



Children's Mental Health Talking Points

The following talking points model how to use research-tested frame elements to craft messages that help the public to think more productively about children's mental health and the philosophy behind a coordinated system of care to support Tennessee's children and their communities. These frame elements include the values of Civic Potential, Human Potential, Civic Responsibility, and Ingenuity; the Explanatory Metaphor Levelness; and a suite of Explanatory Metaphors from FrameWorks' research on the Core Story of Early Childhood Development including Brain Architecture (what develops?), Serve and Return (how it develops), Toxic Stress (what disrupts it?), and Resilience Scale (what can be done?)

For more detailed descriptions of each frame element, see the Message Cards included in this toolkit. You can also read more about the research behind each frame element in the Research Resources section of the toolkit.

These 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 expand and shift public thinking on child mental health outcomes. They need not be used word for word, but when adapting, communicators should take care to maintain the core frame elements in each and be cautious of the communications environment in which the discussion is taking place. For this reason, in this document, some talking points overlap—the repetition here illustrates how to use the same frame element in different ways.

Value: 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.
- If we fail to make this investment, our children will not be able to fully contribute when they become adults. 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.

Value: Civic Potential

- Tennessee is coming together to make good things happen. 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.
- If we don't strive to meet our state's potential, the problems that our children face will get worse. When all children are given their best chance for a strong start in life, we take a big step toward realizing our potential and making Tennessee the place that we know it can be.

Value: Civic Responsibility

- Tennessee is coming together to make good things happen. 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.
- If we fail to do our part and don't live up to our responsibility to the state, the problems that our children face will get worse. Meeting these shared obligations to our state's children can make Tennessee a place where all children are given their best chance to grow, thrive and become responsible citizens themselves.

Value: Ingenuity

- High-quality innovative programs like the system of care initiative involve collaboration at the state, local and individual levels to support these environments. Such programs have solved problems in early childhood development and shown significant long-term improvements for children.
- We are resourceful, clever, and thoughtful – so we can tackle this problem. It's in our culture to find innovative solutions to challenging problems – we have a history of rolling up our sleeves and getting to work on tough issues. And innovation doesn't have to mean inventing from scratch – it also includes finding ideas that work, borrowing them, implementing them thoughtfully.
- Ingenuity can make a difference on those long-standing problems that seem 'stuck.'

METAPHOR FOR TALKING ABOUT CHILD MENTAL HEALTH

Metaphor: Levelness

- One way to think about mental health for children is that it's like the levelness of a piece of furniture, such as a table. And that levelness can depend on the table, the floor it's on, or both.
- Just as levelness allows a table to function properly, the mental health of a child enables them to function in many different areas. When children's brain architecture develops in an environment of toxic stress, it's like a table on an uneven floor.
- 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.

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.
- 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. Just like with a house, establishing a strong foundation at the beginning of the process is better than trying to make changes later.
- 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.

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.

WHAT CAN BE DONE?

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 shift able. 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.

BRINGING THEM ALL TOGETHER

- As a society, our job is to work toward the levelness necessary for our children to be mentally healthy, by developing environments for children that shore up the brain’s architecture, reduce exposure to toxic stress, and create buffers of support to make stress more tolerable. [Value: *Civic Responsibility*, Metaphors: *Levelness*, *Brain Architecture*, *Toxic Stress* and *Resilience Scale*]