



FRAMING CHILD POVERTY BY TELLING A DEVELOPMENT STORY A FRAMEWORKS MESSAGE BRIEF

This message brief recounts and interprets data gathered over the past two years on the ways that exposure to the core story of child development (*outlined in Appendix A) influences support for policies designed to remediate child and family poverty. The child development framing research was conducted to inform communications strategies for the Center on the Developing Child at Harvard University and was supported by the Center. These data are incomplete without an understanding of FrameWorks' existing research base on Early Childhood Development. All research reports and recommendations from these bodies of research are available on FrameWorks' website (www.frameworksinstitute.org/e.cd.html). This message brief is intended to draw out the findings relative to support for anti-poverty policies and programs targeted at poor children.

Situation Analysis

For a variety of reasons, Americans tend to have a very narrow view of what child development is, the processes by which it happens, what relationships and experiences facilitate its progress, and the kinds of policies that could usefully support healthy development. With a public perception that child development unfolds naturally and is, mostly, a private concern of parents alone, it is difficult for most Americans to understand how the policies proposed by experts, including policies to reduce child poverty, will positively influence child development.

1. Narrow understanding of development.

In FrameWorks' research that probed the 'cultural models,' or shared assumptions and hypotheses, people hold about child development, researchers found that people tended to consider parents as solely responsible for children's development. This pattern of thinking aligns with narrow attributions of responsibility for children's development - namely, that differences in outcomes for children are almost entirely attributable to either good or bad parenting, and that fixing disparities in outcomes requires changes in parents' motivation and behavior.

A related cultural model with which people use to reason about children is that they are "self-making," or that development essentially unfolds naturally. Child development is seen as largely automatic, with little input from external environments. When thinking along these lines, the negative impact of impoverished environments on children's development simply does not enter into consideration. Nor does the positive impact that could be made in children's development by enriching their environments is difficult for the public embrace.

Finally, the public tends to think of the concept of "development" as learning, or the accumulation of knowledge. They are less likely to see that early relationships and experiences will affect both later learning (the acquisition of skills, ability to concentrate and adapt, etc.) and health (from cardiovascular health to stress susceptibility) for the rest of the child's life. Poor children are often

short-changed on both accounts (that is, their acquisition of skills is much slower and their long-term health prospects are much worse than children who do not grow up in poverty). While the public is generally aware of some of these social consequences of poverty, they are not likely to see these long-term consequences of early child development as having broad societal impacts. Thus, without some specific attention to the long-term consequences of early child poverty and how those consequences have a residual impact on society as a whole, child experts are not likely to gain very much traction on the issues in the public discourse.

2. These assumptions hide other critical factors for development.

These default cultural models downplay the full range of a child's critical interactions, concentrating attention solely on the domain of the family. Important issues such as the influence of a child's physical environment, network of community relationships, and their social and emotional growth rarely get the same public attention and as a result, are rendered largely invisible in the public debate of children's developmental needs. For example, the limiting effects of poverty on children's development caused by poor housing, inadequate nutrition, lack of access to health care, and limited opportunities for learning are barely perceptible within the public conversation of children's development. Thus, the public discussion about the impact of poverty on children's development becomes much more narrowly construed and singularly focused on the family as the only lever for improving child development outcomes.

3. Public discourse reinforces many of these stereotyped models of early childhood.

A media content analysis of child development conducted by FrameWorks found that media rarely addresses young children's issues from a developmental or systemic perspective, choosing instead to focus on the problems of young people – crime and health stories dominate the news coverage. And, within the domain of health, most typical are stories about accidents and safety. These news frames effectively cast the child as “imperiled” and in need of protection from external and physical environments. This can be confusing to the public: is the community a protective influence or the danger from which children need to be protected? The challenge for advocates is to introduce alternative frames that are more likely to encourage consideration of policy options. The crisis based-narratives about poor children and families that tend to shape the public narrative about poverty share this approach and do little to build public support for public policies to ameliorate the problem.

Key Communications Challenge Based on Insights from Research

Talking about poor children, and the struggles of families in poverty, does not elevate public support for policies that improve child and family wellbeing. FrameWorks' tested the effect of this approach on public support for child development policies through the following paragraph: *“Some people believe that society needs to invest in programs that help the most vulnerable children whose families struggle to make ends meet. According to this view, one way to level the playing field for children who suffer from poverty and discrimination is to financially support their access to the same high quality early childhood programs that wealthier families can afford.”* Exposure to this paragraph had **no** positive effect on support for any child development policies including those targeted explicitly at poor children and their families.

Although this approach is commonly found in the public discourse, it has a fundamental problem. It makes poverty an *attribute* of children, rather than a *condition* that negatively affects development.

Within this approach, responsibility for the problem and possible solutions remain lodged within parents and children, their behavior, choices and values. It misses the chance to demonstrate a role for programs and policies that change environments and improve experiences and interactions, and it therefore leaves people's dominant cultural models about parents and self-making children uncontested.

Translating the Challenges into Successful Practice: Essential Elements for Reframing Child Poverty

As FrameWorks has written elsewhere, the Strategic Frame Analysis™ approach focuses on the elements of framing that are empirically shown to improve support for policies. And so, the stories we need to tell to encourage policy thinking must synchronize all of the elements of the narrative from Values, that orient the audience to the big idea or to “what this is about” and appeals to broad public support; to Simplifying Models, that concretize and simplify complex scientific explanations of how things work; reasonable tone; reinforcing visuals; effective messengers; and to thematic stories that include causal chains, or stories that explain the link between cause and effect.

The core story of early childhood development was developed to reframe these issues in ways that would broaden public support for addressing child poverty and our research suggests that key elements of the story do exactly that. (See Appendix A for a complete list of core story elements.) FrameWorks' initial research on this interaction showed that approaching child poverty from the perspective of child development is a successful strategy for advancing anti-child poverty policy objectives.¹ Additional research focused on precisely which aspects of the core story were most successful at elevating policy support.²

In this brief, we will focus on those specific aspects of the core story of development improved policy support, policy salience, and moved attribution of responsibility away from parents and towards government/public solutions. (The tested policies included income supports such as tax credits, job training, subsidized child care and health care, and services targeted at low-income children such as Early Head Start and programs for teen parents. A full list is included in Appendix B.)

While our research base on this issue is quite extensive – spanning almost 10 years, using a wide variety of qualitative and quantitative methods – in this brief we focus on our most recent set of results from an experimental study testing the frame effects on policies that address many aspects of child development including poverty. We find that on the issue of poverty, two values exert the strongest effects on public support for policy: Ingenuity and Prosperity. The narrative iterations of these values that produced increased levels of public support are:

¹ Gilliam, F. D., Jr. (2007). *Telling the Science Story: An Exploration of Frame Effects on Public Understanding and Support For Early Child Development*. Washington, DC: FrameWorks Institute.

² Manuel, Tiffany (2009). *Refining the Core Story of Early Childhood Development: The Effects of Science and Health Frames*. Washington, DC: FrameWorks Institute.

Prosperity: The future prosperity of any society depends on its ability to foster the health and wellbeing of the next generation. When a society invests wisely in children and families, the next generation will pay that back through a lifetime of productivity and responsible citizenship.

Ingenuity: When we invent and replicate high quality programs for young children, we can solve problems in early childhood development and shown significant long-term improvements for children.

Other Elements of the Frame

Our research has shown that values are clearly important in extending support for addressing poverty in the context of early child development. We have also found other elements of the frame useful in advancing some aspect of public policy thinking among the public. Perhaps the most important category here is that of the Simplifying Models. The Simplifying Models noted below were specifically effective at improving either the *salience* of poverty as an issue (e.g., respondents ranked poverty as a higher policy priority) or the shifting attribution of responsibility from private (parent) to public domains (government, public/private partnerships).

Simplifying Models that improved salience by expanding understanding of how child development happens and the impact of early experiences on the brain:

Environment of Relationships

Young children grow up in an environment of relationships that affects all aspects of their development. Healthy development depends upon the quality and reliability of a child's relationships with adults. The support and interaction of trusted adults shapes a child's brain circuits, and can affect academic performance and interpersonal skills later in life.

Toxic stress (with impact on health)

Chronic stressful conditions such as extreme poverty, abuse, or severe maternal depression –what scientists now call “toxic stress”–can also disrupt the architecture of the developing brain. This can lead to lifelong difficulties in learning, memory and self-regulation. We know that children who are exposed to serious early stress develop an exaggerated stress response that, over time, weakens their defense system against diseases, from heart disease to diabetes and depression.

Simplifying Models that improved salience by focusing on what does and doesn't work to improve developmental outcomes:

Effectiveness factors

We can measure “effectiveness factors” that often make the difference between programs that work and those that don't work to support children's healthy development. Without these effectiveness factors, some children can spend just as many hours in a program, but not show many positive outcomes.

Measuring Return on Investment:

In addition, we can evaluate the efficiency of programs for young children by comparing the benefit of the investment to the cost. This allows a reliable comparison between programs that don't improve child development and those that show real results.

Simplifying Models that shifted attribution of responsibility by demonstrating that there are conditions that can be changed, and that problems are solvable:

Toxic stress (with impact on health)

Chronic stressful conditions such as extreme poverty, abuse, or severe maternal depression –what scientists now call “toxic stress”–can also disrupt the architecture of the developing brain. This can lead to lifelong difficulties in learning, memory and self-regulation. We know that children who are exposed to serious early stress develop an exaggerated stress response that, over time, weakens their defense system against diseases, from heart disease to diabetes and depression.

Measuring Return on Investment:

In addition, we can evaluate the efficiency of programs for young children by comparing the benefit of the investment to the cost. This allows a reliable comparison between programs that don’t improve child development and those that show real results.

Putting It All Together: An Example of Effective Communications about Poverty and Early Child Development

Innovative states and communities have been able to design high quality programs for children. These programs have solved problems in early childhood development and shown significant long-term improvements for children. (VALUE: INGENUITY) They work because children grow up in an environment of experiences and relationships, and science tells us that the interactive influences of genes and experience literally shape the developing brain. (ENVIRONMENT OF RELATIONSHIPS) They are the kind of innovations we need because recent science demonstrates that that stress damages the early developing architecture of the brain. Serious and prolonged stress – toxic stress – such as that caused by living in environments of poverty, can lead to lifelong difficulties in learning, memory and self-regulation. We know that children who are exposed to serious early stress develop an exaggerated stress response that, over time, weakens their defense system against diseases, from heart disease to diabetes and depression. [TOXIC STRESS]

Children exposed to the toxic stress caused by poverty need this stress buffered through more supportive and consistent relationships with caregivers, which will reduce the harmful effects on their developing brains. Ensuring that these children can access high-quality, early education programs with consistent, highly trained staff will build these brain connections and result in positive outcomes in their later ability to learn. [POLICY OR PROGRAM RECOMMENDATION] We can take what we know from science about children’s brain development, and combine it with what we know from measuring “effectiveness factors” to be sure that these programs are actually working. In addition, we can evaluate the efficiency of these programs for by comparing the benefit of the investment to the cost. This allows a reliable comparison between programs that don’t improve child development and those that show real results, and ensure that we are taking the right approach to successfully address the negative effects of poverty on brain development. [EFFECTIVENESS FACTORS and MEASURING RETURN ON INVESTMENT.]

Summary Dos and Don'ts

At this writing, we interpret these findings to suggest the following framing strategies:

DON'T Use Poverty, Vulnerable Children or Struggling Families as the value or organizing principle of your piece

DO lead with values of Ingenuity and Prosperity

DON'T inadvertently suggest that poverty is an *attribute* of children and families

DO explain that poverty is a *condition* that can impact development via the model of toxic stress

DON'T rely on facts about disparities in outcomes of poor children

DO invoke the value of Ingenuity with respect to solving tough problems *and* show that we can improve outcomes for children by Measuring Return on Investment, and ensuring programs are those with Effectiveness Factors

DON'T focus on either the plight of individuals in poverty or rely on other framing strategies that exceptionalize

DO show people where systems that we all rely upon break down and specify how they might be fixed

About FrameWorks Institute: The FrameWorks Institute is an independent nonprofit organization founded in 1999 to advance science-based communications research and practice. The Institute conducts original, multi-method research to identify the communications strategies that will advance public understanding of social problems and improve public support for remedial policies. The Institute's work also includes teaching the nonprofit sector how to apply these science-based communications strategies in their work for social change. The Institute publishes its research and recommendations, as well as toolkits and other products for the nonprofit sector at www.frameworksinstitute.org.

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Appendix A: Elements of the Core Story

FrameWorks has engaged in research to translate for lay publics the core scientific story about Early Childhood Development, as developed by our collaborators on the National Scientific Council on the Developing Child. The following is an outline of the key elements of the core scientific story framed in a way that, our research shows, improves people's support for programs and policies associated with the developmental perspective.

- **VALUE: PROSPERITY** The future prosperity of any society depends on its ability to foster the health and wellbeing of the next generation. When a society invests wisely in children and families, the next generation will pay that back through a lifetime of productivity and responsible citizenship.

- **VALUE: INGENUITY** Innovative states and communities have been able to design high quality programs for children. These programs have solved problems in early childhood development and shown significant long-term improvements for children – but many places still don't have access to these innovations.

- **WHAT DEVELOPS: BRAIN ARCHITECTURE SIMPLIFYING MODEL.** The basic architecture of the human brain is constructed through an ongoing process that begins before birth and continues into adulthood. Like the construction of a home, the building process begins with laying the foundation, framing the rooms, and wiring the electrical system in a predictable sequence. Early experiences literally shape how the brain gets built; a strong foundation in the early years increases the probability of positive outcomes. A weak foundation increases the odds of later difficulties.

- **HOW IT GETS BUILT: SERVE AND RETURN** The interactive influences of genes and experience shape the developing brain. The active ingredient is the “serve and return” relationships with their parents and other caregivers in their family or community. Like the process of serve and return in games such as tennis and volleyball, young children naturally reach out for interaction through babbling and facial expressions. If adults do not respond by getting in sync and doing the same kind of vocalizing and gesturing back at them, the child's learning process is incomplete. This has negative implications for later learning.

- **HOW IT GETS BUILT: CAN'T DO ONE WITHOUT THE OTHERS** You can't focus on developing just one part of the child without paying equal attention to the other capacities. Cognitive, emotional and social capacities are tightly connected throughout the life course. Being an interactive organ, the brain utilizes some functions to enrich others. Language acquisition, for example, relies on hearing, the ability to differentiate sounds, and the ability to pay attention and engage in social interaction.

- **HOW IT'S DISRUPTED: TOXIC STRESS** Chronic stressful conditions such as extreme poverty, abuse, or severe maternal depression –what scientists now call “toxic stress”–can also disrupt the architecture of the developing brain. This can lead to lifelong difficulties in learning, memory and self-regulation. We know that children who are exposed to serious early stress develop an exaggerated stress response that, over time, their defense system against diseases, from heart disease to diabetes and depression.

- **WHAT ARE THE CONSEQUENCES: PAY NOW or PAY LATER** Trying to change behavior or build new skills on a foundation of brain circuits that were not wired properly when they were first formed requires more work and is less effective. Remedial education, clinical treatment, and other professional interventions are more costly and produce less desirable outcomes than the provision of nurturing, protective relationships and appropriate learning experiences earlier in life. The exaggerated neurological response to toxic stress never goes away, with costly consequences for both children and society.
- **WHAT ASSISTS WITH OPTIMAL DEVELOPMENT: EFFECTIVENESS FACTORS and RETURN ON INVESTMENT** We can measure “effectiveness factors” that often make the difference between programs that work and those that don’t work to support children’s healthy development. Without these effectiveness factors, some children can spend just as many hours in a program, but not show many positive outcomes. In addition, we can evaluate the efficiency of programs for young children by comparing the benefit of the investment to the cost. This allows a reliable comparison between programs that don’t improve child development and those that show real results.

Appendix B: Poverty and Work Supports Policy Battery

1. Provide income supplements for low-wage working parents to make work pay, such as tax credits and wage supplements.
2. Expand existing paid parental leave programs for low-income parents.
3. Offer opportunities to parents with limited education and low incomes to increase their skills through job training and adult education.
4. Ensure that services provided to children are delivered by professional staff with expertise and skills to deal with the effects of poverty on families, such as severe depression.
5. Make poor families that can demonstrate proof of full-time work (30+ hours per week) eligible for subsidized child care and health insurance.
6. Increase access for poor families to Early Head Start and other comprehensive, high-quality settings for poor infants and toddlers.
7. Provide services to address the needs of teen parents such as programs to help them graduate from high school and college, so they can successfully raise their children.