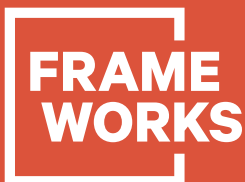


TRENDS REPORT

Five Trends in Public Thinking about the Connections between Early Childhood Development and Climate Change

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Center on the Developing Child
HARVARD UNIVERSITY

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Introduction

Climate change caused by the burning of fossil fuels is a present reality, and children are among those most at risk of long-lasting harm. The environments where young children grow up play an important role in shaping the development of their brains and biological systems, including immune, metabolic, and cardiovascular systems. Climate change is affecting those environments and disrupting early childhood development, both directly, for instance, through exposure to extreme heat (which can affect long-term cognitive functioning), and indirectly, for instance, through school closures or caregiver stress. As a society, we need to address climate change in ways that consider these harms and make changes designed to help kids thrive in a changing climate.

Despite the risk of negative consequences of climate change for children's health and development, this is not an issue that the public is widely aware of, nor is it a major policy focus. A significant shift in public thinking on this issue is needed if we are to build a widespread mandate for change.

This brief presents some key insights on how the public is thinking now and what this means for communicators who are advocating on this issue. A [longer report](#) outlines these findings in greater detail, alongside an analysis of current discourse in the media and in the advocacy field.

While the American public has some mindsets that present a challenge to advocates, we also find that the *absence* of established thinking and discourse presents a significant opportunity to talk about this issue in a way that can build greater public understanding. Further research will be needed to explore how people's thinking can shift in response to framing strategies that are designed to effectively communicate about children and climate change.

Key Findings

FINDING #1

People do not tend to think of children in connection with climate change. When they do, the focus is on direct impacts to health, rather than longer-term developmental impacts.

What We're Finding

People do not readily make connections between children and climate change and, when asked, will initially often draw a blank. When people reflect on how climate change affects children, they mostly focus on immediate physical harms like injury, heatstroke, and (often equating pollution with climate change) exposure to toxins, without recognizing long-term developmental impacts. Sometimes, children are perceived as especially *vulnerable*, due to their physical frailty and dependence on caregivers. Sometimes, conversely, children are perceived as *resilient* because they are young and able to adapt quickly or bounce back. Whether children are thought of as vulnerable or resilient, people tend to emphasize short-term and immediate effects on health, rather than the more profound and long-lasting impacts on development. There is also a mindset that climate change will impact today's children, but only many years in the future, when the situation gets worse.

What It Tells Us

Communicators need to build an understanding of how climate change affects child development. Existing mindsets on this are quite limited because people don't take into account the long-lasting developmental consequences of environmental harms. Communicators also need to show that climate change is already shaping children's physical, cognitive, and emotional development today, not just in the future.

FINDING #2

Structural inequities and how they will be exacerbated by climate change are not well understood.

What We're Finding

People often assume that climate change affects everyone equally, regardless of factors like race, class, or gender. When reflecting on why some groups may be more impacted than others, there is a tendency to rely exclusively on income level as the main source of vulnerability. In other words, people tend to link greater climate harms to poverty, emphasizing lack of resources, rather than the role of systemic racism in exacerbating climate harms. Sometimes people weigh income competitively against race, drawing on the *Class Not Race* mindset to deny that racism is a factor. This extends to children, as people tend not to assume that racism affects how children are impacted by climate change.

What It Tells Us

These mindsets obscure the structural racism that shapes disproportionate exposure and vulnerability. However, it is helpful that the public is thinking about how people experiencing poverty will be disproportionately impacted. Communicators could build upon this existing awareness of income inequality but deliberately name racism and explain how historical and ongoing injustices deepen climate impacts for marginalized communities.

FINDING #3

People think about how climate change can impact caregiving but usually limit caregivers to parents.

What We're Finding

When people think about how climate change affects children indirectly, via caregivers, they focus narrowly on impacts to fetuses during pregnancy or the physical ability of parents to protect their children in an emergency. Other indirect impacts on children, such as caregiver trauma or stress, tend not to be front of mind. As we find in other research on mindsets about children and caregiving, people tend to rely on mindsets like the *Family Bubble*, in which it is assumed that child wellbeing is determined by parents and the home environment. This means that there is little recognition of how other adults, like teachers or health care workers, also shape children's wellbeing.

What It Tells Us

The narrow focus on parents is limited in explaining how caregivers shape children's environments and how these caregivers will be impacted by the changing climate. Communicators should highlight how a wide range of adults and institutions are affected by climate change and how this, in turn, affects children's development and daily environments.

FINDING #4

People think parents are primarily responsible for children's wellbeing, but the government also has a role to play.

What We're Finding

Responsibility for protecting children from climate harms is placed first on parents, with government involvement seen as a backup, or *safety net*, if parents fall short. Even when people recognize the government's role, they are skeptical about its effectiveness due to perceptions of corruption.

What It Tells Us

This way of thinking overemphasizes private responsibility and undercuts systemic solutions. Communicators should affirm that governments have a duty to act proactively to protect children's health and development, not just intervene when crises hit families. While people can perceive that corporate greed contributes to climate change and that governments often fail to act due to corruption, these mindsets can easily tip into a sense of fatalism, that meaningful change is unlikely. In [previous research on the *System Is Rigged* mindset](#), we have found that such problems can be talked about very productively, so long as they are paired with key framing elements, such as values that inspire collective action and specific solutions that can appropriately match the scale of the problem.

FINDING #5

Solutions that can help children thrive in a changing climate are not front of mind. People tend to focus on individual behavior change or technological fixes.

What We're Finding

When asked about solutions, people mostly suggest teaching children about climate change, making greener consumer choices, or relying on the inevitable advancement of technologies like electric cars. Systemic solutions that could protect or support children—for instance, transformations in health care, energy systems, and urban planning—are rarely mentioned.

What It Tells Us

This limits the range of solutions people see as possible. Communicators should introduce collective, systemic actions that strengthen early childhood environments, emphasizing solutions that match the scale of the climate crisis and center children's wellbeing.

Emerging Recommendations

These insights on public thinking present communicators with several promising directions of travel:

- 1. Talk about the impacts of climate change on children, and on development, when you talk about climate change.**

Children are largely missing from the conversation about climate change, despite facing significant risks to their current and long-term health. When writing about climate change, communicators should talk about children specifically.

- 2. Highlight the present impact of climate change on children, not just the future impacts.**

Rather than playing into the mindset that climate change is a deferred problem, talk about how climate change is happening now, and give examples of how it is currently affecting children.

- 3. Talk about developmental impacts of climate change clearly, not just current health risks.**

While people do sometimes connect environmental changes to long-term developmental impacts, for instance, when thinking about the transfer of substances to a fetus during pregnancy, communicators have an opportunity to build understanding of the many direct and indirect ways that climate change can influence long-term health outcomes for children.

- 4. Connect climate change's impacts on adults to impacts on children's health and development.**

Communicators can deepen people's understanding of the way that caregiving can be affected by climate change. For example, if a parent's job is lost due to a climate emergency, which was the case for many in the January 2025 Los Angeles fires, it affects aspects of family stability, which can have down-stream impacts on child development. In addition, people tend to think of parents as the only influential adults in children's lives. We can widen the lens on caregiving by highlighting the impacts of climate change on the many other adults who play a role in the lives of young children, including pediatricians and educators, as well as parents.

- 5. Be clear that marginalized groups will be disproportionately impacted by climate change, and explain why.**

There is some understanding that low-income communities will be disproportionately impacted by climate change, but communicators need to build on this to show how other structural inequities play a role. Racism, specifically, needs to be mentioned as one of these factors. Communicators will likely need to unpack and explain this connection, for instance, by using explanatory chains to show how racist policies in the past can be traced to disproportionate environmental harms in communities of color.

6. Shift responsibility for protecting children from only parents to our governments and wider society.

The public tends to think about parents as being primarily responsible for their child's health and development, and it sees the government as a safety net if parents fail. Instead, communicators need to build a sense of proactive collective responsibility for children in the face of climate change, calling on the government to implement specific mitigation and adaptation policies.

7. Talk about how people can be involved in solutions that address the root causes of climate change and help children thrive.

Currently the solutions that are top of mind focus on individual behavior change (e.g., recycling) or the advancement of technology (e.g., electric cars). There is room for communicators to propose more collective solutions that get to the root of the problem and show how individuals can be involved. While more research is needed on the most effective framing strategies, this could mean more emphasis on civic action (e.g., joining a climate movement group, contacting representatives about climate policies) and less emphasis on individuals going green.

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, multi-disciplinary 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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Acknowledgments

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