Communicating Connections:
Framing the Relationship Between Social Drivers, Early Adversity, and Child Neglect

Marissa Fond, *Ph.D., Researcher*

Abigail Haydon, *Ph.D., Fellow*

Nat Kendall-Taylor, *Ph.D., Chief Executive Officer*

I. Introduction

The idea that something needs to be done about child maltreatment is widely supported by the British public.[1] However, most people do not recognize that addressing this issue requires changes at the community and societal levels. Understanding and addressing these *social drivers* is critical to preventing child maltreatment and reducing children's exposure to early adverse experiences that can derail development and negatively affect long-term outcomes.

Communicating about the role of social conditions in child maltreatment and adversity is challenging. For most people, it is easy to see how individual factors such as poor decision-making, lack of personal control, and selfishness can lead to child maltreatment. It is much more difficult to appreciate how larger social forces like poverty, lack of access to quality healthcare, or poor educational opportunities contribute to child abuse and neglect. For experts and advocates committed to improving the lives of children, families, and communities, promoting a better understanding of how social factors play a role in child maltreatment and adversity is essential. A better understanding of how social factors influence these issues can help people see the importance of supporting programmes that target and reduce these factors.

With support from the Big Lottery Fund and in collaboration with the Social Research Unit at Dartington, the FrameWorks Institute has conducted research on how to increase public understanding of the social drivers of early childhood development generally and child neglect more specifically. The ultimate goal of this research is to provide communicators with messages they can use to increase support for policies and programmes that prevent and address the negative effects of early adversity on children's development and long-term outcomes.

The following research base supports the recommendations we make here:

1. Twenty cultural models interviews with British citizens in 2013 to identify the implicit, but shared, understandings, assumptions, and patterns of reasoning that members of the British public use to think about early childhood adversity and child maltreatment;[2]

2. Two experimental surveys conducted in 2014 with 11,110 members of the British public to test the ability of framing tools to increase public understanding and support for issues related to early childhood adversity and child neglect in particular;[3]

3. Qualitative research conducted in 2014 and 2015 with 88 members of the British public to test and refine a set of recommendations for effectively reframing the role of social conditions in child neglect and early adverse experiences.

This message brief proceeds as follows:

- We first **Chart the Landscape** of public thinking about social drivers of early adversity and child

abuse and neglect.

- We use this analysis of public understanding to identify the **Major Communication Challenges** that exist in making a social conditions perspective available and accessible to people as they think about child maltreatment and adversity.

- We then provide an outline for a **New Story**—a set of research-based recommendations that communicators can use to reframe public understandings of these issues.

- We end with a set of counterproductive **Traps in Public Thinking** that should be avoided in communication materials.

II. Charting the Landscape

When developing strategies to communicate effectively about the relationship between social conditions, early adversity, and child development, it essential to recognize people's existing ways of thinking about these issues. The job of a strategic communicator is, in large part, to be aware of these understandings and to appreciate how they affect what people take away from messages.

Below, we review the dominant patterns in the British public's thinking about early childhood, adversity, and maltreatment. We organize these findings around five questions:

1.   What is the role of adversity in early childhood development?
2.   Why do some children experience severe adversity?
3.   What causes child maltreatment more specifically?
4.   What are the effects of maltreatment and early childhood adversity?
5.   What can be done to address maltreatment and early childhood adversity?

What is the role of adversity in early childhood development?

The following are shared patterns of reasoning that people use to think about the relationship between early adversity and a child's development.

What Doesn't Kill You Makes You Stronger: Members of the public generally underestimate the negative ways that severe stress can affect development and shape long-term life outcomes. In fact, many people assume that stress in early childhood—even severe stress—strengthens character. Viewing stress as a positive developmental experience makes programmes that aim to address sources of stress for young children seem unnecessary, and even counterproductive.

Self-Makingness: Members of the public assume that the most important factor in a child's development is the drive and willpower that both the child and his or her caregivers exert. From this perspective, there are few obstacles that children and adult caregivers cannot overcome through hard work and effort. This perspective focuses people's attention on the individual, and makes it difficult to consider how surrounding factors outside of an individual's control can affect development. The result is that this pattern of thinking deemphasizes the importance of external supports and the potentially damaging effects of severe stress.[4]

The Need for Protection: Members of the public hold a strong understanding that positive development requires protection from physical threats. According to this model, negative development in early childhood results from adults' failure to adequately protect young children from physical threats in their environment. This way of thinking helps people recognize that environments can pose threats to child development, but at the same time focuses attention rather narrowly on *physical* threats to the child.

Why do some children experience severe adversity?

Social Class Stereotypes: Members of the public have common patterns of thinking about lower- and working-class people. They assume that lower-class families are less educated and ambitious, less able and willing to provide for their children and, fundamentally, less competent parents. Thus, the public's stereotypes of lower-class families focus on 'innate' characteristics of the people themselves (lazy, uneducated, selfish…), rather than on the ways in which social and economic disadvantage might pressure and shape behaviours.

Community Decay: In many cases, members of the public explain the causes of early childhood adversity —and the current prevalence of adverse experiences for children—through an overall sense that the values of communities and society in the UK have decayed in recent years. Reasoning from this nostalgic perspective, people explain that communities in the UK used to be strong and supportive, but have become fragmented and uncaring and no longer act as supports for children and families.

Normalisation: Members of the public recognize that abused children frequently become abusers themselves. They explain this trend through an understanding that exposure to bad behaviours early in life makes these actions seem 'normal'. People who are abused as children then act according to the perception that abuse is normal, and continue the cycle.

What causes child maltreatment more specifically?

Ill-Prepared Caregivers: In many cases maltreatment is understood to occur when caregivers—especially young parents—are unprepared for the responsibilities and challenges associated with caring for children. In this way, abuse, and to some degree neglect, are caused by caregivers with poor emotional control, limited problem-solving skills, and inadequate conflict resolution capabilities. The children of these 'ill-prepared' caregivers are exposed to adversity or left without necessary love and support.

Lack of Resources: Members of the public assume that, in many cases, maltreatment occurs when caregivers lack the means to care and provide for children. Neglect, according to this model, occurs when people living in poverty lack the resources to provide adequately for children.

Stress Affects Behaviour: Members of the public assume that adults who are 'stressed out', overworked, unemployed, or frustrated with life are more likely to take out their frustrations on children or to become distracted from caring for their children. Members of the public frequently cite poverty as a source of stress and are able to connect poverty to acts of maltreatment, especially physical abuse.

Selfish Caregivers: Members of the public reason that some children are neglected because the people who are supposed to care for them are more concerned with themselves than their children. According to this assumption, some people neglect their children because they have not developed the maturity or strength of character to put their children's needs ahead of their own.

What are the effects of maltreatment and early childhood adversity?

Depleted Trust and Damaged Self-Confidence: Members of the public understand that maltreatment violates a child's trust in others and that children who have experienced maltreatment thus have difficulty trusting people in their lives. This is assumed to lead to compromised social skills, which reduces outgoingness and compromises a child's chances at success and happiness later in life. This model is typically activated when people think about the effects of abuse, and is typically not associated with neglect. In a related way, members of the public recognize that experiences of abuse damage a child's sense of self-worth and lead to a lack of confidence.

Criminality: Members of the public assume that children who have experienced adversity (particularly those who have been abused) are more likely to engage in criminal behaviour later in life. This pattern of thinking follows from the assumption that these children have been 'damaged' and thus are unlikely to be engaged, functional members of society.

What can be done to address early childhood adversity and maltreatment?

There Is Nothing We Can Do. Members of the public are generally fatalistic about the possibility of reducing early adversity and child maltreatment, in part because of the factors that people see as causes of adversity and maltreatment—most of which are difficult to see as addressable. After all, how do you reduce someone's selfishness, eliminate poverty, or reverse the degradation of community and societal values?

Increase Awareness: Members of the public believe that increasing *awareness* about forms of maltreatment and early adversity is potentially an effective prevention strategy. People reason that if more people were aware of the problem of maltreatment, they could better protect their children and perhaps 'catch' themselves or others before they committed an act of maltreatment.

Parenting Classes: Drawing on the *Stress Affects Behaviour*, *Ill-Prepared Caregivers*, and *Lack of Resources* models, members of the public suggest that maltreatment could be reduced by equipping people with the skills they need to better manage life and parental stress.

Government Responsibility: Through its enforcement agencies (courts, police), social services, and medical institutions, people understand that government has an important role to play in addressing child maltreatment and early adversity. Members of the British public believe strongly that government has a core duty to keep its citizens—and especially its children—safe.

III. Major Communication Challenges

Based on this analysis of public thinking, communicators must overcome the following challenges in order to expand public understanding of how social conditions contribute to child maltreatment and adversity.

- **Help people think beyond *individual-level causes* of maltreatment and adversity to see the importance of *societal-level solutions*.** Though they are somewhat attuned to the role of economic disadvantage, members of the public largely assume that the causes of maltreatment work at the *individual* level. As a result, it is difficult to see the need for (and potential of) structural, societal-level interventions to prevent maltreatment and reduce severe adversity.

- **Deepen understandings of cycles of maltreatment.** Experts understand that childhood maltreatment and adversity affect the developmental process in ways that influence future parenting skills and capacities. While members of the public recognize the trend of maltreatment that runs across generations, they do not see the developmental mechanisms at work—that is, they do not see that experiencing adversity early in life affects skills that are in turn used in caring for children. What is missing is a clear understanding of *why* those who have been maltreated are more likely to maltreat children themselves. With a better understanding of this process, members of the public will be able to appreciate the need for a range of interventions that are currently overlooked as ineffective or unimportant.

- **Expand people's understanding of the effects of poverty to include other social drivers.** The public's social class stereotyping locates early childhood adversity and maltreatment predominantly in lower- and working-class families. This stereotyping blocks thinking about the complex set of environmental factors (like work policy, mental health stigma, and substance abuse) that contribute to maltreatment and adversity across social classes.

- **Help people see that addressing child maltreatment and reducing early adverse experiences is *possible*.** For a variety of reasons, members of the public are highly sceptical about the possibility of addressing child maltreatment and adversity. This sense of fatalism represents a central challenge for those working to improve outcomes for children, as it hampers public support for effective policies and programmes. If a problem cannot be fixed, why spend money and time trying? Communicators must show people that change is possible by demonstrating *how* programmes can meaningfully address issues of maltreatment and adversity in the lives of children.

IV. A New Story: Reframing the Social Drivers of Child Maltreatment and Early Adversity

In the section below, we describe a new narrative that communicators can use to more effectively explain the role of social conditions in causing and addressing child maltreatment and adversity more generally. The narrative is designed to help people better understand what social conditions are and how they work, and to help people see why issues of child maltreatment and adversity are matters of *public* concern that require *social* solutions. The core of this narrative is a set of *Values, Explanatory Metaphors,* and *Explanatory Chains* that are matched to specific framing challenges. These tools are intended to be used together to tell memorable stories that stick in public understanding and expand how people think about children's issues. The ultimate goal of the strategy is to give the public new information that they can access when asked to think about early childhood adversity and what should be done to reduce it.

Why do child maltreatment and adversity matter?

1. Prime communications with the Value of *Social Responsibility* to define the scope and terms of the discussion. Appeals to shared values are a key part of issue framing. Values can motivate engagement and shape the way people understand and interpret information. In short, values answer the question, 'Why does this issue matter and why should we act to address it?' But with a wide range of values, communicators must home in on those values that are most *productive* in relation to their goals. FrameWorks' experimental survey research shows that the Value of *Social Responsibility* helps orient people to the collective nature of issues of child maltreatment ('these issues are important to us all') and establishes a social scope for thinking about solutions ('addressing this issue is a matter of collective responsibility').

Below is an example of this Value. This iteration and other examples provided here are intended to show how the frame element can be phrased. These examples should not be seen as scripts for communicators to follow verbatim. We encourage those using these strategies to apply their skills, creativity, and knowledge of specific audiences to create authentic and effective articulations of the frame elements we describe below.

> **Social Responsibility:** *As a society, we have a collective responsibility to ensure that all children have the best possible start in life. It's important that children have access to the resources they need for healthy emotional, physical, and cognitive development. We need to make sure that we are living up to our responsibilities as members of society and do more to support children, families, and communities.*

2. Define the issue. We know that members of the public often struggle to arrive at definitions of maltreatment that include neglect, and frequently focus solely on physical and sexual abuse. It is important, therefore, that communicators provide a definition for the type of maltreatment or adverse

experience under discussion. Providing basic definitional understandings early and often—for example, by distinguishing between physical abuse and 'a tap on the arm', or between neglecting one's children and simply 'feeling over-extended' or 'not having enough time'—is critical. These definitions do not need to include extensive data about the prevalence of maltreatment, as members of the public already understand that maltreatment is prevalent in the UK. The focus, instead, should be on establishing clear parameters around the types of behaviours in question.

How does development work?

Use Explanatory Metaphors to explain basic processes of child development. Without a solid understanding of the fundamental *processes* of child development, members of the public will have difficulty thinking about how early adversity and maltreatment *disrupt* these processes and lead to negative outcomes. As a result, the public's support for policies that aim to improve outcomes by intervening in development will be compromised. Communicators should therefore explain *how development works.* Our research shows that this type of explanation is a foundation for effective communication about a wide range of children's issues. The following four Explanatory Metaphors, developed by FrameWorks in collaboration with the Center on the Developing Child at Harvard University, and tested extensively in the UK, help people quickly grasp fundamental aspects of child development.[5]

Use the *Serve and Return* Metaphor to illustrate how *interaction* between children and adults plays a crucial role in emotional, social, and cognitive development—and how the *lack of this type of interaction* can derail development.

> *Serve and Return: A vital ingredient in children's development, especially from ages 0 to 5, is the 'serve and return' interactions that they have with their parents, caregivers, and other adults. Like the serve and return rally in a good game of tennis, young children instinctively reach out and serve babbles and facial expressions to adults. If adults do not get in sync with children and 'return' these noises and gestures, the serve and return rally breaks down and the child's development can be interrupted.*

Use the *Brain Architecture* and *Brain Traffic Control* Metaphors to explain how children's brains develop early in life—and how this development is crucial for later learning and social life:

> *Brain Architecture: The basic architecture of the brain is constructed through a process that begins before birth and continues into adulthood. Like the construction of a house, the building process begins with laying the foundation, framing the rooms, and wiring the electrical system. These things have to happen in the right order, and early experiences lay the foundation and shape how the brain gets built. A strong foundation in the very early years increases the chances of good health and learning later on, while a weak foundation increases the odds of later difficulties.*

> *Brain Traffic Control: Children's ability to hold information in mind, focus, and control*

their impulses—what is called their executive functions—is like the air traffic control system at a busy airport. Some planes have to land and others have to take off at the same time, and there's only so much room on the ground and in the air. Children need to develop their brain's air traffic control system to manage their mental airspace, so that they can do things like take in new information, listen to their parents and teachers, and learn and build other skills. This requires practice and giving children chances to work on coordinating their air traffic control system as early as possible.

Use the *Resilience Scale* Metaphor to talk about the importance of social supports and community resources to children's development and resilience:

> *Resilience Scale:* *We can think of children's development as a basic balance scale. The way the scale is tipping is like how the child's development is going. Positive things like supportive relationships get loaded on one side and negative things like abuse and neglect get stacked on the other. The goal of every community is to have development tip positive for as many kids as possible. To do this we need to offload as many things from the negative side as we can and stack as many factors on the positive side as possible. We can also give kids support early on to help them develop coping skills. These skills push the balance point to one side and make the scale harder to tip in a negative direction and more able to bear negative weight.*

How are social conditions related to neglect and other adverse experiences?

1. Use the *Overloaded* Explanatory Metaphor to help people see the role of social conditions in child neglect (and other forms of adversity). The *Overloaded* Explanatory Metaphor helps people think productively about how social conditions such as financial insecurity, access to quality public services, and community violence contribute to neglect. The metaphor also shows promise in communicating beyond neglect and working more generally to help people see the connections between social conditions and early adversity.

> *Overloaded:* *When a lorry carries too much weight, it can be overloaded to the point of breaking down. And when parents are burdened with stresses like poverty or lack of support, the weight of these problems can overload their mental and emotional capacity to take care of their children's basic needs. Over time, carrying and managing heavy burdens puts a strain on people, and can weaken their ability to care for children. And when an especially large burden is loaded onto a person who is already overloaded, it can cause a breakdown in care. However, just like we can unload an overloaded lorry by sharing the load with other lorries or offloading cargo in other ways, we can provide social supports that offload sources of stress from overloaded parents and improve their capacity to care for their children.*

By positioning social conditions as the 'weight that can overload a lorry', the metaphor helps people understand the role that social conditions can play in child neglect. The metaphor is also effective in helping people think concretely about how experiences of adversity in early childhood can affect

development and shape long-term capacities—for example, by discussing how bearing a lot of weight from an early age might compromise systems and capacities (e.g., stressing the engine or axles) and make a person less able to respond productively to challenges and burdens as a young parent.

The metaphor is also strong in helping people think about *solutions*—in particular, the ways that external supports can 'offload' sources of stress to improve functioning or skill-building programs can increase towing capacity. In our research, for example, people described how social workers can put up 'signposts' that help lorries figure out where to go for support and nurses can identify the weights that are heaviest and look for ways to 'pick them off'. Importantly, the metaphor provides a way for caregivers to talk about seeking out these services without provoking judgment or blame, or creating embarrassment or shame. This is a major benefit and productive function of the metaphor.

The *Overloaded* metaphor is helpful in focusing people's attention on how neglect and other forms of adversity can, through the right interventions, be *prevented.* In our research, members of the public as well as child development specialists used the metaphor to discuss how social systems and services can act as a form of 'maintenance' to increase resilience and reduce the likelihood of a person becoming overloaded in the first place.

Research showed that *Overloaded* is a rich metaphor that communicators can use to help the public understand a wide range of social conditions. The chart below describes how communicators can use *Overloaded* to talk about specific aspects of social conditions:

What do you want to talk about?	What does the metaphor say?	What does this do?
Individual differences among caregivers	*There are different kinds of trucks. Some are built to manage heavy loads; others are meant for lighter loads and quicker travel.*	This explains why the same load —or challenge—can affect different people differently.
Past experiences in caregivers' lives	*Some lorries have been continually overloaded over time, stressing their axles and engines. Others have carried weight, but have not been overloaded.*	This explains how past experiences of stress can have an effect on people in the present and future.
Prevention	*Some lorries are well-maintained. They have their oil changed and tires rotated—they have everything they need to run well. This makes them better able and prepared to handle occasional heavy loads and keep moving forward. Other lorries don't have access to the things that are required for maintenance. This means that they are more prone to breaking down when faced with additional burdens.*	This explains how supportive experiences over time shape people's skills and capacities and their ability to respond positively and care for children even in situations of stress.

Social drivers of a wide range of adversities	*Heavy loads make the lorry move more slowly. They can also cause damage to the lorry and ultimately cause it to break down.*	This explains how life's challenges can have different short- and long-term effects, like mental health issues, substance abuse, etc.
Solutions	*We can help an overloaded lorry by bringing in other lorries, finding specialists to make needed repairs, or trying to redistribute the weight in a more healthy way. We can also think of things to do to keep some of the heaviest of loads from ever coming onto the lorry.*	This suggests solutions for dealing with social conditions.

This metaphor is most effective when communicators leverage particularly 'sticky' terms. Doing this will help members of the public remember, repeat, and spread the idea—thereby amplifying the effect of messages. For example, the *Overloaded* metaphor includes terms like 'load', 'loaded', 'overloaded', 'weighted down', 'stacked', 'carrying a load', 'burdened', 'pile', 'pile on', etc. Our research suggests that people easily take up and use this language.

Finally, the *Overloaded* metaphor is highly visual, and lends itself to illustration and manipulation of physical materials. In research, for example, one pair of child development experts drew an outline of a lorry and used different coloured Legos to illustrate how to reduce the likelihood of neglect by offloading different weights. Communicators should tap into the visual power of this metaphor in their communications materials. We believe there is considerable value in thinking beyond text about alternative ways of deploying this metaphor and engaging people in its explanatory power.

Here is a spontaneously-generated example from a research session with advocates:
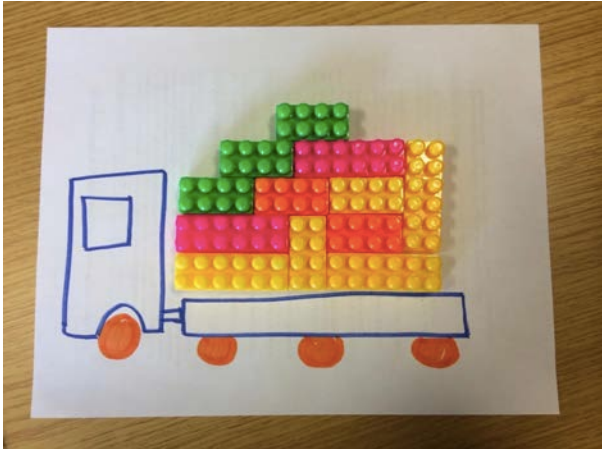
2. Use *Toxic Stress* to explain the effects of early childhood adversity. The *Toxic Stress* metaphor helps members of the public differentiate between different types of stress and understand the impact of chronic, severe stress on developmental processes. It is thus a valuable tool in this overall strategy.

> *Toxic Stress: There are three main kinds of stress that young children can experience: there's positive stress, tolerable stress, and Toxic Stress. Positive stress is a challenge that can help children develop—like facing a new social situation. Tolerable stress is something that could damage development, but not if it's buffered by strong and supportive relationships—like having adult support when a loved one dies. And then there is Toxic Stress. Toxic Stress happens when a child experiences severe and ongoing stress—like extreme poverty, abuse, or neglect—without any support. Toxic Stress can damage the way that a child's brain develops and can lead to lifelong problems in physical and mental health.*

Toxic Stress has been in use in public and scientific communication for over a decade, and has helped the public to understand how some types of stress can indeed be positive, but other types can be 'toxic' for children's development. This metaphor can help communicators make the crucial link between early childhood adversity and its negative developmental effects.

What should be done?

1. Use Explanatory Chains to establish an understanding of cause that people can use to think about what effective solutions look like. Explanatory Chains make explicit the relationships between a problem's cause and its consequences. As such, they are powerful tools for helping people reason about effective solutions. In our research, Explanatory Chains helped deepen understanding of *how* specific social factors can affect people's capacity to care for children and contribute to causes of neglect. By deepening understanding of how the problem works, Explanatory Chains also help people think more productively about possible solutions.

Explanatory Chains that focus on caregivers' past life experiences (such as trauma in childhood) are particularly effective in expanding understanding of the causes of neglect and helping people think about solutions. The effectiveness of this type of explanation likely stems from the way in which it builds upon people's existing focus on parents and the intergenerational transmission of adverse experiences to show more clearly *how* social conditions and experiences shape caregivers' behaviour.

Below is an example of this Explanatory Chain.

> *Equipping Caregivers: When people have experienced abuse or trauma in their own childhoods, their cognitive and emotional abilities may not have had the chance to develop in healthy, positive ways. An interruption in parents' own development can lead them to not react in the most appropriate ways with their own children. For example, they might struggle to stay calm when their children have emotional outbursts, or they might react to things with shouting or violence. As a result, their own children's home life may be unstable.*
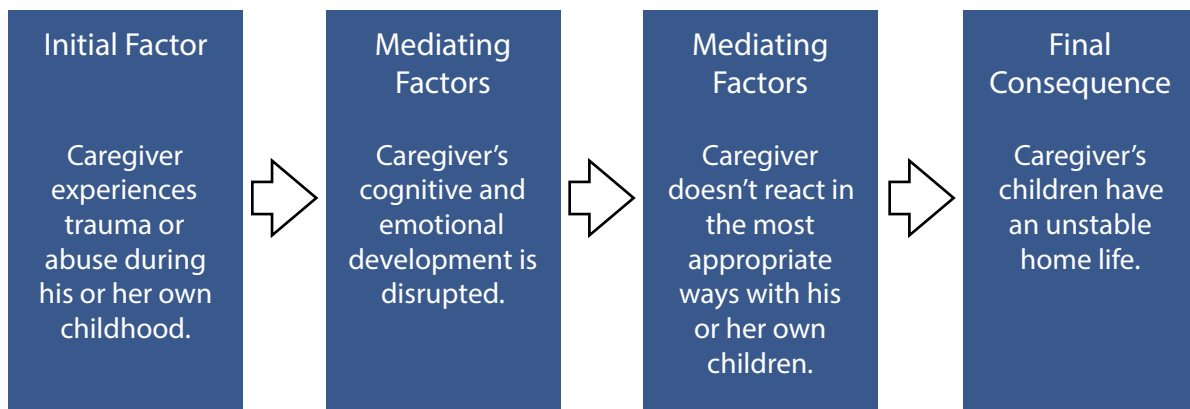
This Explanatory Chain is a powerful tool for helping the public understand how people's prior life experiences influence their ability to care for children. Communicators should be careful, however, not to use this tool in ways that might be perceived as blaming parents and other caregivers for having poor parenting skills. The focus should always be on how *social drivers and conditions* affect development which in turn shapes parenting capacity, rather than on deficiencies that are the fault of parents themselves, because this leads to more productive thinking about possible solutions.

Communicators can create new Explanatory Chains to explain other processes, in addition to the role of parents' past traumatic experiences. However, our research shows that it is important to maintain the components and sequence of the Explanatory Chain, as its power derives from its clear links between causes and effects.

An Explanatory Chain requires the following parts:

1. **Initial Factor: What is the cause of the problem?** Effective chains provide appropriate background information on the problem.

2. **Mediating Factors: What does the initial factor cause?** The mediating factors link the initial factor to the final consequence through explanation. It helps people see that circumstances are not inevitable—that problems have both causes and solutions.

3. **Final Consequence: What are the effects?** The final consequence is the effect, result, or impact.

The following graphic shows how the *Equipping Caregivers* Explanatory Chain contains each of these essential components:

Initial Factor	Mediating Factors	Mediating Factors	Final Consequence
Caregiver experiences trauma or abuse during his or her own childhood.	Caregiver's cognitive and emotional development is disrupted.	Caregiver doesn't react in the most appropriate ways with his or her own children.	Caregiver's children have an unstable home life.

Communicators should tailor the exact wording of the chain to suit their goals, but they should maintain the components of the chain: social drivers ▷ process ▷ effects. Using language that signals cause and effect ('because', 'since', 'so', 'as a result', etc.) will help to make sure that these links are strong and well understood.

2. Follow Explanatory Chains with examples of solutions to combat fatalism and clarify how action improves outcomes. Given the strong sense of fatalism in the public's thinking about maltreatment and early childhood adversity, solutions are a critical part of effective reframing. In quantitative research, using the Value of *Social Responsibility* in combination with concrete talk about solutions (including examples of specific solutions and how they work to address the issue) had the strongest effects on public understanding. This is likely because including discussions of solutions fosters a greater sense of efficacy—the sense that these issues *can* be improved. Those communicating about maltreatment and other forms of early adversity should therefore use concrete examples of *how solutions work to address the issue* in question. Below is an example of how this type of 'solutions' statement could be executed.

> **Solution:** *There are concrete steps that we can take to prevent and address child maltreatment. For example, helplines that children or adults can call at any time of the day or night are effective ways of addressing the problems of abuse and neglect. Most calls—over 50%—result in contacting the police or children's services so they can help children when needed. When appropriate, helplines can also offer counselling and other services to assist children directly. In the last year alone, helplines have improved the lives of almost 400,000 children in the UK by connecting children and families with needed supports.*

An Example Narrative

The following is an example of how elements of the Core Story discussed above can be combined into a brief narrative:

Narrative	Framing Strategy
As members of society, we share responsibility for protecting children and ensuring that they have the opportunity for healthy development. We need to take this responsibility seriously.	Value: *Social Responsibility*
We all know that the early years of life matter greatly. It's during this time that the foundation of the brain's architecture is laid down. These early years are part of a construction process that begins before birth and continues into young adulthood. We also know that this brain-building project can run into problems if children don't have the materials they need to establish a solid foundation.	Explanatory Metaphor: *Brain Architecture*
For example, children need responsive interactions with supportive adults. This is part of a 'serve and return' process—similar to that in a game of tennis—that drives development. This is one of the essential materials used to build brain architecture.	Explanatory Metaphor: *Serve and Return (with Brain Architecture cue)*

This 'serve and return' process is interrupted when adults are continually unresponsive and do not return a child's serves. This is what child neglect is: the chronic failure of adults to provide for children's, emotional, physical, educational, or medical needs.	*Definition* of Child Neglect (with *Serve and Return cue)*
There are many reasons why adults might neglect children. For example, they might be weighed down by the stresses and burdens of poverty that, along with other factors, can overload a parent's capacity to provide the care and attention that children need. And just like a lorry eventually breaks down when it is continually overloaded, caregivers can be overloaded and experience a breakdown in care.	Explanatory Metaphor: *Overloaded*
But there are things we can do. We can help 'pick off' some of the weights that overloaded caregivers are carrying by supporting programmes that address poverty, social isolation, and mental health problems—all of which may contribute to neglect and early childhood adversity.	Explanatory Metaphor: *Overloaded*, with *Solutions*
It isn't enough to rescue children from bad situations. We have a social responsibility to prevent the toxic stress that impedes healthy child development—and to do this, we need to build community services that support families and keep them moving forward.	Value: *Social Responsibility* Explanatory Metaphors: *Overloaded* and *Toxic Stress*

V. Traps: What to Avoid in Communications

In this final section, we identify communication 'traps'—plausible, sensible, and often-observed ways of framing an issue that, in fact, can lead members of the public to think about the social drivers of neglect and other forms of childhood adversity in ways that do not align with advocates' goals. Communicators need to be aware of these traps as they talk about social conditions, neglect, and adversity.

The Unframed Facts Trap. Simply listing facts—such as the causes of neglect—absent the structure of a narrative frame is ineffective because members of the public have difficulty interpreting such facts. For example, although they might understand that mental health issues, poverty, and substance abuse are all causes of neglect, they will not know *why* or *how* these factors cause neglect. Absent this explanation or connection, the public will likely fall back on models like *Social Class Stereotypes* or *Ill-Prepared Caregivers* to draw those connections. This will not get people closer to understanding the role of social conditions, and they will therefore continue to have difficulty thinking about policies and programmes to reduce childhood maltreatment and other forms of early adversity.

The Inevitability Trap. It is important for communicators to avoid deterministic language that implies that a particular cause *inevitably leads to negative outcomes*. In our research, public participants rejected messages that did not clearly lay out the idea of probability (i.e., that while certain social conditions *increase* the probability that maltreatment and adversity will occur, they do not *guarantee* its occurrence). Being clear about the probabilistic relationship between social conditions, early adversity, and developmental issues is both scientifically accurate, and good communications practice.

The Caregiving Skills Trap. Advocates rightfully want to communicate about the necessity of supporting adults in a variety of ways and assisting them with learning crucial caregiving skills. However, emphasizing the role of parenting skills suggests that early childhood adversity can be prevented if parents and other caregivers simply take responsibility for 'doing better'. This mutes attention to the systemic challenges behind the need to support caregivers in the first place. Advocates should always be sure to lead with explanations of the social drivers of maltreatment and adversity *before* moving into discussions of how to support adults in improving their caregiving skills, and continually emphasize how *social conditions* affect people's capacity to care for their children.

The Normalisation Trap. While the intergenerational transmission of early adverse experiences, and maltreatment in particular, is a critical part of experts' understanding, the simple statement that children who are maltreated are more likely to maltreat others is likely to activate the public's *Normalisation* model —a model which does not include reasoning about developmental processes. Communicators must therefore introduce Explanatory Metaphors and Explanatory Chains that detail the processes of development in order to explain *how* maltreatment disrupts development such that one becomes more likely to maltreat children as an adult. This type of explanatory approach is critical to helping people think productively about possible solutions for reducing child maltreatment: when people understand how a problem works, it is much easier to see how particular solutions can address that problem.

The 'Bad Parent' Trap. It is crucial for communicators to avoid highlighting stories of extreme cases of maltreatment perpetrated by individual parents. Emphasizing such stories will likely activate the public's *Selfish Caregiver* model and assign responsibility to 'evil parents'—making it difficult for members of the public to appreciate the factors and pressures that can contribute to maltreatment and early adversity, and reinforcing fatalistic assumptions that nothing can be done to address these issues.

VI. Conclusion

This message brief, and the research base that informs it, highlights a number of important communications challenges that must be addressed to help the public better understand the social drivers of early adversity and maltreatment. These tasks included: (1) explaining how social conditions can lead to maltreatment and adversity; (2) helping the public understand how adversity affects child development; (3) showing social conditions as dynamic and fixable problems, not unchangeable characteristics; and (4) demonstrating the crucial role of social supports.

This research lays out a new, empirically tested narrative—a Core Story—that can be used to communicate about the social drivers of early childhood adversity. This message brief aims to provide communicators with a set of recommendations that they can draw upon in their work to enhance understanding of these important issues and elevate public support for social-level solutions.

The Core Story highlights the following elements that address these challenges:

- **Values:** The Value of *Social Responsibility* primes people to view the issue of early childhood adversity as a matter of public concern, and makes them more receptive to societal-level solutions.

- **Definitions:** Definitions of the issues at hand (e.g., neglect, abuse) ensure that audiences are attending to the same concepts.

- **Explanations:** Explanatory Metaphors and Explanatory Chains help the public fill in their gaps in knowledge about *why* early childhood adversity exists and why it matters. Other Explanatory Metaphors can be used to increase knowledge about child development.

- **Facts and Solutions:** Including facts—with *solutions*, crucially—helps to clarify how solutions work, and emphasizes that change is possible.

We emphasize that these recommendations are not intended to constrain communicators' creativity. We hope, in fact, that those creating messages will bring their knowledge of audiences and experience in messaging to bear on designing powerful, authentic, and ultimately effective communications campaigns. These recommendations are intended to assist with this effort, by outlining important strategies that communicators can use in their own work.

VII. Appendix: Research Methods

A. Mapping the Gaps

In the first phase of this research process, FrameWorks employed an interview method called cultural models interviewing. Using a detailed interview guide, interviewers asked questions designed to uncover how members of the British public think about issues related to child development, abuse and neglect, and early childhood adversity. These cultural models interviews reveal the cognitive 'terrain' on a given issue by focusing on the implicit patterns of assumptions—or cultural models—which individuals employ to process incoming information about an issue. These patterns represent ways of making sense of information that could align well—or not—with various policy goals. To uncover the gaps in understanding on the target issue, the findings from cultural models interviews were held up to the untranslated expert story of child maltreatment. FrameWorks calls this process 'mapping the gaps'.

B. The Methodological Approach to Identifying and Testing Explanatory Tools

1. Designing Explanatory Tools

After identifying the gaps in understanding, the next phase of the research process aimed to generate a set of candidate explanatory tools that were then empirically explored and tested in subsequent research phases.

One goal of this design process is Explanatory Metaphors, specifically intended to explain the causes of child neglect. The result of the design process is a list of both metaphorical domains and multiple iterations of each category. FrameWorks' researchers generate a list of metaphor categories that represent existing conceptual understandings that can be recruited, as well as metaphorical language and concepts shared by the experts and the general public. They generate candidate metaphors that have the potential to address the gaps identified in earlier research, and can be easily visualized and incorporated into thinking about the issue under consideration.

FrameWorks researchers examine the *expected* public response to candidate metaphors, based on cultural models theory and existing FrameWorks research on cultural models that the public employ in understanding related issues. Researchers then use this analysis to review the metaphor categories, adding new possibilities and cutting others. At this stage, researchers also compare the candidate metaphors to the data from the initial cultural models interviews. Metaphor categories that contain elements or aspects of metaphors found to be counterproductive to the public's thinking about the topic are eliminated from the candidate list. Explanatory Metaphor categories containing elements of more productive cultural models are highlighted as particularly promising.

Throughout the process of designing candidate Explanatory Metaphors, FrameWorks also assesses the metaphors' abilities to be incorporated into practice by journalists, advocates, and practitioners. In some

cases, this practical assessment has suggested that some candidate metaphors are too problematic to pass into the public discourse. These metaphors are removed from the working list. Researchers then begin to compose iterations of the metaphors on the list, which are then revised.

In addition to designing Explanatory Metaphors, at this stage of the process FrameWorks researchers also identified non-metaphorical causal explanation as a potentially effective tool for communicating about the causes of early childhood adversity. Researchers prepared iterations of Explanatory Chains to be empirically tested subsequent to the completion of the early metaphor research.

2. Testing Explanatory Tools: Three Tests of Effectiveness

Test 1: On-the-Street Interviews

As the initial opportunity to test candidate Explanatory Metaphors, on-the-street interviews present an ideal opportunity to gather empirical data on the effectiveness of candidate Explanatory Metaphors: which specific elements of the metaphors are functioning well, and which aspects are less successful in clarifying concepts and shifting perspectives.

The metaphors are written up as paragraph-long presentations that cue the listener/reader to two domains of meaning, one that is typically referred to as the 'source,' the other as the 'target'. In the metaphorical statement 'encyclopaedias are goldmines of information', the source domain of meaning is 'goldmine' and the target is 'encyclopaedias'. In FrameWorks' terms, 'encyclopaedias' is the target because it is the object or process that the application of knowledge about 'goldmines' is meant to illuminate.

Researchers tested the effectiveness of these new metaphors in interviews with 56 British residents. Participants were diverse in age, ethnicity, gender, and political affiliation. (However, the sample is not meant to be representative. Although we are not concerned with the particular nuances in how individuals of different groups respond to, and work with, the Explanatory Metaphors tested in these interviews, we recognize the importance of between-group variation and take up this interest in quantitative testing of Explanatory Metaphors. There, the virtues of quantitative sampling techniques can effectively and appropriately address issues of representation and across-group variation.)

All participants signed written consent and release forms, and interviews were video- and audio-recorded by a professional videographer. Data from the interviews were used to winnow and refine categories, as well as to refine the individual executions of metaphors within categories.
FrameWorks had the following goals in designing and conducting On-the-Street interviews: (1) identify particularly promising Explanatory Metaphor categories; (2) refine those categories with more mixed results; and (3) eliminate highly problematic categories in which the underlying *concept* created problems that could not be overcome by refining existing executions or designing new ones. More specifically, interviews were designed to gather data that could be analysed to answer the following questions:

1. Did the participants *understand* the Explanatory Metaphor?
2. Did they *apply* the Explanatory Metaphor to talk about the causes of child neglect in productive ways?
3. Did the Explanatory Metaphor *shift* discussions away from the dominant thought patterns that characterized the initial responses?
4. Did exposure to the Explanatory Metaphor *lead to more robust, fully developed conversations* of issues that participants had problems discussing prior to being exposed to the metaphor?

Test 2: Quantitative Experimental Research

After analysing on-the-street interview data, FrameWorks subjected the refined set of Explanatory Metaphors, as well as Explanatory Chains developed early in the design process, to an online quantitative experiment. The overarching goal of this experiment was to gather statistically meaningful data on these tools' effectiveness, which provided an empirical basis for selecting tools that were most successful relative to a set of theoretically-driven outcome measures.

FrameWorks conducted the survey, which measured the performance of three candidate Explanatory Metaphors (two versions per metaphor), three Explanatory Chains (two versions per chain), and a control in relation to a set of outcome measures—13 conditions total. A total of 4,550 members of the British public were surveyed, and data were weighted on the basis of gender, age, race, education, and party identification to ensure that the sample was representative.

Following exposure to one of the metaphor or chain 'treatments'—paragraph-long iterations of candidate tools—participants answered a series of questions designed to measure a set of theoretically-based outcomes. Each treatment was designed to be roughly equal in length and similar in structure, to ensure (as much as possible) that any differences in effect were due to differences among the framing elements themselves, and not to some unintended confounding variable.

Test 3: Persistence Trials

After using quantitative data to select effective metaphors, FrameWorks often conducts Persistence Trials with metaphors to answer two general research questions: (1) *can* and *do* participants transmit the Explanatory Metaphor to other participants with a reasonable degree of fidelity, and (2) *how* do participants transmit the Explanatory Metaphor? In other words, the method examines how well the Explanatory Metaphors hold up when being 'passed' between individuals, and how participants use and incorporate the metaphors in explanation to other participants.

In this phase of research, FrameWorks researchers also gathered data about two Explanatory Chains at the end of each Persistence Trial.

Participants

The most promising Explanatory Metaphor was tested in four Persistence Trials, involving a total of 24 members of the British public. Participants were recruited through a professional marketing firm, using a screening process developed by FrameWorks and employed in past FrameWorks research. They were diverse in age, ethnicity, gender, and political affiliation.

The Persistence Trial

A Persistence Trial begins with two participants. The researcher presents the candidate Explanatory Metaphor and asks the two participants a series of open-ended questions designed to gauge their understanding of the Explanatory Metaphor and their ability to apply the model in discussing the target domain (here, the causes of child neglect). For example, the researcher asked how the participants understood the Explanatory Metaphor, then probed how well they could use it to talk about why child neglect is prevalent in the UK and what can be done about it. Questions and analysis were also designed to locate any terms or ideas in the execution of the Explanatory Metaphor that participants had difficulty with or explicitly recognized as problematic.

After 15 to 20 minutes of discussion between the two initial participants (Generation 1) and the researcher, Generation 1 was informed that they would be teaching the Explanatory Metaphor to another pair of participants (Generation 2). Generation 1 was given five minutes to design a way of presenting the Explanatory Metaphor, after which they had five minutes to present it to Generation 2.

Generation 2 then had five to 10 minutes to ask Generation 1 questions about the presentation. During this time, the interviewer generally allowed dialogue to unfold naturally between the two groups, but periodically probed for additional information on ideas that emerged.

Generation 1 then left the room and the interviewer asked Generation 2 an additional set of questions designed to elicit their understanding of the Explanatory Metaphor and their ability to apply the concept. This questioning lasted for approximately 10 minutes, at which point Generation 2 was informed that they would be 'teaching' the idea to two new participants (Generation 3). Generation 2 had five minutes to plan their presentation, after which Generation 3 entered the room and the two groups went through the same steps and questions as described above.

A Persistence Trial ends when Generation 1 returns to the room. Generation 3 teaches the tool to Generation 1 (without being told that Generation 1 is already familiar with it), and they are encouraged to debrief with Generation 1 on the direction the metaphor or chain has taken. The researcher then reads the original paragraph-long iteration and asks questions about how the tool changed in its use.

Analysis

In analysing data from Persistence Trials, FrameWorks sought to answer the following specific questions in

relation to the Explanatory Metaphor:

1. Were participants able to *apply* the Explanatory Metaphor; and, more specifically, what were the ways in which they applied it?

2. Was the Explanatory Tool *communicable?* Were each Generation's presentations of the Explanatory Metaphor faithful to the initial model presented by the researcher? How did the groups' presentation of the model differ from the researcher's presentation (e.g., did they use different language, use different ideas related to the metaphor, emphasize different entailments, etc.)?

3. Did the Explanatory Metaphor *inoculate* against dominant default cultural models? That is, did it prevent discussions from falling back to the dominant unproductive cultural models? Furthermore, if one of these cultural models did become active, could the Explanatory Metaphor prevent the discussion from veering narrowly in these perceptual directions?

4. Did the Explanatory Metaphor *self-correct*? That is, if one Generation's presentation was not faithful to the original Explanatory Metaphor or left out a key component, did the ensuing Generation's interpretation and/or presentation self-correct?

5. What specific *language* did the groups use in discussing the metaphor? Was there language that participants used that was not included in the original execution of the Explanatory Metaphor?

Test 4: Usability Trials

The final stage of this research process was to investigate how advocates—for example, social service professionals and child development professionals—could use the Explanatory Metaphor to explain various aspects of what they know about the causes of neglect. There were general research questions: (1) *can* and *do* advocates use the Explanatory Metaphor when talking with members of the public, and (2) *how* do advocates use the Explanatory Metaphor?

Participants

The Explanatory Metaphor was tested in four Usability Trials, involving a total of eight advocates. In addition, eight members of the British public participated as the audience for the advocates' presentations of the metaphor.

The Usability Trial

At the beginning of each Usability Trial, two advocates are presented with a version of the Explanatory Metaphor that elaborates an array of 'entailments', or ways that advocates can use the metaphor to make an argument or point. The interviewer discusses the metaphor with the advocates and explains that their task is to use the metaphor to explain to members of the public what the causes of neglect might be. They should also try to use the metaphor to answer any questions that the public have.

After the advocates make their presentation and answer questions, the members of the public are

dismissed, and the interviewer leads the advocates through a debrief of the exercise.

Analysis

In analysing data from Usability Trials, FrameWorks sought to answer the following specific questions:

1. Were advocates able to *apply* the Explanatory Metaphor; and, more specifically, what were the ways in which they applied it?
2. Which entailments of the Explanatory Metaphor were useful, and which were not? Did the advocates attempt to talk about different aspects of the metaphor?
3. Could the advocates use the Explanatory Metaphor to answer any questions, or address any uncertainty or confusion, expressed by the members of the public?
4. What specific *language* did the advocates use in discussing the metaphor?

About The FrameWorks Institute
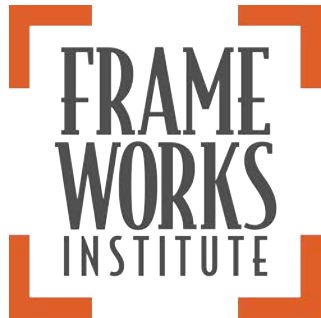
The FrameWorks Institute is an independent nonprofit organisation founded in 1999 to advance science-based communications research and practice. The Institute conducts original, multi-method research to identify the communications strategies that will advance public understanding of social problems and 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.

Endnotes

[1] Lindland, E., & Kendall-Taylor, N. (2013). *'No idea how that works or what you would do about it': Mapping the gaps between expert and public understandings of child maltreatment in the UK.* Washington, DC: FrameWorks Institute.

[2] Lindland, E., & Kendall-Taylor, N. (2013). *'No idea how that works or what you would do about it': Mapping the gaps between expert and public understandings of child maltreatment in the UK.* Washington, DC: FrameWorks Institute.

[3] Kendall-Taylor, N., Simon, A., & Volmert, A. (2014). *Taking responsibility for solutions: Using values to reframe child maltreatment in the United Kingdom.* Washington, DC: FrameWorks Institute. Fond, M., Simon, A., Haydon, A., & Kendall-Taylor, N. (2015). *Attending to neglect: Using metaphors and explanatory chains to reframe child neglect in the United Kingdom.* Washington, DC: FrameWorks Institute.

[4] Kendall-Taylor, N., & McCollum, C. (2009). *Determinism leavened by will power: The challenge of closing the gaps between the public and expert explanations of gene-environment interaction.* Washington, DC: FrameWorks Institute.

[5] Please see FrameWorks' toolkit for communicating about child development in the UK for examples of how these metaphors can be incorporated into messages: http://frameworksinstitute.org/toolkits/childdevelopmentuk/