



Promoting Productive Conversations About Early Child Development and Care:

An Introduction to Strategically Reframing Public Communications



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Child care reform is a major topic of discussion in Australia nowadays. The release this fall of the Productivity Commission’s draft report, “Childcare and Early Childhood Learning,” following the Abbott government’s pledge to update the current system to make it more flexible and affordable, offers an opportunity to make needed improvements to the way our child care system works. It also opens the door to more robust public conversations in communities across Australia about how babies and young children learn, what developing brains need in order to build strong cognitive, social, and emotional skills, and what child care programs, policies, and resources are needed to ensure all children’s successful development.

Those conversations can’t wait—yet at the same time, they have the potential to go awry, if not carefully planned. Strategic Frame Analysis™, an evidence-based approach to communications on complex social and scientific issues developed by the FrameWorks Institute, is one way that early child development professionals and childcare organisations can take up the task of talking with the public about early childhood development, child mental health, and quality childcare programs in such a way that sets up a conversation about policy and alignment with the science on these topics. Practitioners in the field trained in this approach learn to make intentional, research-based choices about how to frame these issues for their audiences: how to start, what to emphasise, what to leave unsaid, and how to make the “whys and hows” of early child development as “sticky,” or memorable, as possible. Strategic framing develops communicators’ ability to engage the public in productive conversations about early child development and childcare reform, linking discussions of development and mental health science and policies to a broader “core story” of early child development, and building public support for quality programs and policies.

There’s no substitute for participating in extended theory-to-practice trainings in strategic framing, but a sampler of some of the key framing techniques are included in this article. The research behind these recommendations draws on social science theory and methods and involved extensive testing in Australia. Researchers surveyed 4,600 Australians, in addition to conducting dozens of in-depth interviews and peer discussion groups. These recommendations are also informed by more than ten years of empirical communications research on translating the science of early child development and child mental health conducted in the USA, UK, and Canada.

Practical Tools for Effective Communications about Updating the Child Care System

Strategic Frame Analysis™ points to three powerful reframing tools—Values, Explanatory Metaphors, and Solutions—that can help the public to understand why children’s development in the early years is important, how it works, and what roles our communities can and should play in ensuring that all children have access to the resources they need to develop well.

Using Values to Establish What's at Stake

Values, or broad ideals about what's desirable and good, act as a starting point on a topic, guiding attitudes, reasoning and decisions that follow. Opening communications with a value can orient people's thinking on the topic, setting up for success in the interaction that follows. Among several values that FrameWorks tested experimentally, Return on Investment/Collective Prosperity, showed broad appeal, and Gender Equity/Women's Workforce Preparation was especially helpful in talking about the need for a system that allows more women with children to return to the workforce. The value descriptions below capture the essence of the idea; they aren't intended to be used verbatim.

Return on Investment / Collective Prosperity

Australia needs to invest in children's development so that everyone in our country can succeed in the future.

Gender Equity / Women's Workforce Preparation

Australia needs to invest in children's development so that women can have the freedom to work and contribute to the economy.

Values can be used to begin a conversation about the relationship of early childhood development to the availability of quality childcare programs: "The collective investments we make today in all of our children's development will benefit the entire country in the future, because we will have a prepared labour force, an engaged citizenry, and leaders who are ready to help us face future challenges." Or, they might be instrumental in highlighting how government efforts to ensure quality childcare programs can help the economy: "Yes, we shouldn't underestimate parents' role in their children's lives, but have you considered how strong childcare programs can both boost a child's development outcomes and ensure that women have the opportunity to return to the workforce and help our economy?" Whether used at the beginning of a conversation or elsewhere, values are a more effective way of engaging people in an issue than framing it as a response to a crisis or making the case that it will primarily benefit specific groups.

Using an Explanatory Metaphor to Explain the Problem

FrameWorks research supports the findings of many other studies into public knowledge of early childhood development and child mental health: the Australian public simply doesn't understand how children's brains develop. As a result, they easily revert to ways of thinking about child development and mental health that contradict what we now know to be true about the development process. The dominant model of early child development involves thinking of it as a passive, unstructured process; very young children just absorb information naturally and don't need any special care. Taking a moment to reframe children's brain development as active (and interactive) work that determines their long-term outcomes is therefore a critical step in every discussion about early child development and childcare policies—it should never be taken for granted.

Metaphors are familiar to us all as poetic devices, but FrameWorks’ research shows that they can also be uniquely powerful devices for thinking. An explanatory metaphor is a simple, concrete, and memorable comparison that quickly and effectively explains an abstract or complex topic. FrameWorks tested several candidate metaphors for communicating about the development process and the role of childcare programs—likening skills development to weaving ropes, for example. Weaving Skills Ropes was one of the most effective and reliable in helping the public to think more expansively about the skills children need to function well.

Weaving Skills Ropes:

“Learning is about the brain weaving social, emotional, and cognitive skills together to form strong skills ropes that children can stretch and reweave to carry out all of the functions and activities life requires.”

This metaphor uses an “easy to think” analogy that allows the public to reimagine early child development as the building of interdependent skills that, in combination, are vital to a child’s ability to function. It also allows for a more robust understanding of the dynamic and complex process of skills building. In this way, the metaphor can help the public understand that learning is more than just cognitive and that childcare programs should focus on social and emotional skills, too, in order to promote successful development.

The Productivity Commission’s report recognises that Australia’s childcare system needs to be updated to emphasise quality over quantity. Such updating involves change—and conversations about change must always be framed carefully. The wrong frames can easily trigger the public’s fear of massive disruptions that are destined to fail. Among the explanatory metaphors FrameWorks tested for communicating about the need for high-quality childcare programs that enrich children’s development and serve as a site of intervention in instances of developmental delays and problems, Developmental Amplifier was the most consistent and reliable in expanding public understanding of child development centres’ function and the need to optimise their potential:

Developmental Amplifier:

“Quality child development centres have the power to amplify children’s development, increasing and adding to the outcomes of the important work their parents and families are doing.”

This metaphor can teach the basic concepts underlying the need for updated childcare policies—and reframe the public conversation away from the idea that child care centres are primarily about child minding. Like all metaphors, Developmental Amplifier communicates these concepts in a succinct, easy-to-understand way. In particular, it sets up a conversation about changes to the childcare system, allowing spokespeople to build on the metaphor with clear explanations of what high-quality programs look like and how new policies can help to improve existing programs.

Building Public Support for the Right Solutions

Preparing the listener to see how the actions being taken will make things better is a vital part of effective framing. When communicators neglect to draw a clear link between a problem and its solution in ways that support non-experts' ability to understand the connection and what's at stake, a crucial opportunity for gaining the public's trust and engagement is lost. FrameWorks' research revealed that certain patterns of unproductive thinking were especially prevalent in talking with Australians about early child development and childcare: a sense of fatalism—a belief that the state of Australia's children is a problem too big to solve, an overreliance on parents as the only ones responsible for child outcomes, and concern that young children are being pushed to grow up too quickly all dominate the public's understanding of the issues. A conversation infused at its start with tested shared values, clear explanatory chains, and simplifying models can overcome this tendency and help the public to reach more productive conclusions about the solution.

This kind of preparation, inviting the public to think about the problem the way experts do, can move people toward whole-picture thinking, or a “wide-angle lens” perspective. Experts know that high-quality child development centres are a public good: they are important to positive child development and early interventions, which are key to building a population of healthy, productive, and engaged citizens, and they allow women to return to the workforce without worrying that their children's development has been compromised as a result. They understand that Australia's outdated, ineffective, and costly childcare programs and policies undermine that goal. The default story in our popular discourse, however, is that early child development is a passive event undisturbed by gene-environment interaction, that childcare centres are just babysitting sites, and that meaningful social change is unlikely or impossible. An audience primed with a view of that more expansive expert picture, however, can more readily sidestep the unproductive model of how, where, and when early child development happens and begin to see how large-scale solutions can address the problem.

Our research shows that giving the public the opportunity to think like the experts do about an issue increases public support for policy solutions. For example, the public lacks a clear understanding of how children's brains develop, why our childcare system needs updating, and how high-quality child development centres can improve outcomes. Although many people have formed strong feelings about the over-medicalisation of young children or the reduction of government services, few know what child development experts do about the science of early child development and the importance of child development centres to good outcomes. To gain public support for investing in high-quality programs, communicators need to show why it is the right solution. That means explaining how well-designed child development programs can enrich children's development and prevent developmental problems and delays from becoming bigger problems down the road. Values and metaphors are easy-to-read signposts that lead audiences to understand early child development the way experts do; building that knowledge base is an important step toward explaining the what, how, and why of the Productivity Commission's report recommendations in ways that make sense to a general audience.

Early Child Development Professionals Are Reframing the Public Conversation

As the early child development community continues to work on the challenge of communicating about children’s brain development and the role of childcare in Australian society, it’s important to learn about what makes the difference between effective and ineffective outreach on this topic. There’s solid evidence that some ways of framing the issue are likely to decrease public engagement and support—for instance, emphasising the exclusive role parents play in a child’s development. Instead, effective framing builds people’s understanding of underlying causes and introduces them to well-matched, collective solutions, so that the public understands how to best address the problem.

These framing strategies are designed for use by child development experts and practitioners in the field who are engaged in efforts to improve Australia’s child development programs and policies. You can learn more about this project at this [link](#).



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