How Are Advocates Talking about Children's Issues? An Analysis of Field Communications

August 2021

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FRAME WORKS

Preface by David Alexander, Leading for Kids

It is hard to imagine more satisfying work than advocating for kids. I have been privileged to be able to spend my professional life doing this. Indeed, there are thousands of amazing organizations across the country and tens of thousands of child advocates who work tirelessly to ensure that all of our kids can thrive. As important and impactful as our advocacy has been, it is hard to ignore the fact that our collective efforts have not had the full impact that we all hope for. As advocates, we feel that we are delivering messages that will generate broad public support for the issues we care about, but if we are honest with ourselves, these messages have not been fully effective in creating the broad public support for the programs we all know would improve the lives of kids.

What if the ways we talk about kids aren't moving the public to see the need for collective responsibility for all kids or the importance of considering what kids need in all of our decisions? What if our messages are unintentionally turning public opinion away from the causes we care about? This report, "How Are Advocates Talking about Children's Issues?", begins to look at these challenging questions. It is the second report from a larger project "Framing a New Narrative for Our Kids" that has been generously funded by the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation and the Children's Hospital Association. The project's first report described the cultural mindsets that keep children from being a policy priority in this country. This report takes a close look at the narratives and frames currently being used by a wide variety of child advocacy organizations and how these frames affect public thinking. It is especially important for us as advocates to be open to the possibility that many of the frames that we use and that deeply resonate with us, may have an unintended effect on the general public we are trying to influence. The final phase of the project will design and test new narratives and framing strategies in order to identify more productive ways of talking about the issues that are so important to us.

It is my hope that by changing the way we talk about kids, we will be more effective in building a culture that considers kids in all of the decisions we make.

Introduction

This report maps frames and narratives that organizations in the field of children's advocacy use and analyzes their likely effect on public thinking. It is one part of a broader, multimethod framing project, conducted in partnership with Leading for Kids and with support from the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation and the Children's Hospital Association. The project aims to understand current discourse and thinking about children's issues and to identify and begin to mobilize a new framing and narrative strategy that can move children's issues up our collective agenda and build support for critical policies.

This is one of a set of three reports that map the landscape of current discourse and thinking. A pair of reports map current discourse: this one analyzes the field's framing practices, while another report maps how children's issues are framed in the news media—both now and looking back in time. A third report lays out how existing cultural mindsets—the public's deep assumptions and implicit understandings—prevent people from prioritizing children in their thinking about policy.[1] The next phase of research will develop and test frames and narratives to find strategies capable of shifting public thinking and discourse.

We have organized this report around a set of recommendations—ways in which the field can shift its practice to begin moving public thinking. In presenting these recommendations, we describe the field's existing framing and storytelling strategies and explain how these strategies are likely to be received by the public—where they cue productive thinking, and where they inadvertently reinforce unproductive patterns of public thinking or allow these ways of thinking to go unchecked. We then explain how these recommendations can help build understanding of and demand for the changes necessary to better support children's welfare. These recommendations provide a starting point for shifting communications practice that further research will use to build a comprehensive strategy for reframing children's issues.

Research Goals and Approach

We identify below the storytelling and framing strategies that organizations in the field use to communicate about children's issues. The research was designed to explore three questions:

1. What narratives and framing strategies does the field use to communicate about children's issues?

2. How are these frames likely to shape public thinking and understanding?

3. How can the field reframe these issues in order to increase collective concern about them, build a sense that something can be done, and build support for policy change?

The FrameWorks Institute answered these questions via a multistage process. First, in collaboration with project partners, researchers generated a list of nonprofits, advocacy organizations, and think tanks working on and communicating about children's issues. This process identified twenty-five relevant organizations.[2] Researchers then sampled public-facing communications materials from each organization's website. These materials, which included press releases, "about us" pages, mission statements, and other communications collateral, were selected because they described the organization's work and orientation toward relevant topics. The final sample consisted of 132 materials across the twenty-five organizations.

The analysis of this sample of field materials proceeded in three stages. First, researchers coded the sample quantitatively to identify important narrative or framing components of each document, such as relevant stakeholders mentioned (e.g., families, government, etc.) and issues highlighted. Next, they used qualitative analysis to identify themes, trends, and patterns of meaning in the data.[3] This analysis discerned patterns in what was said (documents' explicit language or content) and what was implied (ideas derived via interpretation and inference). Finally, the findings were interpreted against the backdrop of the public's deep assumptions and implicit understandings about children's issues identified in prior stages of research.[4] This analysis explores how field frames are likely to (1) cue and reinforce existing ways of thinking among members of the public; (2) conflict with or challenge existing ways of thinking; or (3) fail to address a topic, leaving people to "fill in the blanks" with existing patterns of thinking. This enables us to identify how frames embedded within materials are likely to affect public understanding of children's issues.

This three-step analysis was used to develop a set of communications recommendations—ways in which the field can cue and reinforce productive ways of thinking, avoid reinforcing unproductive ways of thinking, amplify the effective frames already in use, and fill in gaps in public understanding where they exist.

Recommendations

Recommendation #1: Reinforce productive views of child development and highlight a developmental perspective

What the field is doing

The concept of "child development" was not as prominent in field communications as we might have expected. The concept was mentioned by the field in only 24.2% of sampled materials, and it was used as a central concept in only 10.6% of materials.

In cases where development was mentioned, there was little discussion of how development works or of specific developmental impacts. For example, the following quote was the opening paragraph to an article about youth in juvenile detention. Throughout the rest of the article, there is no explanation of why detention is especially harmful for adolescents.

> *"While admissions to youth detention continued to fall dramatically since the COVID-19 outbreak in March 2020, a new survey of juvenile justice agencies in 33 states shows that systems slowed the pace of releasing young people from detention, leaving many young people – disproportionately Black – still living in confinement without access to connections or opportunities, and potentially vulnerable to the virus."*

This article discusses a critical period of development—adolescence—yet doesn't highlight the particular developmental needs of adolescents or discuss how lack of "access to connections or opportunities" impacts adolescents' development. This is representative of other articles that discuss conditions that have major developmental implications without highlighting developmental needs or touching on these impacts.

In addition, organizations rarely drew attention to different developmental periods and children's specific needs during these times. With the exception of Zero to Three, which explicitly focuses on the early years, materials rarely distinguished between different age groups or talked about the specific developmental needs of young children, elementary-aged children, or adolescents.

How this is likely to affect public thinking

Our research on public thinking about children's issues found that while understandings of child development have improved over the past twenty years, there are still unproductive models that get in the way of people recognizing how development works and what it says

about what children and adolescents need to thrive.[5] Unless the field continues to explain development, there is a danger that these gains in public understanding could fade. In addition, gains in understanding have largely centered on early childhood development—members of the public are still missing clear ways of thinking about development at other stages, including critically adolescence.[6] If the field doesn't promote a developmental perspective and explain developmental needs at different ages, the public will continue to lack understanding in these areas.

It is critical that the field explicitly talk about different periods of development. As our cultural mindset research found, when people think of "children," they tend to focus on the 3–12 age band.[7] If communicators don't specify age group and make sure to discuss different developmental stages, early childhood and adolescence will remain out of mind for members of the public. This prevents people from thinking about children's needs during these critical developmental periods. Building a deeper understanding of the specific developmental needs of children and adolescents at different ages is vital for building support for policies that address those needs. If people don't recognize the ways in which current policies harm development and how new policies would help, they are less likely to see the need for changing those policies.

What can help

— **Consistently include development as part of the story.** While thinking about child development isn't the main obstacle to collective action on children's issues, it's important to continue talking about development and reinforcing the productive mindsets about development that have spread over the past two decades. If the field doesn't talk about development, there is a danger that gains in understanding of development may fade.

— **Be specific about age and stage when discussing child development.** This will ensure that children of all ages are in view.

— **Be explicit about developmental needs and how policies impact development.** Communicators must highlight the developmental needs of children at different ages and explain how policies impact development in order to build understanding of and support for policies that most effectively and appropriately support those needs.

— **Highlight periods other than early childhood.** The public understands early childhood development better than other periods of development. Talking about other periods is critical to expanding public understanding of the specific developmental needs of children at these ages.

Recommendation #2: Keep discussing racial equity—but explain terminology and continue to set the frame at the systems level

What the field is doing

Unlike the media, who, as we discuss in a parallel report, talk little about racism and racial equity when covering children's issues,[8] the field discusses these issues significantly in its materials. Issues of race were mentioned explicitly in 38.6% of sampled materials. These included discussion of systemic racism and avowals of the importance of racial equity, such as statements showing support for Black Lives Matter and related civil and human rights movements.

> *"The racial and ethnic disparities that persist across economic, education, healthcare, criminal justice, and other sectors of society make clear that systemic racism continues to undermine the foundations of well-being for communities of color by denying access to opportunity and making it more difficult to secure jobs, housing, healthcare, education, nutrition and equal treatment under law."*

> *"We acknowledge that systemic racism extends beyond the realm of criminal justice and law enforcement. From healthcare and education to child welfare and economic security, our systems and institutions often fail to deliver equal rights and opportunity for people of color from the earliest ages."*

While organizations talk explicitly about systemic racism and racial equity, these discussions are often couched in terms that are not widely accessible and are almost never explained. Terms like "racial equity," "diversity, equity, and inclusion," and "systemic racism" have become commonplace in nonprofit circles, but members of the general public frequently don't know what they mean. Below are some sample quotes with such terms highlighted:

> *[Organization] celebrates **diversity, equity, and inclusiveness**. We embrace these pillars of excellence as crucial to a healthy organization and supportive of the communities we serve. However, we recognize that **inequitable systems, institutional racism,** discriminatory practices, and **implicit bias** continue to limit access and widen the opportunity gap for students who lack power and privilege.*

> *[Organization] will provide these communities with technical assistance and targeted interventions, such as access to its prenatal and NICU initiatives and professional education, such as **implicit bias** training.*

*The Blueprint is significant and unprecedented because it is the first time the wide range of reproductive health, justice, and rights organizations have come together to develop a detailed and **intersectional** agenda.*

Field materials sometimes introduced facts and figures to illustrate racial disparities, but they often left these data unframed, providing little commentary or interpretation of them. In other words, in those cases where disparities were discussed, they were often asserted and not explained, expecting the facts to speak for themselves. The following quote is typical in that it presents facts without explaining or framing them.

"In 2018, black children represented 14% of the total child population but 23% of all kids in foster care.

By comparison: White kids represent 50% of the nation's child population and only 44% of its foster care population. Latino and Hispanic children represent 25% of kids nationwide yet just 21% of all kids in foster care. And Asian and Native Hawaiian kids make up 5% of the U.S. child population but only 1% of its foster care population. In other words, these three groups are under-represented in foster care when compared to their presence in the total child population."

The quote above tells us there are disparities in participation in foster care but doesn't tell us *why* these disparities are occurring.

How this is likely to affect public thinking

Racist tropes are a familiar part of public discourse on social issues—including debates about major pieces of children's legislation, as our research on media content has found.[9] These tropes trigger and reinforce racist stereotypes, which are woven together with the assumptions that some members of the public (most typically, but not exclusively, conservatives and white people) rely on to think about children's issues.[10] Combatting these tropes and stereotypes is essential to building public support for government action on children's issues generally and—in particular—for measures designed to promote equity.

The fact that the field is explicitly talking about racial equity and its importance is promising. But to counter these tropes and undermine these stereotypes, the field must change its frame in two important ways.

First, although there is greater awareness about systemic racism in the wake of the Black Lives Matter movement,[11] the general public is still unfamiliar with many of the terms highlighted above. These terms serve as a shorthand for social justice organizations and their allies but using them liberally without context or explanation is likely to leave the public confused and uncertain about what is meant. For example, in recent focus groups for a different project, we

found that both white and Black participants were largely unfamiliar with the term "equity." When we asked people what this term means, in the context of a conversation about racism, most people talked about home equity or business equity and assumed that the link to racism must be different levels of home or business ownership. In other words, many members of the general public may find DEI vocabulary confusing or even alienating if it is not explained and contextualized. There is great power and value in spreading the terminology of the racial justice movement, as a way of introducing new ideas and concepts to people, but if the field wants to invite new people into the conversation, it must find ways of clearly explaining this terminology to avoid confusing and alienating these people.

Second, unframed facts and figures invite the general public to fill in the blanks about the meaning of the statistics presented. Across a range of research projects, we find that when presented with unexplained facts about racial disparities, people often rely on racist assumptions about Black or other people of color to explain them. For example, people might explain differences in income or wealth by suggesting—often implicitly—that in "some communities" work or education isn't valued, which is what explains the lack of success of "those" (i.e., Black and brown) families. In other words, without effective framing, facts and statistics are often interpreted in ways that reinforce the very assumptions about race that communicators are trying to undermine. The field needs to explain facts and statistics in ways that make the takeaways clear for the public, so people don't misinterpret what they're saying.

Moreover, Americans across racial groups and ideology tend to think about racism in interpersonal rather than systemic terms. People see racism as a function of individual bias and discrimination rather than as something that is built into our society's institutions, systems, and structures. Encouragingly, the racial justice demonstrations of the past year seem to have strengthened the availability of a more systemic perspective, but understandings of systemic and structural racism remain uneven and thin. It is thus critical that communicators not only continue to talk in systemic terms, but also that they explain *how* social systems produce racial inequities and *how* systemic solutions create greater racial equity among children and families.

What can help

— **Continue talking about racial equity.** This is a much-needed corrective to the media's practice of largely ignoring the subject.[12]

— **Explain and contextualize terms.** Explain what terms such as "systemic racism," "equity," and others mean in accessible language, using concrete examples to show what they look like, how they work, and what effects they have.

— **Always contextualize facts and figures about racial equity.** Facts and figures rarely speak for themselves—especially when it comes to issues of race and racial equity where there are deep cultural models that people use to process such information. Leaving facts and

figures about racial inequities unframed invites the public to insert their own—often unproductive—understandings about the issue.

— **Explain systemic sources of racial inequity and how systemic solutions would help.** While further research is needed to know how best to talk about systemic racism and children, there's no doubt the field must not only adopt a systemic frame but also explain how racism works in and through systems and how it can be combatted by changing systems.

The double-edged sword of "human potential"

In many of the communications in our sample, organizations emphasized that "all children," "all students," and "all people" have the capacity to succeed and to reach their potential if they are provided with the right environment and supports. The following quotes are typical of this pattern:

> *"At [Organization], we envision a society that has the knowledge and will to support all infants and toddlers in reaching their full potential."*

> *"Partnering with educators, literacy advocates, and policymakers, [Organization] develops and provides programming, professional development, and resources that empower and raise families to achieve their potential."*

> *"The [Organization] is the leading nonprofit committed to strengthening community by connecting all people to their potential, purpose and each other."*

This frame has upsides for advocates, but communicators need to deploy it carefully in order to avoid some potential traps inherent in the concept. On the upside, the potential frame helps people to recognize the relationship between supporting children now and how they'll do in the future. By connecting public support for children to their long-term success and down-the-line contributions to communities and society, the human potential frame may help to boost the salience of children's issues in the minds of the American public.

However, there are also potential traps embedded in this frame. The human potential frame risks instrumentalizing children, rendering them valuable only insofar as they have the potential to fulfill their (primarily economic) promise as adults. Like the familiar "return on investment" frame, the human potential frame can sometimes be taken to imply that children are not intrinsically valuable and only matter as means to some other future ends. Advocates and funders must balance communications with the value and importance of the wellbeing of children and adolescents, not just as adults, who will later make some contribution to society.

A second trap is how the potential frame may invite generalizations about *who* has potential, which may undermine the idea that all children need support and play into racist stereotypes and stigmas. Talking about children's potential creates space for people to distinguish between children with more and less potential, and people are likely to rely on racist stereotypes to make judgments about which kids have potential and which don't. The idea that children deserve support *because* of their potential invites the idea that kids who supposedly lack potential ("those kids") don't really deserve support.

Further research is needed to identify whether and how the idea of children's potential can be positively leveraged without falling into the traps of instrumentalizing children or inviting relative judgments of the potential of particular groups of young people.

Recommendation #3: Specify the meaning of "child wellbeing"

What the field is doing

Organizations often speak about their goal of promoting "child wellbeing." For example:

> "[Organization] is a project of the [Organization] to track the wellbeing of children in the United States."

> "Children's wellbeing and opportunities depend on where they grow up."

> "The safety and well-being of children in the care of [Organization] across the U.S. is, and always will be, our top priority."

This idea was used broadly across organizational materials in the sample. As with terms relating to racial equity discussed above, the term "child wellbeing" is often left undefined.

We suspect that the ubiquity of the term is due to its ability to holistically encompass multiple outcomes that are of interest to child advocates—from physical and mental health and social and emotional development to educational opportunities and the ability to develop talents and skills. "Child wellbeing" serves as shorthand for a broad set of outcomes, and organizations have come to rely on it as a stand-in for this broader list.

How this is likely to affect public thinking

While "child wellbeing" may be useful shorthand within the field, it is not a term that members of the public necessarily understand in the same ways as the field. By leaving this term undefined, the field invites the public to insert its own interpretations, which can sometimes be unproductive. Our research on cultural mindsets found that people tend to think about "children's issues" in narrow terms, as issues that concern spaces of care, like home and school. This limits thinking about policy to issues like education, childcare, and parental leave. When "child wellbeing" is undefined and its sources unexplained, people are likely to default to this narrow set of care-related issues, rather than recognizing the dimensions of wellbeing that go beyond personal care contexts, such as opportunities for civic engagement and participation, or the development of talents and skills.

What can help

— **Define the term "child wellbeing."** Explain in clear and concise terms what child wellbeing means, what it includes, and why it's important.

— **Connect wellbeing to policies and solutions that impact it.** Make a clear connection between child wellbeing and specific policies that affect it and benefit a wide range of outcomes for children. It is especially important to highlight policies that do not relate directly to the care of children at home or school in order to expand the set of issues that people can see as related to the wellbeing of children and adolescents.

Recommendation #4: Define "opportunity" and be clear about how society structures it

What the field is doing

In their materials, organizations frequently talked about the importance of providing "opportunity" to children, especially as a way to advance equality or equity. However, organizations did not always explain what they meant by "opportunity" or specify what opportunities they are referring to and why they are important.

"[Organization] provide a safe haven for more than 4 million youth, giving them an opportunity to discover their great futures."

"When we center and address the needs of the most marginalized, we recognize their humanity and advance equity and opportunity for all."

"And we are committed to continuing our work to advance justice and opportunity for marginalized children and young adults."

How this is likely to affect public thinking

As with other terms left unframed, leaving "opportunity" undefined invites the public to apply their own understandings of opportunity and success. Given the highly individualistic cultural mindsets that many Americans bring to the table when thinking about public policy and children, it's likely that they will interpret the term as suggesting that all the community needs to do is give children basic opportunities—which by and large they see as already happening—and that it's ultimately up to children themselves (and their parents) to take advantage of these opportunities. In this line of thinking, children who don't succeed are those who didn't work hard enough with the opportunities they had.[13]

When talking about opportunity, it's important to be explicit about two things: (1) that the decisions we make as a society determine the opportunities that individuals and groups have and (2) the fact that in American society, this means that some children and youth have fewer opportunities and supports than others. Further research is needed to identify the best way of doing these things in communications (e.g., it may be that a specific explanatory metaphor or value is effective in countering individualism and helping people think about structuring of opportunity for kids), but it is clear that the term "opportunity" on its own doesn't carry this framework and additional explanation and definition is needed.

What can help

— **Explain what you mean by opportunity.** Articulate clearly what you mean by the concept to foreclose the possibility that the public will fill in with their own understanding.

— **Emphasize that opportunities are shaped by society—and that society provides greater opportunities to some children than others.** Stress and explain the systemic sources of differences in opportunity.

— **Tie opportunity to policies.** Make sure to connect the concept of opportunity to specific policies that would address systems and structures to create more equitable opportunities.

Recommendation #5: Keep talking about parents—while bringing kids into the story

What the field is doing

Organizations implicitly and explicitly foregrounded parents when talking about kids. Parents (or other family members) were mentioned in 50.8% of field materials. These materials frequently argued that supporting children is best accomplished by supporting parents and caregivers. There is a recognition that parents are critical to ensure healthy child outcomes—

they nurture and support, teach healthy habits, make sure children are safe, and make sure they get the healthcare and education they need. This framing centers parents as the source of intervention and support.

> *"Every child deserves a safe, stable, and permanent family and all families deserve the opportunities and supports to raise their children safely and successfully in their own homes, communities and cultures."*

> *"You [parents] are home to your child. And, over time, you are building a home for your little people – one that's loving and patient, and where each of you is getting what you need to be healthy and strong."*

How this is likely to affect public thinking

This practice has potential benefits and drawbacks. On the one hand, foregrounding parents is likely to help members of the public see a wider range of social policies as children's issues. Our research on cultural mindsets found that people can more easily see how a broader set of policies affect parents, whereas when they think about children, people's focus narrows to care-related policies. Talking about parents is a way of linking thinking about children to relevant policies that don't directly involve care at home or school.

On the other hand, members of the public often think individualistically about parents, seeing children's wellbeing as a reflection of the choices of their parents. When thinking this way, considerations of deservingness are top of mind, and people tend to reject policies they see as supporting parents who have made bad choices and thus don't deserve support. In addition, too much emphasis on parents risks obscuring how policies specifically affect kids and backgrounds children's stake in these policies. This framing makes it particularly hard to talk about policies that benefit kids directly rather than via their effects on parents. More research is needed to understand the most effective way of including both parents and children in messages.

What can help

— **Stress how economic policies affect parents.** People are able to recognize that economic policies matter for parents, so emphasizing this connection is a way of helping people see a broader set of policies as family and children's issues.

— **Make the link to kids explicit.** If you've used parents as an entry point to talk about policies that affect families, make sure to continue the chain and explain how those policies affect kids. This helps bring children more clearly into view and makes clear their stake in these policies.

Recommendation #6: Be clear that collective responsibility means government and societal action

What the field is doing

The value of *collective responsibility* was widely used in the field communications we analyzed. Organizations framed child wellbeing as a shared moral responsibility. This frame was apparent in the collective language used in materials, such as "we must" and "we cannot"—formulations organizations used when talking about how to support children's wellbeing. However, organizations were rarely specific about what this collective responsibility entails or how it should be exercised.

Most importantly, the field was rarely explicit about government and societal responsibility. In our analysis of news media pieces on children's issues, we found that 86.6% of articles mentioned government.[14] By contrast, only 38.6% of field materials sampled mentioned government. In other words, the field frequently uses collective language to talk about responsibility, but it is rarely clear that this responsibility involves government action or specific, concrete forms of collective action, such as through nonprofit organizations and public/private partnerships.

> *"We must all work together to provide … support [for youth] and make the connection between the relevance of education and the multiple pathways that exist when it comes to future workforce opportunities."*

> *"We belong to each other. Together, regardless of race and beyond race, we must want what is right for each other, aspire for better, and work for greater if we are to leave the generations of youth that will come after us a just and equitable society—all while caring for each other."*

> *[Talking about rates of high school graduation] "As we face this challenge head on, remember that the difference between 84.6 and 90 percent is not just a statistic, but approximately 200,000 young people who will be left behind. This is a disaster for them, their families and communities, and the nation. We cannot let that happen."*

How this is likely to affect public thinking

Moral appeals for collective action on behalf of children are essential to counterbalance individualism among Americans. But these calls must go beyond generalities. Unless advocates are clear about who must act, the claim that "we" are responsible can easily be understood as a call for each of us in our personal capacity to do what we can for the kids in our lives, rather than as a call for collective, public action. Advocates must be clear that collective responsibility requires collective action—and specifically, government action.

Our analysis of media coverage of children's issues found that the media tend to portray government as inherently ineffective,[15] so it is especially important for advocates to reinforce the idea that while government is currently failing, it has the capacity to do better. In other words, advocates must be careful not to suggest that government is inherently ineffective but rather make clear that policies can be changed and, if they are, government can effectively promote children's wellbeing.

Advocates can, of course, complement discussion of government with calls for other forms of collective action, via nonprofits, public/private partnerships, or other institutions or arrangements. Yet it's critical that, in doing so, advocates explicitly articulate the societal scale of responsibility and action. Calls for nongovernmental action can easily be interpreted as calls for charity—that is, discretionary action by individuals to try to help those in need. This way of thinking about responsibility is opposed to a truly collective understanding. It's essential that advocates find ways of clearly signaling that our society as a whole has a responsibility to act.

What can help

— **Continue to employ collective language to talk about responsibility.** This is a necessary counter to Americans' tendency toward individualism.

— **Specify the role of government and other collective institutions.** Government has an important role to play in organizing collective action on behalf of kids. Be explicit about government's role in advancing children's wellbeing. When talking about nongovernmental institutions, be clear that these are channels through which our society as a whole can fulfill our responsibility.

— **Build a sense of collective efficacy.** The public often has a low opinion of government's ability to help—an idea that is amplified by the media. Advocates should build a sense of efficacy by emphasizing that we can change policy and that, with the right reforms, government can make a big difference in kids' lives.

Recommendation #7: Retire the "vulnerability" frame.

What the field is doing

The "vulnerability" frame—the idea that kids are deeply susceptible to harm and must be protected from this—was widely prevalent in the field communications we analyzed. The frame was applied in particular to disadvantaged children and their families, to describe the specific risks that these groups face. Sometimes the word "vulnerable" was used explicitly, while other times the frame was alluded to in the language.

The [Organization] supports children, families, and communities as they strengthen and create conditions that propel vulnerable children to achieve success as individuals and as contributors to the larger community and society.

As [the risk factors for child death from the coronavirus] increase, protective factors for vulnerable children and families such as food security, access to extended family caregivers, pediatric visits, connections within faith communities, and safe spaces such as schools have been diminished. Teachers, school personnel and health care providers are the greatest sources of reports to child abuse hotlines. With so many mandated reporters of child abuse unable to observe and report suspected maltreatment during this crisis, sharp declines in hotline reports are already being seen across the country — and nobody believes this indicates a decline in incidents of abuse.

How this is likely to affect public thinking

While it important to highlight how our society has harmed and continues to harm children and families from oppressed and marginalized groups, using the vulnerability frame is problematic. The frame suggests that some people have some innate traits that makes them more likely to be disadvantaged in some way. This framing allows space for racist and sexist stereotypes that locate problems in oppressed groups rather than in our collective actions and social systems. It puts the burden on the people who are affected, rather than on the public policies and systemic racism or sexism that are really to blame.[16] The frame is also paternalistic, as it suggests that people are objects to be protected rather than subjects to be engaged with.

What can help

— **Avoid the term and concept of vulnerability.** Talking about vulnerability is likely to reinforce unproductive assumptions about marginalized groups.

— **Be explicit about the systems that cause harm**. Highlighting the ways in which policies, institutions, and social structures work to harm marginalized children and families makes clear where the problem resides—in how we organize society, rather than in children or families.

— **Don't talk about disparities in harm without highlighting the collective actions that cause them.** Talking about disparities without highlighting the actors and actions that cause them allows people to fall back on the assumption that children and families are the source of the problem.

How Are Advocates Talking about Children's Issues?

Recommendation #8: Treat children as active subjects in your communications

What the field is doing

The majority of field materials portray kids as passive objects to be acted upon rather than as active subjects. Only a minority of field materials—which primarily focus on adolescents—portray children as subjects with their own motives, desires, opinions, and ability to act.

The following quotes, which come from this minority of materials, provide a useful illustration of how children *can* be talked about as active subjects whose voices should be listened to and who are capable of action:

As we work to strengthen communities, we must listen to and lift up the voices and experiences of impacted people and communities, particularly the voices of young people in those communities who will lead future generations. Intentionally engaging impacted communities strengthens policies, strategies, and decision-making. When we center and address the needs of the most marginalized, we recognize their humanity and advance equity and opportunity for all.

"I'm committed to helping young folks in my community get access to abortion care. We all deserve education on what abortion is and how it ties into every other facet of reproductive health care. We all deserve real sex education and access to birth control. And if we need an abortion, we should be able to get it without barriers and stigma. I know a lot of young people that feel this way, and it's time for us to work together to protect abortion access. I'm working to become a doula and I'm ready to start a network on my campus to help people understand their options, get transportation, and have support services like abortion doulas when they need them."

"Today's Supreme Court decision to protect DACA is a long overdue victory and a testament to the power of immigrant youth that have demanded a better way forward for our country."

How this is likely to affect public thinking

When we portray children as passive objects rather than active subjects, we reinforce the widespread assumption that children should be kept out of our public conversations and collective decisions. Members of the public tend to think that children should not have to deal with the burdens of social problems and should be protected from these weighty concerns. When communicators adopt a paternalistic standpoint, they reinforce this assumption and make it that much harder for children to be heard on the issues that concern them. Moreover, this deprives advocates of the voices of a powerful set of messengers—children themselves.

How Are Advocates Talking about Children's Issues?

What can help

— **Enlist children as messengers.** While more research is needed to understand whether enlisting children as messengers is effective in building support for specific policies or goals, the act of elevating children's voices is undoubtedly powerful in signaling that children should be more fully engaged and in countering paternalistic assumptions.

— **Create and feature content that centers children's own experiences**. Instead of speaking *for* children, center their own motives, desires, and opinions in your narratives.

Conclusion

By many measures, America is failing its children. In 2019, 14.4% of all children under the age of 18 in the United States were living below the official poverty line.[17] Children of color in this country fare even worse. This is not the result of immutable forces of nature, but of specific policies that misdirect resources away from where they are most needed to ensure the welfare of all children. Children's advocates and funders do critical work in promoting policies and programs that foster their wellbeing at all ages.

But as recent FrameWorks research shows, the public lacks an understanding of how most public policy relates to children. In order to begin to shift public thinking through framing and narrative efforts, we must grasp how the field is currently framing children's issues. In documenting the field's framing and storytelling practices, this report takes an important step toward this goal.

This report identifies several ways that the field can shift how it frames children's issues to expand public thinking and understanding. Among other things, communicators need to explain concretely what terms such as racial equity, child wellbeing, and opportunity mean in the context of children's policy. They must tell a fuller story of what child development entails at different ages. Communicators also need to talk more explicitly about the role of government in safeguarding kids' wellbeing and use parents as gateways into talking about policies that benefit children while also finding ways to bring kids into the story.

In later stages of the project, FrameWorks will conduct research to identify an overarching framing strategy or narrative. This work will build on the ideas in this report as we search for the most effective way of moving children's issues up the public agenda. Through empirical testing of different candidate frames, we will be able to identify an overarching strategy capable of shifting public thinking at a foundational level. This will provide the field a critical tool as it works to ensure that all children have what they need to thrive.

Endnotes

1. L'Hôte, E., & Volmert, A. (2021). *Why aren't kids a policy priority? The cultural mindsets and attitudes that keep kids off the public agenda.* FrameWorks Institute. https://www.frameworksinstitute.org/publication/why-arent-kids-a-policy-priority-the-cultural-mindsets-and-attitudes-that-keep-kids-off-the-public-agenda

2. The organizations sampled were America's Promise Alliance, YMCA of the USA, Boys & Girls Clubs of America, ASPIRA Association, Inc., National Center for Children in Poverty, GLSEN, National Education Association, Kids in Need Foundation, National Center for Families Learning, StandUp for Kids, American Academy of Pediatrics, Partnership for America's Children, Annie E. Casey Foundation, Zero to Three, Kids Count Data Center, Big Brothers Big Sisters of America, Alliance for Children's Rights, Stand for Children, March of Dimes, Children's Rights, Children's Defense Fund, Advocates for Youth, The Children's Partnership, Every Child Matters, and the W. K. Kellogg Foundation.

3. In the qualitative analysis, researchers used a grounded theory approach, developing codes inductively as they went and organizing them based on what emerged from the data, rather than imposing a preestablished coding scheme. See Glaser, B., & Strauss, A. (1967). *The Discovery of Grounded Theory: Strategies for Qualitative Research.* Aldine; Strauss, A., & Corbin, J. (1990). *Basics of Qualitative Research: Grounded Theory Procedures and Techniques.* Sage Publications.

4. For a discussion of these assumptions and understandings, see L'Hôte, E., & Volmert, A. (2021). *Why aren't kids a policy priority? The cultural mindsets and attitudes that keep kids off the public agenda.* FrameWorks Institute. https://www.frameworksinstitute.org/publication/why-arent-kids-a-policy-priority-the-cultural-mindsets-and-attitudes-that-keep-kids-off-the-public-agenda

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11. FrameWorks Institute. (2021). *Is Culture Changing in This Time of Social Upheaval? Preliminary Findings from the Culture Change Project*. https://www.frameworksinstitute.org/publication/is-culture-changing-in-this-time-of-social-upheaval-preliminary-findings-from-project-culture-change

12. Hestres, L., Rochman, A., Busso, D. & Volmert, A. (2021). *How Are Children's Issues Portrayed in the News? A Media Content Analysis.* FrameWorks Institute.

13. Our research on affordable housing found that the term "opportunity" is typically interpreted in highly individualistic ways in the context of housing. See FrameWorks Institute. (2017.) *Reframing Affordable Housing: Findings from Peer Discourse Sessions.* https://www.frameworksinstitute.org/publication/reframing-affordable-housing-findings-from-peer-discourse-sessions

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About FrameWorks

The FrameWorks Institute is a nonprofit think tank that advances the mission-driven sector's capacity to frame the public discourse about social and scientific issues. The organization's signature approach, Strategic Frame Analysis®, offers empirical guidance on what to say, how to say it, and what to leave unsaid. FrameWorks designs, conducts, and publishes multi-method, multidisciplinary framing research to prepare experts and advocates to expand their constituencies, to build public will, and to further public understanding. To make sure this research drives social change, FrameWorks supports partners in reframing, through strategic consultation, campaign design, FrameChecks®, toolkits, online courses, and in-depth learning engagements known as FrameLabs. In 2015, FrameWorks was named one of nine organizations worldwide to receive the MacArthur Award for Creative and Effective Institutions.

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August 2021

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