

Frequently Asked Questions:

Staying On Frame in Real Time

The vast majority of questions and comments that communicators hear from the public and policymakers can be predicted by the research-based “swamp” of cultural models on that issue.

If you can predict, you can prepare.

A strategic framer prepares by anticipating the questions that will emerge from the swamp, considering the “traps” that are lurking in a possible response, and then choosing a well-framed response with the potential to build a more productive way of thinking about the issue. The sample question-and-answer sequences here show this tactical thought process in action. The exemplars come from questions and issues raised by stakeholder groups, but the models aren’t intended to simply script “the right answers” to questions you might be asked. Rather, this is a teaching tool, offering illustrations of how to talk more effectively about early child development, child care policies and programs, and related issues by applying FrameWorks’ research-based recommendations. While communicators are welcome to use the recommended responses, we encourage you to use the analysis of “false start” and “reframed” answers to build your capacity to apply these principles fluidly throughout your communications practice.

QUESTION

Why do you need highly skilled, highly trained people to babysit 0-3 year-olds? Parents don't have qualifications.

ANSWER

The False Start Answer

A key component of the quality of child care programs is the quality of the educators and staff who run them. Well-qualified educators are trained to support children's learning and development and to recognise potential developmental problems or delays.

We support the qualification requirements for early care educators and believe they should be maintained. It's clear from the science of child development that children's brains develop rapidly in the first two years. That is the time to ensure their environments are conducive to healthy outcomes. Young babies learn best through high quality interactions and relationships with their parents and other adult carers.

We expect teachers in schools to have strong qualifications, and it stands to reason that educators in early childhood care centres should likewise be qualified to handle their jobs. It's important that educators have the necessary skills to meet the development and care needs of all the children in their care.

The Reframed Answer

Australia's children are our future citizens, workforce, and leaders. Investing in their healthy development outcomes is critical to our nation's future prosperity. The best way to ensure a good return on that investment is to build the highest quality child care programs we can. A key component of that quality is the training and skills of the educators and staff who run them.

We know that children's brains develop rapidly from birth to age two and that, as their brains grow, children need the stimulation they receive from interactions with adult carers. Like the serve and return in a good game of tennis, young children instinctively reach out to adults through facial expressions and babbling. Adult reactions—the return—feed children's developing brains; without them, the development process breaks down, which can have implications for later learning and health.

Well-qualified educators are trained to employ the best practices in caring for children to ensure the best outcomes—for example, the serve and return that happens through their attentiveness to children's need for communication with adults. They also have the skill to recognise potential problems or developmental delays, so that any issues may be addressed early on. By maintaining high qualification standards for educators, we can ensure that all of our children develop and thrive in optimal conditions.

ANALYSIS

The False Start Answer

- By not leading with a Value, this answer misses an opportunity to explain to the listener what's at stake in debates about educator qualifications.
- The answer relies on scientific authority to make its claim, but FrameWorks' research showed that doing so can trigger unproductive thinking among the Australian public.
- The comparison of educators to school teachers may cue up the tendency of the public to "age up" children—that is, to think of development and education as issues relevant only to older.

The Reframed Answer

- This reframed reply begins with an appeal to the Value *Return on Investment*, to show what's at stake in maintaining high qualification standards.
- Using the explanatory metaphor of *Serve and Return* explains how babies develop interactively and rely on adult relationships to develop well.
- Explaining how development works leads naturally into the *Solution*: the need for well-trained educators who can both engage babies appropriately for positive development and recognise any potential signs of developmental delays or problems that need to be addressed.
- Closing with another appeal to the Value *Return on Investment* helps the listener to remember why the issue is important.

QUESTION

*Why is there such an emphasis on learning in childcare settings?
Why can't they just let kids be kids?*

ANSWER

The False Start Answer

When a child is born, he/she comes with a brain ready and eager to learn. The brain is very much like a new computer. It has great potential for development, depending on what we put into it. Early experiences greatly influence the way a person develops. Everyone who works with children has an awesome responsibility for the future of those children. The activities you do with them from birth to age 10 will determine how their learning patterns develop. As children interact with their environment, they learn problem-solving skills, critical thinking skills, and language skills.

Even very young children are learning all the time, so it's important to provide well-devised opportunities for them to learn in ways that help them develop the skills they need as they grow into toddlerhood, preschool, and beyond. Structured and unstructured play can help them acquire school readiness more quickly, for example, and educators trained in how to make the most of young children's interactions with adults and other peers can boost children's outcomes. Good child care programs hire well-qualified educators who have been trained in how to help very young children develop well. Through their interactions, they can recognise potential developmental problems and intervene appropriately.

The Reframed Answer

From birth onward, children begin observing the world around them and reacting to it, reaching out to adults for interaction, and making discoveries. Anyone who has spent time around babies or very young children has witnessed these development activities. This learning process is about the brain weaving skills together. Just like a rope is made of many strands woven together, children as they learn develop interdependent skills—emotional, cognitive, social, and physical—that they can weave and reweave into skill ropes that help them to function.

When you see a young child playing, they are really hard at work, developing their skill ropes. Even the youngest children need opportunities to develop all the strands of their skill ropes, because all are vital to good development outcomes. Early educators are trained to foster the building of these skill ropes by helping children to engage in both structured and unstructured play. The best child care programs are designed to provide the activities and conditions most conducive to children's development—they make sure children get plenty of opportunities to practice stretching, weaving, and reweaving their skill strands in challenging situations with support from adults. So whether children are engaged in activities at a child care centre or interacting with mum and dad at home, they're doing exactly what kids do—developing the skills and abilities they need to function well.

ANALYSIS

The False Start Answer

- Untested metaphors can have unintended consequences. Here, the brain-as-computer metaphor cues up the unproductive cultural model of babies' brains as empty vessels to be filled by adults.
- The series of statements about child development processes fails to provide a causal chain that shows how development works, how learning happens, what role adults play, and why it's important for child care programs to actively engage children in their own development.
- The "aging up" model present here in the reference to "school readiness" may lead listeners to conflate developmental learning with formal schooling.

The Reframed Answer

- This reframed reply answers the question with the Metaphor *Weaving Skill Ropes*, to tell a memorable story about how children's brains develop interactively with the world around them.
- The Metaphor allows for the introduction of a Causal Chain, in which the role of educators in fostering this brain development is demonstrated.
- By pivoting to the point that children are naturally inclined to learn and to engage in brain-building activities, this answer turns the sceptical question on its head: kids *are* just being kids when they seek out learning opportunities, and it's the job of adult carers to assist them in that work.

QUESTION

Why should my taxpayer dollars be used to fund childcare for women who choose to go back to work?

ANSWER

The False Start Answer

Australia's child care assistance scheme meets two important objectives: supporting workforce participation and supporting children's learning and development.

Greater workforce participation is critical to our economic strength as a nation. Too many women are leaving the workforce when their children are born because they have difficulty affording the levels of child care they need to make full-time work a viable option. Australia's economy is losing workers as a result, which is compromising our ability to maintain our global competitiveness. Providing good child care options is necessary to bring more women back to the workforce.

Not only the children of working women, but all children, should have the opportunity to access high quality early childhood development programs. Even those women who do not work full time may be contributing to the economy and the community in a casual or seasonal job or by volunteering or caring for an aging parent. These women, especially those from low-income families, also deserve access to child care benefits so that their children receive the same learning opportunities as other children.

Early child development and care centres enrich children's lives and developing brains. We need to support them as they grow.

The Reframed Answer

Dedicating our resources to high quality child care programs is an investment in our collective prosperity in two complementary ways: by providing families with access to strong child care programs, we are supporting the healthy development of all of Australia's children, which will secure our country's future wellbeing. And by making these programs available to all, more women will be able to return to work without having to choose between their child's wellbeing and their ability to contribute to our national economy.

Greater workforce and civic participation among women is critical to our economic strength as a nation. Too many women are leaving the workforce when their children are born because they have difficulty affording the levels of child care they need to make full-time work a viable option. We are losing workers as a result, which is affecting our nation's productivity and economic vitality.

Equally important is the need to ensure that all child care programs are of the highest quality—this will ensure that Australia's children grow up to be the engaged citizens and productive workers we need them to be for our country's future wellbeing.

If we use our resources to improve programs and services that ensure all children's health and quality education, women will have the freedom to rejoin the workforce and to become more engaged citizens. That's a necessary step on Australia's path to a prosperous future.

ANALYSIS

The False Start Answer

- Try starting off with a Value. *Return on Investment* offers a direct reply to this question about why investing now in child care will pay dividends later.
- This reply does a good job of explaining why women's return to the workforce is important, but misses the chance to link children's developmental outcomes with Australia's future prosperity.
- There's room here to expand on the ways quality child care programs benefit the community and the economy, which would move the listener away from the unhelpful cultural thinking that "mums at home is best." Try building a Causal Chain that tells a complete story about why child care programs and services are important to the collective good and why funding them is an appropriate use of resources.

The Reframed Answer

- This reframed reply uses the *Return on Investment* Value to frame the immediate question of funding child care programs as a sensible, long-term solution with a collective benefit.
- Explaining how child care funding solves two problems bolsters the Value appeal by showing the connection between expenditures today and prosperity tomorrow.
- Infusing the response with appeals to the Value of *Gender Equity* triggers productive thinking among the public about the need to put resources into child care programs.

QUESTION

Why are we screening toddlers for mental health problems? Kids don't have mental health.

ANSWER

The False Start Answer

Early childhood screening has been suggested as a way to identify and treat kids at risk of developing childhood mental health issues. The most recent Australian National Survey of Mental Health and Well-Being reported that 14% of children and adolescents experience mental health problems at any single point in time. Many of these children and adolescents don't receive professional help.

Mental problems are distressing for children and their families, and they negatively impact child development, learning at school and relationships with peers. Many such problems begin in childhood and persist into adolescence and adulthood. Interventions that can prevent the onset of problems, or effectively treat them in early development, have the potential to provide benefits across the lifespan.

In 2008, Australia implemented a Healthy Kids Check program to encourage early identification of "lifestyle risk factors and physical health issues" in four-year-old children. And in 2011, it was proposed the program be expanded to include screening for early signs of mental health problems. The goal of this expansion was to make better use of targeted interventions to help ensure that children are healthy, fit, and ready to learn when they start school.

The Reframed Answer

When we invest our resources in children's healthy development, we are pledging our commitment to secure Australia's future prosperity. This includes investing in children's mental, cognitive, and physical wellbeing, which all play a role in development outcomes.

All children have mental health, and that mental health can be affected by the interaction between their genes and the environments they grow up in. Think about it like a piece of furniture—a table, for example. If a table isn't level, whether because of an uneven floor or a wobbly leg, the table can't function well. The same is true of children's mental health. Good mental health enables children to function well in all areas of life. Without that levelness, children's learning and development can be disrupted, which in turn can lead to lifelong problems that compromise their human potential and healthy functioning. But just like a wobbly table can't fix itself, children with mental health problems need appropriate interventions.

Early childhood screening is one way to identify and treat kids at risk of developing childhood mental health issues. A table's small wobble can become a big one over time if left unaddressed. Early screening can lead to early intervention, which in turn can prevent small wobbles from worsening. That's why in 2011, the government expanded its Healthy Kids Check program to include child mental health screening for four-year-olds, in order to make better use of targeted interventions to help ensure that children are healthy, fit, and ready to learn when they start school.

ANALYSIS

The False Start Answer

- This reply leaves the listener to wonder why it matters if we screen kids now or later, since some problems aren't found until adolescence.
- When used to enhance a message, data points can be powerful framing tools. This reply uses up valuable real estate space with data—years, percentages—that do not respond to the main question about whether children have mental health.

The Reframed Answer

- This reframed reply immediately responds to the top-level question, "Why is this important?", by inserting the *Return on Investment Value*.
- Taking the time and space to build an Explanatory Chain about child mental health and why it's important to address it pays off in the long run by building the public's understanding and, consequently, its support for the proposed Solution.

- Neglecting to explain how child mental health works unintentionally leaves unfilled the cognitive holes that frequently undermine the public's ability to understand child-related social issues.

- The Metaphor of *Levelness* helps to make the explanation more memorable, or sticky, by offering an “easy to think” way of understanding child mental health and its relationship to external environmental factors.
- Connecting phrases like “which in turn,” “just like,” and “that’s why” are helpful communications cues that tie cause and effect, or problem and solution, together into a coherent story.

QUESTION

I know we should try and help kids who are growing up on the wrong side of the tracks, but is it really going to make any difference? Surely they're just going to follow in their bludger parents' footsteps.

ANSWER

The False Start Answer

High quality early learning and care programs are especially beneficial for children from disadvantaged backgrounds (Cuhna, Heckman, Lochner, & Masterov, 2006; Sylva et al., 2004). For example, the Effective Provision of Pre-School Education Project found that children from disadvantaged backgrounds who attended preschool demonstrate much better levels of attainment at the start of primary school when compared to similarly disadvantaged children who did not attend preschool (Sylva et al., 2004).

Historically, early childhood services in Australia have not been equally accessible or equally utilised by all families. For example, in 2008, in those geographical areas of greatest relative disadvantage in Australia, 60% of children aged between 3–5 years not attending school usually attended a preschool or a preschool program, compared to 80% of children from areas with the lowest relative disadvantage (Australian Bureau of Statistics [ABS], 2009). Children whose main language at home is English are also more likely to attend preschool, a preschool program or long day care (ABS, 2009). Furthermore, 75% of Indigenous children between 3.5 and 4.5 years of age do not attend a formal early education service (Department of Families, Housing, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs, 2009).

In order to address these issues of unequal access and utilisation, the Council of Australian Governments (COAG) reached a partnership agreement to provide universal access to quality early childhood education programs (i.e., preschool/ kindergarten) to all 4-year-old children. Expanding access to childhood programs and services to more disadvantaged children can improve their outcomes.

The Reframed Answer

When we make an investment in children's development, we reap dividends in multiple parts of our society: in workforce preparation, in community participation, and in prevention of health burdens, for example. But we can only do this if we recognise that children grow up in specific environments, and the quality of those environments affects their ability to function.

Think of a child in a community as you would a table sitting on a floor. If the table is not on a level plane, it can't support the weight put on it and it can't function properly. In the same way, a child in a negative environment can't learn, grow, and become a productive member of society.

We have to pay attention to all the factors that contribute to the positive or negative outcomes of a child's development. Think of development as a scale: positive factors like supportive relationships stack up on one side of the child's development experiences, and negative factors like abuse, neglect, or community violence and lack of resources are loaded on to the other. A child's development scale can be tipped to the positive side by offloading the weight of negative factors and stacking as many positive factors as possible.

Providing children and their families with access to high quality child care programs is an important part of tipping disadvantaged children's outcomes scales in a positive direction. For example, trained counselors and educators can help communities and parents to get children the supports they need to function fully—what is called “being resilient”—and can mitigate negative factors through appropriate interventions. Using our resources to support the development of children from disadvantaged communities improves their long-term social, economic, and health outcomes—and that has positive consequences for Australia as a whole.

ANALYSIS

The False Start Answer

- The focus on research and data in this reply is likely to cue up the public's strong sense that just having more information is alone enough to solve social problems.

The Reframed Answer

- This reframed reply uses two Metaphors, *Levelness* and *Outcomes Scale*, to show both how environmental factors interact with developing brains and to demonstrate that this interactive process contains important opportunities to improve outcomes even for children in the worst circumstances.

- Dumping data into the response without interpretive cues such as tested Values or relative comparisons leaves the public to guess at their meaning (e.g., “I guess 75% of indigenous children don’t attend early childhood programs because of cultural differences—nothing I can do about that!”).
 - Focusing on differences among groups tends to call up unhelpful patterns of thinking that cluster children into demographic groups and reason away negative developmental outcomes as the result of those group difference instead of systemic problems of access to and delivery of services.
- The Metaphors also build awareness that development is a process that can be enhanced and assisted by positive interactions and adult support; without using scientific jargon, they strategically redirect people’s thinking away from the belief that genes are fixed and unaffected to environmental influences.
 - A final appeal to *Return on Investment* reminds the public about the collective benefit of using public resources on child development programs and services.

QUESTION

Is an early care centre really what's best for a 0-2 year old child?

ANSWER

The False Start Answer

We all want what's best for our children, and research confirms that children of every age need interaction with adults for healthy development outcomes. Although parents have a critical role to play in a baby's development, not all families are able to have a parent or other family member stay home to care for young children, so an early care centre with quality programming is the best alternative.

Babies' brains start forming before birth, about three weeks post-conception, producing trillions more neurons and synapses than are actually needed for their brains to function. A baby's brain at birth contains 100 billion neurons, and these are nearly all the neurons its brain will ever have. In a child's first years, its brain undergoes rapid changes that are immeasurably important to the child's later developmental outcomes. These critical years will determine how well a child functions later in childhood and as an adult, so we need to get it right. That's why it's important to provide even the youngest babies with good care and adult interaction, even if it is at a child care centre instead of at home.

Experts haven't reached agreement on whether child care for very young children is the best option, but most agree that quality programs can have positive developmental effects on the children they serve. At any rate, the modern world makes child care a necessity for many parents, no matter how old their baby, so it's important to them that we build the best programs we can.

The Reframed Answer

When we see a young baby, it's not always top of mind to imagine where his development will lead, but babies today are Australia's future leaders, citizens, and workers. Giving all babies the resources they need to grow into healthy, well-functioning adults is an important investment for us to make in their future—and Australia's.

Quality child care centres function much like amplifiers to a baby's development: just like an amp takes a signal and makes it stronger and clearer, good child care programs build on what parents and families are already doing at home to ensure babies' healthy development. Babies' brains develop rapidly and depend on supportive interactions with adults to develop well, whether those adults are their parents, other family members, or skilled carers and educators.

For some children—like those from disadvantaged backgrounds or with special needs—well-qualified educators in child care centres can be an important resource that powerfully amplifies these children's developmental efforts.

Access to these kinds of supports are especially important for babies who experience "toxic stress." Toxic stress happens when a baby experiences severe and ongoing stress—for example, extreme poverty, abuse, or community violence—without the benefit of consistent, supportive relationships that can buffer these experiences. Toxic stress affects babies' brain and body development and can lead to lifelong learning and health problems. High quality child care programs can provide much-needed support for babies at risk for toxic stress and contribute to their wellbeing.

It's up to all of us to make sure that all of Australia's children have the opportunity to thrive in nurturing environments, whether it be their homes, communities, or child care centres.

ANALYSIS

The False Start Answer

- Positioning child care centres as the runner-up choice to mum staying at home threatens to cue up Family Bubble thinking about child development as something that happens only within the home.

The Reframed Answer

- Presenting the "big picture" benefits of good child development outcomes opens a space to discuss how child care programs are one important and necessary component of an overall plan to provide support for the nation's children.

- Dumping data into the response without interpretive •
Relying on scientific explanations of brain development will quickly lose the public's attention. Try a tested Metaphor instead to make development "easy to think."
- The response takes care to stress the importance to families of making certain child care programs are of high quality, but a Values prime can demonstrate the public benefit of making good policy decisions.

- Rather than positioning stay-at-home mums and child care programs as an either/or option, this reply uses the Metaphor *Developmental Amplifier* to frame child care centres as a valuable resource that can provide as much support as children and families need.
- The Metaphor of *Toxic Stress* helps the public to understand how babies' development may be harmed by environmental factors at home or in their communities and illustrates the interventionist or mitigating role that child care programs play.

QUESTION

Why is the government weighing changes to the early childhood education and care benefits?

ANSWER

The False Start Answer

It's complicated. The Federal Government has in fact increased expenditure on subsidies by around 30 percent in the federal budget, pledging over \$7 billion per annum of support to families with young children. Despite this, fees continue to rise and the real impact of government support to subsidies is declining as child care prices exceed indexation.

Many of the problems experienced by service providers, families and the government are directly attributed to the subsidy system. The complicated two-payment system—with the child care benefit means tested but the child care rebate non-means tested—is a nightmare.

Service providers spend long hours logging data through the child care management system. This, I believe, is where a lot of the “red tape” is for service providers. Meanwhile, every time a service raises its fees, the government is covering at least half the cost. Many operators are on shoestring budgets trying to keep costs down for families. However, when a “premium service” chooses to offer additional services, such as foreign languages and chefs on the books cooking meals for children, the government is subsidising half the cost up to \$7,500 per year. There is certainly a place for these premium services, and families are willing to pay for the very best for their children—but should the government be subsidising it?

The Reframed Answer

That's a good question. Ensuring that all children have access to the early childhood education and care they need is important to our future prosperity as a nation—their development outcomes affect our future economic outcomes. That's why we are considering changes to the system that will improve families' access to appropriate care.

In our current system, applying for and determining subsidy payments is a complicated process. That makes access to early learning and child care uneven and difficult for some families to obtain, even though the federal government has increased funding for child care subsidies over time. We can make the system more efficient—and make it work for all of us—if we adopt some innovative changes.

These proposed changes would streamline the process for both families and care providers and would improve the overall quality of early learning and child care. That's important because great child care programs can amplify the positive effects of parents' and families' efforts to help their children develop well. Combining funding streams would simplify the way in which families' eligibility is determined and expand the number of care providers to which they have access. Children and communities with particular needs could access additional resources that better meet those needs. A revised National Quality Framework will ensure that all providers meet nationally recognised standards for the kinds of care they provide, such as educational, home-based, and outside-school-hours care.

If we make changes that help the system to work better for more families, then more children will receive the care they need. By improving the system now, we will see a return on that investment in future decades.

ANALYSIS

The False Start Answer

- This answer isn't framed with a Value, which leaves the listener to wonder what's at stake.
- Using numbers without context can reduce their effectiveness. Try supplying a recognisable point of comparison that illustrates the relative size of the numbers involved.

The Reframed Answer

- This reframed reply begins with an appeal to the Value of Return on Investment, which explains why the issue—improved child care access—is important.
- By adopting a positive Tone throughout, this reply avoids cueing up the sense of fatalism that predominates Australians thinking about government policy.

- The Rhetorical Tone emphasises the scope of the problem and makes it seem too big to fix. Phrases such as “it’s a nightmare” are likely to trigger crisis thinking.
 - The solution proposed is for the government to change current policy, but focusing on the government’s ineffectiveness will not build public support for the government’s ability to solve the problem.
- A clear Explanatory Chain identifies the problem, tells what happens as a result, and proposes a Solution that is well matched to the scale of the problem.
 - A subtle insertion of the Developmental Amplifier focuses attention on quality rather than quantity.
 - Closing with another Values appeal cements the importance of fixing the problem.