



— Turning Talk into Action —

Reframing child development and maltreatment to boost UK children's outcomes

Debates about early child development and child maltreatment—what young children need in order to grow strong, healthy brains and bodies and why preventing abuse and neglect is critical to ensure children's good outcomes—are happening across the UK. The Big Lottery's A Better Start initiative is one recent example of growing attention to the services, programmes, and other resources available to children in our communities to support their healthy development. These efforts to improve services for children and their families also create an opportunity for more robust public conversations in communities across the UK about how babies and young children develop, what young brains need in order to build strong cognitive, social, and emotional skills, and why we must support programmes that prevent or mitigate the developmental effects of child maltreatment.

Those conversations are critical to boosting Britons' support for programmes and services that support at-risk children and their families—yet they have the potential to go awry if not carefully planned. Strategic Frame Analysis®, an evidence-based approach to communications on complex social and scientific issues developed by the FrameWorks Institute, is one way that early child development professionals and advocates can foster discussions with the public about early child development, child mental health, and quality social programmes in order to help people see the need to align abuse and neglect prevention policies with the science of child development. Practitioners in the field who are trained in strategic framing learn to make intentional, research-based choices about how to frame these issues for their audiences: how to start, what to emphasise, what to leave unsaid, and how to make the “whys and hows” of early child development and the prevention of maltreatment as “sticky,” or memorable, as possible. Strategic framing develops communicators' ability to link child development issues to a broader “core story” of early child development, using tools and strategies shown to increase public understanding and support.

There's no substitute for participating in extended theory-to-practice trainings in strategic framing, but a sampler of some of the key framing techniques are included in this article. The research behind these recommendations draws on social science theory and methods and involved extensive testing in the UK, Canada, the US, and Australia. Researchers surveyed 46,000 average people, in addition to conducting

dozens of in-depth interviews and peer discussion groups. All told, these recommendations are informed by more than ten years of empirical communications research on translating the science of early child development, child mental health, and child maltreatment.

If You Can Predict, You Can Prepare

The first step to becoming a strategic framer is to recognize that the public will bring a strong set of assumptions to bear on information about child development and maltreatment. These assumptions have implications for policy and programme options that are “easy to think” and “hard to think.” Put another way: these perceptions have the power to limit the public’s support for dedicating resources to improve children’s outcomes through high-quality child development programmes and services, abuse and neglect prevention efforts, and expert interventions. It is imperative therefore that communicators know the public’s default patterns of thinking as they begin to engage their fellow citizens on the topic of child development and maltreatment—their default understanding about how children develop, what causes abuse and neglect, how maltreatment affects developmental outcomes, and how to address these issues. Communicators need to be especially attentive to certain dominant cultural models when they want to talk about how young children develop:

Black Box of Child Development Processes. A majority of UK citizens are unfamiliar with the science of how children develop. Asked to think about how development happens, members of the public default to the idea that development is a passive, natural process that is best left undisturbed by adult intervention. Brain development, and the role of adults in influencing it, is a “black box” of invisible processes, which makes conversations about what children need to develop well so “hard to think.” Without a better understanding of the fundamental workings of early child development, the public has little basis with which to think about how social services and programmes can improve children’s developmental outcomes.

Fatalism. A deep sense of fatalism is prevalent in the public’s thinking about the possibility of successfully confronting the social and structural impediments to children’s healthy development. UK citizens feel strongly that social problems that can affect children’s wellbeing, like poverty, are intractable and that the public systems that should address them are broken beyond repair. This sense of hopelessness depresses support for dedicating resources and developing programmes to help children and their families to overcome situational obstacles that can interfere with children’s development. To build public support for change, it’s critical to avoid calling up this cultural model.

Individualism. Whether discussing healthy child development or development that occurs within the context of abuse and neglect, the UK public has difficulty thinking about the social determinants that influence these phenomena, focusing instead on individual-level causes and solutions. Though partially attuned to how life circumstances—especially financial ones—can influence both children’s outcomes and patterns of maltreatment, this understanding is deeply recessive and must be activated intentionally in communications with the public about these issues. Otherwise, the public defaults readily to the dominant model of individualism, which assumes that individual personality traits and intentional choices, and self-

control are the primary factors that influence behaviors and outcomes.

Practical Tools for Effective Communications about Child Development and Maltreatment

Strategic Frame Analysis® points to three powerful reframing tools—Values, Explanatory Metaphors, and Solutions—that can help the public to understand:

- why children’s development in the early years is important
- how development processes work
- how maltreatment interferes with healthy development
- what we can do to prevent maltreatment, and
- what roles our communities can and should play in ensuring that all children have access to the resources they need to develop well.

Values Establish What’s at Stake

Values, or broad ideals about what’s desirable and good, act as a starting point on a topic, guiding the attitudes, reasoning and decisions that follow. Using a value to open communications about child development and the effects of maltreatment can orient people’s thinking on the topic, setting up for success in the interaction that follows. Among several values that FrameWorks tested experimentally, *Social Responsibility* showed robust results in steering people towards productive conversations about these issues. The value description below captures the essence of the idea; it isn’t intended to be used verbatim.

Social Responsibility: “Meeting our obligation to Britain’s children should be our top priority. By taking responsibility as a society, we can help children develop positively and promote their future success.”

Values can be used to begin a conversation about supporting a local programme for early years learning: “Our community has a responsibility to make sure all of its children have access to the kinds of learning opportunities that will help them to build strong brains.” Or, they might be instrumental in highlighting how expanding children’s access to social services has long-term benefits for everyone: “Yes, we agree that families have an important role to play in their children’s development—but have you thought about how meeting our collective obligation to make sure all families have the supports they need to fulfill that role will improve our communities’ long-term outcomes?” Whether used at the beginning of a conversation or elsewhere, values are a more effective way of engaging people in an issue than framing it as a response to a crisis or making the case that it will primarily benefit specific groups.

Explanatory Metaphors Explain the Problem and Build Understanding

FrameWorks research supports the findings of many other studies into public knowledge of early childhood development and child mental health: the British public simply doesn't understand how children's brains develop. As a result, they easily revert to ways of thinking about child development, child mental health, and the consequences of maltreatment that contradict what we now know to be true about the development process. For example, the dominant model of early child development is that it is a passive, unstructured process: very young children just absorb information naturally and don't need any special care. Taking a moment to reframe children's brain development as active (and interactive) work that determines their long-term outcomes is therefore a critical step in every discussion about early child development and the consequences of child abuse and neglect—it should never be taken for granted.

Metaphors are familiar to us all as literary devices, but FrameWorks' research corroborates what many other scholars have observed: they can also be uniquely powerful tools for thinking and interpretation. An explanatory metaphor is a simple, concrete, and memorable comparison that quickly and effectively explains an abstract or complex topic. It works by mapping an unfamiliar topic onto something common and familiar to the general public. FrameWorks tested several candidate metaphors for communicating about the development process and early learning—likening skills development to weaving ropes, for example. *Weaving Skill Ropes* was one of the most effective and reliable in helping the public to think more expansively about how children gain the skills they need to function well throughout their lives.

Weaving Skills Ropes: “Learning is about the brain weaving social, emotional, and cognitive skills together to form strong skills ropes that children can stretch and reweave to carry out all of the functions and activities life requires.”

This metaphor uses an “easy to think” analogy that allows the public to reimagine early child development as the building of interdependent skills that, in combination, are vital to a child's ability to function. It also allows for a more robust understanding of the dynamic and complex process of skills-building. In this way, the metaphor can help the public to understand that learning is more than just cognitive and that abuse and neglect disrupt not just the development of social and emotional skills but the entire development process.

FrameWorks' research finds that child mental health presents another gap in public understanding of child development. Experts understand that appropriate early intervention can mitigate problems or prevent them entirely. Members of the public, however, tend to view child mental health through the same lenses with which they see adult mental health: as the irreversible outcome of genetic composition, as a matter of personal fortitude, and as treatable only by remediation through prescribed drugs. To counter these misperceptions, FrameWorks developed and tested metaphors to explain some of the key science around child mental health, its treatment, and the role of early intervention. The metaphor *Levelness* demonstrated a strong ability to broaden people's understanding of child mental health.

Levelness: “Just as the levelness of a table is what makes it functional, the mental health of children is what makes them able to function well in all areas of life.”

This metaphor teaches the basic concepts of the science of child mental health and moves the public away from the idea that poor mental health cannot be prevented or reversed. It illustrates the interplay of genes and environment that determines mental health in children and the need for intervention to address problems. FrameWorks’ research demonstrated that the public can readily apply its understanding that a table’s wobbliness may be caused by an uneven floor to the idea that a child’s environment can affect the levelness of his or her mental health. Likewise, the metaphor helps people to understand that, just as a table can’t fix itself, children with mental health problems need the assistance of professionals to become level.

Like all metaphors, *Levelness* communicates these concepts in a succinct, easy-to-understand way. In particular, it sets up a conversation about how programmes and services can dramatically improve children’s outcomes, allowing spokespeople to build on the metaphor with clear explanations of what high-quality interventions look like and why increased resources and expanded public access are necessary.

Building Public Support for the Right Solutions

Effective framing prepares the listener to see how the actions being taken will make things better. When communicators neglect to draw a clear link between a problem and its solution in ways that support non-experts’ ability to understand the connection and what’s at stake, a crucial opportunity for gaining the public’s trust and engagement is lost. FrameWorks’ research revealed that certain patterns of unproductive thinking were especially prevalent in talking with UK citizens about early child development and child maltreatment: in particular, a sense of fatalism dominates the public’s understanding of the issues. A conversation infused at its start with tested shared values, clear explanatory chains, and simplifying models can overcome this default thinking and help the public to reach more productive conclusions about appropriate, systems-level solutions.

This kind of preparation—inviting the public to think about the problem the way experts do—can move people toward whole-picture thinking, or a “wide-angle lens” perspective. Experts know that social determinants play a role in both child development and the occurrence and successful prevention of child maltreatment. They understand that child maltreatment, especially neglect, alters the biological development of children, with long-lasting consequences for both the affected individuals and society as a whole. They know that preventing child maltreatment requires intervening at structural, cultural, institutional and interpersonal levels to support families and strengthen parenting capacities. Such interventions include, for example, expanding access to health care, high-quality educational environments, mental health and substance abuse treatment programmes, and financial assistance for struggling families, and providing more home visitation or parent training programmes that help parents understand what typical child development looks like and how it happens. According to the expert view, these interventions work by modifying the contexts, environments and experiences—such as social isolation and financial stress—that increase the likelihood that child maltreatment will occur.

The default story in our popular discourse, however, is that early child development is a passive event undisturbed by gene-environment interaction, that maltreatment is primarily the result of flawed individuals' choices and therefore inevitable and unpreventable, and that meaningful social change is unlikely or impossible. An audience primed with a view of that more expansive expert picture, however, can more readily sidestep these unproductive misperceptions of maltreatment's effects on early child development processes and begin to see how large-scale solutions can address the problem.

Our research shows that giving the public the opportunity to think like the experts do about an issue increases public support for policy solutions. The public lacks a clear understanding of how children's brains develop, why maltreatment alters the course of that development, and how high-quality interventions can improve outcomes. Though most members of the public believe child abuse and neglect must be addressed, few understand the science of early child development and the importance of addressing the social determinants that lead to maltreatment in order to treat and prevent it and increase children's chance of good outcomes. To gain public support for investing in high-quality programmes that perform this work, communicators need to show why these are the right solutions. That means explaining how strong intervention programmes can improve children's development, support families by treating existing problems and preventing future ones, and lead to better long-term outcomes. Values and metaphors are easy-to-read signposts that lead audiences to understand child development and child maltreatment the way experts do; building that knowledge base is an important step toward explaining the what, how, and why of the Better Start initiative, and similar projects and programmes, in ways that make sense to a general audience.

Early Child Development Professionals Are Reframing the Public Conversation

As the early child development community continues to work on the challenge of communicating about children's development and the treatment and prevention of maltreatment in UK society, it's important to learn about what makes the difference between effective and ineffective outreach on this topic. There's solid evidence that some ways of framing the issue are likely to decrease public engagement and support—for instance, emphasising the exclusive role parents play in a child's development. Instead, effective framing builds people's understanding of underlying causes and introduces them to well-matched, collective solutions, so that the public understands how to best address the problem.

These framing strategies are designed for use by child development experts and practitioners in the field who are engaged in efforts to improve the UK's efforts to prevent child abuse and neglect and to foster good development outcomes for all of its children. You can learn more about this project at [this link](#).