



How to Talk About Early Childhood Development to an International Audience

A FrameWorks MessageBrief for the Center on the Developing Child at Harvard University

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Background

Across the United States, new early childhood policy initiatives are emerging that are clearly informed by the science of early brain development. In some states, for example, measures of quality in early learning environments determine the level of childcare subsidies available to low-income parents.¹ School districts throughout the country are shifting pedagogical practice and remodeling the physical classroom environment to better serve the needs of children who experience the adverse consequences of early experiences of toxic stress.² There is still work to do, but these initial gains give concrete testimony to the Center on the Developing Child's influence on increasing the role and visibility of the science of early childhood development in policymaking. Communications research that translates this science for the American public and for policymakers has been a critical part of this effort.

The gap between knowledge and practice in programming and policymaking for young children is not a problem unique to the United States, however. Meeting the developmental needs of children is a global challenge — and one with which the Center is increasingly concerned. Communicating the science of early childhood development to new audiences, however, requires communications research that takes account of different social and

cultural contexts. One major difference between the Center’s domestic and international translational work is that international non-governmental organizations are far more central to the design and implementation of programs for children, especially in developing countries. As such, international aid workers’ conceptualizations of early childhood development pose new communications challenges.

To that end, this MessageBrief provides a summary of FrameWorks’ research on perceptions of early childhood development among international aid workers, and provides research-based strategies for translating the science of early childhood development for this particular field. This work includes both qualitative and quantitative research, consisting of cultural models interviews, media content and field frame analyses, and metaphor design and testing.³

Situation Analysis

In this section, we provide a brief summary of the patterns of thinking that characterize the international aid community’s understanding of early childhood development, and the ways in which media and professional discourses contribute to these patterns.

- *First Things First.* International aid workers largely believe that considerations of early childhood development can only be addressed after certain, more “basic,” needs are met. FrameWorks has termed this the *Hierarchy Of Needs* model because it assumes that programs that deliver certain services to children — such as basic nutrition or disease prevention — are more fundamental than others. While the exact structure of the hierarchy is not universal among members of this field, the fundamental idea that some needs are “more critical” than others is pervasive. The *Hierarchy Of Needs* model thus constitutes the primary obstacle to communicating about investing in early childhood development programs.
- *Disconnected Issues.* Organizations that address international children’s issues operate in distinct and siloed areas of practice. Certain organizations work on health, others on nutrition, and still others on education — to name just a few. These organizations exist in an environment of limited funding, and are forced to compete with one another for resources. As a result, organizations are under profound pressure to demonstrate that investments in their programs yield quantifiable gains. Given this reality, individuals who work in these organizations are poorly positioned to appreciate synergies and inter-relationships across different issue

areas. Instead, practitioners generally characterize the field of international children's organizations as intensely competitive and disconnected.

- *Black Box.* In many ways, international aid workers' perceptions of early childhood development mirror the dominant cultural models that FrameWorks research has identified among members of the U.S. public.⁴ International aid workers lack a robust sense of the process of early brain development, and focus on physical growth and health as the most important developmental outcomes. They attribute near-exclusive responsibility for children's development to the nuclear family. When they are able to consider wider contexts and environments, they often conceptualize children's surroundings as *threats* to their general well-being. Finally, international aid workers often employ the fatalistic view that developmental difficulties cannot be remediated — in other words, that “damage done is damage done.”
- *Few Explanations.* The dominance of these unproductive models can be explained, in part, by the anemic state of public discourse about early childhood development in international forums. Organizations that address children's issues internationally rarely focus attention on early brain development, and coverage of this topic in the international media is equally sparse.
- *Little Adults.* Unlike members of the general public, international aid workers bring a robust conception of children's rights to their work. Practitioners in this field are working hard to establish the understanding that children are people who deserve basic human and legal rights. The implicit equation of children to adults, however, can stand in the way of an in-depth understanding of children's developmental needs. When young children are understood as little adults, it becomes difficult to grasp their processes of brain development, their vulnerability to certain kinds of stressors during these periods, and the importance of social supports to optimize developmental outcomes.

Key Communications Challenges Based on Insights from the Research

- The *Hierarchy Of Needs* model renders international aid workers more prone to dismiss early childhood development as an “extra,” or even a “luxury,” if it is not contextualized within the field of existing practice.

- If early childhood development is introduced into the field of international children’s organizations as a new and distinct area, organizations are likely to perceive it as a threat to their own financial solvency, given the competitive funding structure and economic constraints that shape the field as a whole.
- Untranslated messages about the science of early childhood development are likely to face substantial resistance because of the dominance of unproductive cultural models that run counter to this science. For example, without explaining early brain development as an active and ongoing process, audiences will likely be skeptical of the effectiveness of interventions that support early childhood development.
- Rights-based discourses that depend on the assertion that children deserve rights “just like adults do” run the danger of the literal equation of children to adults. This kind of messaging may impede audiences from appreciating children’s specific developmental needs.
- Currently, there is no space for issues related to early brain development in existing media or organizational discourse. As such, practitioners do not have a consistent outlet to learn, and stay informed about, the science of the developing brain.

Translating the Challenges into Successful Practice: Essential Elements for Reframing

The Core Story of Early Childhood Development (sometimes called the Core Story of Brain Science) has proven a powerful reframing tool for translating the science of early childhood development to non-expert audiences in the United States. FrameWorks researchers believe it can have the same effect internationally. Realizing this potential, however, will first require strategies that address the specific configurations of the field of international children’s organizations, as well as the existing cultural models that professionals who work in these organizations employ to understand children’s development. This communications work will set the stage for greater uptake of science messages. **In short, the Core Story needs a prologue.**

The following Explanatory Metaphors were designed and tested for their ability to maximize the productive potential of the Core Story of Early Childhood Development in international contexts:

Investment Multiplier: This metaphor explains how investments are multiplied when existing programs incorporate relatively small interventions that are informed by the science of early childhood development.

Organizations working on international children's issues must think about how to use limited resources to get maximum results that improve children's outcomes. Including early childhood development interventions can act as Return on Investment Multipliers for programs that address children's needs in areas such as health, survival, nutrition, education and protection. When existing programs incorporate even small amounts of developmental interventions, they can maximize their resources and multiply their returns. Adding early childhood development programs to existing programs makes it more likely that children grow up to become thriving members of their societies.

This metaphor leverages the field's existing focus on returns on investment, and positions early childhood development as a means of *multiplying* these investments. Furthermore, communicators can use the metaphor to explain research findings that demonstrate the benefits of *adding* early childhood development components to existing programs. It is important to note that the metaphor does not establish early childhood development as a new silo or area of practice; rather, it positions early childhood development as a *complement* to the work of existing issue areas. In this way, the metaphor avoids the trap of portraying early childhood development as yet another player competing for limited funding. Finally, the metaphor models a more cooperative and integrated structure of the field of international children's issues without proposing to radically transform the field's existing priorities.

Road to Positive Outcomes: This metaphor directly addresses the relationship of early childhood development to the sectors that currently comprise the field of international children's organizations. Instead of silos, it proposes a model of cooperation and coordination among designated areas of practice:

Organizations working on international children's issues such as health, education and child protection are like vehicles driving on a road to a common destination, which is to improve children's outcomes. One way to make sure all vehicles reach that destination is to build a solid road, maintain it, and make sure it is smooth and wide enough for all vehicles. Making investments in early childhood development is a way to maintain and smooth the road, so that all these areas can improve outcomes for children.

This metaphor shifts focus from *sector-level outcomes* to *child-level outcomes*. It reminds practitioners that, regardless of their particular issue area, they share a common “destination.” By reconceptualizing the various sectors as vehicles headed toward a common destination, the metaphor suggests pragmatic change, coordination and alignment among sectors, rather than radical transformation of the field. And in so doing, it assails the dominant understanding that some issue areas are more important than others. Lastly, the metaphor clearly positions early childhood development as a shared foundation for all sectors. Attention to early childhood development optimizes sector-specific outcomes, such as health and educational achievement — just as building and maintaining roads optimizes travel for all vehicles.

Do:

- Use the *Road to Positive Outcomes* Explanatory Metaphor to pave the way for the Core Story.

“Investment in programs that attend to children’s early brain development paves a smooth road so that sectors working on children’s health, education, safety and other issues can all reach a common destination — better outcomes for children.”

- Employ visuals that represent the various sectors that comprise the field of international children’s organizations horizontally rather than vertically.
- Use the *Investment Multiplier* Explanatory Metaphor to show how early childhood development programs advance the field’s general mandate to demonstrate return on investment.

“Including early brain development in existing interventions for children can substantially improve children’s outcomes and multiply return on investment.”

- Introduce the Core Story *after* the introduction of these metaphors. After space is created, broaden the field’s science understanding by explaining the mechanisms of brain development.
- Use a pragmatic tone when talking about early childhood development, and emphasize its role as a complement to other sectors and as a potential unifier of a fractured field.

“Early brain development programming complements existing interventions for children internationally, and can feasibly be incorporated into established practices.”

- Explain early brain development prior to any assertions of children’s human and legal rights.

Don't:

- Don't introduce early childhood development as a "new" or "transformative" area of practice in the field of international aid work.
- Don't remind people of the silos of children's issues (health, education, nutrition, etc.) before using the trans-issue metaphors.
- Don't use cues that will activate dominant unproductive models, such as limiting caregivers to mothers, or failing to adequately explain the process of development.
- Don't begin communications listing threats to children's well-being, especially physical safety, as these are likely to activate the *Hierarchy Of Needs* model.

¹ For example, the Wisconsin Shares program offers subsidies for childcare and provides greater funding for centers that have been designated five-star programs. Programs with a five-star designation demonstrate several of the effectiveness factors The Center on the Developing Child has established for early learning environments for at-risk children, including low teacher-to-child ratios, language-rich environments, and well-trained teachers.

² Bornstein, D. (2013, November 13). Schools that separate the child from the trauma. *The New York Times*.

³ The full research reports can be accessed at <http://www.frameworksinstitute.org/international-early-child-development.html>

⁴ Kendall-Taylor, N., & Lindland, E. (2013). *Modernity, morals and more information: Mapping the gaps between expert and public understandings of early child development in Australia*. Washington, DC: FrameWorks Institute; Kendall-Taylor, N. (2010). *Experiences get carried forward: How Albertans think about early child development*. Washington, DC: FrameWorks Institute.