

Key questions from PRC summits

1. Q: If the new big idea is “Child Development”, does that mean that we shouldn’t be talking about parenting anymore?

A: The goal is to emphasise that parenting is a key part of what it takes to support the healthy development of children in Australia. When the big idea is “child development”, parents are positioned as needing support themselves, and that by supporting parents, we can all help make sure children have what they need to develop well. This is why it is absolutely still ok to talk about parenting in relation to new big idea of “Child Development”.

2. Q: As social workers and communicators, we have been trained to start the conversation where people are at. Surely we should start by acknowledging that all parents love their children, rather than start with the new child development message?

A: Tested framing strategies like “Navigating the Waters” and shifting to “child development” as the big idea work in part because they do respond to models, or assumptions, about parenting that are already present in the public discourse. These frames strategically redirect your audiences to new channels of thinking, rather than leaving them where they currently are. Strategic framing takes the redirection approach because meeting people where they’re at runs the risk of reinforcing the unproductive cultural models of parenting that are already present. Here are two examples:

- When you say “Love is the answer”, people think “Parenting is natural, it can’t be learnt and there’s really nothing society can do about it”.
- When you say “How you parent partly depends on your own experience with your parents”, people think “Parenting determines parenting, so there’s really nothing that society can do about it”.

In short, new strategies redirect the conversation instead of keeping it stuck in place.

3. Q: How about starting with an acknowledgment that parenting is the hardest job anyone can ever have, or that parenting is a real struggle?

A: Again, there is a risk that this will reinforce unproductive models of parenting, such as:

- A strong focus on parents’ individual responsibility for parenting outcomes, that prevents people from thinking about contextual factors. The logic goes something like: “Parenting is hard, and it’s a huge responsibility. I really think that if you’re not 100% prepared, you shouldn’t have children”.
- Fatalism about solutions to better support parents in Australia. The logic goes something like: “Parenting is hard and it’s normal to struggle, so there is really no way to support all parents so they can avoid those challenges”.

Additionally, our research has found that focusing on the “normal” challenges of parenting in communications does not increase feelings of efficacy or productive thinking about solutions. Focusing on how parenting can support healthy development for children, on the other hand, does get the public to feel more efficacious and think productively about solutions.

4. Q: Can we use stories of parents talking about their own experience of parenting?

A: Yes, absolutely. Just be sure to connect those stories to the larger context of child development as process that parenting practices can support. Using individual stories of success or failure without this larger context creates a space for people to focus on individual-level causes of child development problems and challenges and lose sight of systemic and environmental ones. You can focus on context by combining individual stories about parenting with conversations about the resources and systems needed to ensure healthy child development. Communicators can also use individual stories as a strategy for presenting appropriate solutions and next steps.

5. Q: Can we use other metaphors besides *Navigating Waters* one? How about Hiking (as it also involves navigating), or sport, like Basketball ?

A: Metaphor is a powerful tool for communicators, but it is also a tool that can quickly backfire (as they say, with great power comes great responsibility). Using a metaphor that has not been tested is risky because it may be ineffective, or worse, counterproductive to your communications goals. Stick to the *Navigating Waters* metaphor, which is proven to be highly effective at redirecting unproductive thinking about parenting in Australia, and helping people understand the role of contextual factors in shaping parenting practices.

6. Q: I don't think that the Navigating Waters metaphor will work with the specific audiences I interact with on the ground. It has not been tested with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander-only audiences, for instance. What if the people I speak to have never been on a boat, or seen the sea?

A: Great question! There are a few reasons why this metaphor is a useful communications tool for a wide audience:

- Thinking metaphorically is something that most humans have in common, regardless of their culture. So using a metaphor to make the abstract more concrete, and the complex more comprehensible, is highly likely to work just as well with all-Aboriginal audiences as with other Australian audiences.
- Even people who have never been out on a boat before are very likely to have an idea of what the sea might look like, and what it might be like to be on a boat. The Navigating Waters metaphor may not activate people's direct experience of being on a boat, but it can still activate people's "mental model" of what being on a boat might look and feel like.
- The framing recommendations were designed to help communicators effectively navigate common patterns of thinking that are shared across a wide swath of the Australian population. As a result, they will work with broad public audiences across the country, which includes Aboriginal people. While we did not test the metaphor with all-Aboriginal audiences, we were careful to include Aboriginal participants in our interviews, survey experiments, and focus groups.
- The Navigating Waters metaphor is versatile and adaptable. You can play around with it to fit your various communications needs – including by adapting it to make powerful arguments about parenting in Australia for targeted audience groups.

7. Q: We know there is a lot of competing and incorrect information about parenting out there. Is directly confronting and rebutting that information a useful strategy?

Immediately rebutting false information is a strategy that routinely backfires. Why? Because rebuttals often **repeat** the offending information and inadvertently make that bad information even stickier. Our shorthand is "If you don't believe it, don't repeat it". Instead, think about incorrect information as an opportunity to respond with a better, empirically tested, more effective reframe. The recommendations for this project have been proven to help audiences know more about parenting and development, support social policy, and increase a sense of efficacy and urgency. And that makes the recommendations great tools for helping the public think more critically about how to support parenting and healthy development!

Q. Is this a new approach? When has framing been used to change public perception before?

Framing is all around us! All communications make framing choices, and communications are always a tool for changing public discourse and social change over time. FrameWorks's experience with early child development framing research in the United States is an example. Beyond framing healthy development as an investment in our shared future, our research developed the *Toxic Stress* metaphor as a tool that has helped to change common understandings about the effect that chronic adversity can have on the developing brain. This metaphor has entered public discourse and shifted public conversations about children's issues toward supporting healthy brain development. That shift in conversation has led to policy changes, legislation, and funding decisions that address childhood trauma on both the national and state level.