

Talking Points:

Framing Child Care and Child Development in Australia

The following talking points can be used flexibly—as a source of themes for longer written pieces, as short responses in media interviews or public appearances, or as set-ups to “pre-frame” a conversation on specific policy or program proposals. Each pulls from rigorously tested messages that have been shown to shift thinking away from common but unproductive ways of thinking about child development, early learning, and child care, and to build the public’s support for evidence-based programs and policies designed to improve child and social outcomes. They need not be used word for word, but when adapting, communicators should take care to maintain the core frame elements in each.

- Australia’s future prosperity depends on the collective investments that we make in all of our children’s development. When we invest in improving programs and services that help all children to be healthy, to get a good education, and to contribute to our collective prosperity, we all benefit. Devoting resources to young children and the programs that support them will help ensure that we are a thriving and prosperous country in the future.
- Australia needs to invest in children’s development so that women can have the freedom to return to the workforce and contribute to the economy. As a nation, we depend on the contributions of all of our citizens—as members of the labour force and as active participants in our society and economy. By devoting resources to improve child development programs and services, we can ensure that people don’t have to choose between work and quality care for their children.
- Quality child development centres have the power to amplify children’s development. Just like an amplifier takes an incoming signal and makes it stronger and clearer, a good child development centre can help children reach their full potential—amplifying things that children will need for the rest of their lives, like social skills, problem solving, flexibility and self-confidence. And just like an amplifier needs to be designed, built and maintained by trained professionals, child care centres need well-trained staff and well-designed programs. When high quality child development centres are in place and can get in tune with the important work that parents and family are doing, they can amplify a child’s development. We need to make sure that all Australian children have access to quality development amplifiers.

- A vital ingredient in children’s brain development is the “serve and return” interactions that they have with their parents, other caregivers, and community members. Like the serve and return in a good game of tennis, young children naturally seek interaction with adults through babbling and facial expressions. If adults do not respond by returning these kinds of noises and gestures, the serve and return breaks down and the child’s developmental process is interrupted, which has implications for later learning and health. That’s why ensuring responsive caregiving is critical for positive child development.
- Children’s mental health is similar to the levelness of a table. Just as levelness allows a table to function properly, the mental health of children enables them to function in many different areas. When children’s brains develop without the support of healthy relationships and access to good health care and nutrition—or if they are exposed to abuse, neglect, or violence—their development wobbles, just like a table on an uneven floor, which can lead to poor development outcomes. But tables can’t level themselves. In the same way, children need help and support to establish stable mental health. That’s why it’s important that very young children have access to the programs and resources that can identify potential problems early on and provide appropriate interventions.
- Children can experience three main kinds of stress: positive stress, tolerable stress, and toxic stress. Positive stress—like facing a challenging social situation—can help children to develop. Tolerable stress includes those circumstances that can potentially damage development—like dealing with a relative’s death—but which are buffered by children’s access to supportive, positive relationships to help them cope. Toxic stress happens when a child experiences severe and ongoing trauma, such as extreme poverty, abuse, or community violence, without the benefit of consistent, supportive relationships. Toxic stress affects the way that the brain and body develop and can lead to lifelong problems in learning, behaviour, and both physical and mental health.
- A child’s development can be thought of as a scale, tipping towards either positive or negative development outcomes. Positive factors like supportive relationships and strong learning opportunities are stacked on one side, and negative factors like abuse, neglect, or community violence and lack of resources are piled on the other. Our goal as a nation is to tip the development scale toward the positive side for as many of Australia’s children as possible, by “stacking the scale” on the positive side—for instance, by making sure all children have access to early child care options that promote early learning and the development of social and cognitive skills that kids need to be resilient in the face of challenges they encounter as they grow.
- Learning is about the brain weaving skills together. Successful learning and development result in a strong set of strands—social, emotional, and cognitive skills—that can be combined to form skill ropes. These skill ropes can stretch and flex to help us perform the full range of tasks and activities that our lives demand. Children need to develop strong individual strands, and they do that through opportunities to practice stretching, weaving, and reweaving these strands in challenging situations with support from adults. Quality child care and early education centres with well-trained educators and staff play an important role in making sure Australia’s children have the opportunities they need to develop strong skills ropes.