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Mapping the Gaps

Between Expert, Stakeholder, and Public Understandings of Early Childhood Development in South Africa

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FRAME WORKS INSTITUTE

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1 INTRODUCTION

Huge strides in provisions to benefit young children have been made in South Africa since 1994 in an attempt to overcome the damage done to children and families by the racially exclusive policies and programmes of *Apartheid* [i]. By 2001 there were more than 30 policy documents, laws and programmes demonstrating high level commitment to improve the conditions in which children live and their future prospects[ii].

The White Paper 5 on Early Childhood Education (2001) stated that: "The Department of Education's departure point for all Early Childhood Development (ECD) policy development is that the primary responsibility for the care and upbringing of young children belongs to parents and families. However, because of the inequality in income distribution, and because ECD is a public good whose benefits spill over from individual parents to society as a whole, the Department sees it as the State's responsibility to subsidise and assure the quality of ECD services" (section 3.1.4).

The State has obligated itself to provide ECD services by virtue of being a signatory to the African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child[iii], the Convention on the Rights of the Child[iv], Education for All[v], and the Sustainable Development Goals[vi], as well as by the South African Constitution and a number of Acts and policies[vii]. Government has also expressed positive intentions to support ECD and, in particular, to redress inequity, through the Children's Act (No 38, 2015), the National Integrated Plan for ECD, and various White Papers. For example, the 1995 White Paper on Education and Training set out the vision for a universal state-provided, free pre-primary school year - which was achieved in 2015. Importantly, South Africa's National Development Plan ***Vision 2030*** (2012) acknowledges the significant role that ECD can play in achieving the country's shared goals for socioeconomic advancement, with a particular emphasis on improved health and education[viii].

The State has obligated itself to provide ECD services by virtue of being a signatory to the African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child, the Convention on the Rights of the Child, Education for All, and the Sustainable Development Goals, as well as by the South African Constitution and a number of Acts and policies

Acceleration towards a national ECD policy started in 2012 when the Department of Planning, Monitoring and Evaluation in the Presidency commissioned a Diagnostic Review of ECD[ix]. The review pointed to the many elements of comprehensive ECD support and services already in place, some of which are performing well. These include aspects of household infrastructure provision, citizenship through birth registration, social security, health care for women and children, centre-based early child care and education (ECCE), and preparation for formal schooling through the pre-school year (Grade R). Improvements in access and quality are being, and must continue to be, sought in all these areas. The Review also identified important gaps, especially services for the youngest children (0-3 years), support for parenting, prevention of stunting among young children, safe and affordable child care for very young children and other families needing assistance, and planned rapid expansion and provision of ECD services to the most at-need families, including children with disabilities.

The 2012 National ECD Conference built further support for policy development, as did the Integrated Programme of Action: Moving Ahead (2013-2018) approved by Cabinet in September 2013. The South African National Integrated ECD Policy was commissioned in 2013 and the 2014 Election Manifesto of the African National Congress committed to expand early childhood development services.

The Policy was approved by Cabinet in December 2015[x], and new funds were committed to support its roll out. However, it is clear that implementation is complex. The existing system, which consists of private and not-for-profit child care centres for largely 3-5-year olds, inequitably distributed across the country, without a formally trained and employed work force, has to be transformed into a government led and funded universal programme. To assist scale-up, the Policy stipulates a nationally branded communication strategy about the value of early childhood development, advising that there should be synergy and consistency across media platforms, in messaging and in materials supporting the communications.

In concert with this Policy, the partners in this research committed themselves to developing an evidence-based narrative that makes the science of ECD more understandable and usable for those working to communicate its importance to the public and stakeholders so as to elevate support for national programmes that support early childhood development.

To provide expertise to further understand what is needed in such a communications strategy, the FrameWorks Institute in Washington, DC, well known for its work with the Center for the Developing Child at Harvard University, was contracted at the end of 2014 to assist a consortium of interested groups represented by the DST-NRF Centre of Excellence in Human Development and the Developmental Pathways to Health Research Unit at the University of the Witwatersrand, Stellenbosch University and UNICEF. The idea for the project was discussed at a stakeholders meeting in Pretoria on the 21st May 2015. A second meeting, at which FrameWorks presented the project, was hosted on the 1st October 2015 in Johannesburg, followed by training for the Wits, UNICEF and Stellenbosch researchers. Dr. Eric Lindland, from FrameWorks, presented a public lecture on progress to date at Wits University on the 1st July 2016.

> *By understanding the various ways that people do (and do not) think and reason about an issue, communicators can craft messages that activate productive understandings, avoid unproductive ones, and engender new ways of thinking that are better aligned with policy goals.*

The first phase of research for the project was conducted between November 2015 and April 2016 and involved three tracks of research.

- The first identified a shared scientific expert story—what FrameWorks calls an "untranslated expert story"—of early childhood development. This story includes explanations of what develops in children, how development happens, and what threatens it, as well as policy and programmatic directions that experts argue would best serve children's development in the South African context.
- The second track of research identified the patterns of thinking that members of the South African public use to reason about early childhood development.
- The third and final track examined how stakeholders – people working in government and implementation in the ECD sector—understand these same topics.

Bringing these three research tracks together, this report identifies key communications challenges faced by experts and advocates as they seek to elevate support for public policies that will best

serve the developmental needs of all children in South Africa. The report provides an initial set of strategic recommendations for how best to communicate the expert story in ways that expand public understandings of early childhood development and build support for policies and programs that leverage this connection.

The research on public understandings presented here is distinct from other public opinion research based on polls or focus groups that documents ***what people say***. The research described here documents ***how people think***, and deconstructs the assumptions and thought processes that inform what people say and how they form judgments and opinions. This cultural-cognitive approach is powerful because identifying ***ways of thinking*** is key to developing more effective and strategic communications. By understanding the various ways that people do (and do not) think and reason about an issue, communicators can craft messages that activate productive understandings, avoid unproductive ones, and engender new ways of thinking that are better aligned with policy goals. In short, an understanding of ***how*** people think is a powerful tool in identifying the specific ideas that require reframing and in designing effective translation strategies.

The ultimate goal of this larger project is to help people understand that a set of public investments that focus on mothers, families and children from the earliest stages of life—in areas like maternal health, pre- and postnatal care, and family wellbeing—are among the most valuable investments a nation can make.

Considering the familiarity of the topic—children—it is not surprising that the public bring a powerful set of cultural models[xi]—implicit and largely shared understandings, assumptions and patterns of reasoning—to their thinking around the topic of young children's development. Importantly, this research shows that while there are significant aspects of public understanding that overlap with the expert story, there are also many features that are not aligned with expert understandings. This non-alignment impedes efforts to elevate support for effective policies. These dominant ways of thinking include assumptions about what "basics" children need, the ages at which key features of development happen, and the primary threats to development that children face.

In describing these and other cultural models, this report provides a detailed understanding of the patterns of public thinking that those communicating about early childhood development are up against, as well as a set of research-based recommendations to inform future communications in this field. In documenting expert, stakeholder, and public perspectives, and enumerating the places where these views both converge and diverge, we are in a position to chart a course for a communications strategy that can be used to help people think more productively about the importance of supporting parents, families, and communities as they seek to foster optimal development for children.

In further collaborations with our research partners in this project, FrameWorks hopes to build on the descriptive research presented here by designing and testing communications strategies for reframing public discourse about and understanding of the importance of early childhood development. The ultimate goal of this larger project is to help people understand that a set of public investments that focus on mothers, families and children from the earliest stages of life—in areas like maternal health, pre- and postnatal care, and family wellbeing—are among the most valuable investments a nation can make.

RESEARCH METHODS

The Expert Story

Based on over fifteen years of collaboration with the Center on the Developing Child at Harvard University[xii], as well as communications research around early childhood development in the US, Canada, the United Kingdom, Australia, and Brazil[xiii], the FrameWorks Institute has developed a working draft of an untranslated expert story of early childhood development. This is the ECD story as told by scientists, not the version of that story that is best suited for communication to the public. Figuring out ***how best to tell that story*** to diverse publics across the globe is a different matter, one that requires the kind of research presented in this report.

To contextualize this expert story of ECD within the South African context, researchers working with FrameWorks from the University of the Witwatersrand and Stellenbosch University conducted 6 one-on-one, one-hour interviews by phone, Skype, or in person with South African researchers and academics with expertise in early childhood development. These interviews were conducted in November and December 2015 and, with participants' permission, were recorded and subsequently transcribed for analysis.

Interviews with experts consisted of a series of probing questions designed to capture expert understandings of early childhood development. In each interview, the interviewer went through a series of prompts and hypothetical scenarios designed to challenge experts to explain their research, experience and perspectives, break down complicated relationships, and simplify concepts and findings from the field. Interviews were semi-structured in the sense that, in addition to preset questions, interviewers repeatedly asked for elaboration and clarification, and encouraged experts to expand upon concepts they identified as particularly important.

Analysis employed a basic grounded theory approach. Common themes were pulled from each interview and categorized, resulting in a refined set of themes that synthesized the substance of the interview data. The analysis of this set of interviews resulted in the distillation of the expert perspective on ECD presented below.

Ethical approval was granted by the Stellenbosch University Humanities Research Ethics Committee: Human Research (HS1164/2015) for all interviews, including those described below.

Public Understandings

Cultural Models interviews—one-on-one, semi-structured interviews lasting two to two-and-a-half hours —allow researchers to uncover the broad sets of assumptions, or "cultural models," that participants use to make sense and meaning of a concept or topic area. The findings about cultural models presented below are grounded in data gathered during 30 in-depth interviews conducted face-to-face with members of the South African public in March and April 2016 in all nine provinces of the country. These interviews were designed to elicit ways of thinking and talking about issues—in this case, people's most "top of mind" and dominant ways of thinking about early childhood development. All interviews were recorded and transcribed with written consent from participants.

Recruiting a wide range of people and facilitating talk about concepts introduced by both the interviewer and the interviewee allows researchers to identify cultural models that represent shared patterns of thinking. Participants were recruited through a range of community-based organizations across the nine provinces and were selected to represent variation in gender, ethnicity, age, residential location (urban or rural), and primary language spoken. Community groups from which participants were recruited included local NGOs, sports clubs, faith groups, men's and women's groups, the Rotary International Club, farming groups, Community Advisory Boards, Community Policing Forums, and a School Governing Body. The sample included 19 women and 11 men. Seventeen participants self-identified as African, 7 as White, 4 as Coloured, and 2 as Indian. The mean age of the sample was 45.7

years old, with an age range from 21 to 79. Eleven had their primary residence in a rural area, while 19 lived in urban or peri-urban locations. Ten interviews were conducted in English , while 7 were done in Afrikaans, 7 in IsiZulu, and 6 in IsiXhosa.

Data from these extended Cultural Models interviews was supplemented with findings from an additional set of 48 On-the-Street interviews conducted in Johannesburg, Durban, and Cape Town in February 2016. These 10 to 15 minute interviews involved opportunistic recruitment of people walking in town, asking them to stop and do a short on-camera interview about children's development. The interviews were recorded and subsequently coded for people's use of cultural models to respond to a series of open questions about how early childhood development happens, why it matters, and how it could be improved. On-the-Street interviews were conducted in 4 languages—IsiXhosa, IsiZulu, Afrikaans, and English—across the 3 locations and were video-recorded for subsequent analysis.

For the analysis of both Cultural Models and On-the-Street interviews, FrameWorks' researchers adapted analytical techniques employed in cognitive and linguistic anthropology to examine how participants understand issues related to children's early development[xv]. Researchers identified common, standardized ways of talking to reveal organizational assumptions, relationships, logical steps and connections that were commonly made, but taken for granted, throughout an individual's talk and across the set of interviews. In short, the analysis documented patterns discerned from both what was said (how things were related, explained and understood) as well as what was not said (assumptions and implied relationships). In many cases, analysis revealed that people brought conflicting models to bear on the same issue. In such cases, one of the conflicting ways of understanding was typically found to be dominant over the other. For the analysis of the 30 Cultural Models interviews, an initial round of primary analysis—divided across 6 analysts—was succeeded by a round of secondary analysis of selected transcripts, conducted by different analysts, in order to test and confirm emerging findings.

Stakeholder Understandings

To identify dominant models held by ECD policymakers and implementers in South Africa, 10 interviews were conducted with people working in the ECD arena in both government and implementation sectors. These interviews were conducted by phone, skype, or in person during November and December 2015 and, with participants' permission, were recorded and subsequently transcribed for analysis. As with the expert interviews, subsequent transcripts were subjected to a grounded theory approach, wherein common themes were identified across the interviews and correlated and distilled for presentation in this report. When suitable, quotes were extracted from the transcripts for inclusion in this report, in order to demonstrate some of the most prevalent patterns running through stakeholders' thinking around the domain.

Below, we present the expert messages that comprise the untranslated expert story of early childhood development. This is followed by an analysis of the cultural models that members of the public bring to understanding this topic, and then by a summary of stakeholder thinking. We compare these expert, public, and stakeholder understandings in order to identify key overlaps and gaps, and conclude with a set of suggested areas that are promising for future research.

RESEARCH FINDINGS

The Expert View

Below, we present a summary of the untranslated expert story of ECD as derived from FrameWorks' previous collaborations with ECD experts in the US, Australia, the UK, and Brazil, as well as six interviews with South African ECD experts.

1. What develops?

The developing brain is central to the story. For early childhood development experts, the development of a child's brain, alongside their physical and psychological development, is at the heart of the developmental story. Connections across regions of the brain grow very rapidly and strengthen over time. Simple neuronal circuits develop first, followed by more complex ones that get layered on top, in a process of emergence that is both genetically driven and contingent on experience.

Plasticity is key to this brain story. Experts focus considerable attention on the idea of "plasticity" and the brain's capacity to change over time. They emphasize the continued openness of the brain to change throughout childhood and across the life course, if developmental circumstances around a child provide opportunities for that change. Experts also emphasize that plasticity decreases over time, and that there are "critical periods" when plasticity is at its peak, particularly during early childhood and again during adolescence. These stages are, in the expert view, "once in a lifetime" phases of brain development. The implications of this are clear for experts: Helping create positive brain development early on produces better health, education and social outcomes for children across their life span, and is less costly for both individuals and society than trying to remedy things later.

Foundational skills are set up early. Experts emphasize that inborn emotional and communicative capacities must be activated for the development of higher order organization and control which experts call "executive function" and "self-regulation". They emphasize that the strength of these organizing skills depend upon the quality of a child's relationships. These skills, including the ability to focus, resist distractions, keep a number of things in mind at one time, switch attention when needed, and keep emotions in check develop in conjunction with each other and are part of "setting up" a broad range of life skills, competencies and behaviors.

2. How does development happen?

Genes are manifest in an environment of relationships. Experts explain that development is essentially a "transactional" process between a child's genetic makeup and their environmental experiences, especially their relationships with caregivers. The quality of their relationships fundamentally shape children's emotional and psychological development, and establishes key features of a child's emerging physical and mental health, including their resilience. Under conditions that support family and parent relationships, the environment of the child is stable and the child shares emotional and attentional interactions with others that are both stimulating and responsive to a child's interest and engagement.

Young children benefit from the support of others (called "scaffolding") as they experiment with, explore and engage the world around them. Experts describe how children first develop simple skills and capacities and then gradually more complex skills are built on top of them. They also describe the importance of "scaffolding" at all stages of skill development, which is when adults and other more advanced learners provide young children with opportunities to explore, problem-solve, and make mistakes as children exercise their emerging skills, and others provide them with mutually enjoyable support and feedback.

Early means early. Experts emphasize that the earliest months and years of a child's life, both in the womb and during the first 2 post-natal years, are foundational to subsequent development. Experts assert the critical nature of this early period, together with supports for children across the spectrum of growth and development, including during adolescence.

3. What threatens early childhood development?

Chronic stress threatens development. Experts hold that within the parameters of shared processes of human development, profound differences in outcomes for children are created by different exposure to a range of protective and risk factors; factors that either support or undermine the child's developing brain and biological systems. In particular, scientists focus on how chronic stress—from factors like violence, emotional and physical abuse, neglect and poverty—undermines development in profound ways. These kinds of factors, when persistent and unbuffered by caregivers' love and protection, lead to the continuous over-activation of the body's stress response systems. This causes physical damage to the brain and other organ systems. Experts explain that the over-activation of these systems alters processes of development and leads to long-term negative consequences in multiple life domains, including learning, health and social functioning.

Inadequate services undermine development. Experts contend that there is a substantial gap between what the science says are the conditions that support early childhood development and the kinds of programs and policies that are actually in place. Inadequate public services in areas like housing, health, education, and household financial support threaten young children's development at a societal level, while inadequate pre- and post-natal care for health, wellbeing, and nutrition, and the prevention of substance abuse and violence can impede the subsequent healthy development in a child.

4. What can be done to improve early childhood development outcomes?

Improve conditions for families, caregivers, and children. Experts point to the importance of policies and programs that support children's development, including high-quality child care and primary health care and social services. They also highlight how broader contexts and family circumstances can either support or undermine outcomes for children, especially for families living in extremely difficult circumstances. They explain that by improving the quality of environments and supporting parents and caregivers — through mechanisms such as income support, free health services, family leave, maternal mental health, home visits, family groups, and substance abuse treatment and violence prevention programs — public policies have the power to promote positive developmental outcomes for more children.

Use science to inform policy. In line with the focus on context and support, experts promote the science of early childhood development to inform policy and program impact. They call for "closing the gap between what we know and what we do" by using innovative science and knowledge of the factors that affect development, and of the effectiveness of various interventions, to guide policy-making and implementation.

Give more attention to at-risk populations. While all children have a right to live in conditions conducive to healthy development, experts emphasize the need for a more strategic and well-integrated effort to reach at-risk children and families, alongside a broader effort to improve supports for children in general. This involves efforts to end discrimination against marginalized populations, and to extend services and supports to populations who have less access to or who are less engaged with the family and child support services that do exist.

Better coordinate the range of services all children and families need. While improvements have been made since South Africa became a democracy, experts argue for the value of increased coordination and accountability across the sectors that focus on the health and wellbeing of families and children, including in health, nutrition, education, social and child protection, and infrastructure provision. These efforts should include improved training for both professional and non-professional workers on the front lines who work with children.

Untranslated Expert Story of Early Childhood Development

What develops?

- **The developing brain is central to the story.** Alongside physical and psychological development, neuronal connections across the brain grow rapidly and strengthen over time in a process that is genetically driven and contingent on experience. Simple circuits develop first, with more complex ones layered on top.
- **Brain plasticity is key.** There are "critical periods" when plasticity is at its peak – during early childhood and again during adolescence. Helping create positive brain development early on produces better outcomes across the life span, and is less costly than trying to remedy things later.
- **Foundational skills are set up early.** Inborn emotional and communicative capacities must be activated early as a precondition for development of executive functions and self-regulation. These skills are contingent on the quality of a child's environment of relationships and set up a child's capacity to regulate subsequent skills, competencies and behaviors.

How does development happen?

- **Genes are manifest in an environment of relationships.** Physical, social and emotional health is structured by interplay between genetic makeup and the quality of environmental experiences, especially relationships with caregivers. Ideally, relationships are stable and characterized by stimulation, responsiveness and shared interactions.
- **Children benefit from scaffolding as they explore and engage the world.** Adults and advanced learners should provide children with opportunities to problem-solve and make mistakes and provide them with mutually enjoyable support and feedback as interactive partners.
- **Early means early.** The earliest months and years of a child's life, both in the womb and during the first 2-3 post-natal years, are foundational to all subsequent development.

What threatens early childhood development?

- **Chronic stress threatens development.** Differences in outcomes for children are structured by differential exposures to protective and risk factors. Persistent and unbuffered chronic stress – violence, abuse, neglect and poverty leads to over-activation of stress response systems and causes physical damage to the brain and other organs, with long-term negative outcomes in learning, health and social functioning.
- **Inadequate services undermine development.** Outcomes suffer because of insufficient supports in housing, education, and household finances, as well as in pre- and post-natal care for health, wellbeing, nutrition, and substance abuse and violence prevention.

What can be done to improve early childhood development outcomes?

- **Improving conditions for families, caregivers and children.** Key policy arenas include child care, income supports, free health services, family leave, maternal mental health, home visitation, and substance abuse and violence prevention programs.
- **Using science to inform policy can improve development.** The science of ECD must be promoted to inform policies, programs, and implementation and "close the gap between what we know and what we do."
- **More attention to at-risk populations.** Need for a more strategic and well-integrated effort to reach at-risk children and families. Must end discrimination against marginalized populations and extend services to populations with less access to or engagement with existing family and child support systems.
- **Better coordination of the services all children and families need.** Need for increased interagency coordination and accountability across the sectors that focus on families and children, including in health, education, social and child protection and infrastructure. Should include improved professional training for front-line workers.

Figure 1: *Expert Story*

The Public View

Below, we present the dominant cultural models—shared assumptions and patterns of thinking —that guide and shape the South African public's view of early childhood development: what it is; what factors shape it; why it matters; and what can and should happen to improve developmental outcomes for more children in the country. These models represent the conceptual constructs that most powerfully orient and organize public thinking around these topics.

There was of course substantial variation within and across the four language populations—Afrikaans, English, IsiXhosa, and IsiZulu—that were sampled for this research. Some models that were strongly evident among one or two language populations were noticeably weak or absent among others. For the purposes of this report and summary, we have identified below ***only those models that were prevalent across all four language populations.***

Models That *Define* ECD

1. About the Basics

When asked to think about the most important requirements for a child's early development, members of the South African public consistently spoke about four elements – love, nutrition, safety, and discipline. These are considered "the basics" that all children need. The strength of this model structures in fundamental ways ***what people think development is about***. Embedded within this ***About the Basics*** model is an underlying assumption that much of what develops in children early on happens automatically, assuming the basic conditions are met. In other words, there is a lack of attention to the fact that development depends on relationships, and that many key cognitive and emotional capacities do not emerge automatically but rather are dependent on the right kinds of inputs.

> *" What a newborn needs more than anything is love. Therefore, a child that is raised with love is able to develop fast and understand feelings at that time."* (IsiZulu speaker)

> *" You should also attend to the nutrition at home. Food is very important. Even though the economic situation may not allow the child to get exactly what they need, but the child needs to get food with nutrients to build their body."* (IsiZulu speaker)

> *" You start to discipline a child as early as you can. Remember, children go through different stages. Once they are born, you need to start to instill discipline. [...] By holding a baby closer to your body, you are giving that baby love. The baby will feel your heart and love. So it's very important that at all times we give our children love."* (IsiXhosa speaker)

> *" I think they've got to have a proper diet, proper nutrition to function properly at school. A happy house, proper food, and love and attention – that's the main needs of a child."* (English speaker)

> *" They must learn what is 'yes' and what is 'no,' and some people don't discipline their children. They can run wild and do what they like."* (English speaker)

" If people do normal things at home, the normal household activities should be fine, I think. I didn't try to make my baby super clever, you know, I just did the natural things that you supposed to." (English speaker)

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2. Early On, It's Physical, Social, and Emotional

When introduced to the topic of early childhood development, participants think first and foremost about children's physical, social and emotional – including moral – development. As described above, there is an underlying assumption of automaticity about these developmental tracks, and a notable lack of attention to the early experience-dependent development of children's brains.

" When talking about a child, one is talking about a baby who is still trying to stand on its own, or a child who depend on the parents because of not being able to do anything for themselves." (IsiXhosa speaker)

" So from zero and afterwards, they depend on the parents, then they crawl, then they stand up then fall, then they're able to run later. That is physically then. Mentally, we notice those things where they sleep most of the time when they're young, but after a while they begin to make noises. They begin to call "father," "mother." "
(Afrikaans speaker)

" From 0 to 1 [years] they can laugh and cry and sit and then crawl, and maybe walk at 1, and they start developing teeth. They are very spontaneous. If you tickle them they smile. You feed them they are happy." (Afrikaans speaker)

Researcher: *"What does it mean when you say a child is developing or a child has developed?"*

Participant: *"Well it's emotional and physical. Physical development with the hormonal changes, the body taking different shape etcetera, so the hormonal development."*
(English speaker)

" Early childhood development...I think it's about the values that us, as parents or grown-ups that we need to instill into our children as they grow up." (English speaker)

" At a certain stage the child is expected to be able to laugh. At a certain stage it needs to develop teeth. At a certain stage it needs to be sitting, and be able to descend steps and so on. It can eat solids and it has stopped breastfeeding. At a particular stage, it has started talking, it can hear, it can run and whether it is ready to go to crèche, is it ready for school. All that to me is development, whether everything is going well."
(IsiZulu speaker)

" I would say maybe they are talking about how children are brought up. And caring for children, how children should be cared for. You have to teach a child that when you are growing up this is how you conduct yourself so that you can be someone in the community." (IsiZulu speaker)

3. Aging Up

South African interviewees consistently responded to questions about early childhood with talk about topics relevant to ***older*** children, in particular schooling and academic learning. Across the scope of our analysis, it became clear that people slipped into thinking and talking about older children and felt they understood better what was happening developmentally for older children than for younger children in terms of their physical, social, and emotional development.

> **Researcher: "** *What about early childhood development? What do you think that means?"*
>
> **Participant:** *"Oh, I would say that early childhood development is the education system of the country, to develop the child."* (English speaker)

> **Researcher:** *"If you hear "early childhood," what do you think about?"*
>
> **Participant: "***Three to six years."* (Afrikaans speaker)

> *" It's very important, for child development to go well, for children to be involved in community activities and sport. Parents must bring children together and get them to play any type of sport as well as games."* (IsiXhosa speaker)

> *" I think of someone in the ages, maybe from 10 years up to I would say 21. The teachings at home, the teachings in the school they go to. I would say the teachings at school and in the community."* (IsiZulu speaker)

In a related vein, people regularly attributed the capacities of older children to younger ones, as, for example, when one participant recounted how a five-month old can manipulate adults to get something they want, in this way talking about an infant as if they have higher-order reasoning and intentionality.

> *" I've got 4 grandchildren and I hadn't looked after any of them. They all went to crèches. So this one I had taken on from 4 months, going onto 5 months and I was like a new mother, and I didn't know and I didn't realize he was manipulating me. [...] At a certain age they know, they're clever. So he would just lie there and start crying and look at me and cry. [...] Until I couldn't take it anymore because this child was crying day and night, and if I didn't pick him up or just sit there. […] I took him to the paediatrician. He said he's 100% healthy; his weight is excellent; he does have a bit of a constipation problem, and gave some meds for that, and said, "No, he is just playing me. He is absolutely clever; he is manipulating me. I must just leave him to cry if I know he's fed and changed and he's all well, leave him." And from that day that is when I started learning his tricks."* (English speaker)

> **Researcher: "***Do you think a child develops socially as well?"*
>
> **Participant:** *"Yes, I think so. From day one, a baby manipulates with certain behaviors, until they are older."* (Afrikaans speaker)

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4. Resilience – You Have It, or You Don't

When asked whether and how a child can do well despite facing adverse conditions, respondents asserted that some children have the strength and grit within them to do well and overcome problems while other children simply do not. What was notable about these responses was how resilience was often described as an attribute that either is or is not within a child or is inborn, with little consideration of degrees of resilience, or about the ways by which resilience can be strengthened or weakened by a child's relationships and experiences[xvi].

> *" I just think it's totally what that child is made of. [...] They've got their own characteristics, so it's purely on the characteristic of the child."* (English speaker)

> *" It is nature, I think it is nature."* (IsiZulu speaker)

> *" Some of them just have tough skin. Some have stronger personalities…and others don't really."* (English speaker)

> *" I think there's a lot of children who have a lot of spirit and fight in them…And then there's those who will retract and step back and hide because something has happened. [...] So yes, children are different."* (English speaker)

> *" It all depends on your drive, if you have an internal drive you will come out on top."* (Afrikaans speaker)

Key Implications of Models that Define ECD

- The strength of the ***About the Basics*** model is important to consider, not because it is incorrect, but because its strength diverts attention away from other fundamental needs that children have, especially cognitive and emotional stimulation and social interaction. As long as members of the public confine their understanding of young children's developmental needs to the basics of love, nutrition, safety, and discipline, and assume that much of development happens automatically, they will be less inclined to support investments in programs and policies that promote a more focused vision of what infants need for optimal development.
- The assumption that ***Early On, It's Physical, Social and Emotional,*** and the lack of corresponding attention to children's brains in that model of thinking, causes people to undervalue the important brain development happening both pre- and postnatally, and can thus lead to public efforts to help parents and caregivers better support brain development in their children being undervalued.
- Likewise, the ***Aging Up*** model represents a core challenge to public efforts to better support early childhood development in South Africa. As long as the public assumes that a child's cognitive development only happens once a child reaches school or pre-school age, advocates and policymakers will struggle to ensure the required focus on the earliest stage of life as a critical timespan when key cognitive structures and skills develop in children's brains.
- The ***Resilience—You Have It, or You Don't*** model obfuscates the fact that—whatever inborn differences in resilience there are across children—there are also important ways that the resilience

of all children can either be bolstered or undermined through their exposure to protective or risk factors, especially during the earliest stages of life. As long as people see resilience as an inborn trait, they will be less inclined to support efforts to strengthen protective factors and limit risk factors for all children.

Models of What *Shapes* ECD

1. Environments Are Key

South Africans believe that the environments that surround children fundamentally shape their development and help determine children's life outcomes. This is a highly generalized model that sees environment in broad terms, as consisting of the varied family, social, economic, health, behavioral, media, and other factors and contexts that surround a child.

> *" Your environment in which you grew up will determine how you will deal with things in life."* (Afrikaans speaker)

> *" The environment is very important, my sister, because when we are born, we are not born with any evil. You don't think [yet], but [you] have a pure mind. [...] But the environment can shape you into being another person. Some environments shape you to be a better person; others may make you go down, depending on where you grew up."* (IsiZulu speaker)

> *" I think that when the child is born, like, it's a blank piece of paper [...] So I think once he is exposed to the society to whereby now things are happening, but I will say for me a child is born like a blank page."* (English speaker)

> *" A child belongs to the community and not just their own parents. Unfortunately, these days, even in the communities where we live and raise our children, there are bad influences which might alter your good values and objectives for your child."* (IsiXhosa speaker)

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2. Parents First, but a Shared Responsibility

Not surprisingly, South Africans hold parents primarily responsible for the development of their children. Parents are supposed to set up the fundamental home environment that shapes the child and are responsible to provide "the basics" of love, nutrition, safety, and discipline described previously. At the same time, people consistently pointed to the role of other agents, including relatives (aunts, uncles, and grandparents), educators, community members, and governments, and argue that they too share a responsibility.

> *" We are talking parents that they should be able to train a child and build their character in terms of the child knowing themselves, who they are. It is also people from the church because, as people, we are also religious and our religions teach us how a person or a child conducts themselves so that when they reach adulthood they can be able to face adulthood matters. We also find teachers in schools because they are the ones who spend the most time with children. Therefore, they should be firm and*

be able to teach children in a correct manner, and that is where the government should intervene and train teachers properly so they can teach children proper teachings. There are also community groups that can also train children whilst they are still young, according to their talents." (IsiZulu speaker)

" When you see a child, you have a responsibility to guide and develop that child [even if it's not yours] and you can do this by even taking the child to crèche or any other activities. So, the community has a role to play, as well as parents, in developing children's mind-set so that children can develop and reach their adult stage." (IsiXhosa speaker)

" The parents are primary, primary, primary, primary in a child's life. [...] Then, obviously the secondary influential person would be the teacher because I mean they go to school from 3." (Afrikaans speaker)

" In the beginning stages, it's the parents. In the institutional phases, it's the teachers and then in the tertiary institutions, I would say it's the government, because that's where impact must be the most. The government needs to play a big role in universities, like maybe funding children for studies, encouraging the children for studies." (English speaker)

" It takes a village to raise a child. So I think the community also need to play a role in bringing [children] up… in loving them, showing them the right way, talking to them." (English speaker)

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3. Extreme Dangers Threaten

Fed by a steady diet of media coverage, South Africans understand their country to be a place of alarming danger to children. Respondents cited multiple hazards, including abuse, kidnapping, child trafficking, rape, drugs and alcohol, and various forms of violence both within and beyond the home. This assumption of extreme danger to children's development arouses a sense of concern about whether any child can be safe, and is accompanied by a degree of fatalism about whether these dangers have any remedy in South Africa today.

" Children are confronted by these drugs people, and we also hear of human trafficking, and the stealing of children by people who don't have children, who want to make them their own." (IsiZulu speaker)

" Children are being kidnapped and are also knocked over by cars because their parents work and they have to be on the street unsupervised." (IsiXhosa speaker)

" Common dangers are child abuse, that happen in the house between family members; rape, kidnapping, trafficking." (Afrikaans speaker)

" Child trafficking and all this rape and all this rubbish going on." (English speaker)

" There are fathers who rape their own children." (IsiZulu speaker)

There is also a consistent concern about the ways that increasing levels of exposure to digital and cellular technologies and their content are having damaging effects on children's development

" Technology, social media, access to bad sites on their cell phones. Kids are walking around 7 years of age with cell phones and they can access anything that an adult can as well so I think that also has a big influence somewhat nowadays on children." (Afrikaans speaker)

" The dangers of drugs and alcohol, and sexual abuse, are huge. The things today's children are facing are beyond, because of these cellphones and access to pornography." (IsiXhosa speaker)

" Technology ends up being dangerous because these soapies and dramas they are watching, are not checked whether they are suitable for children. Let me take wrestling for an example. Children watch wrestling and you will see the child wrestling another child. And then these soapies, Generations and Days [Of Our Lives], you will find that the child is deep into these things." (IsiZulu speaker)

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4. Poverty Undermines Development

Members of the public consider poverty to be a problem for children's development because it so often compromises the quality of their nutrition, shelter, education, and health, and because parents living in poverty constantly have to struggle and work to make ends meet and thus have less time to commit to their children's development.

" I notice the difference between children who come from poor families and those who are from well off families. It looks like poor nutrition can affect the development, as well to an extent and thereafter it is issues of values—what you get taught, the types of people that you grow up with." (Afrikaans speaker)

" Maybe they don't have proper running water, or they're drinking from a river. Maybe they can't afford food, or they lack certain nutrition. Maybe they can only afford bread and butter, or maybe a few vegetables here and there, lack in protein...lack of education." (English speaker)

" Because in a slum area, you have one community toilet, which everybody uses, which is unhygienic. They have no proper taps. There's one tap and 20 families would use it. So that also hampers their development." (English speaker)

" The environment you are in has an impact. You cannot compare the development of a child that has never seen a TV, living in the rural areas without civilization. Even the thinking of that child is different." (IsiZulu speaker)

Key Implications of Models About What Shapes ECD

- ***Environments Are Key*** is a critically important model to leverage in communications because it sets up attention to the kinds of risk and protective factors that surround a child and shape their wellbeing. It provides a key opening to emphasize the importance of a broad range of social, community, and family factors that can and should be bolstered through public supports to strengthen and improve children's environments.
- The ***Parents First, But a Shared Responsibility*** model has largely positive implications, though care must be taken to leverage it appropriately in communications. A key strength of the model is that, when thinking in this way, people recognize a responsibility beyond the household level for helping improve children's early development, including substantial attention to the roles of both community and government. From a public policy perspective, this is a critical assumption. That said, care is required, as the strength of the ***Parents First*** part of the model can result in the assertion of parental responsibility, and of the idea of the home as private space, at the exclusion of other actors. Communicators should focus on helping people recognize that public institutions have a critical role to play in supporting and empowering parents in their role as caregivers and facilitators of children's healthy development.
- The ***Extreme Dangers Threaten*** model has mixed implications. Taken on its own, the recognition that there are extreme dangers faced by children in South Africa is neither incorrect nor problematic. However, relative to a larger picture of the kinds of risks faced by children in South Africa, the strength of this ***Extreme Dangers*** model can divert attention away from more broadly distributed and pervasive risks to children's development—risks like maternal depression, spousal conflict and abuse, pollution and unhealthy housing.
- The ***Poverty Undermines Development*** model represents a key understanding by the public, one that can be leveraged in support of efforts to extend supports to families who are struggling. It opens up a productive space to make the case for cost-effective ways to provide supports to those families and to strengthen their children's development in the process.

Models of Why ECD *Matters*

1. "Early" Childhood Development is Foundational

Because of the ***Aging Up*** model described above, people are more likely to consider a 3-year-old than a 3-month-old when thinking about important "early" developmental processes. Yet, despite this lack of attention to children's earliest months and years, South Africans do understand that fundamental structures and behaviors are being set up during a child's early development and that therefore it is important for caregivers and other adults to attend to early development.

" [ECD] is the foundation for adulthood, so it means if the foundation is wrong, everything else can't be constructed right." (Afrikaans speaker)

> *" Children are the roots of a person. I do not think a tree can survive without roots because it must absorb nutrients, bear leaves and be beautiful. Any existing person originated from a child. It's a very important thing; I think it's the most important thing. Take care of it. Once children are taken care of, maybe, we might have a changed society."* (IsiZulu speaker)

> *" It is the foundation, the base of what the child will be tomorrow as a human being."* (IsiXhosa speaker)

> *" So it means developing them, laying the foundation, and setting them in the right direction."* (English speaker)

Participants put particular attention on how children's capacities and skills as adults, as well as their confidence later in life, are structured by their early experiences.

> *" When they are developing, they have to learn skills so that, when they have the skills, they will be able to do things for themselves."* (English speaker)

> **Researcher:** *"Why does ECD matter?"*
>
> **Participant:** *"It is because it is where you build the child. It is where there is potential to see what the child is going to become when they grow up. [...] It is better to focus on early childhood because that is where you can see where the child is headed in life."* (IsiZulu speaker)

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2. Society is an Outcome

Because of the ***ECD is Foundational*** model described above, South Africans understand that the behaviors and capacities that adults possess emerge during development, as does the health and functionality of society overall. In short, if many children develop poorly, society will suffer; and if most children develop well, society will benefit.

> *" We won't always be governed by [today's] adults. Children need to be developed because they are future leaders."* (IsiXhosa speaker)

> *" There's a song that says happy parents make happy children, happy children make happy families, happy families make happy communities, and happy communities make happy nations. [...] Sad to say there is a big gap. That is maybe why we have such an angry nation and angry community, angry people, because something terrible has gone wrong in the development of children."* (English speaker)

> *" Because we want a healthy society. I want to feel safe in my house. I don't want to live next to the neighbor if their child was arrested for theft or robbery. He will steal all my stuff. I need to worry about the children in the community, so that we can have a healthy society."* (Afrikaans speaker)

Key Implications of Models of Why ECD Matters

- While misunderstanding of just what constitutes "early" represents a substantial challenge, as seen with the ***Aging Up*** model described above, the core insight that ***Childhood Development Is Foundational*** is perhaps the most useful cultural model held by the South African public for building support for public policies. Attention to the fundamental importance of earlier rather than later development, and to the idea that later developments are built on earlier ones, is both consistent with the science and provides a key platform for asserting the benefits of helping parents, families, and communities strengthen supports for early childhood development.
- The ***Society Is an Outcome*** model likewise provides an important starting point for strengthening the idea that shared investments in children's early development brings shared benefits to communities and the nation. Communicators must be strategic and aware, however, in terms of ***how*** they leverage this model in communications, recognizing that there is a difference between emphasizing the ***positive*** outcomes that emerge from ECD investments—healthier, more capable, and more engaged citizens—as compared to emphasizing the ***avoidance of more negative outcomes***—crime, substance abuse, or corruption. Further research is necessary to provide insights into how best to leverage the ***Society as an Outcome*** model effectively in the service of ECD policies and programs.

Models for *Improving* ECD

1. More Control of Children

A strong model emerged that children in South Africa have too many rights and privileges and that the balance of power, so to speak, has shifted too far in favor of children, at the expense of parental authority and control. Linked back to the idea that children need discipline in order to develop well, this model contends that a culture of entitling children does them, their parents, and society a disservice.

> *" So we find very few of those adults [who know right from wrong] in our society these days. It's because of the freedom children are given and I blame the governments for that. I really blame the government for that. They have taken the prayer out of the schools, number one. They have taken the authority away from the parent, of being a parent to its child. In other words, now the child is no more the parents' child, it's the government's child, because children have more rights."* (English speaker)

> **Researcher: "***Do you think there are any other rights that children need?"*
>
> **Participant:** *"I think what we have now is more than enough. Sometimes we go a little bit overboard."* (Afrikaans speaker)

> *" When the government said children should not be beaten up, no, the government did not say the right thing. A child needs to be beaten up so they can know that what they are doing is wrong and not do it again."* (IsiZulu speaker)

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2. Spanking is Necessary

As per the final quote above, there is a robust model that values corporal punishment as a necessary and effective tool for disciplining children. Research participants consistently criticized the move towards banning physical discipline in schools and homes, and argued that parents and other caregivers must have spanking available to them as a disciplinary tool because there are times when it is the most effective way to teach a child right from wrong.

> **Researcher: "***Do you think children should have any other rights that they don't currently have?"*
>
> **Participant:** *"Right to a hiding! I am in favour of physical punishment. I know there are some people that take it too far, but like in the good old days when a teacher was able to hit you with a ruler twice on your hand – I think it is a child right that has to be there. A child should have the right to be hit if they are out of control. This will bring back discipline in school and will make it easier for the teacher to teach the class."* (Afrikaans speaker)

" So I believe you can always smack them. Just let them know, "You are not allowed, you can't be doing that." Then they know." (English speaker)

" Even in the Bible, God agrees that if you don't beat the child, you are killing them, even the Bible agrees. Sometimes you have to use a stick to just remind the child, because sometimes if you keep telling them they don't remember, but once you give them a hiding they remember." (IsiZulu speaker)

" People normally say, 'Bend the tree while it is still young,' because if you do not do that while a child is still young, you cannot change that later on, because it's too late by then." (IsiXhosa speaker)

" We got a hiding when we did wrong. We got a hiding, and we grew up just fine." (English speaker)

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3. Strengthen Government Services and Oversight

In line with the ***Parents First, but a Shared Responsibility*** model described above, the public also believes that government has a strong role to play in supporting ECD to achieve the health and wellbeing of the population. This public role is strongly modeled as one of direct services, particularly the provision of health care, education, and youth services, with the focus on the latter two once again evidence of the strength of the ***Aging Up*** model.

> **Researcher:** *"What role do you think the government plays in early childhood development?"*
>
> **Participant: "***On a practical level, they bring in educational systems and things."* (English speaker)

" It all goes back to the government. Private organizations and individuals are also responsible, but the government has the infrastructure to reach everyone." (Afrikaans speaker)

Researcher: *"Let's talk about South Africa as a whole. What do you think can be done on that level to improve childhood development?"*

Participant: *"Give more money, it's as simple as that. [...] More government and extra government."* (English-speaker)

There was also a focus on the role government should play in raising public awareness and understanding issues of early childhood development. The assumption is that greater awareness will translate into more effective parenting and broader support for children's development.

" We need to inform people about early childhood development as well. If you have posters as you're driving, people can see, look at it and be, "Okay, I need to look after my child." (English speaker)

" I think it is important that people are taught in the clinics, on radio and on TV, so that everyone will have knowledge on how to raise children." (IsiZulu speaker)

" Government can assist in building arts and culture centers and sports. Most importantly, raising awareness regarding the importance of early childhood development." (IsiXhosa speaker)

" Parents need to be educated so that they know how to raise their children in the right way and to be supportive." (Afrikaans speaker)

Another dominant theme was the perceived need for increased government monitoring of crèches and daycare centres, as well as more professional development of caretakers and educators.

" First they need to train the SGBs [School Governing Bodies] and the people who are facilitating, to monitor everything. It might even help to have a register that they sign when they come to work. They must be trained so that they can train children." (IsiXhosa speaker)

" First of all, the teachers need to know what they are doing. There needs to be enough support for the teachers from the government." (Afrikaans speaker)

" The government's role is to ensure that these people are trained for work with children." (IsiZulu speaker)

" I think if the government could do spot checks on all these day-care centres, then at least, you know, they would be able to address any issues that they come across." (English speaker)

Key Implications of Models for Improving ECD

- Both the *More Control of Children* and *Spanking is Necessary* models are problematic because they suggest that more rigorous attention to discipline and structure are important solutions to what ails both children and society in contemporary South Africa. Both models suggest that a stricter and a "harder" hand is required to bring children under control to achieve right standards of conduct and self-discipline. Communicators will need strategies to avoid triggering either of these models in people's thinking when they make the argument for strengthening supports for children and their families, as both models support practices that experts know to be detrimental to child development.
- The *Strengthen Government Services and Oversight* model has mixed implications. On the one hand, the fact that the public holds a robust model of government responsibility and action on behalf of children can be an important starting point for communications advocating public ECD policy and implementation. It provides the basis for maintaining and strengthening those public agencies that provide direct services to families and children. At the same time, to the extent that such direct services dominate public thinking about government's role, they confine people's thinking about the other, less-direct, ways that public agencies work on behalf of children's positive development, through support to families in the form of family leave, maternal mental health promotion, home visits, substance abuse treatment, violence prevention, housing, and other policies.

Figure 2: *Cultural Models of Early Childhood Development in South Africa*

The Stakeholder View

Alongside researching expert and public understandings of early childhood development, the project conducted preliminary research with stakeholders from government and implementation organizations to provide an initial snapshot of perspectives from this key population. These findings suggest stakeholder thinking occupies an intermediary place between experts and the public, and that this group holds models that are both consistent with the science, as well as models that are aligned with dominant patterns in public thinking.

Stakeholders had a better understanding than the public of the science story about children's need for stimulation and social relationships to foster critical brain development, recognizing it as a contingent rather than automatic process, one that relies on critical inputs and engagements.

> *" It is everything that is developed from the womb onwards. So I think, first of all, you have got to understand the rapid processes of brain development. Synapses that are forming and synapses that are important in terms of later learning and later development and all of that. So, it needs adequate nutrition; it needs the right stimulation; it needs health care and all the health care interventions that are needed; and it needs attachment and good parenting; and then obviously the resources of government enter."* (ECD implementer)

> *" Understanding that it's beyond just physical development. That it's not just developmental milestones, like when your child sits or crawls or rolls or walks. And understanding that [...] it's not, like, predestined, you know? That, actually, the way in which your child will develop over that period is largely influenced by the way in which you engage with your child."* (ECD implementer)

> *" Adequate stimulation, someone playing with them, looking and talking to them, making facial contacts, touching—really critical exercises that get the baby's system to start working."* (ECD implementer)

Likewise, much of what stakeholders said was aligned with the science in emphasizing that it is the first months and years of life that are critical:

> *" Early childhood development begins at the conception stage. That human foetus is already in early childhood development. Also everything that goes with the mother's needs while they are pregnant."* (National policymaker)

> *" Well, it starts in the home where the child is born, with the parents, with the family and with the community, before a child can even go out to a programme outside the home. Because those first zero to two years, in fact those first 1,000 days, are very important."* (National policymaker)

At the same time, there was also evidence of the ***Aging Up*** model among stakeholders, which suggests they also need help keeping their focus on the earliest phases of children's lives as the critical window for development. For example, when asked to name the most important public policy they would change, this stakeholder responded:

> *" The public policy that I would change is, I would say, okay, state-funded universal access to early childhood development programmes* ***from the age of three*** *for children with different modalities, not necessarily in centres, but different modalities that can be provided."* (ECD implementer, emphasis added)

In terms of the factors that shape development, stakeholders—like members of the public—emphasized family and community factors, as well as the role of poverty in undermining a family's capacity to effectively promote a young child's positive development.

> **Researcher:** *"What are some of the things that you would want the South African general public to know about Early Childhood Development?"*
>
> **Stakeholder:** *"Okay. I would like them to know about the importance of Early Childhood Development in terms of participation of parents and the community—that if we don't lay a good foundation for the growth of the child from conception, mother being healthy and having nutritious food, and avoiding alcohol, smoking and anything else that can harm the child. That is very important."* (National policymaker)

> *" Early childhood development happens first and foremost in the home—where the parents are, where the family is, where the extended family is, and where the friends come and visit. That's the primary place where early childhood development happens."* (ECD implementer)

> *" I think, first, there's poverty that's having a negative impact on our kids. And, of course, linked to poverty are all the other things you know, maternal education—it's key, we know, for physical development, emotional development, intellectual development, internal education. [...] Then, of course good nutrition, early childhood stimulation, and I don't think we're doing enough on teaching the parents parenting skills on stimulating kids, you know. So I mean many of these things, unfortunately, are related to socioeconomic factors and poverty."* (National policymaker)

> *" Poverty obviously is a massive factor, not just because you don't have resources for things, but because of the strain it puts on mental health issues, you know? It's not just that you can't necessarily buy the best future for your child, but actually that you are occupied by the things that are life threatening. So, other things, like whether your child is getting stimulated or not, become secondary."* (ECD implementer)

Like both experts and members of the public, stakeholders understood that early childhood development matters not only for the lives and futures of individual children, but also for the future of South African society. As with some members of the public, this model was at times as much about avoiding negative outcomes—criminality, for example—as it was about promoting positive ones.

> *" If you don't start at an early age to prepare the child, to be able to contribute to society in a positive manner, have good self-esteem and be able to stand up confidently on their own, you have failed that child."* (National policy maker)

> *" It's the future of the country. If members of the public really understand that—the stability of the country, stability in terms of longevity. How long will we continue being a society is dependent upon how we treat early childhood development now. So yes, we should be concerned, because if you want to be safe, secure, productive in South Africa, you cannot afford to ignore early childhood development. If we don't, we are raising monsters for ourselves and we will become ungovernable in one of these many years to come, because we haven't prepared enough."* (ECD implementer)

In terms of what to do to improve ECD outcomes across the country, stakeholders placed substantial emphasis on the need to maintain and expand a robust public health infrastructure, one that includes expanded access and outreach to expecting and new mothers.

> *" We need to improve our antenatal care and what we do during the antenatal period. [...] And then, of course you know, we need to have better quality ECD centres—better facilities, better qualified teachers, better resourcing for ECD centres."*
> (National policymaker)

> *" I mean health is very important, so the clinics where the social workers are. And then, where the early child programmes are in the community, so that people can use them to their full potential, in terms of what services are available within their reach. Also, those families that need services but cannot afford them—to be able to know where to get help in terms of getting a [social] grant, if the parent is eligible for the grant."*
> (National policymaker)

Finally, stakeholders also focused on the need to raise awareness of children's early developmental needs, especially their cognitive development, and to empower parents with the requisite support they need to promote their children's development.

> *" I would place a much higher emphasis on the importance of parental support and capacity development."* (ECD implementer)

> *" I talk about providing parents with information about stimulation and all of those other things that are required. [...] From a policy level, there needs to be communication around—what is government's policy, and what are the rights that can be claimed by parents for their young children and then indirectly claimed by children?"*
> (ECD implementer)

> *" Because currently people still feel disempowered and feel that they can't do anything, and constantly abdicate to others, to schools and others. So, a sense of building efficacy—that it is in the hands of parents, "You have the power. You can transmit power to your children," I think is an important part of it. [...] I think politicians sit up and take notice when you talk power, so I want parents in South Africa to feel that they have power through early childhood development."* (ECD implementer)

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4 MAPPING THE GAPS IN UNDERSTANDING

The goals of this analysis were to:

(1) document the way experts talk about and explain the science of early childhood development;

(2) establish how the South African public understands this same topic;

(3) point to some preliminary patterns in thinking among stakeholders; and

(4) compare and "map" these explanations and understandings to reveal the gaps and overlaps across the perspectives of these three groups. We now turn to this fourth task.

There are important overlaps between expert, stakeholder, and public perspectives that provide a good place to start and build from in effectively communicating about early childhood development. That said, and as will become apparent, several of these overlaps are also linked to important gaps between experts, stakeholders, and the public, making their implications for strategic communication anything but straightforward.

Overlaps

1. Childhood development sets up the rest of life

Experts, stakeholders, and the public all believe that the earliest years of a child's development are foundational to their behavior, success, and health for the rest of their life. While the default definition of what constitutes "early" differs (see a major gap below), this shared attention to the fundamental importance of ECD is a significant overlap that can and should be leveraged in communications around the domain. Communicators can activate and build on this model to increase the salience of early childhood and the importance of early development as a long-term, social issue.

2. Environments and poverty matter

Experts, stakeholders, and the public all understand that the environments that surround a child shape their experiences and development in fundamental ways. All are also attuned to the ways that poverty can undermine development because of the burdens it places on parents, families, and children. This attention to a child's surroundings, and the recognition that it can be of better or worse quality, is a fundamental overlap that should be leveraged in communications about both how and why to improve supports for children and families in South Africa. Messages should employ language and images that cue this existing sense that "what surrounds us, shapes us."

3. Access to quality services is key

Experts, stakeholders, and the public share attention to the importance of high quality public services that support children and families and recognize that not all South Africans have access to these supports. All argued for improving access to quality services across all regions of the country, especially for children and families living in poverty.

4. Development matters because a good society depends on it

Experts, stakeholders, and the public share an understanding that ECD is not simply a private concern, but rather that it has implications for the health of society overall.

5. Government must play a key role

At a general level, experts, stakeholders, and the public all share a model in which government is an active and engaged agent in the early childhood development arena. Though the vision of this public role varies (see below), the fact that there is a shared commitment to a strong public role is a key overlap that provides an important leverage point for future communications.

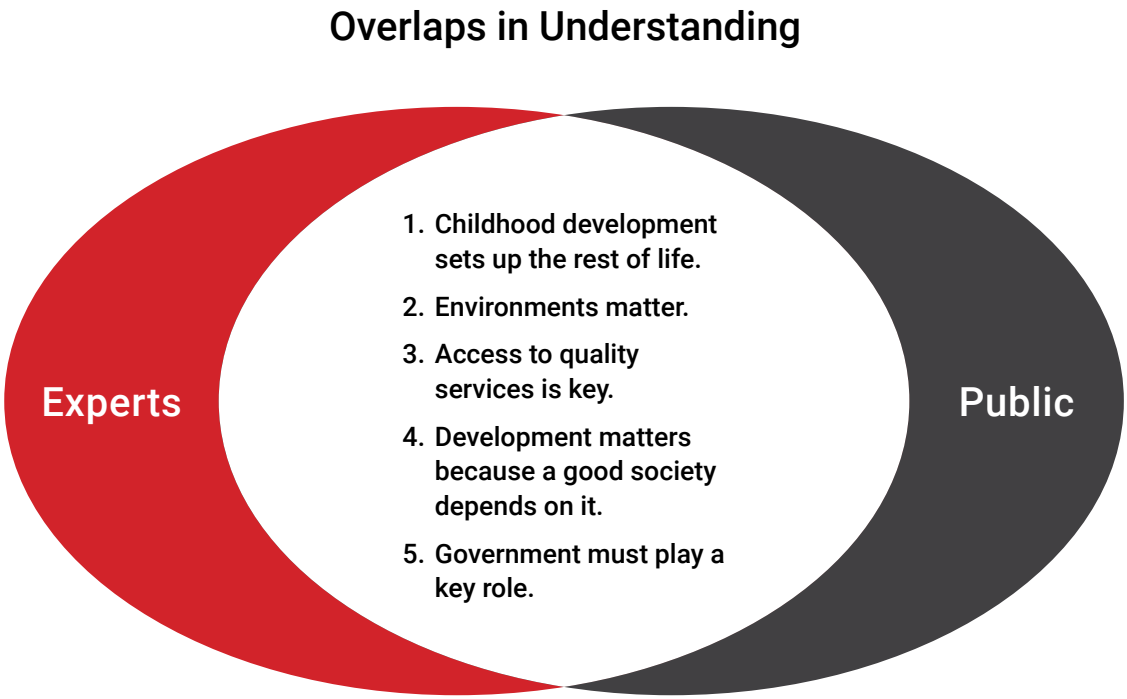

Figure 3: *Overlaps in understanding between the Expert and Public views*

Gaps

Alongside these overlaps are a series of key gaps, especially between experts and members of the public.

1. What Is developing: Brains vs. Other Things

Experts focused on the emergence of a set of organising cognitive and emotional skills, called executive function and self-regulation, that develop during early childhood. They argued that the quality of a child's environment of relationships can either foster or hinder these foundational skills. The public's focus is on children's physical, emotional, and psychological development, but not on the important development of brain structure and function, nor on the relationships and environmental inputs that children require.

2. Critical timing of brain development: Early means Early vs. Aging Up

Experts emphasize that the pre-natal and early post-natal stages of a child's life are foundational to all subsequent development. Their focus is squarely on the first 1000 days of a child's life. By contrast, the public, and some stakeholders, default to older children—age 3 or 4 and above—as the time when important cognitive development and learning really gets started.

3. Early development needs: Stimulation vs. Just the Basics

Experts emphasize the importance of children experiencing stimulation, social interaction, and communication from caregivers from the very beginning of their lives. They point to how these engagements promote new neural networks and functional brain connectivity. The public, by contrast, defaults to concern with the basics of love, safety, nutrition, and discipline as the key ingredients for early development. While the public is not wrong about the importance of nurturance and safety for babies and infants, their lack of attention to for the importance of cognitive and emotional stimulation during these early years represents a key gap.

4. Threats to development: Pervasive Risks vs. Extreme Threats

Experts emphasize how ongoing risk factors, like maternal depression or conflict in the home, can trigger stress responses in the developing child and thereby undermine their healthy development. They note that, while typically not front-page news, these kinds of pervasive, sometimes unnoticed, factors can do long-term harm to children. The public is instead focused on a set of high-profile threats to children's safety, including trafficking, kidnapping, rape, and abuse. While these extreme threats are present in South African society, their strength within public thinking appears to overshadow attention to more pervasive and common risk factors identified by experts, factors which, on balance, harm greater numbers of children in South Africa.

5. Resilience: Conditioned by Environments vs. "You Have It, or You Don't"

Experts describe childhood resilience as an important outcome that emerges from the interaction between genetic and environmental factors. Alongside a strong genetic role, experts assert that resilience can be strengthened or weakened in ***all*** children through exposure to protective or risk factors respectively. The public's most readily available model of resilience is as a largely inborn characteristic, one that a child either does or does not have. This model diverts attention away from how a child's environment and experiences can either foster or undermine the development of resilience. The upshot of such a view is likely to dampen support for measures designed to strengthen children's resilience.

6. Rights: Human Rights vs. Too Many Rights

Experts emphasize the importance of honoring and protecting the human rights of all children, with attention on the special protection and care that all children need. They point to the need to maintain and build the legal, policy, and programmatic structures necessary to help guarantee those rights for all South African children. Among the public there is a strong notion that South African society awards children too many rights and that the discourse of "children's rights" comes at the expense of parental and community authority over children, and that children are deprived of needed direction as a result.

7. Providing structure to children: Explanation and Distraction vs. Corporal Punishment

Experts consider corporal punishment to be damaging to a child's development, especially young children, and instead hold that the best way to teach children discipline and self-control is through techniques of distraction and explanation – distracting a child away from an attractive but unsafe object or activity by offering them an alternative that is safer or healthier, and helping children understand why certain behaviors are better alternatives than others; for example, by pointing out how a child's behaviour may harm someone else. The public, meanwhile, shares a strong model of the value and benefits of spanking as a means to discipline children and train them up to know right from wrong.

8. Timing of interventions: First 1000 Days vs. School-Age

In line with their assertion that "early means early," experts assert that ECD policies and programs should target pregnant mothers and children in their first 1000 days of life. It is during these early months of pre- and post-natal development that interventions can have their greatest and most enduring impacts. By contrast, when considering institutions beyond the home environment, the public focuses attention on older school-aged children, and defaults to thinking about schools and youth clubs as the most important contexts in which improvements can and should be made.

9. Role of government: Empowering Families vs. Providing Direct Services

Recognizing the central role played by the home environment in children's lives, much of the expert focus was on how public institutions can better support parents, families, and other caregivers in their capacity to create consistent conditions that foster positive early childhood development. Experts want government to empower, support, and scaffold families across a variety of domains (financial support, housing, counseling, protection services, home visits, and others) in order to help parents provide experiences that are conducive to children's developmental wellbeing. The public has a narrower focus on how government can provide ***direct*** services to benefit children, especially in the domains of health and education, alongside awareness-raising and monitoring efforts. They are less attuned to the ways broader supports for parents and families fundamentally shape developmental outcomes for children.

Figure 4: *Gaps identified between Expert and Public views*

5 CONCLUSION

This report is the first step in an envisioned larger collaboration between the FrameWorks Institute and our research partners in South Africa to develop a set of communication strategies and tools that can elevate public and policymaker support in South Africa for national programmes that support early childhood development. Towards that end, the collaboration seeks to develop an evidence-based narrative that engages people in the value of investments in early childhood development.

This report highlights some of the central challenges and opportunities involved in engaging members of the South African public in a productive conversation about the importance of early childhood development. The identified challenges suggest a set of key communications tasks, described below. Addressing each of these tasks will require identifying and testing framing strategies and tools that can be used to communicate a new narrative around the issue of early childhood development in South Africa.

In particular, future research should seek to develop and test strategies that help people better understand that:

- The "early" in ECD means early, by countering the strength of the ***Aging Up*** model which distracts people—including many stakeholders—from focusing on the critically important developmental needs of children in the first 1000 days of life: from conception through the first 2-3 years of life.
- Structural and functional brain development is the crucial locus for developmental processes; that fundamental cognitive and self-regulation skills are set up in the earliest months of a child's life; and that children require social and emotional interaction, stimulation, and engagement to foster their brain development.
- Public policy must target the pervasive, everyday challenges and ongoing threats that undermine children's development.
- Corporal punishment damages children's development and that there are more effective ways to guide and discipline children.

Effectively re-framing public understanding of the importance of early childhood development, and its role in individual and community wellbeing, will require the use of new communications tools and strategies that are specifically designed to bridge the gaps described above. Below, we provide a preliminary sketch of potential re-framing ideas to test in future research.

- Identify and test **Values** that strengthen the existing understanding that there are positive social outcomes linked to early childhood development, like having productive and engaged citizens.
- Test **Explanatory Metaphors** that have been developed in FrameWorks' previous ECD research that show promise in addressing several of the core gaps and tasks identified above. These include metaphors such as:
    - ***brain architecture*** – to help explain how brains develop and why early matters
    - ***toxic stress*** – to emphasize how pervasive stressors undermine development
    - ***serve and return*** – to explain the importance of reciprocity in early stimulation and interaction
    - ***levelness*** – to explain the importance of child mental health and how to best support it
    - ***amplifying development*** – to emphasize the importance of high quality childcare services
    - ***resilience scale*** – to help explain the role of risk and protective factors
    - ***overloaded*** – to emphasize the importance of support for parents who are struggling

- Develop and test new **Explanatory Metaphors** that target gaps specific to the South African context, in particular to challenge public support for corporal punishment, and to help the public better understand the detrimental effects of daily, pervasive environmental stresses on young children's development.

As researchers, advocates, and practitioners collaborate more strongly around the science of early childhood development, the need to translate this knowledge for members of the public—and thereby elevate support for policies designed to strengthen early childhood development—is increasingly important. However, this translational task is far from simple. Instead, re-framing the public discourse about the early developmental needs and capacities of children requires a comprehensive communications strategy, one that extends the research presented here to develop and test original messaging tools that can generate broader understandings of how children develop, and drive home the point that **early really does mean early** and that **how we interact with young children** constitutes the most important environment for development.

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About the 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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[xii] See http://developingchild.harvard.edu for more about the Center.

[xiii] See http://www.frameworksinstitute.org/international-issues.html to access previous reports about FrameWorks research on early childhood development in these countries.

[xiv] Among these ten were 3 for whom Tsonga (x1) and Northern Sotho (x2) were their primary languages of use.

[xv] See Quinn, N. (Ed.). (2005). *Finding culture in talk: A collection of methods.* New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillan.

[xvi] It should be noted that some participants had available an alternative model of environmental influences on resilience—the idea that resilience is shaped by experience. Nonetheless, the more deterministic and binary model described here came through most strongly across the 4 language populations.