



## Child Abuse Prevention Toolkit: Frequently Asked Questions

*This document is not intended to provide "the right answers" to questions you might be asked, but rather provide illustrations of how to incorporate the framing strategies that FrameWorks' research has proven to be effective in increasing support for policies that support child well-being. In the following Q and A, we demonstrate how an advocate might think about turning unproductive frames embedded in questions into opportunities to advance a more effective message. Communicators will find their own ways of putting these principles into practice.*

### **Q: How many children are abused and neglected each year?**

#### *False Start:*

According to Child Maltreatment 2007, the most recent report of data from the National Child Abuse and Neglect Data System (NCANDS), an estimated 753,000 children were victims of child abuse or neglect in calendar year 2007. Of this number, 59 percent suffered neglect, 10.8 percent were physically abused, 7.6 percent were sexually abused, 4.2 percent were emotionally or psychologically maltreated, and less than 1 percent were medically neglected. In addition, 13.1 percent of victims experienced "other" types of maltreatment such as "abandonment," "threats of harm to the child," and "congenital drug addiction." These numbers are shocking, since child abuse and neglect are completely preventable.

#### *Analysis:*

- Relies on unframed data to tell a story.
- Data is difficult to understand and seems overwhelming.
- Keeps the conversation lodged within parental responsibility by focusing on who is abusing, neglecting and maltreating kids.
- Doesn't reframe responsibility by highlighting community supports and influences.

#### *Reframed Response:*

The real issue here is that, when all children don't have equal opportunity for healthy growth and development, we put our future at risk. Fortunately, we know how to do better. Because a third of children reported as abused or neglected are children under four years of age, and most are in the child protection system for the first time, we are focusing on innovative programs that intervene early on. These programs help lay strong foundations for children's

later growth and development, which will reduce the possibility of more serious (and expensive!) problems from developing later, resulting in lifelong effects on physical and mental health. Although 753,000 children are reported as abused or neglected each year, using this approach, we are confident we can reduce that number significantly.

*Analysis:*

- The response starts with the value of future prosperity to establish why the audience should care.
- Data is put in context and connected to solutions. Note that the data used to support the reframe came from the same source.
- Uses the core story element of “Pay Now or Pay Later” to encourage support for appropriate policies.

**Q: Who are the perpetrators of child abuse and neglect?**

*False Start:*

Although you might think that most children are abused by strangers, in fact, most child maltreatment is committed by parents – 80 percent in the latest statistics. Another 7 percent of maltreatment was committed by other relatives. That’s why we have to reach out and educate parents about how to be better parents.

*Analysis:*

- Reminds the audience of a false belief (i.e., most children are abused by strangers).
- Defaults to bad parents as the problem and parent education as the only available solution.

*Reframed Response:*

We know that stressors in a child’s environment can affect the architecture of the developing brain, and that interventions in the lives of children who are experiencing toxic stress – such as chronic poverty and community violence – should not be delayed. Innovative states and counties have designed high-quality programs that have resolved developmental problems that arose in early childhood, and led to significant long-term improvements. We have to make sure all of our communities have access to these innovations.

*Analysis:*

- Lodges the problem in environments, not parents or perpetrators.
- Briefly explains that toxic stress can have a material impact on children’s development.
- Reinforces the value of Ingenuity and shows that there are solutions that should be brought to scale.

**Q: How can we prevent child abuse?**

*False Start:*

Children don't come with an instruction booklet and too many parents face the challenges of raising their children without the knowledge and support they need and deserve. We all have opportunities to reach out to parents in our own families, neighborhoods, place of worship, and place of employment. We have a lot of parent education programs available as well as support groups for parents who are at risk of abusing or who have abused their children.

*Analysis:*

- Reinforces belief that problems with development are a result of bad parenting.
- Solutions are presented as only including parents.

*Reframed Response:*

When we intervene early in children's lives, we see the results later on in a more prosperous future for all of us. Child development is community development. When we provide healthy environments of experiences and relationships, we build a strong foundation for healthy brain development. One active ingredient is the "serve and return" relationships that children have with their parents and other caregivers in their communities. As in games such as tennis and volleyball, young children naturally reach out for interaction, and adults respond with reliable, engaged interaction. When this process is disrupted, children's brain circuits are underdeveloped, and future development must rely on a fragile foundation.

That is why our organization supports efforts to implement child abuse prevention programs known to be effective, such as our family support program, which provides access to counseling and peer support for families who need help developing these kinds of relationships. This ensures that all children in our community will grow up with the healthy development they need to become stable, contributing adults.

*Analysis:*

- Reminds people of why prevention matters with values of future prosperity.
- Uses the serve and return simplifying model to explain the need for specific prevention initiatives.
- Includes more than parents as the solution.

**Q: Don't we risk interfering in people's personal lives? Home visiting programs and other government programs are intrusive and not needed.**

*False Start:*

A lot of people feel that the government shouldn't be involved in people's personal lives, and that programs like home visiting violate family privacy. However, these programs have been

proven to work. Studies show that home visiting programs reduce the likelihood that parents will abuse or neglect their children. (AND MORE FROM BAD EXAMPLES) And sometimes, parents just need a little help – someone to listen, someone to care.

*Analysis:*

- Reinforces the belief that intervention programs are government interference.
- Doesn't reframe the issue as one of child development and what children need to be successful.

*Reframed Response:*

When you are building a house, you go step by step, beginning with a strong foundation. Just like a house, a strong foundation in children's early years increases the probability of positive outcomes. A weak foundation increases the odds of later difficulties. Nurse home visiting programs are designed to build that strong foundation by connecting families with community support and resources to help create positive environments for young children. When that strong foundation is built, children are able to develop their cognitive, social and emotional capacities, which all work together to create positive outcomes.

And these programs are a great return on investment: When we compare the effectiveness of home visiting programs with other intervention programs for families, the benefits far outweigh the initial investment. Foster care, clinical treatment and other professional interventions are more costly and produce less desirable outcomes for children than nurturing, protective relationships and appropriate experiences earlier in life.

*Analysis:*

- Uses the simplifying model of Brain Architecture to explain how these programs affect development.
- Includes community as part of the solution, not only parents.
- Uses Return on Investment to show why these programs are valuable.

**Q: What should I do if I suspect a child is being abused?**

*False Start:*

It's very important that you report suspected abuse to your county child protective services agency. The number should be in the front of your phone book.

Beyond that, our prevention campaign is an opportunity to work together to keep children safe, provide the support families need to stay together, and raise children and youth to be happy, secure and stable adults. We have many resources and suggestions to help you support prevention activities in our community, and if you go to our website at [www.wecare4kids.org](http://www.wecare4kids.org), we have a list of ways you can help.

Family strengthening activities that help parents find needed resources and support in their communities also are an important part of prevention. You may want to contact a neighborhood resource center or your local social services agency for information regarding local programs that welcome volunteers.

*Analysis:*

- Fails to address the public's underlying mistrust of the "community" as a safe and supportive place for children.
- Doesn't address other beliefs about child abuse that work counter to these activities and policies.

*Reframed Response:*

We know that healthy development requires environments free of what experts call toxic stress. These chronically stressful environments, such as exposure to family violence or extreme poverty, actually harm children's developing brain architecture. That's why it's so important that when you suspect abuse, you call your local county child protective services phone number to connect families to supports.

Our prevention campaign is also an opportunity to work together to create support for families that reduces exposure to toxic stress, including our legislative efforts to expand violence prevention programs that provide additional economic and social supports to at-risk families. We have many resources and suggestions to help you support prevention activities in our community, and if you go to our website at [www.wecare4kids.org](http://www.wecare4kids.org), we have a list of ways you can help.

*Analysis:*

- Uses the toxic stress simplifying model to explain the need for programs.
- Explains program activities in the context of reducing exposure to toxic stress.