



— Frequently Asked Questions —

Staying On Frame in Real Time

The vast majority of questions and comments that communicators hear from the public and policymakers can be predicted by the research-based [“swamp”](#) of cultural models on that issue.

If you can predict, you can prepare.

A strategic framer prepares by anticipating the questions that will emerge from the swamp, considering the “traps” that are lurking in a possible response, and then choosing a well-framed response with the potential to build a more productive way of thinking about the issue. The sample question-and-answer sequences here show this tactical thought process in action. The exemplars come from questions and issues raised by stakeholder groups, but the models aren’t intended to simply script “the right answers” to questions you might be asked. Rather, this is a teaching tool, offering illustrations of how to talk more effectively about early child development, child care policies and programs, and related issues by applying FrameWorks’ research-based recommendations. While communicators are welcome to use the recommended responses, we encourage you to use the analysis of “false start” and “reframed” answers to build your capacity to apply these principles fluidly throughout your communications practice.

Q: Why is there such an emphasis on learning in the early years? Why can't we just let kids be kids?



THE FALSE START ANSWER

When a child is born, he/she comes with a brain ready and eager to learn. The brain is very much like a new computer. It has great potential for development, depending on what we put into it. Early experiences greatly influence the way a person develops. Everyone who works with children has an awesome responsibility for the future of those children. The activities you do with them from birth to age 10 will determine how their learning patterns develop. As children interact with their environment, they learn problem-solving skills, critical thinking skills, and language skills.

Even very young children are learning all the time, so it's important to provide well-devised opportunities for them to learn in ways that help them develop the skills they need as they grow into toddlerhood, preschool, and beyond.

THE FALSE START ANALYSIS

- Untested metaphors can have unintended consequences. Here, the brain-as-computer metaphor makes it difficult for the public to imagine how external factors like adult support or early intervention are possible.
- The series of statements about child development processes fails to provide a causal chain that shows how development works, how learning happens, what role adults play, and why it's important for child care programs to actively engage children in their own development.
- The references to critical thinking and other education-related terms may lead listeners to conflate developmental learning with formal schooling.



THE REFRAMED ANSWER

From birth onward, children begin observing the world around them and reacting to it, reaching out to adults for interaction, and making discoveries. Anyone who has spent time around babies or very young children has witnessed these development activities. This learning process is about the brain weaving skills together. Just like a rope is made of many strands woven together, children as they learn develop interdependent skills—emotional, cognitive, social, and physical—that they can weave and reweave into skill ropes that help them to function.

When you see a young child playing, they are really hard at work, developing their skill ropes. Even the youngest children need opportunities to develop all the strands of their skill ropes, because all are vital to good development outcomes.

THE REFRAMED ANALYSIS

- This reframed reply uses the Metaphor Weaving Skill Ropes to tell a memorable story about how children's brains develop interactively with the world around them.
- Explanation, rather than description, makes complex development processes "easy to think."
- By pivoting to the point that children are naturally inclined to learn and to engage in brain-building activities, this answer turns the skeptical question on its head: kids are just being kids when they seek out learning opportunities, and it's the job of adult carers to assist them in that work.

Q: It's a nice idea to think about helping kids growing up poor, but is it really going to make any difference? Aren't they bound to turn out like their parents, regardless?



THE FALSE START ANSWER

It's true that growing up in poverty can dramatically reduce a child's lifetime outcomes. Poverty and its related hardships can cause emotional, social, cognitive, and physical delays or problems in children. For instance, research shows that across all grade levels, the poorest children perform worse than their wealthier peers. Gaps in development between poor children and those whose families are better off can appear as early as 22 months of age.

A shocking 3.5 million UK children live in poverty, and of those, approximately 1.6 million experience extreme poverty. We owe it to these children to help. By working to break the cycle of poverty, we can give these children the opportunity to escape their disadvantaged circumstances and live better lives.

We must invest in quality child care programs and early interventions for young children from poor backgrounds. We need to provide school programs that make extra resources available to children who need them to close any development gaps. We also must find ways to provide help to low-income or workless parents, such as assistance securing decent, flexible jobs and access to services such as mental health treatment, family counseling, and community support programs.

Unless we take drastic action to reverse their fortunes, today's poor children will become the UK's next generation of impoverished adults.



THE REFRAMED ANSWER

We have a collective responsibility to make sure that all of the UK's children have the resources and support they need to develop healthy brains and bodies, so they can grow up to be stable, productive members of our community. By paying attention to all of the factors that contribute to the positive or negative outcomes of a child's development, we have the opportunity to influence those outcomes.

Think of development as a scale: positive factors like supportive relationships stack up on one side of the child's development experiences, and negative factors like abuse, neglect, or community violence and lack of resources are loaded on to the other. A child's development scale can be tipped to the positive side by offloading the weight of negative factors and stacking as many positive factors as possible.

Providing children and their families with access to programming that can address these negative factors and offset their effects is an important part of tipping disadvantaged children's outcomes scales in a positive direction. For example, trained counselors and educators can help communities and families to get children the supports they need to function fully—what is called “being resilient”—and can mitigate negative factors through appropriate interventions. Using our resources to support the development of children from disadvantaged communities improves their long-term social, economic, and health outcomes—and that has positive consequences for our entire community. It's a social obligation we need to take seriously, for all of our sakes.

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THE FALSE START ANALYSIS

- Dumping research and data into this reply without interpretive cues such as a tested Value or Explanatory Metaphor leaves the public to guess at their meaning (e.g., “If developmental delays start that early in life, then there’s no point in worrying about extra tutoring for these kids when they reach school age—the damage is already done!”).
- Big numbers without any relative comparisons and words like “shocking” are likely to confirm the public’s belief that poverty is a social problem too big to solve (so why bother trying?).
- Framing with Solutions helps people to comprehend the scope of a social issue, which can increase the public’s support for appropriately scaled measures to address and fix social problems. Just be careful to emphasize community- or systems-wide solutions, rather than focusing on fixing “broken” individuals.

THE REFRAMED ANALYSIS

- Opening with the tested Value of Social Responsibility guides the listener to see why the issue of child poverty is a matter of public concern, rather than a private trouble.
- The Metaphor of Outcomes Scale explains both the effects of environmental factors on developing brains and how this interactive process contains important opportunities to improve outcomes even for children in the worst circumstances.
- Without using scientific jargon, the Metaphor strategically redirects people’s thinking away from the belief that genes are fixed and unaffected by environmental influences.
- The Solutions language in this reply keeps the focus on larger-scale interventions, rather than on individuals.
- A final appeal to Social Responsibility reminds the public about its collective responsibility to help all UK children.

Q: Child abuse is a terrible thing, but what can we really do to prevent it? We can't stop bad people from having kids.



THE FALSE START ANSWER

Child abuse can affect generation after generation. While we can't predict every instance of abuse, we can train doctors, teachers, and carers to identify early signs of potential abuse and prevent them from developing into actual abuse. If we don't, we risk repeating the cycle of abuse.

Abusers are made, not born, and many people who are abusers were once abused children themselves who grew up not knowing any better. We need to treat them as people, not monsters. By recognizing when people are at risk for behaviors that can harm the children in their care, we can intervene before it's too late. Circumstances like poverty, social isolation, a history of being a victim of abuse, and mental health problems can be contributing factors that lead people to engage in abusive behaviors.

Professionals who work with children must be better trained to spot potential problems and make sure children are kept out of harm's way. Adult family members may need substance abuse treatment or job training. Prevention programmes can teach parents to manage their stress better or help to address other underlying causes of abuse. Treating the anger management and mental health problems that lead to abuse can also help keep families together and prevent children from growing up to become abusers, too.



THE REFRAMED ANSWER

As adults, we have a collective obligation to ensure the safety of all children and to protect their opportunity for healthy development.

We know that the architecture of children's brains is built over a long process that begins before birth and continues into young adulthood. This biological construction project can turn out poorly if children don't have the materials they need to build a solid brain foundation. For example, to develop well, children need supportive, responsive interactions with adults—a "serve and return," similar to that in tennis, of gestures, cooing, and speech.

Adult unresponsiveness or abuse can cause long-term damage to children's brain-building, leading to poor health and mental outcomes later in life. That's why mitigating risk factors—taking measures to prevent abuse before it starts—is important for children's long-term outcomes.

For example, adults who were themselves abused as children frequently lack the skills to build healthy serve-and-return relationships. We can help family members and other adult carers to develop these skills in order to foster healthy adult-child relationships. Preventative programmes can also address other circumstances, such as poverty, social isolation, and mental health problems, that may contribute to abusive behaviors and impede healthy relationships.

It isn't enough to rescue children from bad situations. We have a social responsibility to prevent them in the first place by building community supports and services that help at-risk families grow healthy and strong.

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THE FALSE START ANALYSIS

- By emphasizing the cyclical nature of abuse, this “false start” unintentionally feeds the public’s sense of fatalism—that abuse is indeed inevitable.
- This reply is very descriptive but leaves the public to fill in gaps in its own understanding. Try building a clear Explanatory Chain to show how the preventive measures being proposed are well matched to address the risk factors that can lead to abuse.
- This reply frames abuse as a matter of “fixing” individuals, which calls up the dominant cultural model of abusive adults as rational actors who choose bad behavior. Strategic framers use a wider lens to incorporate broader, systems-level policy solutions.

THE REFRAMED ANALYSIS

- Applying the Social Responsibility Value upfront pivots the reply away from the question’s fatalism and subtly implies confidence in our collective ability to address child abuse preventatively.
- The Metaphor Brain Architecture is used in this response to explain developmental science in order to show why preventing abuse is as important as stopping existing abuse.
- The Serve and Return Metaphor both increases the public’s understanding of how child development works and provides a memorable example of how prevention efforts can actually change or reverse learned patterns of abuse.

Q: Don't these programmes and policies really just reward poor parenting?



THE FALSE START ANSWER

Poor parenting is only one of many causes of children's developmental delays. Others include environmental factors such as poverty or neighbourhood violence, and health-related problems that require medical intervention. And often, what seems like poor parenting is really a symptom of other difficulties: the stress of poverty, a lack of resources, a parent's misunderstanding about how to identify and address problems in a child's development, and so on.

It's tempting to blame parents for anything that goes wrong as a child grows, but we have a duty to do our best for all of the UK's children. We can't let children suffer for their parents' mistakes or problems. That's why we need to support programmes and policies that give children access to good health and nutrition, to high-quality care, and to professionals trained to recognize potential problems and intervene appropriately. Such programmes also offer children the chance to experience nurturing, responsive adult relationships outside the home.

At the same time, parenting programmes and protective services that intercede appropriately to address troubled families' problems are important to ensuring that vulnerable children are kept from harm.



THE REFRAMED ANSWER

Healthy child development depends on a broad range of factors that includes physical environments, supportive relationships with family and other community members, and access to resources like health care, good food, and ample learning opportunities. These environmental and experiential conditions influence how children's brains and bodies develop.

Think of a child in a community as you would a table sitting on a floor. If the table is not on a level plane, it can't support the weight put on it and it can't function properly. In the same way, a child in a negative environment can't learn, grow, and become a healthy, productive member of society. But just like a table can't level itself or the floor on which it sits, children may require social services and other professional interventions to develop well.

When children are exposed to unhealthy conditions such as abuse, neglect, extreme poverty, or community violence that persist over time, these chronic stressors—what scientists call toxic stress—derail children's healthy development. That's why it's important that we offset such stressors by providing resources, support, and interventions for children who need them. We must support programmes designed to ensure that all children have the chance to develop well and thrive.

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THE FALSE START ANALYSIS

- By trying to correct the misperception that child service programmes reward bad parenting, this reply reinforces “blame the parents” cultural models and misses the opportunity to reorient the conversation to systems-level thinking.
- Avoid terms like “troubled families” and “vulnerable children,” which trigger unproductive models of class stereotypes and limit solutions to removing children from their homes.
- Try optimism! This isn’t about giving bad parents a pass, it’s about working collectively to solve problems that affect us all—but this answer doesn’t make that clear.

THE REFRAMED ANALYSIS

- This reframed reply eschews negative words in favor of a reasonable, explanatory Tone, which invites the listener to be more open-minded about the information that follows.
- Focusing squarely on how children develop and what they need to develop well keeps this reply from falling into the “bad parent” trap.
- The Levelness and Toxic Stress Metaphors offer a sticky, or memorable, way to talk about the full range of environmental influences that help shape child outcomes, in order to redirect attention toward the importance of programmatic interventions.

Q: Once the damage has been done, is it really possible to change a kid's outcomes?



THE FALSE START ANSWER

It's true that what happens in a child's early years can have lasting consequences. For example, Janie's teenaged parents were unprepared to start a family, and they struggled with the financial and emotional hardships of parenting. Their financial situation worsened, and Janie's parents found themselves homeless, living in a shelter and taking turns looking for low-skilled work. Without the community resources and support they needed to provide Janie with all the things children require for healthy development, the toddler began to exhibit symptoms of developmental delays.

When children like Janie experience prolonged periods of toxic stress in their lives, such as those associated with homelessness, extreme poverty, or abuse, their development of the resiliency they need to face adversity is compromised. Once this process is derailed, it is very difficult for children to become healthy and balanced adults. They are more likely to drop out of school, enter the juvenile justice system, and rely on other forms of social services to survive through life. These problems are a social and economic drain on our region's resources, so we need to do what we can to help these children while they are young.

By the time Janie reached primary school, she lagged far behind her peers and struggled with relationships and age-appropriate skills. Although tutoring and counseling are helping to improve her circumstances, earlier interventions might have mitigated the worst effects of toxic stress on her early years. We must protect children like Janie from the developmental problems caused by toxic stress, so that fewer children suffer its potential long-term consequences.



THE REFRAMED ANSWER

Our communities depend upon the healthy functioning of children who will be the citizens of tomorrow. Chronic stressors such as abuse or extreme poverty interrupt children's healthy brain development, which can have long-term effects on their ability to function well throughout life. We have a responsibility to do what we can to support children who experience toxic stress, in order to ensure their healthy brain development despite these challenges.

Recent insights from the science of child development demonstrate that positive, healthy experiences can help shape children's brains in improved ways. This is good news for our region. We want to help our city's children develop a stronger sense of resilience.

We think a child's sense of resilience is like a scale with two sides: while one side gets loaded with negative things, like stress, violence and neglect, the other side gets stacked with positive things, like supportive relationships, skill-building opportunities and resources. Loading the positive side of the scale offsets the weight on the negative side, which tips children's resiliency scales toward positive outcomes. Where the fulcrum is positioned—how children's genes interact with their environments—also affects how the scale responds to what is loaded on each side and how easily it tips in one direction or the other. But we can help influence the degree to which children's scales are tipped toward the positive. With more nurturing relationships and positive learning environments, we can start to stack the positive side of the scale and improve children's outcomes, from their early years onward.

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THE FALSE START ANALYSIS

- Episodic storytelling—narratives that focus on personal tales of tragedy and triumph rather than on systems and social structures—cues up individualist thinking, which inhibits the public’s ability to see the issue as a matter of public concern rather than a private trouble.
- This reply reinforces the “Damage Done is Damage Done” cultural model, or the idea that, once development is derailed, it cannot be put back on track—impeding public support for policy and programme solutions.
- Avoid making the negative case. By mentioning the worst-case scenario for children experiencing toxic stress, this answer triggers the public’s deep-seated beliefs about youth and their supposed trajectory toward crime and at-risk behaviors.

THE REFRAMED ANALYSIS

- By opening with the Social Responsibility Value, this reframed reply emphasizes early child development as a broad social issue that requires systems-level solutions.
- This response avoids triggering individualist thinking by using the Toxic Stress Metaphor to explain the effects of environments (i.e., the impacts of toxic stress) on brain development and in shaping a child’s resilience.
- The Outcomes Scale Explanatory Metaphor illustrates how supportive relationships and positive learning environments enable children to respond positively to toxic stress and other adversity.