



The Big Picture

Executive Summary

Framing Children's Issues in Jacksonville

While Jacksonville has made great improvements in children's services in recent years, the city's outcomes on many indicators of child wellbeing remain among the worst in the South. Continued progress and sustained implementation of recent reforms requires public understanding, public will, and even public demand. In turn, this requires advocates to maintain a productive and purposeful dialogue with members of the public. To address the perennial need for more effective outreach and advocacy, the Partnership for Child Health and the Jacksonville System of Care Initiative sponsored research on how best to engage in the conversation on children's issues.

The FrameWorks Institute, a nonprofit think tank known for its pioneering research on the communications aspects of social issues, conducted a series of studies in Jacksonville to develop communications strategies, tools, and techniques that would build public understanding and support.

Between 2011 and 2014, FrameWorks researchers pursued a series of communications questions, ultimately sampling more than 2,000 ordinary Jacksonville residents and fielding several experiments yielding an actionable set of messaging priorities and tactics. Because of the methods used in these studies, the findings should remain pertinent and useful for years to come. The findings are applicable to a range of policy issues facing the city (for example, child care, early mental health screening, integration of behavioral and physical health, foster care, full-service schools, and more).

The resulting, research-based strategy involves a set of "frame elements," or themes and techniques that make communications more effective, as well as guidance on communications strategies that are likely to backfire. As a set of high-level strategies and themes, this "umbrella campaign" can be applied to the full range of communications platforms in use by organizations that support child wellbeing, from talking points to website copy to social media feeds. In fact, for the full value of these strategies to be realized, they need to be used in a wide range of communications, across organizations, and across the nonprofit and public sectors. By coalescing around a common language for explaining complex issues like child mental health and childhood adversity, the advocacy field has a much better chance of building public understanding.

This project differs from typical communications initiatives in several important ways. Key distinctions include:

- **Goals.** Framing strategies are focused on public understanding and awareness of fundamental concepts in child and youth development. For instance, the project seeks to reframe child

development itself—what it is, why it matters, how it works, and what public solutions help to maintain and improve it for everyone. This “issue push” approach differs, for instance, from individual behavior-change campaigns designed to educate parents about steps they can take on their own or targeted legislative advocacy campaigns aimed at promoting a specific policy or regulation.

- **Strategy.** A shared umbrella campaign is a cross-organization effort to use every opportunity to promote common themes (and avoid others) in organizational messaging.
- **Time frame.** A reframing initiative is typically a long-term endeavor, involving an initial commitment of three years of consistent, comprehensive outreach to achieve results.
- **Evidence base.** This effort is grounded in sound social science, allowing users to have confidence that the recommended strategies will have consistent, reliable effects.

Some of the key findings include:

- Public support for better children’s policy is limited by two patterns of thinking in particular: **Individualism** and **Fatalism**.
 - *Individualism* is the tendency to explain social problems (child adversity, poverty, poor-functioning schools, etc.) as caused by the failures of individual actors (bad parents, unmotivated children, “bad apple” teachers, etc.) When reasoning from Individualism, Jacksonville residents have trouble seeing a role for public policy or systems-level interventions, beyond offering more education or information to shape individual behaviors.
 - *Fatalism* involves the belief that the city’s problems are inevitable and unsolvable. When thinking this way, people are skeptical that collective efforts to improve systems do much good.
- A messaging experiment found that opening communications with one of two themes helped to steer people away from *Individualism* and *Fatalism*.
 - Appealing to **Civic Responsibility**—the idea that the city has a shared obligation to its children—muted individualistic thinking and boosted support for better public policy and greater access to effective programs.
 - Appealing to **Civic Potential**—the idea that Jacksonville is on the cusp of great things, just ahead—warded off fatalistic thinking and evoked more aspirational, positive attitudes toward citywide reforms related to children.
- The Jacksonville public (like most Americans) knows very little about how children develop and what influences healthy development. In the absence of a developmental perspective, people assign blame to individuals, families, or broad social conditions like poverty. Public education efforts are therefore an essential piece of building policy support.
- FrameWorks tested several explanatory metaphors in wide use among scientists and

advocates working nationally on building public understanding of child development. All worked very well in Jacksonville. These included:

- **Brain Architecture**, which compares early brain development to building the foundation of a house
- **Serve and Return**, which compares back-and-forth interaction between infants and caregivers to a good game of tennis or volleyball
- **Skills Ropes**, which explains how social, emotional, academic, and physical development are intertwined,
- **Levelness**, which helps people to understand that, just as a wobbly table doesn't support objects very well, when children experience poor mental health, there is a risk that academic, physical, or social-emotional development will slip.
- Jacksonville residents were surprised and concerned that *Jacksonville has the worst child outcomes of any large city in Florida*. This message was effective at creating a sense of urgency, but also needed to be paired with a message element that wards off fatalism. FrameWorks research found two possibilities for this paired element:
 - Comparing the System of Care or other coordination-of-services efforts to the process of building and aligning a well-functioning system of train tracks was highly effective.
 - Using a cause-and-effect explanation of how the System of Care Initiative lowers costs and increases coordination was highly effective.

The recommendations are quickly being adopted by leading voices in Jacksonville and have informed advocacy and outreach efforts across the city. Tools are available to engage a wider circle of communicators in using this research. These efforts include:

- **Toolkit**. An online, multimedia toolkit unpacks the implications of the research and models the recommended strategies in sample communications.
- **Online course**. An interactive learning module offers a guided tour of how to apply the research to communications.
- **Leadership briefings**. FrameWorks has briefed nonprofit leaders in Jacksonville, including the System of Care Initiative board on multiple occasions.
- **Trainings in strategic framing**. FrameWorks facilitators have led a number of workshops and training series for organizations and networks interested in reframing their communications.
- **Adaptation to specific campaigns**. A variety of Jacksonville organizations have applied the research to create specific campaigns and communications guidelines for their leaders and staff.

To access these resources, visit <http://frameworksinstitute.org/toolkits/jax/>.