



Framing Early Child Development Message Brief

The FrameWorks Institute's research on public perceptions of early childhood development is extensive but ongoing. The complete set of research reports to date, and summarizing message memos can be viewed at <http://www.frameworksinstitute.org/ecd.html>

In this summary, we provide some of the highlights from this research, the recommendations that result, and some examples of framing decisions that this research helps to clarify.

Situation Analysis: Child Development is a Black Box

Americans have only a loosely organized model of early child development, leaving them to view what happens inside the child as a "black box." This in turn makes them especially vulnerable to "default" habits of thinking and less able to assimilate new learning into a coherent approach.

1. Default Explanations Predominate.

Because of this, many conversations about early child development "default" to those aspects of child-rearing with which Americans are most familiar: it's "about" the family, self-reliance is the main goal of the successful, self-made child, and physical safety is the primary concern.

2. Americans Struggle for Working Models to Explain Child Development.

The analogies that come most naturally to people when they talk about very young children relate to sponges, blank slates or disks, precious objects, young plants to be nurtured, clay to be molded, empty vessels to be filled, little adults, etc. While these are often sketchy and inadequate, they nevertheless have consequences for the ways people think about what is necessary for healthy child development; most of these metaphors and simplifying models elevate certain types of responses and downplay others.

3. Most popular default frames and current models downplay the full range of a child's critical interactions, concentrating attention solely on the domain of the family and on observable, largely cognitive, development.

Such important issues as the influence of a child's physical environment, network of community relationships, social and emotional growth, are largely invisible to most adults. Frameworks' research has found one of the primary default frames in the public reasoning is that parents are solely responsible for children's development. Indeed, interdependence and interactivity outside the family are downplayed by these working models in favor of children's individualism, self-reliance, and parental responsibility. Advocates reinforce this "family bubble" frame when their communications explain programs and policies as

“strengthening families,” or the like, which obscures the environment of relationships, structures and systems that encourage healthy child development.

4. News media promotes many of these stereotyped frames of early childhood, while experts’ and advocates’ materials fail to contest them effectively or to substitute better frames.

Few news reports address young children’s issues and even fewer do so from a developmental or systemic perspective, choosing instead to focus on “the imperiled child.” Expert materials are confused about the message they wish to deliver on such critical issues as contexts of children’s development, the impact of stress, etc.

5. Daycare isn’t about development.

Americans view the institutions that have traditionally cared for very young children as necessary but regrettable aspects of the fact that many women must work or choose to do so. Thus, there is little positive foundation for early child development to be accrued from Americans’ long-standing familiarity with this issue.

6. The brain research is little understood and, in the absence of real information, seems cold and calculating.

While there appears to be broad acceptance of the idea that something important happens to children “from zero to three,” this appreciation is based on an understanding of brain development as ingesting information, not wiring the circuitry. Americans are leery of approaching child development from the utilitarian standpoint of building a better labor force, for example.

7. School readiness is not yet an effective organizing principle for the lay public.

School readiness is not a clear and motivating concept ready to be tapped by advocates to advance lay support. Indeed, if communications are misdirected, school readiness can be interpreted pejoratively as hurrying children, judging them inappropriately, or as the misguided practice of “fancy” parents.

8. Americans are more likely to consider the policies and programs that form the core of school readiness when communications uses layperson language, emphasizes familiar values, and replaces educational language with the language of discovery.

For example, the phrase “hearts, souls and minds” is more effective in setting up a discussion of the developing child than are explicit school readiness and brain development messages, when the latter are not accompanied by simplifying analogies.

9. Messages framed in terms of stewardship, future, interaction and opportunity serve best to engage the public in the conversation that needs to take place in order to prioritize the constellation of policies associated with school readiness.

Community stakeholders will need to be diligent in translating their policy agendas into these frames in order to advance their cause and avoid the debilitating effects of many of the default frames and faulty understandings associated with early childhood and school readiness.

Key Communications Challenges (Based on Insights from the Research):

1. We must avoid the inference that a child's chances for betterment are totally precluded (determinism) by making clear that the brain is plastic and, with effort, new wiring can be developed – but getting it right the first time is optimal.
2. We need to help people see that, if we wait until pre-K to intervene in a child's development, we are starting too late.
3. People often assume that a child is a sponge or an empty vessel up to a certain developmental point; we need to get inside the child and demonstrate that what happens very early on is foundational to everything that follows.
4. Fuzzy concepts like “personality” or “stress” tend not to be taken as material and serious by people, whereas the brain is taken quite seriously; witness this quote from an informant: *“I think what really gets me ...is that it could actually have a chemical or biological or some sort of impact on the child's brain. ... Behavior is one thing, and attitude and personality is one thing, but if it can really negatively impact ... the chemistry and the makeup of the brain – you can damage that that early – that's really serious. That's more than just having a bad personality, that's really screwing up a kid.”*
5. When people do think about development, they tend to think of it as the amassing of knowledge or learning. We want to get away from the bifurcation of Mind and Body by showing that Brain Architecture is created by numerous kinds of stimuli and that this architecture will affect both learning (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.
6. We need to use examples that go beyond the child's family – caregivers, other adults in the community, conditions in the community like violence, etc. – as stimuli to development. Without this, people will revert to their firmly held notion that the child is the sole responsibility of its family members and see no role for society.

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

As FrameWorks has written elsewhere, Strategic Frame Analysis adopts the position that communications is storytelling; but the stories we tell must have all the elements in place. Values, that orient the audience to the big idea or to “what's at stake” and “what this is about”; Simplifying Models, that concretize and simplify complex scientific explanations of how things work – in this case, how children development; Reasonable tone; Reinforcing visuals; Effective Messengers; and thematic stories that include “causal sequences”, or stories that explain the link between cause and effect. We provide, below, examples of the Values and Models shown through our research to effectively elevate support for children's issues. For the latest research findings as they become available, please visit our website: www.frameworksinstitute.org

Frameworks Institute's research with the National Scientific Council on the Developing Child (developingchild.net) has resulted in the articulation of not only Simplifying Models that more effectively communicate core principles of development, but an overall "Core story" or key elements of development. The Core Story of Development is the focus of our most recent research – identifying how to execute these principles for public understanding and support of early childhood policies.

The Core Story of Development:

1. Child development is a foundation for community development and economic development, as capable children become the foundation of a prosperous and sustainable society (Prosperity).
2. The basic architecture of the brain is constructed through an ongoing process that begins before birth and continues into adulthood (Brain Architecture).
3. Brains are built from the bottom up (Skill Begets Skill).
4. Interaction of genes and experience shapes the developing brain and relationships are the active ingredient in this Serve and Return process (Serve and Return).
5. Cognitive, emotional, and social capacities are inextricably intertwined, and learning, behavior and physical and mental health are inter-related over the life course (Can't Do One Without The Other).
6. Toxic stress damages the developing brain and leads to problems in learning, behavior, and increased susceptibility to physical and mental illness over time (Toxic Stress).
7. Brain plasticity and the ability to change behavior decrease over time and getting it right early is less costly, to society and individuals, than trying to fix it later (Pay Now or Pay Later).

Values

Prosperity: As we look for ways to keep our country prosperous, we need to think of the connection between child development and economic development.

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.

Responsible Manager: Addressing problems before they get worse is the responsible way to manage our society's future. Taking advantage of opportunities that arise as we understand science better allows us to innovate.

The Brain Architecture Simplifying Model: The early years of life matter because early experiences affect the architecture of the maturing brain. As it emerges, the quality of that architecture establishes either a sturdy or a fragile foundation for all of the development and behavior that follows --- and getting things right the first time is easier than trying to fix them later. When interpersonal experiences are disruptive, neglectful, abusive, unstable, or otherwise stressful, they increase the probability of poor outcomes. When a young child experiences excessive stress, chemicals are released in the brain that damage its developing architecture.

Serve and Return Simplifying Model: Scientists now know that 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.

Types of Stress Simplifying Model: Scientists now know that “toxic stress” in early childhood is associated with such things as extreme poverty, abuse, or severe maternal depression and damages the developing brain. It is important to distinguish among three kinds of stress. We do not need to worry about positive stress (which is short-lived stress, like getting immunized). Tolerable stress is made tolerable by the presence of supportive relationships, like a strong family when a loved one dies. But toxic stress lasts longer, lacks consistent supportive relationships and leads to lifelong problems in learning, behavior, and both physical and mental health.

In the following paragraph, we attempt to demonstrate how a conversation about child development might be more effectively introduced, combining the recommendations above into a new narrative:

If our society is to prosper in the future, we will need to make sure that all children have the opportunity to develop intellectually, socially and emotionally. But recent science demonstrates that many children’s futures are undermined when stress damages the early developing architecture of the brain. The stress may come from family tensions over a lost job or death in the family or even changes in caregivers. But the damage that is done from these critical experiences affects the foundation on which future growth must depend for either a strong or weak structure. Serious and prolonged stress – toxic stress – such as that caused by abuse or neglect, makes babies’ brains release a chemical that stunts cell growth. When communities make family mental health and support services available so that early interventions can take place, they put in place a preventable system that catches children before they fall. When communities invest in a stable workforce of trained early child providers, they also help to ensure that a child’s basic foundation will be durable. These early investments reap dividends as child development translates into economic development later on. A child with a solid foundation becomes part of a solid community and contributes to our society.

Finally, the FrameWorks Do and Don't list that we hope can serve as a bit of an overall cheat sheet for what to avoid and what to include in all communications.

DON'T:

- Begin the conversation with school readiness, brain, daycare or development
- Use the language of experts, e.g., “multi-track, age-appropriate developmental contexts”
- Focus only on observable learning
- Use an extortion model: e.g., “If you don't get early ed investments, youth crime will go up down the road.”
- Talk about parents as incompetent or supercompetent
- Make child rearing something you must have resources or education to do well
- Reinforce the family, safety or individualism frames verbally or visually (defensive child rearing)

DO:

- Prime the discussion with values like stewardship, future, prosperity, responsible manager
- Use the language of ordinary people: heads, hearts, minds
- Use examples that are not specifically cognitive & observable, but might pay attention to social and emotional development, as well
- Use an exchange or future model: give to children now who give back later
- Talk about the shared pleasures of raising children, for everyone
- Position pre-school (or early care/early ed) as an opportunity for stimulation that all should have access to regardless of income
- Make community actors visible in children's development
- Wherever possible, connect the child to the larger environment

Lynn Davey, Ph.D. for FrameWorks Institute
Updated April 27, 2009

Proper citation: FrameWorks Institute, “Framing Early Child Development Message Brief.” (2009). Washington, DC: FrameWorks Institute.