

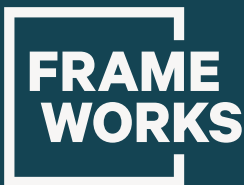
Executive Summary

Measuring Early Years Mindsets:

Patterns of Thinking that Shape Australia's Future

FrameWorks Institute, in partnership with
CuriJo and Minderoo Foundation

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Acknowledgements

The Moving Mindsets Project recognises the valuable contributions from all our partners

and participants including Advisory Group ■ Curiyo · Minderoo Foundation project team ■ Tiraapendi Wodli ■ Community Reference Group (the Tiraapendi Wodli-led group of eight Aboriginal leaders).

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Engagement partners (in alphabetical order): Act for Kids ■ Australian Children's Content Summit ■ Emerging Minds ■ Flying Bark Productions ■ Karitane ■ Minderoo Pictures ■ Parenting Research Centre/Raising Children Network ■ Queensland Kids Partnership ■ Raising Literacy Australia (Words Grow Minds) ■ Runaway Unicorn ■ SNAICC ■ Story Bridge Films ■ The Front Project

The FrameWorks Institute acknowledges the Traditional Owners and Custodians of Country throughout Australia. We extend our respect to Traditional Custodians of the lands on which we conduct research, to Elders past and present, and to all Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples whose wisdom contributes to our future. The research for this report took place online with participants from across Australia, including from the traditional lands of some 500 different Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples.

This report focuses on findings from a nationally representative survey conducted online in February 2026. We recognise the rich cultural and linguistic diversity of communities across Australia. We acknowledge that people from different backgrounds have varied experiences. The findings presented in this report reflect the views of participants who speak English and were able to take part in an online survey. As such, they do not fully capture the experiences of all communities in Australia. Including this rich diversity would require appropriate translation into various languages and survey hosting on platforms supporting those languages and is beyond the scope of the research undertaken at this time.

We use the terminology Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples in this report. We recognise there is diversity among Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities, with approximately 250 languages and complex links to different Country and kin throughout Australia. We also recognise differing preferences regarding the use of terminology and that many people prefer to be known by their specific group name, their Country, as Traditional Owners and Custodians and/or as First Nations People.

Content Warning

One mindset described in this report (*Otherism*) includes harmful racist and bigoted thinking about certain groups of people. Some readers may find descriptions of this type of thinking traumatic and triggering. For a list of national support services, including culturally safe services, see Appendix C.

We include descriptions of this mindset because it is present in public thinking in Australia. We understand that describing this mindset is complicated and not without risks. However, we also feel that it is important to understand these harmful assumptions so we can develop framing and narrative strategies to counter and overcome them and ensure that these mindsets aren't unintentionally triggered by the way we communicate about the early years. By describing this mindset, we are in no way condoning it; on the contrary, we recognise this thinking as highly toxic and describe it in service of finding ways to push it out of public thinking to advance justice, equity and inclusion.

Executive Summary

Advocates and communicators working to promote the wellbeing of young children and families in Australia face critical challenges and significant opportunities. While our research shows there is broad public recognition that children and families need greater support,¹ understanding of the specific factors that shape early development and support for actions necessary to improve the wellbeing of all children and families in Australia remains uneven.

Advancing better policies and changing child- and family-serving systems depends on shifting the cultural mindsets that shape how Australians think about the early years. These deeply held patterns of thinking influence what people see as the problem, which solutions seem appropriate and viable, who they see as responsible and the extent to which they expect and demand change from leaders.

This report is part of a multiyear project undertaken by the FrameWorks Institute in partnership with Curijo and Minderoo Foundation. It is written for advocates and communicators working in and on the systems that affect children and families in Australia — including the early years, housing, employment, justice, health, education, transportation and more.

The larger project aims to measure mindsets about the early years over time, test framing and narrative strategies that can shift them to build demand for change and collaborate with our partners to use project findings to change the public conversation and policy context (see Acknowledgements for the full list of partners).

In this report, we outline a set of findings from a nationally representative descriptive survey conducted in February 2026. In the survey, we measured the strength of a set of mindsets Australians use to think about early childhood and examined how these mindsets vary across groups, how they interconnect or ‘cluster’ and how they relate to support for solutions. Based on these findings, we offer initial recommendations for how to navigate the complex terrain of mindsets that shape public thinking.

In upcoming research, we will begin testing specific framing strategies and develop applied toolkits that support communicators in using recommendations in their communications and strategies.

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Our findings show that individualistic ways of thinking — such as the idea that parents are narrowly responsible for early years outcomes — remain strong. But we also find evidence for a set of more collective and systems-oriented mindsets that people can and do use to make sense of the early years and that lead to dramatically different conclusions about what needs to be done.

We also find important differences in mindset strength across demographic groups. For example, mindsets related to collective responsibility and racism vary significantly when we look across demographic groups, while other mindsets — such as *Individualism* and *Family Bubble*, the idea that parents are narrowly and exclusively responsible for children's outcomes — are held at similar levels across groups. In addition, some demographic differences (for example, age) correspond to significant variation in mindset strength. These differences can help guide the choices we make when we communicate and the common themes that we embed into and use to advance our stories.

We find that mindsets are closely tied to support for policy change. Certain mindsets, such as *Government as Partner* and mindsets that recognise the impact of racism on children and families, are strongly associated with increased policy support. The stronger these mindsets are in people's thinking, the more they support policies and solutions. Other mindsets — such as *Fatalism*, *Otherism* (the idea that there is a superior 'us' and an inferior 'them' that compete for resources) and *Racial Progress* (thinking that leads people to the conclusion that racism is no longer a problem) — erode support for solutions. This shows that using framing strategies to activate more productive mindsets can help build support for change.

The report identifies two broad groups, or what we call 'clusters', of interrelated mindsets. These mindsets are connected to one another — meaning that the stronger a mindset is in thinking, the more likely a set of other mindsets are strongly endorsed. When we activate one mindset in a cluster with our framing, it is likely that all the other mindsets in the cluster also become active and shape thinking. One cluster focuses on individual responsibility and a sense that there is a natural order to the world. When this cluster is active, people are resistant to change. They hold on to the status quo and have difficulty seeing the effects of context and systems in shaping the lives and development of young children and families. The other cluster opens people up to a sense of collective responsibility and allows people to see the role of context and systems. This cluster leads to the recognition of a shared, social responsibility for the wellbeing of children and of the need to look at and alter contexts to provide it. Both of these clusters exist in people's thinking, and people can (and do) move between them based on how issues are framed. The presence of these mindset clusters unlocks a new layer of strategy by revealing a range of mindsets that can be activated through communications to strengthen solutions support — and a set of traps to avoid.

These findings present a set of implications for those working on the early years and related issues:

- **The power of framing (avoid/advance):** We find clear evidence that people hold multiple mindsets and that some of these mindsets help to build support for solutions while others undermine it. We also know that these mindsets are frame-sensitive; they are activated by the decisions communicators make about how they say what they have to say. Communications activate mindsets in the moment but can also shift the relative dominance of mindsets over time. Together, this points to the importance of using communications to activate certain mindsets and avoid cueing others effectively in the moment and strategically and persistently over time.
- **How to use limited resources:** Communicators might spend less time and fewer resources trying to strengthen already dominant mindsets that increase support for policy solutions. These mindsets require only minimal cueing to become active in thinking and boost policy support. On the other hand, activating and strengthening productive mindsets that are not as dominant — for example, the *It Takes a Village* mindset, the idea that responsibility for children's outcomes is collective — should be a focus for those working on the early years and related issues.
- **A new look at segmentation:** Significant differences in mindset support between demographic groups can help communicators select segments of the population to target with messages, engagement and campaigns. Communicators can either focus on segments that might be near a tipping point in their endorsement of a mindset or focus their efforts on groups where significant shifts in thinking are needed.
- **Clusters and cascades:** Clusters show that activating single mindsets can turn on broader systems of understanding — for better or worse. Understanding these connections opens up a broader set of potential strategies by expanding the mindsets that are relevant to and shape public thinking.
- **Central lynchpins:** All mindsets are not created equal; certain mindsets are central to broader ways of understanding and are thus key to consider in framing and narrative strategy. Focusing communications efforts on activating lynchpin mindsets in productive clusters can be a highly efficient way to shift thinking. At the same time, it seems important to be extra careful to avoid activating core mindsets in the unproductive cluster.
- **Spillovers:** Mindset clusters are used to think about multiple issues related to the early years and beyond. Realising that communications about a broader set of issues influence thinking about the early years and, in turn, that work on the early years has spillover effects on a wider set of issues points to the importance, power and potential of coordinated, cross-sector framing and narrative efforts.

These implications reveal a set of initial ideas for how to build support for policy and systems change in Australia:

- **Focus on the role of government in supporting children and families:** Navigate multiple mindsets on government while remaining honest and specific about where and when government isn't doing its job and the Australians that it's failing to serve.
- **Advance & strengthen:** Focus on using framing to activate the *It Takes a Village* mindset.
- **Avoid & weaken:** Avoid inadvertently cueing unproductive mindsets (*Otherism*, *Racial Progress*, *Fatalism*) and be attuned to subtle cues that may activate this thinking.
- **Expand & stretch:** Leverage the strength of the *Passive Development (Sponge)* mindset, the idea that children develop through passively absorbing things (for example, language, behaviours and values) from people and the environment, to activate its productive aspects while overcoming its limitations.
- **Build on policy support:** To normalise and further increase support for change, highlight how policy solutions are widely supported across groups. Communicators can also connect familiar policies to less-supported ones and should be clear about why different types of support are required in different contexts and for different groups.
- **Harness clusters and look for lynchpins:** Because mindsets exist in clusters, activating one can activate and strengthen others in a cluster. Central mindsets — such as *Government as Partner* — can be particularly strong cluster activators, and communicators should target them in their framing efforts.

We hope you will engage with us as we continue this research and ramp up our efforts to use findings to support the framing and narrative efforts of those working to ensure the wellbeing of all young children and families in Australia.

GET UPDATES ON THE PROJECT



Scan the QR code or visit www.frameworksinstitute.org to receive updates on the project

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