Remind people that development involves much more than what happens in the home and in interactions exclusively between parents and children. Entire communities play a role in supporting healthy development and creating the conditions for positive outcomes.

It Take a Village: The view that communities play a major role in bringing up children is a model for development and learning that communicators can use to their advantage. The It Takes a Village perspective is a more focused version of the Environments Matter model (good influences are good for development) because it directly identified communities as positive influences on children. This also allows communicators to step outside of the Family Bubble and recruit community members to help children thrive.

Recommendation: Build on this view of communities and development in messaging about children’s issues in Alamance. These messages can remind people about something that they already believe about supporting children, and help them see beyond what happens in the home at the same time.

Endnotes

1 See Aubrun, A., & Grady, J. (2003). *Simplifying early childhood development: Findings from cognitive analysis and phone interviews*. Washington, DC: FrameWorks Institute.

2 Lindland, E., Kendall-Taylor, N., Baran, M., O’Neil, M., & Simon, A. (2012). *Mapping the gaps on skills and learning: A core story of education report*. Washington, DC: FrameWorks Institute.

Overview of Swamp

Visual summary of relevant findings from cultural models research.

What's in the Swamp of...

Early Child Development and Learning in Alamance County

Child Development

- Black Box
- Aging Up

What Shapes Development?

- Family Bubble
- Self-Makingness
- Environments Matter

Learning

- Caring Teacher
- Tangible Triad
- Funding = Learning
- Education System in Crisis

Solutions

- Keep 'Em Active
- Parenting Classes
- It Takes a Village

Challenges

- Normalization
- Race Matters
- Nostalgia
- Politics as Usual