

# **From Risk to Opportunity: Framing Adolescent Development**

**Strategic Brief  
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**Daniel Busso, EdD, Director of Research  
Moira O'Neil, PhD, Vice President of Research Interpretation  
Nathaniel Kendall-Taylor, PhD, Chief Executive Officer**

**FRAME  
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# Introduction

Adolescence—the years between childhood and adulthood—is a period of enormous opportunity. Decades of scientific research shows that adolescents’ sensitivity to their environments makes this a critical window in which to influence long-term health, wellbeing, and educational and occupational achievement—positively impacting our communities and society as a whole. As a recent National Academies report argues, fulfilling the “promise” of adolescence requires us to provide young people with the kinds of positive, supportive, and empowering experiences that drive healthy development.<sup>1</sup> Policies and programs that support adolescents are especially important for the millions of young people facing economic, social, and structural disadvantage—experiences that can create obstacles to positive development.

Prior FrameWorks research shows that adolescence is misunderstood in America, and these misperceptions create obstacles to these productive policies and practices.<sup>2</sup> Members of the public are frequently exposed to negative messages about and representations of young people. In addition, they struggle to make sense of racial inequities in adolescence, often relying on explanations that further marginalize communities of color. Together, these misunderstandings dampen support for evidence-based practices and policies that can lessen the impact of structural inequalities and promote healthy development for all adolescents.

To change these attitudes and understandings, we need to advance a new narrative—one that moves the conversation into more productive territory. This Strategic Brief is a response to that challenge. It is designed to help inform the communications efforts of the field, whether that happens through issue campaigning, research, policymaking, non-profit leadership, or philanthropy. The communications strategy detailed in this report suggests that advocates change the public conversation by advancing a new narrative centered on the *opportunity of adolescence*. This works to build a more productive understanding of adolescence in several ways:

- It emphasizes resources and supports that adolescents need in order to develop their full potential as individuals and as contributing members of communities and society.
- It explains how young people’s environments facilitate their understanding of themselves, their passions and goals, and their place in the world.

- It shows how positive environments are not available to all young people and that those who experience inequities need particular kinds of support.
- It invites people to think about adolescent development as a shared project and common good.

By focusing on the opportunity of adolescence, advocates can neutralize the public's tendency to view adolescence solely through the lens of risk and vulnerability. This is not to say that there are no risks inherent in this time of life. However, the risk and vulnerability narrative is so dominant that it often "crowds out" other, more productive ways of thinking about young people. As a corrective, we need to rebalance the discourse by drawing attention to the ways in which this time of life affords unique opportunities for learning, exploration, and growth. These corrections are even more important when we consider messages about young people of color, about whom negative stories are particularly pervasive.

Advocates can advance this new frame by adopting a set of concrete framing guidelines. The recommendations we present here are based on a multi-method research project with more than 6,600 members of the US public, including young people. Details about the research design, samples, methods, and results are available in the appendices.

# Recommendations

## Recommendation #1: Balance negative perceptions of adolescents by advancing a positive vision of young people and their development.

People are surrounded by stories about young people behaving badly, making poor choices and disrupting their families and communities. Adolescence is commonly understood as, at best, an unfortunate time of life that young people and their caregivers have to struggle through. At worst, it is seen as a risky and dangerous period for young people and those around them. Given this overwhelmingly negative narrative, it is no surprise that people have difficulty thinking about adolescence as a period of opportunity.

The most critical task in reframing adolescence, therefore, is to balance the negative discourse with positive perspectives that disrupt people's existing stereotypes. Communicators can do this by providing concrete and positive examples of how adolescents contribute to their communities and society, emphasizing the promise and opportunity of adolescence rather than vulnerability, and explaining the community and social outcomes that result when young people's positive development is supported.

### How to do it

- **Focus on community engagement.** Emphasizing the contributions that young people can and do make shifts thinking about adolescents in more positive directions. The most effective of these stories highlight young people's ability to make contributions to their *communities*. Stories about individual success are less effective in advancing a positive vision of young people.
- **Listen to and amplify the stories young people tell about themselves.** Our research shows that young people do not see adolescence as a fundamentally negative time of life. Their stories about their own experiences *do* focus on opportunities. Creating space for adolescents to tell their own stories is a powerful way of shifting the balance in the public conversation from risk to opportunity. Use direct quotes or clips of young people within larger articles, or find other opportunities to allow adolescents to tell their stories in their own words.

- **Draw attention to support required for positive outcomes and avoid focusing on vulnerabilities.** Characterizing young people as “vulnerable” can inadvertently reinforce people’s thinking that adolescents need to be shielded from the world and from themselves. Consequently, people think that the only role for policies and programs is to insulate young people and protect them from risk. Instead, focus on how we develop important social skills during adolescence, and the kinds of support, resources, and experiences that young people need to develop these skills to effectively navigate this period of life and beyond.

## What it looks like

| Instead of this ...   | Try this ...  |
|---|---|
| Younger adolescents are particularly vulnerable to peer pressure because they are still developing the skills to make their own decisions and develop resilience. | Younger adolescents are developing skills to make good decisions and build their resilience. They need space for positive interactions with peers to fully develop these skills.        |
| Giving young people opportunities to make their own choices and decisions is critical to support their healthy development and life success.                      | Giving young people opportunities to make their own choices and decisions is critical to help them develop the skills they’ll need to become contributing members of their communities. |
| In order to develop well, teenagers need a safe environment that protects them from negative influences.  | Young people need consistent, loving support from adults in their lives as they explore and experience the world beyond their immediate family.   |
| Opportunities for positive risk-taking help adolescents learn new skills and build confidence.  | “The first time I got up there and danced, I was nervous, but then I heard everybody cheering my name and clapping, and I felt like, wow, this feels good. I can actually do this!”     |

## Why this works

Many people view adolescence solely as a period of risk, danger, and heightened vulnerability to threats. Furthermore, they understand adolescents as incapable of making good decisions and frequently draw on negative stereotypes of young people. Rebutting these critiques will not necessarily counter or dislodge them. Advancing alternative and positive stories about adolescent engagement can start to shift the predominantly negative views of adolescents towards the potential of this developmental period.

### What's in a name?

Our research found that people frequently do not understand what the term “adolescence” means or what age ranges it refers to. We do not recommend the term “teenager,” which in addition to being defined more narrowly than adolescence, tends to evoke negative associations of this group as obstinate, self-absorbed, and challenging.

Consider using the term “young people” in place of or to alternate with “adolescents.” If you are committed to using the term “adolescence,” contextualize it by referring to the specific age range you want people to focus on, pointing to grade levels in school, or talking about life experiences common to young people at particular ages. Being specific is especially important because development differs at different stages of adolescence (for example, the programs that could support a 12-year-old are not the same as those needed by an 18-year-old). Here are some examples of how to do this:

- “The transitional period between childhood and adulthood”
- “A time of life beginning with the onset of puberty and ending when individuals take on the roles and responsibilities of adulthood”
- “Early adolescence, from about 10 to 12 years old”

## Recommendation #2: Explain the structural factors that lead to disparities and inequities among adolescents.

Advocates who wish to discuss the role of racism, poverty, and other forms of structural disadvantage in shaping adolescent development should not simply *describe* inequities. Our research shows that the American public attribute these differences to the poor choices or poor character of marginalized communities, or see them as an unchangeable status quo. When communicators do not explain underlying causes and their connection to outcomes, the public is likely to blame individuals or communities—not policies and systems—for these disparate outcomes.

To help audiences understand why disparities exist, and the kinds of policies and programs that can help eliminate them, advocates need to adopt an explanatory approach. This means telling a causal story that lays out exactly *how* structural factors create disparate outcomes for certain groups of adolescents—pinpointing their causes in specific policies, and identifying the mechanisms by which these policies affect young people.

### How to do it

- **Don't rely on data alone.** Data can be helpful to talk about the structural drivers of inequality. However, they need to be situated within a broader narrative that explains why inequities among young people exist and persist. When we highlight the way our

social setup creates inequity, we lead people to see that systems change makes sense and is necessary. Don't mention prevalence rates, correlations, or risk factors without explaining the ways that systems disadvantage certain groups of people.

- **Signpost cause-and-effect relationships.** Explanations can help people make sense of the systemic causes of inequity, so use causal transition words and phrases like *because* or *as a result*. To avoid overstating what a study showed, consider phrases like *this helps to explain why* or *this is one reason why*.
- **Listen to and center adolescents with lived experience.** Framing efforts must integrate the perspectives of content experts such as researchers and policy analysts with the views of context experts who have lived experience or authentic connections in communities facing disadvantage. Recommended frames must translate science with fidelity *and* incorporate and reflect the concerns and perspectives of the young people most affected by inequities.

## What it looks like

| Instead of this ...   | Try this ...   |
|---|--|
| Adolescents from communities of color often have lower high school graduation rates than their white peers.         | One impact of the history of racial segregation is that schools that serve communities of color tend to have less funding and fewer resources. This is one reason why adolescents of color have lower high school graduation rates than their white peers. |
| LGBT youth are at higher risk for serious mental health problems compared to heterosexual or cisgender adolescents. | LGBT youth often experience discrimination, harassment, and violence in their families, schools, and communities. This puts them at increased risk for mental health problems compared to heterosexual or cisgender adolescents.                           |

## Why this works

While facts detailing the inequities faced by certain groups of adolescents are indisputably true and undeniably stark, by themselves they don't change what or how people think. If you don't provide audiences with a way to make sense of facts and data points, they may simply rely on their existing ways of thinking to interpret what those data mean. In particular, we have found that many people explain disparities by race or class in terms of poor decision-making, or deficient values or work ethic.<sup>3</sup> Unframed statistics about disparities among adolescents are a cue for these highly unproductive ways of thinking.

## Recommendation #3: Don't acknowledge myths about adolescents. Instead, advance stories of youth service and activism.

Challenge stereotypes and misperceptions of young people by consistently focusing on their ability to contribute positively to their communities and to society. Our research showed that stories that feature youth's civic engagement, service, and activism are especially powerful. Restating misperceptions—even to refute them—only reinforces them in people's thinking. Focusing on the positive and not repeating negative ideas boosts favorable attitudes toward adolescence and increases people's sense that there are things that we can do to meaningfully support healthy development during these years.

### How to do it

- **Reframe—don't rebut.** Spending time in communications countering misperceptions does not advance the idea that adolescence is a period of potential and opportunity.
- **Tell stories about young people's engagement in their communities.** Make sure these stories are not just about individual achievements. Highlight how young people are engaged in activities with common benefits, like community service and activism.
- **Use recent or historical examples of youth activism to make your case.** Build a bank of well-known examples of young people's participation in social movements. These include (but are not limited to): the Vietnam anti-war movement, the civil rights movement, the women's rights movement, the Arab Spring, and youth activism against gun violence and climate change.

### What it looks like

| Instead of this ...   | Try this ...   |
|---|--|
| Many people think of adolescents as lazy and selfish. In fact, during adolescence we develop new abilities and motivations to contribute to our families, friends, and communities. | Adolescents are primed and ready to help the world around them. During adolescence we develop new abilities and motivations to contribute to our families, friends, and communities. |
| We often think about teenagers wreaking havoc on our communities, but in fact young people have been central actors in many of the major social movements of our time.              | Positive social change often begins with young people, whose willingness to challenge things that seem wrong improves society for all of us.   |

## Why this works

While it may be tempting to directly counter misperceptions about young people, this strategy can backfire and reinforce unproductive ways of thinking. Advancing the story you want to tell without repeating the “myth” is a more effective strategy for countering people’s negative perceptions without reminding them of—and reinforcing—their current misperceptions.

### Don’t restate myths (even to debunk them)

It is tempting to try to eradicate misinformation and stereotypes by reminding audiences of popular myths, then smashing them down with the truth. But research shows that this well-intended technique actually reinforces the myth, leaving audiences more convinced of its veracity than before. In fact, our research on adolescents found that participants’ perceptions of adolescents become even more negative when they were told about the ways adolescents are mischaracterized as lazy, rude, and selfish before hearing a positive case for these young people (see Appendix D).

By restating myths, even to refute them, advocates end up making their jobs much more difficult. What actually increases positive perceptions of adolescents and the policies and programs that support them? Messages that simply make the positive case, without actively taking on the misinformation at all.

## Recommendation #4: Instead of focusing on the brain, talk about social, emotional, and identity development.

People tend to equate the development of “the brain” during adolescence with a narrow set of cognitive and intelligence-related aptitudes, such as IQ. This draws attention away from the wider set of competencies that develop during the adolescent years, including identities and interests, and the ability to manage emotions and relate well to others.

Instead of focusing on the brain, advance a social, emotional, and identity frame: Speak about adolescence as a period in which young people are actively working on their social and emotional skills and forging lifelong identities, interests and ambitions. This keeps development in the picture, while inspiring support for solutions that enable adolescents’ healthy transition to adulthood.

If you need to talk specifically about brain development, this information needs to be firmly situated within a social, emotional, and identity development frame. Communicators should *first* establish the importance of social, emotional, and interpersonal development during adolescence and *then* connect the development of these skills to specific changes in the brain.

## How to do it

- **Lead with opportunity, not risk.** Where possible, focus on the benefits that accrue when adolescents have what they need for positive social, emotional, and identity development. Talk about opportunities for “wellbeing” when development is supported rather than “risks” and “problems” that threaten to undermine it.
- **Be clear and specific about what supports social, emotional, and identity development.** Highlight the specific kinds of policies, programs, and practices that support adolescents’ social, emotional, and identity development. Explain how they work and what they achieve.
- **Be concrete about what results from positive social, emotional, and identity development.** Remind people that social and emotional development are foundational to a wide range of competencies, including forming healthy relationships, interacting positively with peers and adults, and going on to achieve professional success.

## What it looks like

| Instead of this ...  | Try this ...   |
|--|--|
| The brain is rapidly forming connections during adolescence in response to a young person’s experiences.   | Adolescence is a time when young people are especially attuned to their real-life social experiences in ways that help them learn about their place in the world and how to work with others.  |
| The adolescent brain changes significantly between puberty and the mid-20s. These neurobiological changes underpin a young person’s cognitive and socio-emotional development. | The changes that occur during adolescence create a period of intense learning about who we are and who we want to be. Supportive relationships with peers and caring adults in these years help us form a positive sense of identity.  |
| During adolescence, young people become increasingly able to understand and regulate their emotions, maintain positive relationships, and resolve disagreements.               | During adolescence, young people learn to understand and regulate emotions, maintain positive relationships, and resolve disagreements. They do this by participating in or observing relationships where there is mutual respect, empathy, and positive ways of resolving conflict. |

## Why this works

Many people struggle to connect the brain (which they understand to govern a narrow set of cognitive functions) with the higher-level skills they see as developing during adolescence—relationship skills, emotional control, decision-making, identity formation, and so on. Audiences understand the mental lives of adolescents to be richer and more complex than younger children, in ways that they can’t reduce to the firing and wiring of neurons.

Many people find it particularly challenging to see how healthy brain development could connect to broader social or community-level outcomes. In contrast, a social, emotional, and identity development frame helps people see and think about the ways in which what happens during adolescence affects communities and society in more robust ways.

## **Recommendation #5: Use “discovery” metaphors to explain how adolescents benefit from opportunities to try things out and learn.**

Most people view adolescence with the idea that, above all else, young people need to be protected from the dangerous world that surrounds them. When thinking this way, the idea that we should facilitate and support adolescents’ *deeper* engagement with the world and encourage positive risk-taking is hard to grasp.

Using “discovery” metaphors helps people see and appreciate young people’s need to try things out, take risks, make mistakes, and learn from this process. These metaphors also help people understand that adolescents need to explore and act within the world to effectively develop their identities, interests, and ambitions.

Our research showed that comparing adolescent development to the process of scientific discovery or wilderness exploration shifted people’s thinking towards the need for young people to have secure boundaries in which to exercise their independence; it increased the perception that we all play a role in supporting adolescent development; and it decreased negative perceptions of young people. This concept of discovery-based learning is flexible and can be evoked in multiple ways. For example:

- “Young people learn by trial and error.”
- “Young people need resources and opportunities to try, fail, and try again.”
- “They need opportunities to test out new ideas and experiences.”
- “Adolescence is about unearthing new experiences and making sense of them.”
- “Adolescents need to experiment—to try new things without knowing what the outcome will be.”
- “Middle school is a laboratory of social learning, where young people can experiment with relationships, roles, and behaviors to better understand who they are and where they fit in.”
- “During adolescence, we begin to explore the world outside of our family in new ways.”
- “As adolescents, we’re testing out what we might like to do and the sort of person we might like to become.”

## How to do it

- **Be creative and express the metaphor in multiple ways.** Reinforce the power of the metaphor using a variety of different language cues and images.
- **Talk about how we can create opportunities for discovery-based learning.** Give examples of what this looks like and how it works. The idea that young people need “discovery labs” to learn and develop had a powerful effect on participants in our research. Comparing the world around young people to a lab helps people see that young people need to try things out and to explore and engage in their communities, and that they need the right resources to do this effectively. It also inoculates against the paternalistic focus on protection that dominates public thinking about young people.
- **Use the discovery metaphor to talk about identity formation as wilderness exploration.** Point out that exploration of new places and contexts builds necessary social and emotional skills and forms young people’s identities.
- **Repetition is powerful and necessary.** The discovery metaphor is designed to dislodge highly dominant understandings that risk-taking is inherently negative and that we should prevent adolescents from exploring the world around them. People need to hear the metaphor many times, in different mediums, and from different messengers in order to shift their thinking.
- **Explain how resources and environments shape opportunities for discovery-based learning.** Emphasize that opportunities for adolescents to explore, try things out, and learn in positive, supported ways aren’t available to all young people. Rather, they need to be intentionally carved out through policies and programs, as well as by parents and other adults.

## What it looks like

| Instead of this ...  | Try this ...  |
|--|---|
| It is important for youth to be able to take risks.                          | Adolescents need the resources and opportunities to satisfy their need to explore and experiment in positive ways.  |
| Young people develop through opportunities for learning and new experiences. | When young people have the opportunity to explore new terrains, they develop the social, emotional, and cognitive skills they need to become contributing adults. |

## Why this works

Metaphors explain complex or abstract concepts by likening them to something more concrete and familiar.<sup>4</sup> They guide and shape thinking and are memorable and shareable. The language of *discovery* was rigorously tested to ensure that it painted an accurate mental picture of adolescent development (see Appendix D for more details.) Results showed that metaphors about the process of discovery inoculated against the idea that adolescents need, above all else, to be protected and shielded from experiences. These metaphors led to robust thinking and discussions about the experiences that young people need and how they can be given the resources and opportunities to have these experiences.

### Avoid “othering” young people

Small framing choices and language cues have big impacts. To change the dialogue around adolescents, advocates need strategies to disrupt the public’s mental model of young people as an almost alien group set apart from the rest of society. One way of doing this is to pay careful attention and be diligent about the use of pronouns. Incorporate messages using *we* or *our* instead of *they* or *them* whenever possible (for example, “during adolescence, we’re learning who we are and where we fit in,” instead of “adolescents are learning who they are and how they fit in”).

Another, related strategy to combat othering is to remind people that we have all experienced this time of life (e.g. “we were all adolescents once” or “think back to when you were a young person”). This allows people to identify with rather than distance themselves from young people.

These subtle language cues are an invitation to change perspective and encourage a more inclusive, less stigmatizing orientation toward young people.

## Recommendation #6: Use the value of *Community Connections*.

Values—broad ideals about what’s desirable and good—are powerful directives that guide attitudes, reasoning, and decision-making. As framing devices, values help people understand why an issue matters and what’s at stake.

By using the value of *Community Connections*—the idea that supporting adolescents enables them to serve their communities and create a stronger social fabric—advocates can spark a very different conversation than the ones that currently dominate the public narrative about young people. This value establishes that supporting positive adolescent development matters because it’s an important *social* issue. It builds support for collective action and policies that empower youth and give them opportunities to contribute and thrive.

## How to do it

- **Use the *Community Connections* value to talk about the needs of marginalized groups of adolescents.** Use the value to speak to the ways that certain groups of adolescents don't have the opportunities or resources to develop the skills they need to find their place in society. This provides an opening to explain how supporting *each and every* young person leads to stronger communities.
- **Explain the link between adolescent development and community-level outcomes, don't just assert or describe it.** Make the connection between adolescents' access to resources and supports, and their capacity for civic engagement. Show how these behaviors produce better outcomes for communities and for society.

## What it looks like

### Example

Supporting adolescents leads to healthier and more connected communities. Right now, many young people don't get the support they need to develop the social, emotional, and cognitive skills they'll need as adults. We need to make sure all adolescents have the opportunities and resources they need to thrive as integral members of our communities.

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## Why this works

Audiences typically understand adolescent outcomes in highly individualistic ways, and in terms of personal accomplishments (such as success in school or in the workplace, or in terms of their individual happiness or independence). This makes it hard to see supporting young people as a matter of collective concern or to view adolescent development as a social or public policy issue.

By focusing on community connections and the social ties that unite us, we avoid getting stuck in fatalism and judgement. People are less likely to think that youth development is about "someone else's kid" (and therefore "not my problem"). Instead, the value of *Community Connections* establishes a sense of collective responsibility and increases willingness to act on behalf of young people.

## Recommendation #7: Foreground the future effects of adolescent development.

People tend to think about the immediate impacts—both positive and negative—of adolescent development. It is difficult for people to be forward-looking when adolescence is primarily seen as a period that we all just have to struggle through. Along with highlighting the community and societal-level impacts, communicators should also emphasize the *future* impacts of adolescent development.

### How to do this

- **Connect the dots.** Show people how supporting positive youth development today yields benefits now *and* in the future. When possible, point to local or known examples of how opportunities for civic engagement have led to positive impacts.
- **Try to frame future impacts at the community or societal level.** Do not rely solely on stories that focus on an individual young person’s future success. Instead, focus on collective future impacts. For example, along with talking about the relationship between academic achievement and career success, talk about connections between academic achievement and workforce participation.

### What it looks like

| Instead of this ...   | Try this ...  |
|---|---|
| Adolescence is a pivotal period for youth to acquire the attitudes, competencies, values, and social connections necessary for them to be successful. | Adolescence is a pivotal period for youth to acquire the attitudes, competencies, values, and social connections today that will help ensure a prosperous future for everyone.                    |
| High school students who have strong relationships with their teachers are more likely to graduate from high school.                                  | Supporting strong relationships with teachers is one way to increase the high school graduation rate in the US, which in turn builds a stronger workforce and a more robust economy for everyone. |

### Why this works

People have a narrow understanding of what adolescent success looks like and think narrowly in terms of *immediate* and *personal* accomplishments. Broadening the time scale for the benefits that result from supporting young people makes people aware that supporting young people creates a better future for all of us.

# Conclusion

Communicators face three significant challenges when trying to increase public understanding of and support for adolescent development:

1. People hold negative views about young people and this time of life. These negative views become even more toxic when people think about adolescents from disadvantaged communities.
2. People struggle to understand adolescent development as a matter of collective concern and responsibility.
3. People fail to see how changes in environments, policies, or practices can yield positive outcomes.

In the past few decades, science has helped us understand adolescence as a critical window for social learning and development during which we can have a real impact. Research is also helping to highlight how inequity derails positive development. This knowledge creates an opportunity for policy action.

The potential to design and implement programs, policies, and systems that support positive development for *all* young people cannot be realized, however, if we continue to tell the wrong story.

The strategy presented here asks communicators to create, advance, and repeat a positive vision of adolescence. It also highlights the importance of avoiding reminders of existing negative perceptions of this developmental period and the individuals moving through it. This new strategy can help build a more accurate public understanding of what young people need from society, the contributions that they can make, and the feasibility of making changes to support positive development. Sharing and advancing this framing strategy holds the potential to change the way people think and talk about young people to not only shift toward more productive public attitudes about adolescents, but to increase support for policies and programs that support youth development.

Since current understandings are the result of a legacy of negative frames and toxic stories about young people, shifting thinking means that advocates must balance the public discourse. This strategy requires communicating the opportunity and promise of adolescence and reducing

the focus on risk and vulnerability. The public already understands and over-emphasizes risk and danger; they struggle to maintain focus on the possibilities of adolescence. By giving people a heavy dose of positive stories about young people, advocates will ensure that public understanding more closely reflects the more balanced expert stories about this period.

But this framing strategy is just the beginning.

New frames only work when people hear them in different ways, from different people, and through different channels over time. The challenge for those working to change society to better support young people and address systemic inequities is to unite around this new framing strategy and find ways to share it in engaging, creative, and sustained ways.

## Research Methods

This report presents findings from the second, prescriptive phase of the Reframing Adolescence research project.

In this second phase we developed and tested framing strategies for their ability to:

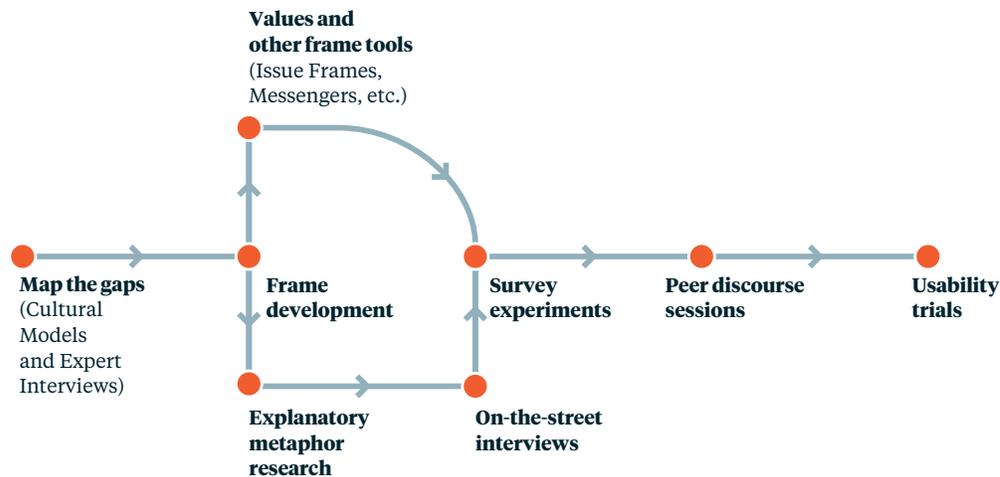
- expand public understanding of what adolescent development involves and the kinds of supports that young people need
- cultivate productive attitudes about adolescents
- increase support for policies and programs that support youth development.

This research builds on our earlier research in which we “mapped the gaps” between field and public thinking on these issues.

To arrive at the recommendations described above, we applied Strategic Frame Analysis®—an approach to communications research and practice that yields strategies for shifting the public discourse on social issues. This approach has been used to increase understanding of and engagement with child development and other social issues.

### How Did We Identify Effective Frames?

To identify effective ways of talking about adolescent development, FrameWorks researchers collaborated with members of the youth development field to develop a range of potential frames. We then tested their effectiveness with members of the US public, as well as their usability with experts and advocates. All told, more than 6,600 people from across the US were included in this research. These methods are described briefly below and summarized in the following diagram:



## Frame Design

After specifying the task the frames needed to perform, FrameWorks researchers brainstormed potential reframing strategies that we thought might accomplish one or more of these tasks (for example, different explanatory metaphors, values, or ways of ordering message components). After generating a list of candidate framing ideas to test, researchers solicited feedback on these ideas from a panel of professionals from various adolescent fields to ensure that the frames were both accurate and potentially usable for those working in the field. Based on this feedback, researchers refined a set of frames and brought them into empirical testing.

## On-the-Street Interviews

In the next stage, FrameWorks researchers conducted a set of “on-the-street” interviews to explore the effectiveness of candidate framing tools with members of the public. In these one-on-one interviews, researchers tested seven explanatory metaphors that explained various aspects of adolescent development: *Hunger*, *Mosaic*, *Gardening*, *Exploration*, *Rehearsal*, *Scientists*, and *Invention* (see Appendix A for the full set of frames tested in these interviews). A total of 58 interviews were conducted in Tampa, Florida, and Denver, Colorado, in March 2019. In these brief, face-to-face interviews, researchers approach a member of the public and ask them if they would be willing to participate in a short research study about “issues in the news.” These interviews were video recorded with written consent from all participants.

Interviews began with a series of open-ended questions to ascertain respondents’ baseline thinking about adolescence. The interviewer then presented respondents with a candidate frame, after which they were asked a second series of questions that paralleled the pre-exposure set. This process is designed to gauge the effect of that frame, or tool, in shifting people’s attitudes, perspectives, and understandings about the issue.

Researchers analyzed the resulting data, looking for patterned ways in which each tool affected thinking and talking about adolescence. The analysis also focused on isolating the reasons *why*

each frame had its respective effects. Based on the results of this analysis, we brought forward four metaphors (*Exploration*, *Mosaic*, *Scientists* and *Rehearsal*) for further investigation.

## **Survey Experiments**

Following on-the-street interviews, we conducted two online survey experiments in August and November 2019. These included 2,000 and 4,500 respondents, respectively, for a total of 6,500 respondents. Respondents were US-based adults (over the age of 18), matched to national demographic benchmarks for age, sex, household income, education level, race/ethnicity, and political party identification. Appendix B shows the full breakdown of the sample for each survey experiment.

In each experiment, respondents were randomly assigned to an experimental condition (in which they read one framed message) or to a control condition (in which they read nothing, or in some cases, information about a fictional legislative proposal intended to promote adolescent development). Those assigned to a values-based experimental condition received identical information about the proposal but framed using a values-based argument.

Respondents were subsequently asked a series of questions designed to measure understanding of adolescent development, their attitudes about adolescents, and their support for policies. Questions were Likert-type items with five- or seven-point scales, or open-ended questions requiring free-text answers. They were presented in a random order. For the purposes of analysis, responses to these questions were aggregated to form a set of composite measures, or “batteries.” Sample questions are presented in Appendix C.

Researchers used multiple regression analysis to identify differences between each experimental condition and the control. Models controlled for demographic variables, and were used to determine whether there were statistically significant differences between responses to each battery for each experimental condition, relative to the control. An alpha level of 0.05 was used to determine statistical significance. Graphs showing the results of this survey experiment, for each of the recommendations in this Strategic Brief, are available in Appendix D.

## **Peer Discourse Sessions**

FrameWorks researchers conducted six peer discourse sessions (a form of focus group) to explore how frames work in conversational settings, in order to refine them and generate specific recommendations for their use. Sessions were held in Portland, Oregon, and Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, in September 2019, and involved a total of 54 participants. Participants were recruited to represent variation across demographic characteristics, including race/ethnicity, gender, age, and political identification. Sessions were video recorded with written consent from all participants. Sessions included a variety of discussion prompts and role-playing activities

designed to evaluate which frames are most easily understood by the public, allow them to most productively use new information, and were most easily used during conversation with peers.

## **Usability Trials**

Finally, we conducted nine usability trials, involving a total of 19 participants, to gauge the usability of the frames in communications. Usability trials are conversations with a sample of end users that represents the spectrum of advocates, experts, and practitioners that would potentially use the framing strategies in their work. Sessions were conducted in Berkeley, California, San Jose, California, and Washington, DC, in October and November 2019. The sample included developmental scientists, leaders, and communications staff from youth-serving nonprofits. Four of these sessions involved youth themselves (e.g. young people working as emerging leaders in systems reform and advocacy).

In a usability trial, a pair of professionals is given background information about the nature of the project and told about a particular frame that has emerged from earlier stages of research. Initially, the moderator only states the frame, but after initial discussion, the professionals are given more information about the frame in writing, including a paragraph using the frame to communicate about the issue, and a summary that makes key concepts in the metaphor explicit. After a period of preparation, the professionals give a short, informal presentation to one or two members of the public using that frame.

In this research, we tested two metaphors which proved to be most productive in prior methods. The professionals were given one of the metaphors (*Scientists* or *Explorers*) and asked to use the metaphor to explain what adolescence is, what adolescent development involves, and what could be done to support adolescents more effectively.

Members of the public were encouraged to ask questions, and after the professionals addressed those questions, members of the public were dismissed so the professionals and the moderator could debrief together. Finally, the professionals were introduced to the metaphor they hadn't received initially. The moderator shared the metaphor verbally and asked professionals to share their thoughts about the metaphor and how they would use it to give a similar presentation.

Researchers analyzed the video data from these sessions to determine how usable each of the metaphors was for professionals, which aspects were more likely to be taken up, and which aspects the professionals struggled with. This analysis revealed some strengths and weaknesses of both metaphors. On the basis of this analysis, the general recommendation to use the concept of “discovery-based learning” was incorporated into Recommendation 5.

# Appendix A: Explanatory Metaphors Tested in On-the-Street Interviews

**Hunger.** Adolescents are hungry for experiences. This appetite drives them to explore new identities and interests, to build deep social connections with peers and adults, and to want to make meaningful decisions affecting their lives. In the same way that we need access to good nutrition to support our physical growth and development, adolescents need access to experiences and environments that nourish other aspects of their development. As a country, we need to make sure that adolescents' environments are stocked full of positive experiences and opportunities, so that we can satisfy their needs and support all aspects of their growth.

**Mosaic.** As adolescents develop, they piece together experiences, much like a mosaic. Just as artists need tiles in all shapes, sizes, and colors to create a vibrant mosaic, adolescents need many different experiences to piece together a clear and well-defined image of themselves. As a country, we need to provide adolescents with the tiles they need—such as opportunities to explore new identities and interests, to build deep social connections with peers and adults, and to be able to make meaningful decisions affecting their lives. These are the many different tiles adolescents need to piece together a picture of who they are.

**Gardening.** Adolescents are like gardeners, cultivating their identities, interests, and values. Like gardeners, adolescents need fertile soil that's full of positive experiences and opportunities so that their development can be nourished. As a country, we need to enrich the environments in adolescents' lives by providing them with opportunities to explore new identities and interests, to build deep social connections with peers and adults, and to be able to make meaningful decisions affecting their lives. This is the fertile ground that adolescents need so that their development can take root and grow.

**Exploration.** Adolescents are like explorers, navigating through a landscape of different experiences. Like explorers, adolescents need opportunities to explore the world, expand what they know and map out their position in society. As a country, we need to equip them for this journey by providing them with opportunities to explore new identities and interests, to build deep social connections with peers and adults, and to be able to make meaningful decisions affecting their lives. This is the equipment adolescents need to find their own path and head in a direction where they want to go.

**Rehearsal.** Adolescence is like a rehearsal for adulthood. Like performers, adolescents need opportunities to try out new roles, to take on new identities, and to make mistakes while they test things out. And in the same way that actors need continuous practice and training to be successful, adolescents need opportunities to learn through trial and error. Adults and peers can act as supporting actors, providing guidance and feedback, and acting as partners as adolescents try new things, and assisting them if they forget their next line. As a country, we need to set the stage for adolescents to develop well and help them prepare to step fully into their adult roles.

**Scientists.** Adolescents think and learn in the way that scientists do. Like scientists, adolescents have a drive for discovery. They learn through trial and error, forming and testing theories about how the world works and their role within it. And in the same way that scientists can't be successful without access to the right equipment and laboratories where they can experiment and learn, adolescents need experiences and environments that support their exploration. As a country, we need to provide adolescents with opportunities to experiment with different interests and identities, to think critically about themselves and society, and to ask questions, in ways that allow them to discover who they are.

**Invention.** Adolescence is a process of self-invention. Like inventors, adolescents don't often succeed the first time around. They learn through trial and error, testing out different ideas and identities to see what works best. And in the same way that inventors can't be successful without access to the right materials, and to workshops where they can experiment and learn, adolescents need experiences and environments that help spark their own self-invention. As a country, we need to provide adolescents with opportunities to discover their own identities, and spaces where they can try things out with others.

# Appendix B: Sample Demographics from Survey Experiment

| Demographic variable    | Wave 1<br>(n=2,000) | Wave 2<br>(n=4,500) | National benchmarks |
|-------------------------|---------------------|---------------------|---------------------|
| <b>Sex</b>              |                     |                     |                     |
| Male                    | 40%                 | 34%                 | 51%                 |
| Female                  | 60%                 | 66%                 | 49%                 |
| <b>Age</b>              |                     |                     |                     |
| 18–29                   | 15%                 | 16%                 | 21%                 |
| 30–44                   | 27%                 | 27%                 | 26%                 |
| 45–59                   | 32%                 | 28%                 | 27%                 |
| 60+                     | 26%                 | 28%                 | 26%                 |
| <b>Household Income</b> |                     |                     |                     |
| \$0–\$24,999            | 20%                 | 19%                 | 23%                 |
| \$25,000–\$49,999       | 26%                 | 26%                 | 24%                 |
| \$50,000–\$99,999       | 32%                 | 33%                 | 30%                 |
| \$100,000–\$149,999     | 13%                 | 13%                 | 13%                 |
| \$150,000 or more       | 9%                  | 9%                  | 10%                 |

| Demographic variable                  | Wave 1<br>(n=2,000) | Wave 2<br>(n=4,500) | National<br>benchmarks |
|---------------------------------------|---------------------|---------------------|------------------------|
| <b>Educational Attainment</b>         |                     |                     |                        |
| Less than high school diploma         | 2%                  | 3%                  | 14%                    |
| High school diploma                   | 30%                 | 29%                 | 28%                    |
| Some college or Associate's degree    | 36%                 | 33%                 | 29%                    |
| Bachelor's degree                     | 20%                 | 22%                 | 18%                    |
| Graduate degree                       | 12%                 | 14%                 | 11%                    |
| <b>Race and Ethnicity</b>             |                     |                     |                        |
| Caucasian/White (non-Hispanic)        | 72%                 | 75%                 | 61%                    |
| Hispanic or Latino                    | 8%                  | 7%                  | 16%                    |
| Black/African American                | 12%                 | 9%                  | 11%                    |
| Asian                                 | 5%                  | 5%                  | 4%                     |
| American Indian/Alaska Native         | 1%                  | 1%                  | 1%                     |
| Hawaiian/Pacific Islander             | <1%                 | <1%                 | <1%                    |
| Other/Bi-racial or multi-racial       | 2%                  | 2%                  | 8%                     |
| <b>Political Party Identification</b> |                     |                     |                        |
| Democrat                              | 50%                 | 48%                 | 34%                    |
| Republican                            | 38%                 | 37%                 | 25%                    |
| Independent/Other                     | 11%                 | 15%                 | 41%                    |

**Notes: Not all categories sum to 100% due to rounding.  
National benchmarks were derived from the 2010–2014 American Community Survey.  
Participants in the survey experiment were drawn from 46 States (and the District of Columbia).**

# Appendix C: Sample Questions from Survey Experiment

| Scales   | Sample questions  |
|--|---|
| Perceptions of adolescents                                       | <p>Imagine a “typical” adolescent. Please indicate how often would you say the following words or phrases describe them? [<i>‘Never’, ‘Rarely’, ‘Sometimes’, ‘Very often’, ‘Always’</i>]</p> <p>a) Caring; b) Lazy; c) Friendly; d) Hard to deal with; e) Threatening; f) Curious; g) Rude; h) Risky; i) Driven</p>   |
| Understanding of adolescents’ need for independence and autonomy | <p>Adolescents do best when they are given control over their lives and are able to make important decisions that affect them.</p> <p>[<i>‘Strongly disagree’, ‘Disagree’, ‘Somewhat disagree’, ‘Neither agree nor disagree’, ‘Slightly agree’, ‘Agree’, ‘Strongly agree’</i>]</p>  |
| Effects of adolescent development                                | <p>When adolescence goes well, how much of an effect do you think it has on an individual’s success later on in life?</p> <p>[<i>‘No effect at all’, ‘A very small effect’, ‘A small effect’, ‘A moderate effect’, ‘A large effect’, ‘A very large effect’, ‘An extremely large effect’</i>]</p>  |
| Policy support   | <p>Do you think that government funding for programs that provide adolescents with educational, leadership, or extra-curricular opportunities should be increased, decreased, or kept about the same?</p> <p>[<i>‘Significantly decreased’, ‘Decreased’, ‘Slightly decreased’, ‘Kept about the same’, ‘Slightly increased’, ‘Increased’, ‘Significantly increased’</i>]</p> |

| Scales   | Sample questions   |
|--|--|
| Role of systemic and environmental factors in shaping adolescent development | <p>We're interested in your thoughts about why adolescents may or may not develop successfully. Please rank the following in terms of how big an effect you believe they have on how adolescents develop. Place the things that you think would have the biggest effects at the top, and things that have the smallest effect at the bottom.</p> <p><i>The adolescent's attitude; How an adolescent is parented; Whether the adolescent comes from a two-parent household; The presence or absence of youth-serving organizations and programs in the community; How much money the adolescent's family has; The presence or absence of discrimination in the community; The quality of the school that an adolescent attends; How safe the adolescent's community is.</i></p> |
| Collective efficacy  | <p>In your opinion, how realistic is it to have a society in which all adolescents can develop successfully?</p> <p><i>['Not at all realistic', 'Slightly realistic', 'Moderately realistic', 'Very realistic', 'Extremely realistic']</i></p>   |
| Collective responsibility  | <p>In your view, how much of an obligation does our society have to support adolescents in this country?</p> <p><i>['No obligation at all', 'A very small obligation', 'A small obligation', 'A moderate obligation', 'A large obligation', 'A very large obligation', 'An extremely large obligation']</i></p>  |

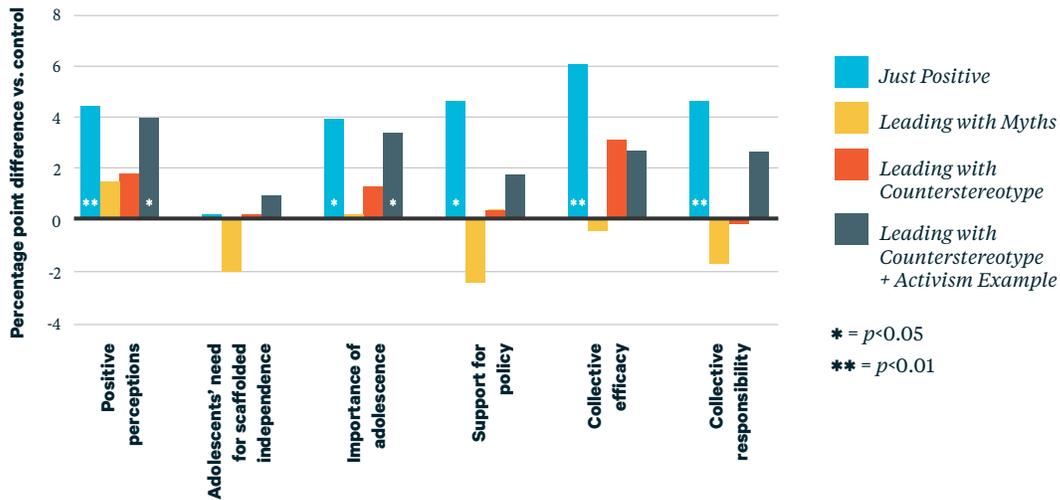
# Appendix D: Research Evidence Supporting Recommendations

**Recommendation #1: Balance negative perceptions of adolescents by advancing a positive vision of young people and their development, and Recommendation #3: Don't acknowledge myths about adolescents. Instead, advance stories of youth service and activism.**

A key reframing task for this project was to dislodge the public's negative attitudes about young people, and redirect them in more positive directions. In the survey experiment, we tested four strategies to accomplish this goal. The first condition, *Just Positive*, simply highlighted the ways in which adolescents are committed, driven, and invested in their communities. The second condition, *Leading with Myths*, identified some of the ways in which adolescents are unfairly characterized as lazy, rude, and selfish, before advancing the more positive case. The third, *Leading with Counterstereotype*, flipped this order, leading with adolescents' positive role in their communities and then explaining how they are unfairly characterized and stereotyped. And finally, the *Leading with Counterstereotype + Activism Example* took the *Leading with Counterstereotype* and additionally provided examples of adolescents' long history of involvement in social movements (e.g. US civil rights movement, Vietnam War protests, etc.).

We found that the *Just Positive* condition was most effective, resulting in a significant increase in participants' positive perceptions of adolescents, understanding of the importance of adolescent development, support for policy, and sense of collective efficacy and responsibility. While other conditions included the same content as the *Just Positive* condition, the inclusion of "myths" about adolescents—even to rebut them—undercut the power of these messages.

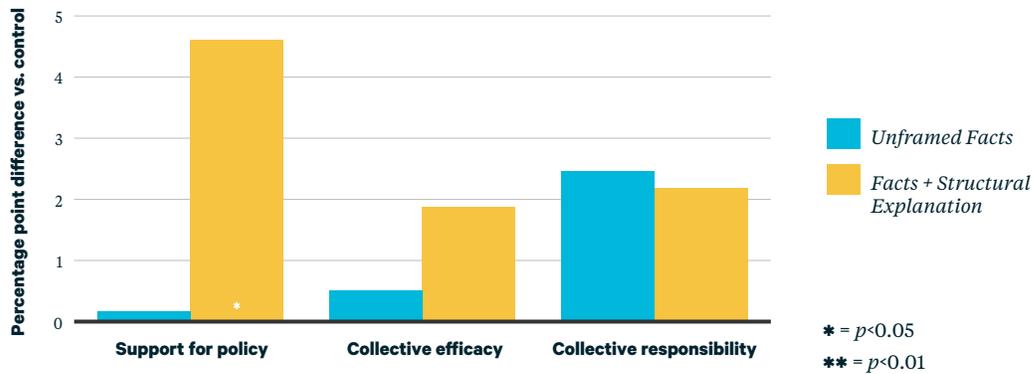
The *Leading with Counterstereotype + Activism Example* condition, though not as effective as the *Just Positive* condition, had positive effects on participants' positive perceptions of adolescents and their understanding of the importance of adolescence. This suggests that stories about youth service and activism can serve as powerful framing strategies that underscore the role that adolescents can play in serving their communities and society, thereby undermining negative stereotypes and promoting more positive attitudes about young people.



## Recommendation #2: Explain the structural factors that lead to disparities and inequities among adolescents.

In the survey experiment, we designed and tested two frames that explored how to effectively talk about inequities among adolescents. These were designed to build people's understanding of why disparities exist, and how they can be addressed. In one condition, *Unframed Facts*, we simply presented statistics showing differences in outcomes (e.g. in education and health) among different racial, ethnic, or socioeconomic groups. In the second condition, *Facts + Structural Explanation*, we contextualized these data points by explaining how disparities arise, for example, explaining that due to history of racial segregation and the funding of schools through local property taxes, schools that serve African American and Hispanic communities tend to have less funding and fewer resources.

As shown in the graph below, the *Facts + Structural Explanation* condition led to a statistically significant increase in participants' support for policy, relative to the control. In addition, it led to a greater understanding of the role of systemic factors in shaping adolescent outcomes (not shown in graph;  $p = .04$ ).



**Recommendation #4: Instead of focusing on the brain, talk about social, emotional, and identity development.**

Issue frames establish what a topic is actually “about.” For example, one could say that adolescent development is, at its core, an issue of brain development. Alternatively, adolescent development could be considered to be first and foremost about socio-emotional development, or identity development. Experts recognize that there are many dimensions to this issue. But in public discourse, one dimension of a topic—also known as an “issue” frame—is frequently invoked. Framing research shows that foregrounding particular issue frames can dramatically affect public thinking and policy support.

To that end, in peer discourse sessions we tested three issue frames that emphasized different aspects of adolescent development: *brain development*, *socio-emotional development*, and *identity development*. In separate groups, participants were asked to engage in discussion around each of these issue frames, and were probed about what they understood it to mean, and how they might use it to advocate for different types of programs and policies that support young people.

In these discussions, participants struggled to understand the relevance of the brain to adolescent development, or understand how different interventions or services could affect the brain (as one person said, “How do you support healthy brain development? I have a hard time figuring out what this would entail”). More specifically, participants understood supporting healthy brain development to be about promoting IQ, and not about other aspects of an adolescent’s development (as another participant said, “social and emotional skills and relationship skills don’t start in the brain”).

In contrast, participants easily and intuitively understood the relevance of *both* socio-emotional development and identity development. They connected these dimensions of development to real work outcomes, such as being able to interact effectively with significant others, coworkers or bosses, or developing skills, interests, and professional goals. Importantly, both these issue frames also opened the door to thinking about different types of interventions, services, programs and policies that could effectively support youth development.

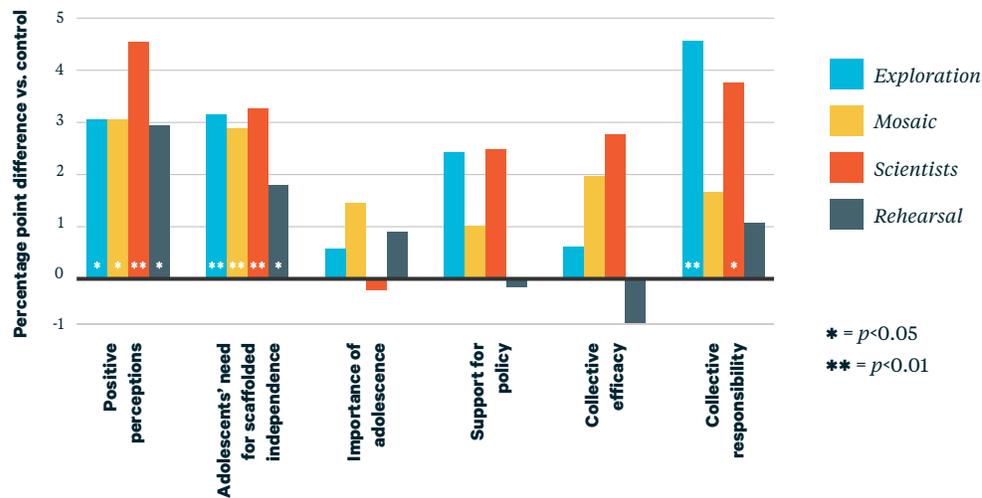
## Recommendation #5: Use “discovery” metaphors to explain how adolescents benefit from opportunities to try things out and learn.

Explanatory metaphors are linguistic devices that help people think and talk about a complex concept in new ways. By comparing an abstract or unfamiliar idea to something concrete and familiar, explanatory metaphors can make information easier to understand—and have a particular power to change the way a topic is understood.

At the beginning of the prescriptive research process, FrameWorks researchers identified a key reframing task suited to an explanatory metaphor—generating an understanding of how adolescents need scaffolded opportunities to learn through trial and error. Candidate explanatory metaphors were tested across a suite of qualitative and quantitative methods, including on-the-street interviews, survey experiments, and usability trials.

Across these qualitative and quantitative methods, we found that that metaphors focused on discovery-based learning, such as a *Scientists* metaphor and an *Exploration* metaphor, were particularly effective. These tapped into universally accessible understandings about the value of exploration, discovery, and learning through failure.

In on-the-street interviews and usability trials, participants who received a version of these metaphors used it with ease. The language of the metaphor stuck in people’s minds, and the metaphor was easily picked up and passed around in dialogue with the researcher. This indicates that these metaphors have a strong capacity to enter into and shape public discourse. In the survey experiment, both metaphors had significant effects on participants’ positive perceptions about adolescents, their understanding of adolescents’ need for scaffolded independence, and their sense of collective responsibility. On the basis of this analysis, and the conceptual overlap between the *Scientists* and *Exploration* metaphor, our overarching recommendation is to use either of these “discovery” metaphors in flexible and creative ways.

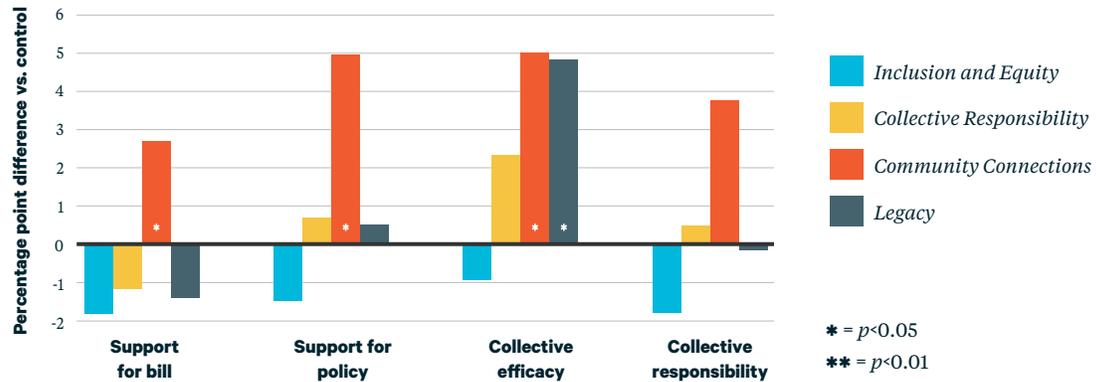


**Recommendation #6: Use the value of *Community Connections*.**

Values tap into people’s shared commitments and priorities to make a case for why people should care about a particular issue and work to address it. Because values help people understand why an issue matters and provide reasons for action, we expected that values messages would foster a sense of collective efficacy and responsibility, and boost people’s support for policies that can improve youth outcomes.

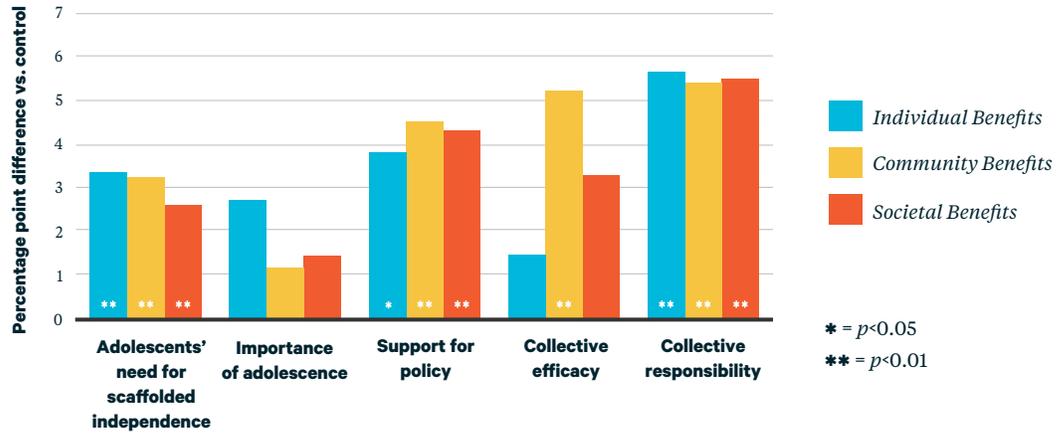
In the survey experiment, *Community Connections* was more effective than any of the values tested. As shown below, it led to significant positive effects on support for the policy initiative as well as overall policy support and collective efficacy.

**Recommendation #7: Foreground the future effects of adolescent development.**



In the survey experiment, we tested a set of frames designed to foreground different future impacts of successful adolescent development, focusing on *Individual Benefits* (such as healthy relationships or educational and employment success), *Community Benefits* (such as individuals cooperating with others in their local communities, or contributing to the local economy), and *Societal Benefits* (such as contributing to a healthier democracy or the labor market). These conditions were designed to explore how focusing these future benefits at different levels may differentially affect people’s support for policy, as well as collective efficacy and responsibility.

As shown below, all three of these conditions had statistically significant impacts on these outcomes of interest. Their similar effects suggest that the simple act of highlighting future benefits is what matters to build this sense of collective importance, irrespective of whether this is at the individual, community, or societal level.



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# Endnotes

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The FrameWorks Institute is a nonprofit think tank that advances the mission-driven sector's capacity to frame the public discourse about social and scientific issues. The organization's signature approach, Strategic Frame Analysis®, offers empirical guidance on what to say, how to say it, and what to leave unsaid. FrameWorks designs, conducts, and publishes multi-method, multi-disciplinary framing research to prepare experts and advocates to expand their constituencies, to build public will, and to further public understanding. To make sure this research drives social change, FrameWorks supports partners in reframing, through strategic consultation, campaign design, FrameChecks®, toolkits, online courses, and in-depth learning engagements known as FrameLabs. In 2015, FrameWorks was named one of nine organizations worldwide to receive the MacArthur Award for Creative and Effective Institutions.

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# **From Risk to Opportunity: Framing Adolescent Development**

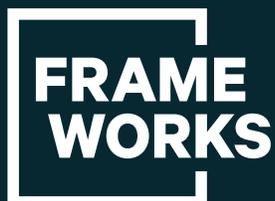
**Strategic Brief  
April 2020**

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