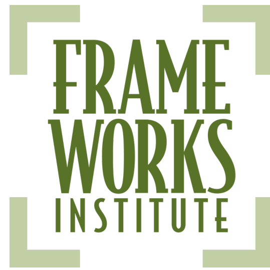

A Brief Intro to Reframing Child Mental Health

Child mental health is a major topic of discussion in Tennessee nowadays. The formation of the Council on Children's Mental Health as part of SAHMSA's (Substance Abuse and Mental Health Administration) System of Care offered us an opportunity to make needed improvements to the way we collaborate at the state, local and individual levels in serving our children. It also opens the door to more robust public conversations in communities across Tennessee about what child care programs, policies, and resources are needed to ensure all children's successful mental health based on emerging scientific research that shows us what developing brains need in order to build strong cognitive, social, and emotional skills.

Those conversations can't wait—yet at the same time, beginning them can feel difficult or even daunting. Strategic Frame Analysis™, an evidence-based approach to communications on complex social and scientific issues developed by the FrameWorks Institute, is one way that advocates, educators, mental health professionals and child welfare organizations can take up the task of talking with the public about early childhood development and child mental health. 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 emphasize, what to leave unsaid, and how to make the "whys and hows" of early child development and child mental health as "sticky," or memorable, as possible. Strategic framing develops communicators' ability to engage the public in productive conversations about early child development and child mental health, linking discussions of development and mental health science to build 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 across the United States and Canada.

Our researchers have surveyed 35,000 Americans about early childhood development and thousands more on the issue of child mental health, in addition to dozens of in-depth interviews and peer discussion groups. The recommendations in this document

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 US and also internationally, in the UK, Australia, and Canada. Finally, suggestions here on the System of Care are informed by research conducted as part of a place-based project in Jacksonville, Florida.

If You Can Predict, You Can Prepare

The first step to becoming a strategic framer is to recognize that the public will bring a strong set of assumptions to bear on information about child mental health and related issues. These assumptions have implications for solutions that are "easy to think" and "hard to think." Put another way: these perceptions have the power to limit the public's support for measures like a coordinated System of Care philosophy to support child mental health, when the issue itself is poorly understood. It is imperative therefore that communicators know the public's patterns of thinking as they begin to engage their fellow citizens on the topic of child mental health—their default understanding about what it is, how it develops, and who's responsible for supporting and promoting this development. Communicators need to be especially attentive to these cultural models when they want to talk about policies and regulations that create the conditions for supporting good child mental health.

Black Boxes of Child Mental Health and Early Childhood Development

A critical point to bear in mind is that a majority of Americans are not used to thinking about child mental health and when asked to think about it, tend to default to the more familiar but separate terrains of mental illness. Similarly, Americans lack a solid understanding of *how* development unfolds, and the factors that support positive developmental outcomes. While experts understand children's development as a dynamic process that is shaped over time by the interaction of genes, biology and environments, public thinking is focused on *what* children should learn. The process of development itself is assumed to happen automatically, as part of the natural course of physical development and maturation. Consequently, the work done by organizations like the Tennessee Commission on Children and Youth (TCCY) is often taken for granted or misunderstood.

Determinist Thinking about Child Mental Illness

Americans across the ideological spectrum default to the assumption that conversations about mental health must be about mental illness, for which they can see few productive interventions. The public's "what's done is done" or fatalism about mental illness leads to an ability to engage in solutions-oriented thinking about these problems or to imagine what role communities might play in promoting and protecting good child mental health. When solutions do enter the conversation, the emphasis falls on remediation rather than prevention.

Mental Health Individualism

In discussing issues related to supports for child mental health, the public employs a sense of "*Self-Makingness*," locating responsibility for mental health within individuals

themselves and the steps individuals must take to take responsibility for having a positive emotional state, which according to this way of reasoning is understood to be most responsible for promoting positive mental health. This hyper-focus on individual choice and personal action has been notes in many topic areas in FrameWorks' body of research which shows that by and large Americans default to individual-level solutions.

Changing the Conversation

One takeaway from the preceding overview of dominant patterns of thinking is that communicators should avoid activating these cultural models. For instance, highlighting an individual's story about overcoming mental illness would only reinforce these patterns of thinking. When the public is reasoning from these highly familiar, chronically accessible mental shortcuts, collective, preventive solutions to support the promotion of child mental health are "harder to think." However, that doesn't mean that advocates for change should give up on engaging the public—in fact, FrameWorks believes quite the opposite. When advocates have an intentional, evidence-based strategy for shaping public discourse and guiding conversations with the public, communicators can circumnavigate these top-of-mind cultural models and move toward recessive beliefs that are "in there somewhere" but need to be pulled out through strategic framing.

Below we outline a handful of key framing techniques that will help communicators engage with the public about child mental health work and its relationship to early childhood development.

Practical Tools for Effective Communications about Child Mental Health

Strategic Frame Analysis™ points to three powerful reframing tools—Values, Explanatory Metaphors, and Solutions—that can help the public to understand what mental health is, how it works, and why it is important. Also, these tools help to bring in the science to talk about the role of children's development in the early years 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, *Human Potential* suggested itself as particularly helpful for building support for policies in the areas of poverty, racial disparities, child services and child mental health. *Ingenuity* was especially helpful in asserting that innovative solutions can be brought to bear on improving child mental health, overcoming the default

assumption that little within the public sphere can be done to improve outcomes for children. *Civic Responsibility* and *Civic Potential* came our of our research in Jacksonville, Florida as moving public thinking in support of the System of Care Initiative. The value descriptions below capture the essence of the idea; they aren't intended to be used verbatim.

Human Potential
Tennessee is coming together to make good things happen. One thing we are doing is investing our resources in our children and families, recognizing that when we ensure that children have the opportunity to learn and develop, they can better realize their full potential. Developing the health, skills and abilities of our children's should be our top priority. Together, we — all of Tennessee's residents and leaders — can invest resources in strengthening the systems that provide education, child health care, and support for parents. On the other hand, if we fail to make this investment, our children will not be able to fully contribute when they become adults.

Ingenuity
Innovative states and communities have been able to design high-quality programs for children, which have solved problems in early childhood development and shown significant long-term improvements for children. As a society, we need to invent and replicate more effective policies and programs for young children.

Civic Potential
One thing our state must do to reach its full potential is support our children and families, recognizing that we can only accomplish our goals for Tennessee by ensuring that all of our state's children have the opportunity to learn and develop. Realizing our potential, and becoming the state that we know we can be, should be our top priority. Together, we — all of Tennessee's residents and leaders — can create strong systems that provide education, child health care, and support for parents.

Civic Responsibility
One thing our state is doing is taking responsibility for supporting our children and families, recognizing that we share a duty to ensure that all of our state's children have the opportunity to learn and develop. Meeting our obligation to Tennessee's children should be our top priority. Together, we — all of Tennessee's residents and leaders — can do our duty to the state by strengthening the systems that provide education, child health care, and support to parents.

Values can be used to begin a conversation about the relationship of early childhood development to improving child mental health outcomes: "Making investments in people by assuring that all children are given their best chance in life is the best way to build strong and fully contributing members of a community." Or, they might be instrumental in highlighting how government efforts to ensure system improvements like the System of Care can help the economy: "Tennessee's future depends on

ensuring that all of our children grow, thrive and contribute to our collective well-being. If we are to achieve this as a society, we must find the best ways to address the very real problems facing our children today." 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 American 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. *Levelness* was one of the most effective and reliable in helping the public to think more expansively about the idea that children and their environments need to be brought into a functional state.

Levelness
Scientists say that children's mental health affects how they socialize, how they learn, and how well they meet their potential. One way to think about child mental health is that it's like the levelness of a piece of furniture, say, a table. The levelness of a table is what makes it usable and able to function, just like the mental health of a child is what enables him or her to function and do many things. Some children's brains develop on floors that are level. This is like saying that the children have healthy, supportive relationships, and access to things like good nutrition and health care. For other children, their brains develop on more sloped or slanted floors. This means they're exposed to abuse or violence, have unreliable or unsupportive relationships, and don't have access to key programs and resources. Remember that tables can't make themselves level — they need attention from experts who understand levelness and stability and who can work on the table, the floor, or even both. We know that it's important to work on the floors and the tables early, because little wobbles early on tend to become big wobbles later.

This metaphor uses an "easy to think" analogy that concretizes and establishes the importance of stability. Additionally, it allows the public to reimagine the influence of a variety of causal factors. It also allows for a more robust understanding of the influence of environmental factors, and the ability to make adjustments and modifications to achieve levelness. In this way, the metaphor can help the public understand that learning is more than just cognitive and that we should focus on social and emotional skills, too, in order to promote successful development.

To further situate this conversation, and to help build new associations and channel attention away from unproductive status quo thinking and toward what contemporary science tells us about child development, FrameWorks recommends using levelness along with a suite of metaphors comprising a Core Story of Development, namely *Brain Architecture, Serve and Return, Toxic Stress,* and *Resilience Scale*. The goal in deploying these metaphors is not to literally "illustrate" the science, but rather to fully develop an analogy so that it creates a picture in people's minds that is clear and enduring about what actually develops, how development happens, what disrupts it and what positive outcomes might look like.

METAPHORS FOR TELLING THE CORE STORY OF DEVELOPMENT

WHAT DEVELOPS?

Metaphor: Brain Architecture

We now know that the basic architecture of a human brain is constructed through a process that begins before birth and continues into adulthood. Like the construction of a home, the building process begins with laying the foundation, framing the rooms and wiring the electrical system, and these processes have to happen in the right order. Early experiences literally shape how the brain gets built. A strong foundation in the very early years increases the probability of positive mental health outcomes. A weak foundation increases the odds of later difficulties. Evidence demonstrates using a "System of Care" approach to providing support for children's mental health when they are young improves prospects for long-term success for the child.

HOW DOES IT HAPPEN?

Metaphor: Serve and Return

The interactive influences of genes and experience shape the developing brain. The active ingredient is the "serve and return" interactions that children have with parents and other caregivers in their family or community. Like the process of serve and return in games such as tennis and volleyball, young children naturally reach out for interaction through babbling and facial expressions. If adults do not respond by getting in sync and doing the same kind of vocalizing and gesturing back at them, the child's learning process is incomplete. This has negative implications for later learning.

WHAT DISRUPTS IT?

Metaphor: Toxic Stress

Neuroscientists are now reporting that certain kinds of stress in a child's environment can lead to mental health problems. Toxic stress in early childhood is caused by experiences such as extreme poverty, abuse, and chronic or severe maternal depression, all of which can disrupt the developing brain, particularly when children lack supports to protect against these harmful experiences. So just like we need to limit the negative substances in our environments to avoid harm, we need to eliminate the stressors in children's environments to avoid the toxic stress that will affect their mental health.

Metaphor: Resilience Scale
In the same way that the weight sitting on a scale or teeter-totter affects the direction it tips, the factors that a child is exposed to affect the outcomes of their development. A child's scale is placed in a community and has spaces on either side where environmental factors get placed. These factors influence which direction the scale tips and the outcomes of the child's development. Development goes well when the scale tips positive. Positive factors, such as supportive relationships, get stacked on one side, while risk factors, such as abuse or violence, pile up on the other. It's important to realize that not all these factors are the same weight. Resilience happens when the scale tips positive even though it's stacked with negative weight. This happens when communities counterbalance the scale by stacking protective factors like supportive relationships and opportunities to develop skills for coping and adapting. There's another part of the scale called the fulcrum, which is also important in how the scale tips. Different scales have different places where this fulcrum starts, just as children have different genetic starting points, and the position of this fulcrum influences how much positive weight it takes to tip the scale toward positive outcomes and how much negative weight it takes to send the scale tipping down toward negative outcomes. We also know that the fulcrum is not fixed — a child's experiences can cause the fulcrum to move in either direction, affecting how the scale works and what it takes to tip it either way. What's key is that there are certain periods during development where the fulcrum is especially shiftable. During these times, it's critical that children have positive experiences such that their fulcrums can shift in a direction that will make them more able to bear negative experiences later on.

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. For example, in research conducted in Jacksonville, Florida designed to better understand how to communicate about children's issues and services — in particular, those that relate to children's mental health - FrameWorks' research revealed that certain patterns of unproductive thinking were especially prevalent, namely a sense of fatalism. This manifested in the belief

that the fates of Jacksonville's different communities are separate, unrelated and irreconcilable, and that parents are primarily responsible for child outcomes.

However, a conversation infused at its start with tested shared values, clear explanatory chains, and Explanatory Metaphors can overcome this tendency and help the public to reach more productive conclusions, orienting people toward taking communal action to address children's issues and increase support for the policy and programmatic solutions needed to improve the lives of children.

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 community level supports like the System of Care philosophy which promote positive child development and early interventions are key to building a population of healthy, productive, and engaged citizens. The default story in our popular discourse, however, is that early child development is a passive event undisturbed by gene-environment interaction, and that meaningful social change is unlikely or impossible. Primed with a view of that more expansive expert picture, however, the public can more readily sidestep the unproductive model of how, where, and when early child development happens, and what disrupts it, and then 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 their support for policy solutions. For example, the public lacks a clear understanding of how children's brains develop, and why solutions like the System of Care can improve outcomes. To gain public support for investing in high-quality programs, communicators need to show why they are the right solution. That means explaining how innovative 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 to an understanding of early child development which parallels that of experts; building that knowledge base is an important step toward explaining the what, how, and why in ways that make sense to a general audience.

Mental Health Advocates 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 community-level supports that are child-focused, family directed, and culturally and linguistically competent, 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, emphasizing 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 a useful resource for outreach by child development experts, policymakers, and advocates engaged in efforts to improve child mental health programs and policies in Tennessee.