HOW TO TALK ABOUT YOUTH DEVELOPMENT

This brief summary highlights FrameWorks Institute's research on public perceptions of youth development. All research reports and recommendations from the original research are available on our website, including a summarizing message memo, and a toolkit with sample talking points and other communication materials. (www.frameworksinstitute.org/adolescence.html) This summary is intended for use only as a review of the key points in these materials.

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

FrameWorks' research documents several dominant beliefs that shape Americans' thinking about youth.

1. Americans are worried about teens and believe today's teens grow up in a more dangerous environment than in the past, with more potential for risk-taking and destructive behaviors.
2. Americans believe youth today are different from past generations.
3. They believe the difference is the result of declining values among today's youth.
4. They are not persuaded by factual rebuttals that demonstrate most American youth to be respectful, engaged in volunteering, and in tune with adult values.
5. They suspect that parents are to blame by neglecting or spoiling their children.
6. Most Americans have little understanding of child development overall, and tend to think of teens as fully formed.
7. They toggle between a perception of teens as "the other" or an alien species and adolescence as a process we all go through.
8. Americans struggle to accord a role to community in the rearing of children, which is seen as happening almost exclusively within the private domain of the family.

Additional research in Minnesota found that:

People believe no program can or should supplant parents. Nor should programs serve to reward deficient parenting. Rather, programs need to be seen as "on the same side" as parents and communities, making families more effective and communities better. Getting this relationship right—among family, community and youth programs—is an important pre-requisite for engagement.

Community actors such as mentors, after-school programs, etc. can serve as effective prompts to imagining the outcomes associated with youth programs, but they do not come easily to

mind. While the images of youth in volunteer, performing arts and team sports did indeed get people over their immediate mental image of the terrible teen, there was some consistent resistance to coaches and coaching, which was perceived as having become too much about "winning" and less about fostering team-building skills.

There is general agreement that self-esteem and depression constitute more important and primary threats to young people than drugs, alcohol and other widely touted risks; the latter are seen as the result of inattention to the former. Many adults appreciate the importance of providing a healthy foundation to inoculate young people from risky behaviors.

There is a widely held belief that youth programs are numerous and that the main obstacle to participation is parent/youth motivation. At the same time, there was a common assumption that programs might not be available in rural areas, poorer neighborhoods, etc. due to cost and transportation. These programs are deemed desirable but not necessary; most people cannot readily name a lost benefit or outcome associated with postponing or reducing program availability.

The question of whether programs were "government-run," compared to government-funded, loomed large in the discussion of whether they were effective and cost-effective, whether they were appropriate vehicles for guiding youth, or instead responding to failed families.

Any message that connects youth programs to deficiencies in the schools runs the risk of being overwhelmed by the public's concern that the core education system is crumbling and requires more immediate attention than the expendable add-ons that youth programs are perceived to be. Framing youth development as an adjunct to the K-14 education system, with an emphasis on individual success, academic achievement and global competitiveness, is more likely to prioritize investments in in-school basics than in out-of-school development programs.

Key Communications Challenges Based on Insights from Research

Across the research, there were three consistent frame challenges that must be addressed consistently in all messaging about youth and youth programs:

Making Explicit the Developmental Benefits to Communities of successfully integrating young people into community life, including the fact that communities are the beneficiaries of the solid, decent kids that emerge from programs that help them practice the roles they will need to assume as adults;

Making visible the Developmental Impacts of Quality Programs on the lives of young people, in terms of extending parental values through the guidance of community actors and experiences, as young people enter the world through their community; and

Explaining Adolescent Development in such a way that adults readily understand it as a biological phase with emergent competencies which are, in turn, dependent upon external experiences and relationships.

Finally, there are two important components of any message about youth programs: Parents must be acknowledged and their relationship to community made explicit, but not to the

degree that responsibility is assigned uniquely to them or that parents are perceived as the main clients for programs; and the fact that good programs have been lost or rendered unaffordable, or that mediocre programs are not getting the job done and require transformation must be included in order to offer a reason for re-examination of this issue.

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

As FrameWorks has written elsewhere, the Strategic Frame Analysis™ approach teaches 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 this is about;" Simplifying Models, that concretize and simplify complex scientific explanations of how things work; 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 elevate support for youth development. For the latest research findings and publications, please visit our website.

Values

Reciprocity: We give support to our young people now, so that they can grow up to become good citizens and community members as adults.

Additional helpful values include Community, Stewardship, and Future.

Brain Architecture Simplifying Model (See Early Child Development summary):

For adolescents, this model should include specific information on the special nature of adolescence – what parts of judgment and social identity are being connected in the brain, making this process tangible and material. This is the advantage of the Brain Architecture Simplifying Model; it helps make this process tangible and material.

Putting It All Together

As a society, it is our job to ensure that the future is in good hands, and that means making sure young people have access to a full range of opportunities throughout their childhood. When young people get involved in the community, they are shaped by those experiences. Scientists tell us that adolescence is another of the great building moments in the development of the brain's architecture. The parts of the brain that control judgment, foresee consequences and see complex interactions are all in play during this phase of growth. The opportunity to lead a discussion, to work with a group of seniors on a project, to mentor or be mentored in playing a musical instrument or performing in a play help make positive connections in the brain. The experiences children have in after-school and youth development programs literally build a foundation in the brain that transforms a young person into an engaged member of our community. And our society, our quality of life, benefits from the programs that support that healthy development.

Finally, here is the FrameWorks Do and Don't list for what to avoid and what to include in all communications about youth development issues.

DON'T:

- Use the word teenager; use young people or youth.

- Explain the end-goal of adolescence as individual academic achievement or economic success.

- Use individual life stories to exemplify the transformation caused by successful youth development programs.

- State the goal of youth development as a negative, i.e. keeping kids off the streets, or reducing crime.

DO:

- Remind people of adolescence as a developmental stage; use brain architecture to explain it as a biological and material process that which creates critical capacities.

- Help people understand the documented positive impacts of meeting the developmental needs of young people. Link programs to developmental outcomes.

- Talk about the community's need for solid, healthy, decent, productive, well-rounded young people who will be able to give back and sustain the community.

- Explain the interaction between young people and quality programs in developmental terms as developmental experiences.

- Show young people in the community, interacting positively with other adults.

- Get community actors in the picture early, from mentors and role models to youth program leaders.

- Explain the role of programs as reinforcing parents, and explain the benefits to communities of providing these programs.