



# Talking about the Science of Parenting

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A **FrameWorks** MessageMemo

***Sponsored by:***

The Parenting Research Centre, Australian Government Department of Social Services, Department of Education and Training Victoria, NSW Government Department of Family and Community Services and The Benevolent Society

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# Foreword

Dear colleague,

Improving children's outcomes means supporting parents in their parenting.

We already know how much parenting matters, but we are also becoming increasingly aware that how we think and talk about parenting matters too. We now know that if we want to overcome some of the barriers to families getting the support they need, we need to have a much more productive conversation to support parenting in Australia.

This latest piece of research from the FrameWorks Institute gives us concrete strategies for these productive conversations. It builds on earlier work that mapped the gaps between public perceptions and expert understandings. And it gives us the tools we need to support parents by communicating much more effectively about improving child development.

Our research partner, the FrameWorks Institute, now presents us with a range of important and immediately useable findings. These findings can be applied across the human services and communities to improve how we talk about the critical role parents play in child development and how to get public support. This rigorous research demonstrates powerfully that we must now move from a parent effectiveness frame to a master narrative that has child development at its core.

Just as important as the findings from this work is the partnership that sits behind it. We are deeply grateful to the Australian Department of Social Services, The Department of Education and Training, Victoria, the NSW Department of Family and Community Services and The Benevolent Society for having the vision and commitment to join with us in this venture. Large-scale, cross-jurisdictional and cross-sector change is never easy. But the engagement of our partners from different locations and contexts means we are in an enviable position to garner the knowledge from these findings and put it to work.

The Parenting Research Centre is committed to finding collaborative ways of putting evidence into action to improve outcomes for children and families. This work is a wonderful example of what happens when people come together to engage in big-picture thinking.

I commend this report to you. I believe it will help policy practitioners, service delivery and community members to employ powerful and effective messages that will improve the policy and practice responses for children and their families.

**Annette Michaux**

Director, Parenting Research Centre

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# Introduction

Evidence from the science of parenting is building. Researchers are learning more and more about effective caregiving practices as they untangle the connections between parenting, child development, family wellbeing, and the health and functioning of a society.

The evidence is clear: improving child development requires providing better support for parents who care for children. Research on parenting has the potential to deepen public knowledge, drive better practice, and contribute greater wellbeing for all Australians. Explaining the findings from this body of evidence to general audiences, however, is challenging and rarely straightforward.

The research detailed here was conducted by the FrameWorks Institute in partnership with and with support from the Parenting Research Centre. The research was funded by the Australian Government Department of Social Services, Victorian Department of Education and Training, NSW Government Department of Family and Community Services and The Benevolent Society and coordinated by the Parenting Research Centre. It confirms the extent of the challenges of communicating about parenting. But, importantly, it takes the next step. It presents an evidence-based strategy that moves the public discussion about parenting in Australia in a direction that builds support and demand for the policies and programs that support parents, so that they can support children.

The words ‘science’ and ‘parenting’ are not concepts that most Australians are accustomed to or comfortable with thinking about together. Information about effective parenting, let alone the science or study of parenting, evokes highly charged and divisive responses. Attempts to *evaluate* parenting practices are frequently perceived as attacks on people’s deep-seated identities, resulting in either outright rejection of any message or messenger, guilt, or both. Parents and non-parents share an understanding of parenting that is highly individualised, subjective, natural, and instinctual, which impedes their ability to hear advice on parenting practices, not to mention science or evidence-based recommendations. Careful framing is key if people are to apply information on effective parenting and understand the need for more effective parenting support. Without such framing, people will reject evidence-based messages and resist new ideas, and we will continue to fall short of providing parents in Australia with what all parents need but only some receive.

The research presented here finds that moving from a parenting effectiveness frame to a *Child Development* master narrative wins hearts and minds when it comes to the issue of parenting. This frame shift increases people’s sense that parenting is a *social* rather than individual issue, builds public will for a more robust system of support for parents, and makes people more receptive to hearing about and acting on information about effective parenting. The research also shows that following the *Child Development* master narrative with a metaphor that explains the external factors that affect parenting creates dramatic increases in people’s support for actions that promote effective parenting practices. When people understand that improving parenting is a way to improve outcomes for children, and recognise that

parenting is shaped by social context, they can consider core elements of the science of parenting and support the solutions that it advances.

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## Evidence Base

### What does the research on parenting say?

To distil expert consensus on effective parenting, FrameWorks researchers conducted interviews from September to November 2015 with 10 researchers, practitioners and policy experts working on the issue. These data were supplemented by a review of relevant academic and advocacy literature and refined during a set of in-person feedback sessions with parenting researchers, practitioners, and advocates in Australia.

### How does the public think?

To document the deep, but implicit, cultural understandings the public draws on to make sense of parenting issues, FrameWorks conducted 50 in-depth cognitive interviews in December 2015 in the greater Sydney, Melbourne and Brisbane metro areas. These data were analysed to identify the implicit, shared understandings and assumptions that structure and support public opinion. This analysis was supplemented by data from 40 additional interviews on child development that were conducted in July 2012.<sup>1</sup>

### How can we shift thinking?

To identify effective ways of talking about parenting, FrameWorks researchers developed a set of candidate frames.<sup>2</sup> These frames were tested in 2018 in Australia and refined using three methods:

- Seventy-six rapid, face-to-face on-the-street interviews to test the ability of various frames to prompt productive and robust thinking and discussions on parenting issues.
- An experimental survey involving a nationally representative sample of 7,405 respondents to test the effectiveness of frames on public understanding, attitudes and support for programs and policies.
- A series of qualitative frame tests with a total of 36 participants to explore how the frames worked in conversational settings in order to refine their execution and generate recommendations for their use.

All told, more than 7,600 people from across Australia were included in this research.

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# How Can Communicators Anticipate Public Thinking and Be Strategic?

The Australian public brings a rich and complex set of cultural models<sup>3</sup>—widely shared but implicit patterns of understanding—to thinking and talking about parenting. Many of these cultural models prevent the sector from advancing its key ideas. If communicators and campaigners understand these ways of thinking, they can anticipate how people will interpret messages about effective parenting and they can position their messages so that the Australian public understand them and can act on them.

Commissioned by the Parenting Research Centre, in 2016, FrameWorks performed a systematic analysis of how Australians think about parenting. This work examined assumptions and beliefs about why parenting matters, how it works, what challenges it, and how it can be better supported. This work elicited deeply held and widely shared ways of thinking about issues related to parenting. This research is explained in detail in our 2016 report, *Perceptions of Parenting: Mapping the Gaps between Expert and Public Understandings of Effective Parenting in Australia*.<sup>4</sup>

The following table briefly summarises this research. Communicators can use this chart to filter their messages, think through how their communications will land, and make strategic framing choices to tap into the most productive models and avoid those that may lead their messages astray.

Table 1: Australian Cultural Models of Parenting

COMMON ASSUMPTIONS AND BELIEFS AMONG THE AUSTRALIAN PUBLIC	IMPLICATIONS FOR COMMUNICATING ABOUT PARENTING
<p><b>Happiness is key:</b> People assume the goal of parenting is to create happy children.</p>	<p>Although happiness is important, reasoning from this assumption limits people’s understanding of what healthy development looks like—including the development of skills—and excludes key dimensions of effective parenting.</p>
<p><b>Natural parenting:</b> People assume good parenting comes ‘naturally’.</p>	<p>When triggered, this way of thinking leads people to resist the idea that parenting practices can be improved and undermines support for evidence-based parenting resources.</p>
<p><b>Filter v. wall:</b> In these competing models, people assume that external environments offer positive experiences when properly <i>filtered</i> by parents or, conversely, that external environments are threatening and that a parent’s role is to act as a <i>wall</i>, protecting children from harm.</p>	<p>Whereas the <b>filter</b> model helps people think productively about a parent’s role in scaffolding children’s learning, the <b>wall</b> model blocks people from understanding an enrichment perspective—that <i>positive</i> development can be facilitated through supportive environments and experiences.</p>

<p><b>Determinism:</b> People believe that people’s parenting is determined by how they were parented as children and that there is little that can be done to change this pattern.</p>	<p>This way of understanding is highly fatalistic and restricts people’s ability to see how programs to support parents can make a difference to outcomes.</p>
<p><b>Choice point:</b> People view good parenting as a choice that is up to the individual’s discretion and willpower.</p>	<p>This perception puts the onus on the individual to overcome challenges and leaves little room for people to think about how context and circumstance limit and shape people’s choices.</p>
<p><b>Social contexts matter:</b> People recognise that social environments can be a source of either stress or support for parents.</p>	<p>This model can be activated to help people think more deeply about the systems and structures that shape parents’ lives.</p>
<p><b>Threat of modernity:</b> People blame modern life and ‘Australia today’ for many of the challenges parents face and hold a nostalgic view of how parenting ‘used to be’.</p>	<p>A sense of nostalgia for a mythic past lost and gone forever activates fatalistic thinking, shuts down people’s ability to imagine solutions and causes them to disengage.</p>
<p><b>One-way parenting:</b> People see parenting as something adults <i>do</i> to children, which children <i>receive</i> in a one-way transaction.</p>	<p>When people view parenting in this unidirectional way, they have trouble thinking holistically about the parent–child relationship and recognising the influence that children have on parenting.</p>
<p><b>Men are important, but women are responsible:</b> Though people generally think of parenting in gender-neutral terms, they overwhelmingly blame women for poor parenting outcomes and hold women responsible for fixing problems that arise.</p>	<p>These gendered assumptions undermine men’s role in parenting, disparage women, and make it difficult to foster productive conversations about men’s <i>equal</i> role in parenting responsibilities.</p>
<p><b>Ageing up:</b> In thinking about child development, people tend to focus on older, school-aged children and have trouble holding young children in mind.</p>	<p>Unless age is made explicit, the <b>ageing up</b> model leads people to misunderstand communications about early childhood development as being about older children.</p>
<p><b>Infinite and absolute variation:</b> People believe that human beings are, like snowflakes, unique.</p>	<p>The focus on every individual’s singularity weakens people’s support for evidence-based approaches that can be applied across varying situations and individual differences. The thinking goes: If every child is unique, what can we really say about effective parenting?</p>
<p><b>Three models of government:</b> People have contradictory ways of thinking about government and parenting—as an intrusive and unwanted supervisor, as an incompetent problem solver, or as a supportive partner in the parenting endeavour.</p>	<p>Whereas the <b>supervisory</b> and <b>incompetent</b> models block people’s receptivity to policy-based solutions, the <b>support</b> model facilitates thinking about how public programs and infrastructure can be changed to create better parenting outcomes.</p>

# What's the New Story to Advance?

To move the public conversation on parenting in Australia and increase public support for solutions, communicators need framing strategies they can count on to dislodge unproductive cultural models and open new, more productive ways of thinking. A major frame shift is required to accomplish these tasks.

To arrive at such a shift, FrameWorks researchers designed a series of qualitative studies and quantitative experiments to test the effects of a range of different frames and narratives.

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## Which Frames 'Work'? That's an Empirical Question

To arrive at a set of framing strategies that advocates can use to communicate more effectively about parenting issues, FrameWorks researchers conducted a series of qualitative and quantitative studies that tested the effects of different frames on public thinking and support for solutions.

One of the key methods used was a nationally representative controlled experiment. The experiment determined which frames moved public thinking and showed significant change on the following outcome areas of interest: understanding of parenting issues, attitudes about parenting, efficacy of improving the situation, support for specific policies and programs, and behavioural outcomes. A frame 'works' when it can move these targeted communications outcomes in a desired direction. Researchers tested alternative frames and analysed which ones were most effective in moving the outcomes summarised in the table below.

**Table 2:** Tested Outcomes: Improved Knowledge, Change in Attitudes and Increased Policy Support

SCALES	SAMPLE QUESTIONS
<b>Parenting as a set of skills</b>	Parenting is a set of skills that people can learn. ( <i>Strongly disagree; Disagree; Slightly disagree; Neither agree nor disagree; Slightly agree; Agree; Strongly Agree</i> )
<b>Role of systemic and environmental factors in shaping parenting</b>	Please rank the following in order of how important they are in explaining how well people parent: Parents' wealth and income; Whether parents experience discrimination; Whether parents have access to community and health services; Whether parents have access to government programs for support; Whether parents are responsible, hard-working individuals; How people were parented themselves; How much parents love their children

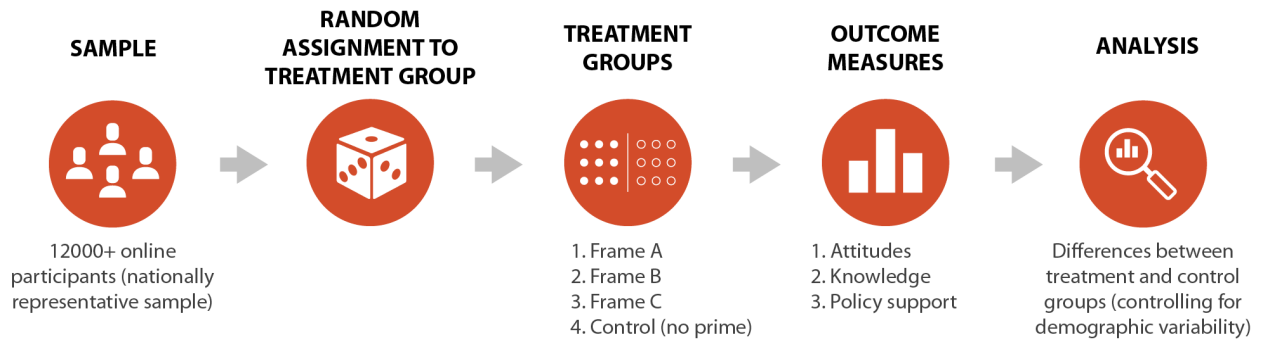


<b>Role of effective parenting in the early childhood development</b>	The way a child is parented before age three has a big effect on how healthy they are when they're older. <i>(Strongly disagree; Disagree; Slightly disagree; Neither agree nor disagree; Slightly agree; Agree; Strongly agree)</i>
<b>Policies that address parental stress and hardship</b>	We should increase public assistance for low-income parents to help pay for housing, food and other household costs. <i>(Strongly oppose; Oppose; Slightly oppose; Neither oppose nor favour; Slightly favour; Favour; Strongly favour)</i>
<b>Policies that prevent parenting difficulties</b>	Employers should be required to provide longer paid leave and more flexible work schedules for new parents. <i>(Strongly oppose; Oppose; Slightly oppose; Neither oppose nor favour; Slightly favour; Favour; Strongly favour)</i>
<b>Efficacy</b>	In your view, how realistic is it that we, as a society, can improve how people parent in this country? <i>(Not at all realistic; Slightly realistic; Somewhat realistic; Moderately realistic; Very realistic)</i>
<b>Social effects of parenting</b>	If parenting in Australia were better, there would be lower levels of inequality. <i>(Strongly disagree; Disagree; Slightly disagree; Neither agree nor disagree; Slightly agree; Agree; Strongly agree)</i>
<b>Collective responsibility</b>	In your view, how much of a responsibility does our government have to improve parenting practices in this country? <i>(No responsibility at all; A very small responsibility; A small responsibility; A moderate responsibility; A large responsibility; A very large responsibility; An extremely large responsibility)</i>
<b>Support for specific parenting initiative</b>	Would you be willing to pay higher taxes so that the [name of initiative used in treatment message] initiative could be put in place? <i>(Yes; No)</i>

Results associated with each frame in each of these outcome areas were compared and analysed against a control group that received no messages but answered the same questions. This design allows researchers to pinpoint the specific effects caused by exposure to different frames. In addition, researchers controlled for a wide range of demographic variables (including age, race, class and gender of respondents) by conducting a multiple-regression statistical analysis to ensure that the effects observed were being driven by the frame elements rather than demographic variations in the sample. Researchers also analysed open-ended questions that probed the kinds of support parents most need and asked why participants favour or support certain initiatives.

Figure 1: Determining Effective Frames

This experimental design—a hallmark of Strategic Frame Analysis®—allows researchers to feel confident that differences in understanding, attitude, or solutions support are due to the frames being tested rather than to some other confounding variable.



## A New Master Narrative: Supporting Child Development

Changing culture and reshaping policy requires a master narrative that changes how people think and what they see as important. A master narrative tells audiences what an issue is about, why it matters, what will happen if action is not taken, and what needs to be done. The master narrative shapes how people interpret and engage with the issue and what changes they will see as important and necessary. Identifying an *effective* master narrative is critical for anyone attempting to move public thinking and change policy.

A master narrative needs to move public thinking and attitudes, but it also has to be big and flexible enough to be advanced by an entire sector. It must be able to encompass the specific areas of focus, as well as policy- and systems-change goals, of the broad range of organisations in a sector. When a sector reorients and coalesces around an effective master narrative, it can shift public thinking in significant ways.

Below we describe the master narrative that emerged from a set of iterative studies on public thinking and framing of parenting. We then lay out a set of more specific recommendations that communicators can use to fill in and deepen this master narrative.

## Shift the Big Idea from Improving Parenting to Supporting Child Development

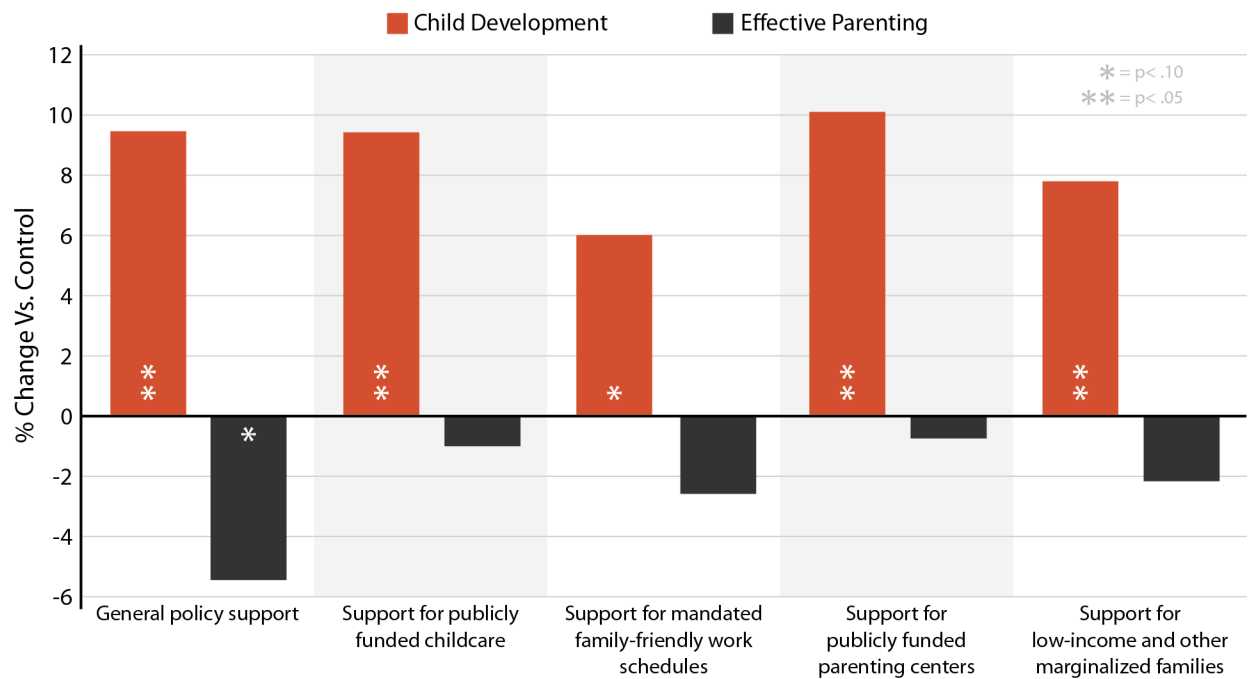
Parenting experts and advocates can strategically choose from a variety of master narratives to explain why supporting parenting in Australia matters. One common narrative strategy is to focus directly on how to improve parenting and better support the skills, practices, and behaviours that help people parent well. In this narrative, effective parenting is the objective, and the ultimate goal is to change parents' attitudes, behaviours and practices. Another strategy is to focus attention on the importance of healthy child development; effective parenting in this narrative is the *means* to achieve improved developmental outcomes for children. The difference between these two master narratives is subtle: one is about making people better parents and one is about achieving healthy developmental outcomes. But as we explain below, the *effects* of this framing choice are highly significant.

In order to determine the effectiveness of these two master narratives, FrameWorks researchers designed a series of qualitative and quantitative studies that culminated in a controlled survey experiment. In the experiment, participants were given a fictitious announcement about a major initiative designed to support parents across Australia. One set of research participants was randomly chosen to receive a message framed in terms of *Child Development*, that is, the idea that the initiative was designed to make sure that all children grow up in conditions that enable them to do well. The announcement argued that because parenting is central to healthy child development, providing support for parents is essential. Another set of participants received the same information but presented via an *Effective Parenting* master narrative, in which the initiative was designed to support parents by creating conditions that enable them to parent effectively. In essence, these master narratives gave people two very different ways of answering questions about why the initiative matters, what it will do, and whom it will affect.

As Figure 2 shows, these two master narratives have dramatically divergent effects. The *Child Development* frame was *highly* effective, leading to large, statistically significant gains in support for the parenting initiative, as well as increases in more specific policies such as making child care freely available for all Australian parents, requiring employers to offer family-friendly work schedules, funding parenting centres in every neighbourhood, and providing additional support for parents in disadvantaged and marginalised communities.

In contrast, the *Effective Parenting* master frame resulted in a statistically significant *decrease* in people's support for the initiative. An analysis that directly compared the *Child Development* and *Effective Parenting* master narratives demonstrated that general support for the proposed initiative differed by more than 15 percentage points between these two messages—a difference that is highly statistically significant. The *Effective Parenting* master narrative also negatively affected people's support for childcare policies, workplace policies, support for publicly funded parenting centres, and support for families from low-income and marginalised families, although these differences did not reach statistical significance.

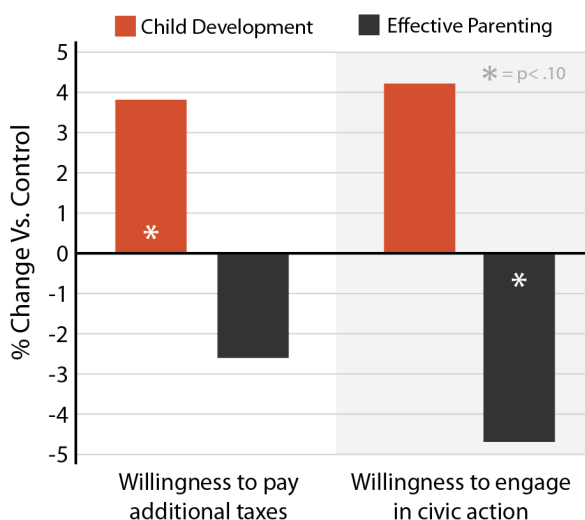
Figure 2: Effects of *Child Development* and *Effective Parenting* frames on policy support



The *Child Development* master frame was also highly effective in shifting a set of behavioural outcomes, including willingness to pay additional taxes or engage in civic action, such as signing a petition supporting the initiative, writing to an elected official, or donating to an organisation working to enact the initiative (see Figure 3). The *Effective Parenting* frame did not create positive movement on these behavioural outcomes and actually reduced participants’ willingness to engage in the civic behaviours listed above.

Figure 3: Effect of *Childhood Development* and *Effective Parenting* frames on behavioural measures

The research shows that using a *Child Development* master narrative is dramatically more effective than one oriented around effective parenting. Leading with how programs, policies, and other kinds of



interventions will affect children, the *Child Development* narrative circumvents the unproductive cultural models of approaches to parenting described above. By focusing people’s attention on development—a process of change over time in response to relationships and experiences—the master narrative prevents people from seeing parenting as an innate or natural activity, thus diminishing their sense that nothing can be done to improve parenting practices.

The *Child Development* narrative focuses attention on what children need to do well and therefore does not elicit the pushback that occurs so frequently when

people encounter messages about effective parenting. By leading with children and development, rather than parenting effectiveness, the narrative makes people less likely to interpret messages as giving unwanted and intrusive parenting advice. Additionally, this approach makes people less likely to judge parents whom they perceive to be struggling or experiencing difficulties.

When talking with non-specialists, the sector should communicate that initiatives to support parents improve outcomes for children. This idea needs to be presented early in communications. Communicators can include a range of developmental areas and outcomes in their communications. The critical point is that children are the target of the policy, program or initiative; they must be the constituents who will benefit from actions that support effective parenting.

**Before:** *We need to invest in better programs to support effective parenting.*

**After:** *To raise healthy and thriving children, Australia's parents need better support.*

Shifting to a *Child Development* master narrative in some cases will simply be a matter of order and emphasis. Consider the examples below. In the first excerpt, children's behaviour is cast as a second and ancillary outcome. In the second, supporting children's development is the primary goal.

**Before:** *By changing child-rearing attitudes and practices, we can change parenting and family life, which will change children's behavior.*

**After:** *We can better support children when we promote positive parenting attitudes and practices.*

This research also suggests that the sector should not lead with the impacts of effective parenting support on parents themselves. Nor should this be the primary takeaway of messages. This means downplaying rhetoric around what all parents want and need. While acknowledging the challenges and struggles that parents face, communicators should feature these as supporting, rather than primary, arguments in messaging. In a *Child Development* master narrative, effective parenting is a means to an end; supporting effective parenting will have positive impacts on children.

**Before:** *When life's stresses build up, it's normal for parents to feel overwhelmed and frustrated. Talking over problems with a more experienced parent can make all the difference.*

**After:** *Healthy child development starts early. It's a vital process that builds young brains and equips children with the skills they need. Policies that support parents help Australia's children to thrive.*

The research suggests that employing the *Child Development* master frame will make substantial gains in shifting public perception, increasing issue engagement, boosting policy support, and influencing behaviours. The power of this narrative is in its ability to help people clearly see how child development is affected by parenting. Below, we provide specific recommendations for how to include more explanation of parenting in the master *Childhood Development* narrative.

**RECOMMENDATION:****Avoid language that inadvertently evaluates parents or parenting.**

People discount and even reject messages about parenting when communicators use terms such as *good parenting*, *effective parenting* or *improving parenting*. This kind of language hardens people's ideas that parenting is highly subjective, that every parent and child is different, that parenting is innate, and that therefore it cannot be learned or improved. When expertise and recommendations are framed as scientific, these messages can backfire. Language that evaluates parenting or appears to be commenting on 'good' or 'bad' parenting should thus be avoided.

Instead of evaluating specific parenting practices, communicators should draw attention to the conditions that shape people's ability to parent and explain how improving those conditions will enable more positive parenting practices. By evaluating social conditions—how they can either support or hinder parenting practices—communicators can avoid the perception that they are judging the quality of parenting (and of parents). As we describe in more detail below, metaphor is an effective strategy for bringing social conditions into view.

**RECOMMENDATION:****Use metaphor to help people see that parenting is affected by context, and is not completely natural and innate.**

Earlier phases of research showed that people think that quality parenting depends on how much individual parents love and care for their children. People also believe that parenting practices are determined by how people were parented when they were children. Parenting is perceived to be an instinctual and natural activity, which makes it difficult for people to understand how social context—economic status, access to quality healthcare and mental healthcare, housing conditions, among other things—significantly shapes people's ability to parent. Reframing parenting requires finding ways to inspire more systems of thinking among members of the public.

To do this, researchers turned to metaphor. Explanatory metaphors compare an idea that is not well understood to a familiar event, object or process to give people new ways of understanding the idea. Strong explanatory metaphors are memorable, which makes them effective framing tools because they pass easily from one person to another, widening the reach of a message.

FrameWorks designed a number of different candidate metaphors and tested them for their ability to provide people with a more contextual picture of parenting—one focused less on innate abilities and more on the influences of communities, context, and social environments on parenting. Of the metaphors FrameWorks researchers tested in on-the-street interviews, a large-scale survey experiment, and persistence trials, one—*Navigating Waters*—was highly effective at helping people see that parenting is determined by an interplay of systemic factors.

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## Navigating Waters:

Raising children is like sailing. To develop healthily, children need an even keel. But things like poverty, health problems and stress can make it harder for parents to navigate family life and provide this even keel. Just like we can build lighthouses and safe harbours to guide and protect boats during heavy storms, we can help parents by providing things like counselling services, high-quality child care, and assistance with housing and food. This not only offers safety and protection during difficult times, but makes for smoother sailing and helps all children in Australia to thrive.

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Qualitative research helps us understand why the *Navigating Waters* metaphor is so effective and how communicators can best deploy it in messaging.

The metaphor draws attention to the supports that strengthen parenting practices. When supports are likened to things like lighthouses and harbours, people easily see how external factors—access to affordable childcare and counselling services—are essential to helping all parents. The lighthouse imagery in particular was effective at helping people consider the benefits of universal policies, as lighthouses are designed to help all boats. Finally, the *Navigating Waters* metaphor helps people think about the *system* of supports necessary to strengthen parenting practices. People can easily extend the metaphor to think about other actors and institutional contexts that might also provide support for families. One group of participants, for example, discussed schools and teachers acting as extra life jackets for children when storms hit.

In addition to helping people clearly see the support structures necessary for effective parenting, the metaphor opens up people's thinking about the external factors that challenge parenting, such as financial issues and unemployment. After exposure to the metaphor, participants reasoned that parenting, just like navigating rough waters, involves unexpected challenges that are outside of the navigator's control. Participants had productive conversations about the economic determinants of parenting, such as the high cost of child care in Australia. Crucially, reasoning with the metaphor, individual characteristics like love, care, strength of will, or parents' own experiences of being parented were present in conversations, but were never seen as *the exclusive* determinants of effective parenting. The metaphor expanded and enriched people's thinking about the role of social context in the process of parenting.

Finally, research showed that the *Navigating Waters* metaphor has high potential to be used in creative and generative ways and is highly visual. Research participants were able to extend the metaphor and use it to make points, have discussions, and argue positions that were not included in the original language that was presented to them. For example, some participants introduced into the discussion 'sharks' as a way to talk about substance-use issues, 'heavy cargo' as a way to make points about how social stressors can affect parenting, and 'cracks in the hull' as a way to introduce ideas about additional support needs.

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### Tips for Using the *Navigating Waters* Metaphor

- **Focus on the conditions that the navigator faces to highlight the systemic factors that shape parenting.** Because of conventional associations between the weather and the economy, people can use ideas about storms and rough seas to think about influences on parenting that are outside an individual's control. Communicators should focus on those external elements when using the metaphor.
- **Use the storm entailment to focus on the economic determinants of parenting.** The idea of storms gets participants to see that financial issues can create conditions that make parenting more difficult, which makes people more likely to agree with calls to increase financial support for parents.
- **Focus on common challenges and shared goals rather than the uniqueness of each journey.** People's default thinking is that each child and parent is different and that there is no one-size-fits-all approach. When using the metaphor, do not emphasise the uniqueness of the journey; instead, focus on the commonality of the challenges and the shared goal of the endeavour.

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The *Navigating Waters* metaphor is highly productive because it is a part of a more general class of metaphor focused on journeys and navigation. Communicators can use the metaphor flexibly and creatively to communicate that parents are on a journey and need to navigate various types of external challenges. A robust system of supports will help all navigators reach their destination.

#### RECOMMENDATION:

Introduce parenting skills after priming with the *Navigating Waters* metaphor.

Changing the conversation about parenting and advancing the programs and policies that support parents requires that experts talk about specific parenting skills, capacities and practices. While this seems like a straightforward task, talking about effective parenting skills is one of the more challenging parts of communicating about the science of parenting. When people interpret messages as offering parenting advice, there is a tendency to dismiss the message outright as intrusive, inappropriate, or an example of science going into territory where it does not belong.

Compared to experts, members of the public have very different ways of thinking about parenting skills and very different ideas about what the most important skills are for parents to develop. For instance, people easily fall into the mode of thinking that knowing how to discipline children is the most important parenting skill, while experts focus on a much broader range of skills.

To avoid these traps and misfires, communicators should set up conversations about parenting skills with the *Navigating Waters* metaphor, which brings into sharp relief the external influences that shape parenting. This metaphor helps people think through the skills that all parents need to reach their destination—like navigating by the stars, finding the closest harbour in a storm, and adapting to changing circumstances and conditions. After being cued to think about external influences on parenting, people



are less judgemental and are less likely to think about parenting as an innate skill. People are then positioned to reason that, while there is not a one-size-fits-all way to parent, there are common things that all parents can do and learn to make their journey smoother. Other metaphors tested were not as effective in setting up productive conversations about parenting skills (see Appendix).

The main takeaway is that parenting skills need to be at the *heart* of the message rather than the *starting point*. Leading with descriptions of effective parenting skills will be perceived as unwelcome and intrusive. People also view this as a futile attempt to define or redefine parenting. To avoid this, communicators must first help people understand more about the external challenges that shape parenting and get people to see why certain, common skills are necessary and important. The combination of the *Child Development* master frame and the *Navigating Waters* metaphor provides this context and opens new and more productive conversations about parenting skills.

**Before:** *When people develop good parenting skills, they can develop stronger bonds with their child.*

**After:** *Healthy child development will make a healthy Australia. But all parents need safe harbours when storms hit—such as stress in the workplace or mental health troubles. Supporting parenting skills will help us reach our destination.*

#### **RECOMMENDATION:**

**Explain brain and biological development to show *how* parenting shapes childhood development.**

The Australian public understands that early childhood is an important developmental period, but they struggle to articulate how it happens and how developmental outcomes can be improved. When faced with explaining how development works, researchers found that Australians typically fall back on the understanding that children develop ‘automatically’, following ‘natural’ trajectories of physical growth and maturation. The process remains poorly articulated. As a result, people struggle to explain how specific parenting practices shape developmental outcomes or how parenting supports improve developmental outcomes.

Communicators should, therefore, work to deepen people’s knowledge about early childhood development in order to increase support for policies and practices designed to improve parenting. One way to do this is, again, through the use of effective metaphor.

FrameWorks developed the *Brain Architecture* explanatory metaphor and tested it in Australia in 2014 to communicate the idea that brains are built over time through an active and intentional process with early periods of development being particularly important for later outcomes.<sup>5</sup> This metaphor at once communicates *process* (that brains are actively built from relationships and experience), *urgency* (that early action matters), and *efficacy* (that it is possible to improve development as well as address issues early).

FrameWorks also tested the metaphor of *Serve and Return* to help people understand that relationships with supportive caregivers are a critical part of the brain-building process. By describing how reciprocal interactions are the ‘active ingredients’ that build the brain circuitry for future health and learning, the metaphor directs attention to the importance of particular parenting practices (for example, adapting to the needs of the child) and the need for specific parenting support services (for example, maternal mental health services). Getting the public to understand how experiences and interactions affect the brain and biological development highlights how responsive caregiving is a critical skill for parents.

Here is an example of how communicators can use the *Brain Architecture* and *Serve and Return* metaphors to deepen understanding of early childhood development and the role of parenting in this process.

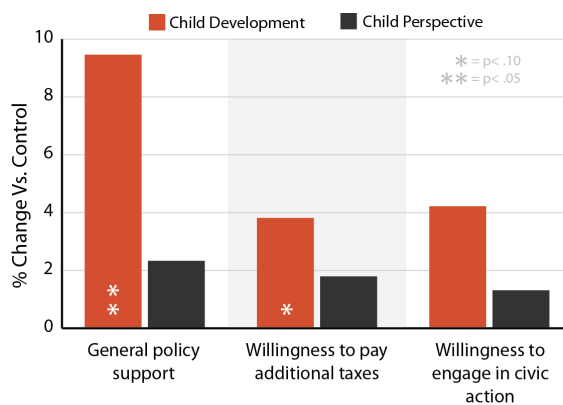
*The basic architecture of a human brain is constructed through a process that begins before birth and continues into adulthood. Early experiences shape how the brain gets built. A vital ingredient in a child’s brain development is the ‘serve and return’ interactions that they have with their parents, caregivers and community members. Young children naturally reach out and serve to adults through babbling and facial expressions. Getting in sync and returning these kinds of noises and gestures is a critical skill for parents: this is something that they can learn and get better at with support over time.*

**RECOMMENDATION:**

Use the power of the third-person perspective to make effective parenting a collective issue.

The point of view or perspective taken in a communication can profoundly shape people’s willingness to engage with information. In order to test the most effective way to execute the *Childhood Development* master frame, FrameWorks compared two perspective-based frames. The first offered information about effective parenting from a child’s perspective and asked readers to imagine they were children thinking through the challenges their parents were facing. The second explained the importance of parenting on early childhood development using a third-person or outside perspective.

**Figure 4:** Effects of Childhood Development and Child Perspective frames on policy support and behavioural outcomes.



As shown in Figure 4, the *Child Development* frame delivered through the third-person perspective was significantly more effective than the same master frame delivered from the child’s perspective. The third-person frame creates movement on key behavioural measures. By contrast, the *Child Perspective* frame, which attempts to shift audiences into the child’s position, does not affect these measures.

These results may seem counterintuitive—after taking a child’s perspective why wouldn’t people want better supports made available to parents? But qualitative research showed that focusing attention on the experiences of an individual child trains attention on parental responsibility for outcomes. This makes it very difficult for people to focus on shared and collective responsibility and therefore to understand the role of *public* policies to support parents.

Presenting the *Child Development* master frame in the third-person collectivises the issue. The initiative is not about one child and their health or learning, but about the healthy development of all children in Australia. Seeing through this lens, people are better positioned to consider the societal benefits of effective policies that improve parenting practices.

**Before:** *Imagine you are a child. Wouldn’t you want to know Australia was providing all of the right supports for your parents? We need to invest now in supporting parents.*

**After:** *Children learn skills like problem-solving over time through supportive relationships with caregivers. Parenting skills help parents build strong brains. We need to invest more in supporting parents.*

**RECOMMENDATION:**

Don’t normalise parenting struggles, as it only makes them seem natural and insurmountable.

Communicators frequently start conversations about effective parenting by acknowledging and normalising the struggles and challenges that parents face. For example, communications often start with statements such as ‘Being a parent is the toughest job you will ever have, and none of us can be perfect all of the time’. The logic behind this strategy is that acknowledging that parenting is a challenging task will make people more open and willing to talk about and support initiatives designed to improve parenting.

Our research showed that, by normalising challenges, communicators run the risk of making those challenges seem to be an inevitable part of parenting that cannot be addressed or solved. The *Normalisation* frame had no effect on perceptions of efficacy, or the idea that there are things Australians can do to improve parenting. Instead, communicators should use the *Navigating Waters* metaphor to explain, rather than normalise, the external challenges that parents face.

***Before:** All parents struggle to keep up with the demands of family life. We need better policies to equip parents with the right skills.*

***After 1:** To develop healthily, children need to go through life on an even keel. Programs that help parents navigate life's choppy waters—such as work stress and financial worries—help Australia's children to thrive.*

***After 2:** For families experiencing poverty and stress, raising children can be like sailing in rough waters. Just as we provide lighthouses and safe harbours, we can help parents with services such as counselling, quality child care and financial support.*

## Moving Forward

The research described here shows the power and potential of telling a new story about parenting in Australia. If all organisations in the sector can get on message by sharing and amplifying the master narrative outlined here, they can change the public discussion about parenting, boost support for policy solutions, and increase public engagement with calls to support parents and parenting.

The research shows that shifting the big idea from effective parenting to supporting child development fundamentally reorients public thinking. It results in dramatically different ways of engaging with parenting information and initiatives. While this reframing strategy does not mean that parenting organisations must stop talking about parenting—they must not—it does require a shift in approach.

For some organisations, delivering all communications through the frame of child development may be an extension of their existing communications practice—this shift will require paying attention to order in communications and points of emphasis. For other organisations, reframing messages will be a significant and difficult task, as the primary strategy so far has been to acknowledge and validate parenting challenges.

Delivering messages about effective parenting through the frame of child development is a strategic decision. The research shows that this is an important step to take. Through the support of strategic framing, we can create a clearer path to the goal we are all working towards: ensuring all parents and children in Australia have what they need to be healthy and well.

## Methods Appendix

To determine the effects of different frames, three online survey experiments were conducted between February and June 2018, completed by a total of 7,405 respondents. Each of these survey experiments was completed by a sample of adults (individuals over the age of 18) from Australia, matched to approximate national demographic benchmarks for gender, household income, education, age, and Aboriginal ancestry (yes/no). The table below provides the demographic breakdown of the sample, across all three survey experiments.

<b>Sample Demographics (Total N=7,405)</b>	
<b>Age</b>	
18–29	15.2%
30–44	25.9%
45–59	28.9%
60 and older	30.0%
<b>Gender</b>	
Male	47.1%
Female	52.9%
<b>Aboriginal</b>	
Yes	3.0%
No	97.0%
<b>Household Income</b>	
Less than \$33,800	21.1%
\$33,801 – \$64,999	26.5%
\$65,000 – \$103,999	24.2%
\$104,000 – \$181,999	21.7%
\$182,000 or more	6.5%
<b>Education (Highest Achieved)</b>	
Year 12 or lower	34.3%
Advanced diploma, diploma, Certificate III or IV	32.7%
Bachelor degree level and above	33.0%

In each experiment, respondents were randomly assigned to receive a message treatment, or to a null control. After reading the message (or, in the case of those assigned to the null control group, no message at all), all respondents were asked an identical series of questions designed to measure knowledge, attitudes and policy preferences relating to parenting. Each battery consisted of multiple questions. Questions were Likert-type items with seven- or five-point scales, yes/no questions, or open-ended questions requiring free-text answers.

Multiple-regression analysis was used to determine whether there were significant differences in responses to questions between the treatment groups and the control group. To help ensure that any observed effects were driven by the frames rather than demographic variations in the sample, all regressions controlled for the demographics mentioned above. A threshold of  $p < 0.05$  was used to determine whether treatments had any significant effects.

## Experimental Treatments

All experimental treatments were prefaced with the following instructions:

*Below, we have provided a brief selection from an article that recently appeared in the news. Please read this carefully. In the questions that follow, you will be asked for your thoughts and opinions about the topics and ideas that the article raises.*

### Metaphors

#### **Art:**

Learning to parent is like learning an art. Just like we aren't born knowing how to play the guitar or draw, we aren't born knowing how to be a great parent. To develop our skills and knowledge in the art of parenting, we need time and opportunities to practise. And just like mentoring is important in learning the best techniques for playing a guitar or drawing, we need guidance and support to become good parents. Strong relationships and support from the community can help parents learn and develop their skills, and things like flexible work-hours would give parents time to practise. With time and support, everyone can learn the art of parenting.

#### **Craft:**

Learning to parent is like learning a craft. Just like we aren't born knowing how to sew or do woodworking, we aren't born knowing how to be a great parent. To develop our skills and knowledge in the craft of parenting, we need time and opportunities to practise. And just like mentoring is important in learning the best techniques for sewing or woodworking, we need guidance and support to become good parents. Strong relationships and support from the community can help parents learn and develop their skills, and things like flexible work-hours would give parents time to practise. With time and support, everyone can learn the craft of parenting.

#### **Sport:**

Learning to parent is like learning a sport. Just like we aren't born knowing how to swim or play football, we aren't born knowing how to be a great parent. To develop our skills and knowledge in parenting, we need the same things we need to learn a sport—time and opportunities to practise. And just like coaching is important in learning the best techniques for swimming or playing football, we need guidance and support to become good parents. Strong relationships and support from the community can help parents

learn and develop their skills, and things like flexible work-hours would give parents time to practise. With time and support, everyone can learn the moves of parenting.

***Sailing:***

Parenting is like sailing on the water. The seas that a family has to navigate are shaped by how parents were brought up and by the characteristics of their children. But the seas that parents encounter on their journey are also shaped by the places they live, and what's happening in their lives. Things like poverty, health issues, or emotional stress at home or at work are storms that make it harder for parents to navigate the challenges of parenting. But just like we can build lighthouses and safe harbours to guide and protect boats during heavy storms, we can help parents by providing things like counselling services, high-quality child care, and assistance with housing and food. This not only offers safety and protection during difficult times, but makes for smoother sailing and helps all families in Australia move forward.

***Overloaded:***

Parenting is like driving a heavy load of cargo. The weight carried by a family comes in part from how parents were brought up and the characteristics of their children. But a lot of the weight that parents have to carry around comes from the places they live and what's happening in their lives. Things like poverty, health issues, or emotional stress at home or at work can overload a person's capacity to handle the challenges of parenting. But just like we can unload an overloaded ute, we can lighten parents' load by providing things like counselling services, high-quality child care, and assistance with housing and food. This help not only relieves parents when they are overloaded, but supports all parents and helps all families in Australia move forward.

## **Parenting Initiative Frames**

***Base Message (Control):***

The Australian Parenting initiative would invest \$50 billion over 10 years to support parents. Under the initiative, the government would provide free child care to all parents in Australia, require employers to provide family-friendly work schedules, build a parenting centre in every neighbourhood in Australia, and provide additional support to low-income families, Aboriginal Australians and Torres Strait Islanders, and other disadvantaged families.

***Child Development Issue Frame:***

People working in the field of child development have proposed a new initiative to support healthy child development. The initiative is designed to make sure that all children grow up in conditions that enable them to do well. Because parenting is central to healthy child development, the initiative focuses on providing support for parents.

The Australian Child Development initiative would invest \$50 billion over 10 years to promote children's wellbeing. Under the initiative, the government would provide free child care to all parents in Australia, require employers to provide family-friendly work schedules, build a parenting centre in every

neighbourhood in Australia, and provide additional support to low-income families, Aboriginal Australians and Torres Strait Islanders, and other disadvantaged families.

The initiative would support healthy child development by making sure that children grow up in conditions that enable them to thrive. By providing parents with the support they need, we can help ensure that all children in Australia can do well.

***Parenting Issue Frame:***

People working in the field of parenting have proposed a new initiative to support parents. The initiative is designed to support parents by creating conditions that enable them to parent effectively. All parents want to be good parents, and the initiative would provide the support that parents need.

The Australian Parenting initiative would invest \$50 billion over 10 years to support parents. Under the initiative, the government would provide free child care to all parents in Australia, require employers to provide family-friendly work schedules, build a parenting centre in every neighbourhood in Australia, and provide additional support to low-income families, Aboriginal Australians and Torres Strait Islanders, and other disadvantaged families.

The initiative would support effective parenting by making sure that the conditions in which people are parenting enable them to thrive. By providing parents with the support they need, we can help ensure that all parents in Australia can be the parents they strive to be.

***Family Relations Issue Frame:***

People working in the field of family relationships have proposed a new initiative to support healthy relationships within families. The initiative is designed to support families by creating conditions that strengthen family relationships. The initiative would provide the support that families need to build and maintain strong relationships.

The Australian Families initiative would invest \$50 billion over 10 years to support families. Under the initiative, the government would provide free child care to all parents in Australia, require employers to provide family-friendly work schedules, build a parenting centre in every neighbourhood in Australia, and provide additional support to low-income families, Aboriginal Australians and Torres Strait Islanders, and other disadvantaged families.

The initiative would strengthen family relationships by creating conditions that enable families to thrive. By providing families with the support they need, we can help ensure that all families in Australia can build and maintain strong relationships.

***Child Perspective Frame:***

Imagine that you're a child. Your parents love you, but life can make it hard for them to be the parents they want to be. They're stressed about making ends meet. They're worried about losing their home, and your mum has to work two jobs to pay the bills. Because of the stress, your parents fight a lot, and they



yell at you more than they mean to. And because they're dealing with so much, it's hard to give you the attention you need.

If you were this child, you'd want your parents to have the support they need to be the parents they want to be. That's why we need to adopt the Australian Parenting initiative. The initiative would invest \$50 billion over 10 years to support parents. Under the initiative, the government would provide free child care to all parents in Australia, require employers to provide family-friendly work schedules, build a parenting centre in every neighbourhood in Australia, and provide additional support to low-income families, Aboriginal Australians and Torres Strait Islanders, and other disadvantaged families.

Put yourself in the place of that child. This initiative would address the conditions that make your parents' job so difficult. It would give your parents the support they need to be the parents you need. Wouldn't you want our country to adopt this initiative?

***Parent Perspective Frame:***

Imagine that you're a parent. You love your children, but life can make it hard for you to be the parent you want to be. You're stressed about making ends meet. You're worried about losing your home, and you have to work two jobs to pay the bills. Because of the stress, you and your spouse fight a lot, and you yell at your children more than you mean to. And because you're dealing with so much, it's hard to give your children the attention they need.

If you were this parent, you'd want to have the support you need to be the parent you want to be. That's why we need to adopt the Australian Parenting initiative. The initiative would invest \$50 billion over 10 years to support parents. Under the initiative, the government would provide free child care to all parents in Australia, require employers to provide family-friendly work schedules, build a parenting centre in every neighbourhood in Australia, and provide additional support to low-income families, Aboriginal Australians and Torres Strait Islanders, and other disadvantaged families.

Put yourself in the place of that parent. This initiative would address the conditions that make your job as a parent so difficult. It would give you the support you need to be the parent your children need. Wouldn't you want our country to adopt this initiative?

***Social Responsibility Value Frame:***

We have a responsibility as a society to make sure that all families in Australia have the support they need to do well. Parenting today is hard, and parents shouldn't be left to fend for themselves. As a society, we have a responsibility to make sure that families have the help they need to succeed.

That's why we need to adopt the Australian Parenting initiative. The initiative would invest \$50 billion over 10 years to support parents. Under the initiative, the government would provide free child care to all parents in Australia, require employers to provide family-friendly work schedules, build a parenting centre in every neighbourhood in Australia, and provide additional support to low-income families, Aboriginal Australians and Torres Strait Islanders, and other disadvantaged families.

To make good on our society's responsibilities, we need to do more to support parents and families. By adopting this initiative, we would create conditions that would allow all families in Australia to thrive. Doing more to support parents and families is the right thing for our country to do.

***Cost Effectiveness and Prosperity Value Frame:***

Our society would benefit from making sure that all families in Australia have the support they need to do well. Good parenting helps kids get the start they need, which means they can contribute to our society's prosperity when they grow up and are less likely to use costly social and health services. As a society, it's in our interest to make sure that families have the help they need to succeed.

That's why we need to adopt the Australian Parenting initiative. The initiative would invest \$50 billion over 10 years to support parents. Under the initiative, the government would provide free child care to all parents in Australia, require employers to provide family-friendly work schedules, build a parenting centre in every neighbourhood in Australia, and provide additional support to low-income families, Aboriginal Australians and Torres Strait Islanders, and other disadvantaged families.

It is in our society's interest to do more to support parents and families. By adopting this initiative, we would promote Australia's future prosperity and reduce our spending on health services, criminal justice, and welfare. Doing more to support parents and families would benefit our whole country.

***Normalisation of Parenting Challenges Frame:***

Parenting is hard. Everyone who has been a parent knows how challenging parenting can be. And in Australia today, we face life pressures that make parenting harder. We all know how work schedules, long commutes, distance from family, and financial pressures can make life challenging, and every parent knows what it's like to struggle with parenting when faced with all of this.

That's why we need to adopt the Australian Parenting initiative. The initiative would invest \$50 billion over 10 years to support parents. Under the initiative, the government would provide free child care to all parents in Australia, require employers to provide family-friendly work schedules, build a parenting centre in every neighbourhood in Australia, and provide additional support to low-income families, Aboriginal Australians and Torres Strait Islanders, and other disadvantaged families.

Parenting is hard in the best of circumstances. Every parent struggles sometimes, even if things are set up for their success, and right now, parenting in Australia is harder than it should be. This initiative would make parents' job a bit easier by providing parents with the support they need.

***Expectations of Effective Parenting Frame:***

Parenting is important. Effective parenting involves not only meeting children's basic needs, but also providing children with opportunities to learn, being responsive to their individual needs and interests, setting clear boundaries and expectations for behaviour, and flexibly adapting to changing circumstances. We need to create conditions in Australia that make it easier for people to parent in these ways.

That's why we need to adopt the Australian Parenting initiative. The initiative would invest \$50 billion over 10 years to support parents. Under the initiative, the government would provide free child care to all parents in Australia, require employers to provide family-friendly work schedules, build a parenting centre in every neighbourhood in Australia, and provide additional support to low-income families, Aboriginal Australians and Torres Strait Islanders, and other disadvantaged families.

We need to make it easier for people to parent effectively. We must take steps to support parents, so that all parents in Australia can adopt effective parenting practices. This initiative would provide parents with the support they need so that they can parent well.



## About the FrameWorks Institute

The FrameWorks Institute is a think tank that advances the nonprofit sector's communications capacity by framing the public discourse about social problems. Its work is based on Strategic Frame Analysis®, a multi-method, multidisciplinary approach to empirical research. FrameWorks designs, conducts, publishes, explains and applies communications research to prepare nonprofit organizations to expand their constituency base, build public will, and further public understanding of specific social issues—the environment, government, race, children's issues and health care, among others. Its work is unique in its breadth, ranging from qualitative, quantitative and experimental research to applied communications toolkits, eWorkshops, advertising campaigns, FrameChecks® and in-depth study engagements. In 2015, it was named one of nine organizations worldwide to receive the MacArthur Foundation's Award for Creative & Effective Institutions. Learn more at [www.frameworksinstitute.org](http://www.frameworksinstitute.org).

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## Endnotes

- <sup>1</sup> For a description of the content of the earlier set of interviews conducted on child development, see Kendall-Taylor, N., & Lindland, E. (2013). *Modernity, morals and more information: Mapping the gaps between expert and public understandings of early child development in Australia*. Washington, DC: FrameWorks Institute, p. 14.
- <sup>2</sup> Framing refers to the subtle selection of certain aspects of an issue in order to cue a specific response. FrameWorks tests a set of frame elements that convey meaning and affect the way that people respond to an issue. These include values, metaphors, narrative, messengers, and more.
- <sup>3</sup> Quinn, N. (2005). *Finding Culture in Talk: A Collection of Methods*. New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillan.
- <sup>4</sup> Volmert, A., Kendall-Taylor, N., Cosh, Ian, and Lindland, Eric. (2016). *Perceptions of Parenting: Mapping the Gaps between Expert and Public Understandings of Effective Parenting in Australia*. Washington, DC: FrameWorks Institute. Retrieved from [http://www.frameworksinstitute.org/assets/files/Australia/PRC\\_MTG\\_Report\\_May\\_2016\\_final.pdf](http://www.frameworksinstitute.org/assets/files/Australia/PRC_MTG_Report_May_2016_final.pdf).
- <sup>5</sup> In 2014, the FrameWorks Institute conducted a series of studies that documented the conceptual challenges faced by communicators in translating the science of early child development and mental health in the Australian context. Supported by the Centre for Community Child Health at the Royal Children's Hospital in Melbourne, the research also empirically explored and tested a set of tools that can be used to translate this science and increase support for evidence-based programs and policies designed to improve child and social outcomes in Australia. This research built upon similar inquiries undertaken by FrameWorks in the United States of America and Canada. The full report is available [here](#).