

Advancing Wellbeing and Expanding Opportunities: Reframing Transition Age Foster Youth

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Moira O'Neil, PhD, Vice President of Research Interpretation
Marisa Gerstein Pineau, PhD, Principal Researcher and Strategist

**FRAME
WORKS**

A FrameWorks Strategic Brief

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Introduction

Building public support for transition age foster youth is a critical part of making sure they have what they need to become healthy, happy, successful adults.

But the American public is unfamiliar with the unique experiences of these young people. This is due in large part to its lack of understanding of the foster care system—a system that’s generally a “black box” to those who haven’t had direct experience with it.

Once people learn who transition age foster youth are, they are generally sympathetic, but they still struggle to think about ways to support them. Three important barriers to people’s thinking must be overcome to build public engagement and support for transition age foster youth:

1. People tend to think of transition age foster youth as permanently damaged by the experiences that led them to foster care and their experiences in the foster care system. As a result, transition age foster youth are often “othered”—that is, seen as inherently different from other young people—and may be viewed as lost causes.
2. People assume that any young person can become involved in the foster care system. This impedes understanding of how racism and socioeconomic disparities can shape foster care involvement and how these inequities impact transition age foster youth as they transition out of the system.
3. Americans’ individualistic, “pull yourself up by your bootstraps” thinking about success limits their understanding of solutions. They mostly focus on ensuring financial success rather than supporting the overall wellbeing of transition age foster youth.

As a result, people have a hard time understanding how the right policies and programs are necessary for transition age foster youth’s successful transition to adulthood.

Two Narratives Advocates Can Use When Advocating for Transition Age Foster Youth

We are fortunate to have two narratives to improve understanding and build support for addressing the needs of transition age foster youth. The first narrative, *Advancing Wellbeing*, shows people how effective supports aid the healthy biological, psychological, and emotional development of transition age foster youth. The second narrative, *Expanding Opportunities*, helps people understand the racial and economic factors that create disparities leading to foster care involvement, the disparities perpetuated by that system, and the ways in which supports for transition age foster youth can address those inequities.

This strategic brief outlines how we can do this together by:

- Showing the most effective ways to change perceptions and build support for reform
- Giving examples of what this looks like in practice
- Reviewing the research that underlies each recommendation.

More information on the early phases of the project can be accessed [here](#).*

* www.frameworksinstitute.org/publication/telling-a-new-coming-of-age-story-mapping-the-gaps-between-expert-and-public-understandings-of-transition-age-youth

Overarching Recommendation: Contextualize the term “transition age youth” with the word “foster.”

People do not immediately understand the term “transition age youth.” Although the term connotes a certain period of life—adolescence—it does little to explain the particular circumstances of these young people.

This is easily addressed by either introducing the term “foster” as part of the term or presenting a short definition immediately after introducing the term.

What it looks like

Instead of this ...	Try this ...
Transition age youth are young people who were in the foster care system and who are now young adults.	Transition age foster youth are young people between the ages of 16 and 24 who are transitioning out of the foster care system as they reach adulthood.

Keep in mind

- **Use “foster care” as part of the label or definition.** The term “transition age youth” connotes any young person transitioning into adulthood. Incorporating the word “foster” as part of the term *or* providing a short definition quickly after introducing the term addresses that misunderstanding. This also leads to discussions about their needs and effective supports. Adding “foster” to variations of the term, such as “youth transitioning out of foster care,” does the same good work.
- **Use the age range 16–24 when defining transition age foster youth.** People are often unsure of the age range the word “youth” refers to. Providing the age range clears up that confusion.

Transition age foster youth are often unaware of the term “transition age youth” themselves, although they think it accurately describes them once it is explained. Share with them the language you use to describe their experiences so they can use it in their own advocacy.

Narrative 1: Advancing Wellbeing

The *Advancing Wellbeing* narrative shows people why it is important that transition age foster youth have the same support and resources that all young people need.

This narrative is particularly effective at building a sense of collective responsibility for their successful outcomes, expanding thinking about effective programs and policies, and creating a sense of efficacy around providing these programs.

Just as importantly, this narrative discourages “othering” of transition age foster youth. It helps people see how their needs are similar to the needs of other young people reaching adulthood, while leaving room for discussion about how we can ensure those needs are addressed.

Four frames make up this narrative. Although they can be used individually, they gain power when used together.

Recommendation #1: Talk about how programs and policies for transition age foster youth can and will support their healthy development.

Link effective programs and supports for transition age foster youth to their healthy biological, psychological, and emotional development, and explain how these supports lead to positive outcomes in adulthood.

Emphasizing what can and *will* happen when we provide support for healthy development is critical. When we make a positive case, we build public buy-in.

What it looks like

Instead of this ...	Try this ...
Transition age foster youth need a range of supports if they are going to succeed as adults. Right now, the foster care system and social services aren't helping them successfully make the transition. Transition age foster youth need more than financial assistance; they need additional resources if they are going to do well in the long term.	When we support the healthy biological, psychological, and emotional development of transition age foster youth, we help them become successful adults. Programs that offer not just financial assistance and life skills but also access to mental health services and ongoing supportive relationships improve transition age foster youth's overall wellbeing in the long term.

Keep in mind

- **Talk about healthy development as a holistic approach to achieving long-term positive outcomes.** Linking supports and resources to healthy development, in all its various forms, expands thinking about the range of supports that transition age foster youth need to thrive.

- **Emphasize healthy emotional and psychological development.** People recognize that mental health and happiness are important parts of healthy development. Emphasizing these aspects encourages discussion about the range of supports beyond financial assistance.
- **Connect ongoing, supportive relationships to healthy emotional and psychological development.** Reminding people that relationships contribute to emotional and psychological health positions relationships as a critical form of support.
- **Avoid focusing on negative cases.** Starting with stories about poor outcomes when transition age foster youth don't receive the support they need leads to fatalism. If we need to talk about less positive situations, we should begin by discussing how the right supports and resources *can* lead to positive development.

Why this works

When they think about the needs of transition age foster youth, people tend to focus on a narrow set of supports, such as teaching life skills and providing financial aid for schooling. Talking about a holistic approach to development expands people's thinking about the types of supports that transition age foster youth need. These include not just financial resources but psychological supports like counseling and social supports like mentoring.

Making a positive case builds a sense of efficacy. Rather than focus on the psychological and emotional damage the youth may have sustained before and during their involvement with foster care, people see the possibilities for long-term wellbeing. This approach moves thinking away from fatalism and toward possibility.

Recommendation #2: Talk about how transition age foster youth need the same things all young people need to thrive as they become adults.

Connect the needs of transition age foster youth to those of other young adults as they make the transition to adulthood while emphasizing that the supports all young people need are more difficult for transition age foster youth to access.

What it looks like

Instead of this ...

Transition age foster youth benefit from programs that address their specific needs. Unlike other young people, they don't have financial support for college or caring relationships to support them. We need strong programs that ensure transition age foster youth's specific needs are addressed so they can do well as they become adults.

Try this...

All of us need support as we become successful adults. We need help with things like paying for college or finding a job, and we need supportive relationships we can rely on as we find our place in the world. But transition age foster youth often lack these things because they don't have the same family connections to rely on. We need strong programs to ensure transition age foster youth receive the things that all young people need to thrive.

Keep in mind

- **Emphasize the common process of becoming an adult.** Use a *Universal* message that highlights how transition age foster youth are like other young people. This moves people away from the unhelpful idea that transition age foster youth are permanently damaged because of their experiences. Instead, it shifts the focus to thinking about how we can address their needs.
- **Connect universal needs to healthy development.** Talking about transition age foster youth's healthy development helps people realize their needs are similar to other young people's needs. Use these two frames together to expand thinking about programs and supports.
- **Talk about why transition age foster youth may need more of these supports and how to make that happen.** People recognize that while transition age foster youth need similar supports as other young people, they may need more of them, for example, longer-term financial support or better access to mental health services.

Why this works

People tend to view young people who have been in foster care as permanently traumatized by their experiences. This sets them apart from other young people reaching adulthood who had "normal" upbringings in their families.

Talking about transition age foster youth's needs as similar to those of other young people disrupts "othering." When people think about what all young people need to transition to adulthood, they can more easily think about effective solutions and supports that we need to make available to transition age foster youth. It also makes people receptive to the "more and better services" argument: While transition age foster youth's needs are similar to other young people's needs, people recognize that they may need *more* support, such as additional financial aid or *better* access to psychological support like counseling.

Recommendation #3: Talk about how we can support transition age foster youth as they become adults using the *Steep Climb* metaphor.

Use the *Steep Climb* metaphor to build people’s understanding of the experience of becoming an adult while aging out of foster care. Highlight the similarities between transition age foster youth and other young people, but also discuss how much more difficult it is for them to access the supports they need.

What it looks like

Instead of this ...	Try this ...
Becoming an adult while transitioning out of foster care presents many challenges. We need to make sure that transition age foster youth have a variety of resources and supportive relationships as they reach adulthood.	Becoming an adult is like following a difficult path, and for transition age foster youth the climb to adulthood can be particularly steep. We need to equip them with the resources they need to navigate that path and make sure they have supportive, encouraging guides to help them find their footing.

Keep in mind

- **Be creative with the metaphor.** Because it’s connected to the idea that “life’s a journey,” people can easily apply the terminology of climbing to the experience of becoming an adult under difficult circumstances. Use words and terms like “backpack,” “supplies,” “shelter,” and “difficult terrain” when describing the experience.
- **Talk about the people who help transition age foster youth make the climb.** People recognize that a steep climb isn’t tackled alone: Climbers have guides, fellow climbers, and people at base camp who make sure they have the resources they need and cheer them on.
- **Don’t talk about the journey as lonely or frame the climb as an individual achievement.** When people focus on climbing as an individual achievement, the many resources and supportive players that climbers need are obscured.

Why this works

The *Steep Climb* metaphor is useful for many important reasons.

First, it creates room for people to think of the range of supports that climbers need, which they can then extend to the experiences of transition age foster youth. It helps them think about the resources and people that need to be in place to assist with the climb to adulthood.

Second, it helps people think about transitions, such as leaving foster care and the adolescent years, because it conveys the process of moving from one place to another. This makes people more receptive to the idea that transition age foster youth should not simply “age out” of foster care but that they should transition over time.

Third, the metaphor promotes positive attitudes about transition age foster youth because it portrays them as overcoming a difficult transition with assistance. This moves people’s thinking away from the idea that transition age foster youth are irremediably damaged and toward more hopeful expectations for their long-term outcomes.

The journey aspect of this metaphor was particularly useful for transition age foster youth when talking about their own experiences. They could easily relate their experiences of leaving the foster care system to the experience of facing a steep climb and needing supports. Most said they would use the metaphor when telling their own stories about transitioning out of foster care.

Recommendation #4: Link support for transition age foster youth to the importance of building *Community Connections*.

Highlight the importance of supporting transition age foster youth by connecting it to our shared interest in building strong communities.

Talk about how communities benefit when transition age foster youth have stronger ties to the places they live.

What it looks like

Instead of this ...	Try this ...
Supporting transition age foster youth means providing the things they need to succeed. That means connecting them to critical resources in our communities.	When we support transition age foster youth, we are also supporting our communities. Our communities are stronger when we make sure that everyone, including transition age foster youth, is connected to each other.

Keep in mind

- **Emphasize that supporting transition age foster youth supports our communities.** Talk about how programs that help transition age foster youth create stable, happy lives ultimately benefit us all by creating more engaged, connected citizens.
- **Talk about how community connections prevent isolation.** Transition age foster youth say their lack of community connections leads to a sense of detachment and isolation. Members of the public recognize the importance of creating these links. Advocates, including transition age foster youth themselves, should talk about how links to communities benefit transition age foster youth *and* the places they live.
- **Talk about community-based programs.** Increase people’s sense of collective responsibility and support by linking transition age foster youth’s long-term wellbeing to local programs and policies.

Why this works

Previous FrameWorks research on reframing adolescent development makes it clear that Americans highly value the idea of community. This belief in the power of community is particularly helpful when raising support for the healthy development of adolescents, including transition age foster youth.

Making community connection a central part of the argument for supporting transition age foster youth activates our thinking about our collective responsibility for young people and the ways in which we all benefit when we support transition age foster youth. This makes the issue more salient for people and boosts their support for effective programs and policies.

Transition age foster youth say they often feel disaffected from the communities around them because they haven’t had many opportunities to develop strong social connections. The *Community Connections* value helps them articulate their experiences of isolation and their strong desire, not just their need, to be connected to their communities.

Narrative 2: Expanding Opportunities

This narrative explains the racial and economic disparities that shape the experience of transition age foster youth in foster care, and it explains how inequitable systems impact a range of outcomes. It also shows how our efforts to reduce inequality are a primary way to better support transition age foster youth as they become adults.

Recommendation #5: Make it about addressing inequality.

If we want to build better understanding of how larger social inequities shape the foster care experience, we need to explicitly make the issue about addressing inequality.

By crafting a clear argument that supporting transition age foster youth is a way to collectively address social inequality, we can increase people’s support for policies and programs that will accomplish that goal.

What it looks like

Instead of this ...	Try this...
When young people in foster care become adults, they face challenges and opportunities. We need to make sure transition age foster youth have what they need to make the transition successfully through housing assistance, scholarships, and mentoring.	Racial and social inequities, including discrimination and economic inequality, are reflected in our foster care system. This means most transition age foster youth are young people of color, have lived in poverty, or are otherwise marginalized. We need to sharpen our focus on the inequities they experience before, during, and after they are in the foster care system if we want to fully support them as they become adults.

Keep in mind

- **Explain how social inequities shape the foster care experience.** Clear 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.” Consider phrases like “this helps to explain why” or “this is one reason why.”
- **Don’t rely on data alone.** Data can be helpful when talking about structural inequality, but they need to be situated within a broader narrative that explains *why* inequities exist and how those inequities shape the foster care experience. Highlighting the way our social system creates inequity leads people to see that system change makes sense and is necessary. Don’t talk about prevalence rates, correlations, or risk factors without explaining the ways in which systems disadvantage certain groups of people.
- **Listen to and center transition age foster youth with lived experience.** Framing efforts must integrate the perspectives of advocates, researchers, and practitioners with the views of those with lived experience. Racial and economic inequities must be fully explained and contextualized *and* must incorporate and reflect the concerns and perspectives of transition age foster youth.

Why this works

When people try to understand why a child may end up in the foster care system, they often focus on the idea of “bad parenting.” They rarely connect foster care involvement to larger structural factors such as poverty, racial discrimination, or unequal access to health care, especially caregivers’ access to mental and behavioral health supports. They also fail to see our collective responsibility to make sure transition age foster youth have what they need to successfully transition to adulthood.

When we make this issue about inequality, we are better able to tie the foster care experience to larger systemic forces. People then have a deeper understanding of how we can address inequality, build a more equitable system of care, and better support transition age foster youth.

Along with building support for policy change among members of the general public, by transition age foster youth reported that the *Addressing Inequality* issue frame accurately reflects their own experiences.

Many of the transition age foster youth we spoke with said they wanted to talk about the ways in which racism and inequality were integral parts of their experiences, although they were skeptical about whether this would convince others, including policymakers, to make deeper investments in better supports. But research with the public indicates that if they connect their own experiences to larger systems of inequity, they can build support for policies that would provide them with what they need to successfully transition to adulthood.

Recommendation #6: Show what all young people need using the *Opportunity for All* value.

Use the *Opportunity for All* value to signal our collective responsibility for providing transition age foster youth access to the same supports that other young people receive from parents, families, mentors, and communities.

What it looks like

Instead of this ...	Try this ...
The transition from adolescence to mature adulthood can be a precarious time for young people with foster care experience. This experience may impede the development of skills and capacities that are essential for successful adult functioning. The multiple problems faced by these youth present barriers to meeting normative developmental milestones, including vocational and educational success, and the development of stable relationships.	Everyone should have the opportunity to succeed, regardless of their start in life. But young people leaving foster care are not getting the resources and supports they need to succeed once they reach adulthood. When foster youth turn 18, the foster system generally stops supporting them and leaves them without the support that all young people need for healthy development—things like financial support, stable housing, and educational resources.

Keep in mind

- **Be aspirational but realistic.** Using words and terms such as “can,” “should,” and “is more likely to” helps create more efficacious thinking. Avoid statements that sound too deterministic (for example, “improvements to the children’s care *will*”), which members of the public may dismiss as unrealistic.
- **Make it about access.** Stress that differences in outcomes between foster youth and other young people are a matter of *access* to opportunities and supports rather than intrinsic characteristics of the young people themselves.

Why this works

When thinking about foster care, people tend to focus on tabloid-worthy, extreme situations of cruelty and abuse, and presume that all foster youth and transition age foster youth suffer from irremediable psychological damage. They reason that transition age foster youth are fundamentally different from young people without foster experience and are so damaged that there is not much we can do to support them.

The *Opportunity for All* value emphasizes what *all* young people need and avoids casting transition age foster youth as fundamentally different than young people without foster care experience. It also helps people see that supporting transition age foster youth is a collective responsibility and that better policies can lead to better access to opportunities that will help them thrive.

Recommendation #7: Explain how we can create a grid of essential services that transition age foster youth can and should be *Plugged In* to.

Use the *Plugged In* metaphor to describe the system of care that must surround transition age foster youth as a network they need to be plugged in to. This metaphor explains not only the supports that need to be available but also reminds us of our collective responsibility for ensuring that grid is in place.

What it looks like

Instead of this ...

Transition age foster youth are at high risk of not successfully transitioning to independent adulthood due to their complex needs, the many challenges they face, and the lack of a support system to assist them. This leaves them vulnerable to mental and behavioral health problems, involvement in the justice system, and other negative outcomes.

Try this ...

As teenagers become adults, they need to be plugged in to networks of support that power their growth and success. Most teenagers can stay plugged in to the networks they need through their relationships with their families. But many young people leaving foster care are suddenly unplugged from all networks of support. We can ensure that all young people leaving foster care are plugged in to the resources they need.

Keep in mind

- **Avoid emphasizing the ways in which transition age foster youth are particularly vulnerable and need additional attention and concern beyond what other young people need.** Talk about how other young people are already connected to networks of support by their families and how transition age foster youth need similar supports.
- **Focus on collective responsibility (rather than individual effort) for ensuring access to the grid.** Do not leave people with the idea that transition age foster youth are individually and solely responsible for finding and accessing services. Talk about transition age foster youth's need "to be plugged in" rather than the need to "plug themselves in."
- **Emphasize that the grid is made up of a range of resources and supports.** Extend the metaphor to a variety of supports that are part of the grid, such as mentoring, housing, and health care, so people don't focus on education and employment.
- **Remember to include emotional supports and advocacy.** Along with supports that address transition age foster youth's material needs, give concrete examples that link emotional support to our policy and programmatic decisions.

Why this works

People do not think of transition age foster youth as a distinct population with specific material and developmental needs, which makes it difficult for them to imagine the kinds of supports that must be in place as these young people transition out of the foster care system into adulthood. Furthermore, people think of the foster care system as temporary, so the idea that children can “age out” of it is hard for them to grasp. Therefore, they have no basis for understanding how we can better support these young people as they transition out of the system.

Using the *Plugged In* metaphor, we can describe in detail a grid of supports that focuses on the material and emotional needs of transition age foster youth. We can also explain the practical steps we can take to ensure that all young people have access to and are plugged in to the supports that will best help them.

In feedback sessions with transition age foster youth, these frames were often linked. This suggests that the *Expanding Opportunities* narrative may be particularly useful for youth advocates who want to tell their own stories in ways that highlight the roles their racial, social, and class identities have played in their experiences.

Conclusion

The overarching recommendation that emerges from this research is that we need to work together to raise awareness about transition age foster youth. We need to tackle deeper assumptions that continue to slow down efforts to build systems of supports for their ongoing wellbeing.

Doing this requires two narratives. First, we need a story that puts transition age foster youth’s healthy development at the forefront, reminds people of our collective role in ensuring positive outcomes, and consistently points to the broader and collective impacts of an improved system. This is more effective than the crisis narratives that are often used to talk about this group of young people because it does not inadvertently “otherize” transition age foster youth or their families. Instead, it makes the responsibility for improving the system of supports a collective one.

Second, we need a story that explains the systemic factors, such as racism and economic injustice, that shape entry into the foster care system; the foster care experience itself; and the experience of transitioning out of that system. When people think about how inequality shapes the experiences of transition age foster youth, it is easier for them to see how supporting these young people helps us collectively create a more just and equitable society.

Challenging public thinking is a serious undertaking, but with the right frames and a consistent strategy to mobilize these frames, advocates can foster a new understanding of transition age foster youth.

Research Methods

This report presents findings from the second, prescriptive phase of the *Reframing Transition Age Foster Youth* research project.

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

- Expand public understanding of who transition age foster youth are and the kinds of supports they need

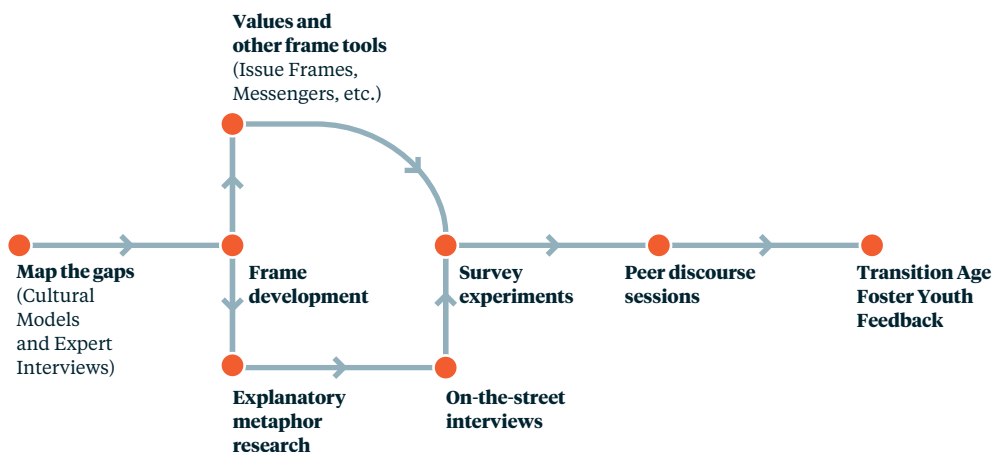
- Cultivate productive attitudes toward transition age foster youth
- Increase support for policies and programs that support transition age foster youth as they become adults.

This research builds on our [earlier research](#)* in which we “mapped the gaps” between field and public thinking on these issues.

To arrive at these recommendations, 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 and youth development and other social issues.

How Did We Identify Effective Frames?

To identify effective ways of talking about transition age foster youth, FrameWorks researchers collaborated with members of the field to develop a range of potential frames. We then tested their effectiveness with members of the US public, as well as their appropriateness and usability with transition age foster youth. All told, more than 6,500 people from across the United States were included in this research. These methods are briefly described below and summarized in **Figure 1**:



* www.frameworksinstitute.org/publication/telling-a-new-coming-of-age-story-mapping-the-gaps-between-expert-and-public-understandings-of-transition-age-youth;
www.frameworksinstitute.org/publication/stuck-in-crisis-media-and-organizational-discourse-on-foster-care-and-transition-age-youth

Frame Design

After specifying the task that the frames needed to perform, FrameWorks researchers brainstormed potential reframing strategies that 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 frames, researchers solicited feedback on these ideas from a panel of professionals to ensure 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 eight explanatory metaphors that explained why and how we should support transition age foster youth: *Bridge*, *Cliff*, *Exploration*, *Plugged In*, *Rehearsal*, *Science*, *Steep Climb*, and *Toolbox* (see Appendix A for descriptions of the frames tested in these interviews). A total of 49 interviews were conducted in Denver, Colorado, and Minneapolis, Minnesota, in June 2019. In these rapid, face-to-face interviews, researchers asked members of the public 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 transition age foster youth. Interviewers 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 was designed to gauge the effect of these tools in shifting people's attitudes, perspectives, and understanding about the issue.

Researchers analyzed the resulting data, looking for patterned ways in which each tool affected thinking and talking about transition age foster youth. 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 two metaphors (*Plugged In* and *Steep Climb*) for further investigation.

Naming Pilot and Survey Experiments

Naming Pilot. Prior to the on-the-street interviews, we conducted a naming pilot to determine whether “transition age foster youth” is the most productive term to use in communications. This online survey included 1,200 participants recruited through Amazon's Mechanical Turk platform. Participants in different groups were exposed to different descriptive names, then asked a set of questions to assess their understanding of what they thought it meant.

Nationally representative survey experiment. Following the on-the-street interviews, we conducted two online survey experiments in December 2019 and February 2020. These included 2,949 and 2,259 respondents, respectively, for a total of 5,208 respondents. Respondents were US-based adults over the age of 18 who were 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 support transition age foster youth). Those assigned to a value- or issue-framed condition received identical information about the proposal, but the information was framed using a value- or issue-based argument.

Respondents were subsequently asked a series of questions designed to measure their understanding of the causes of foster care experience, their attitudes about transition age foster youth, 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 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 presented in Appendix D.

Peer Discourse Sessions

FrameWorks researchers conducted four 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 Irvine, California, and Baltimore, Maryland, in February 2020 and involved 36 participants. The 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 were most easily understood by the public, allowed them to most productively use new information, and were most easily used during conversation with peers.

Feedback from Transition Age Foster Youth

Finally, we asked for feedback from 15 transition age foster youth to make sure the frames we developed through our research with the public were considered appropriate and usable by these young people. This research used a mixed method due to the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic and shelter-in-place orders. We conducted one group feedback session in New York City in late February 2020 with a group of six transition age foster youth. In April and May 2020, researchers conducted telephone feedback sessions with nine additional individuals. Participants lived in New York; Pennsylvania; Washington, DC; Nebraska; Colorado; Delaware; and Indiana. Participants had varying levels of experience with advocacy, with some youth having none and others having testified before state legislatures or participated in child and youth services boards.

In this research, we solicited feedback on each of six frames that tested well with the public: the *Healthy Development* and *Addressing Inequality* issue frames; the *Community Connections* and *Equal Opportunity* values; and the *Plugged In* and *Steep Climb* metaphors. Participants were asked to read each frame and then respond to questions about their overall reaction to the frames. They were asked whether they found it appropriate, whether they thought it was convincing, and whether they would use it themselves to talk about their experiences.

Researchers analyzed the video data from focus group discussion and the transcripts of the nine feedback interviews. This analysis explored the appropriateness and usability of the frames and provided insight into how the field (including youth themselves) might incorporate the framing strategy into their own advocacy and communications.

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

Bridge. As teenagers cross over to adulthood, they need a bridge of support to help them make that transition successfully. Most teenagers already have this bridge, which is built through the resources and supportive relationships they have in their families. But transition age foster youth don't have this bridge because they've never had a long-term foster family to rely on. Instead, crossing over to adulthood means falling into a void with no supports. This is why we need to create strong partnerships between the foster care system; services that help adults with housing, education, and jobs; and programs that offer supportive, ongoing relationships—to ensure that transition age foster youth successfully cross over to adulthood.

Cliff. Becoming an adult is a journey that requires time and support. When teenagers have resources and supportive relationships in their families to rely on, they can find a smooth path to follow to their destination. But transition age foster youth must face the edge of that cliff alone because they've never had a long-term foster family to rely on. This is why we need to create strong partnerships between the foster care system; services that help adults with housing, education, and jobs; and programs that offer supportive, ongoing relationships—to ensure that transition age foster youth follow a smooth path on their journey to adulthood.

Exploration. Becoming an adult is like being an explorer. Like explorers, teenagers need opportunities to try new things, expand their knowledge, and map out their futures. Most teenagers get these opportunities through the resources and supportive relationships they have in their families. But transition age foster youth don't have these opportunities to explore

because they've never had a long-term foster family to rely on. This is why we need to create strong partnerships between the foster care system; services that help adults with housing, education, and jobs; and programs that offer supportive, ongoing relationships—to ensure that transition age foster youth navigate their way to adulthood successfully.

Plugged In. As teenagers become adults, they need to be plugged in to sources of support that power their growth and success. Most teenagers can stay plugged in to the resources they need through the relationships they have in their families. But transition age foster youth are suddenly unplugged from all sources of support because they've never had a long-term foster family to rely on. This is why we need to create strong partnerships between the foster care system; services that help adults with housing, education, and jobs; and programs that offer supportive, ongoing relationships—to ensure that transition age foster youth are plugged in to the support they need to power their success in adulthood.

Rehearsal. Teenagers need to rehearse for adulthood. They need opportunities to try out new roles, and practice and learn through their mistakes. Most teenagers have the time, space, and freedom to rehearse for adulthood, thanks to the resources and supportive relationships they have in their families. But transition age foster youth don't have these opportunities to rehearse for adulthood because they've never had a long-term foster family to rely on. This is why we need to create strong partnerships between the foster care system; services that help adults with housing, education, and jobs; and programs that offer supportive, ongoing relationships—to ensure that transition age foster youth have the supports they need to successfully rehearse for adulthood.

Science. Becoming an adult is like practicing science. Teenagers need opportunities to learn through trial and error, test theories about how the world works, and discover their place within it. Most teenagers have the time, space, and freedom to test and learn like this, thanks to the resources and supportive relationships they have in their families. But transition age foster youth don't have these opportunities for trial and error because they've never had a long-term foster family to rely on. This is why we need to create strong partnerships between the foster care system; services that help adults with housing, education, and jobs; and programs that offer supportive, ongoing relationships—to ensure that transition age foster youth discover their place within adulthood successfully.

Steep Climb. Becoming an adult is like climbing a mountain. When teenagers have resources and supportive relationships in their families to rely on, they can find a gradual path upward to their destination. But transition age foster youth face a steep climb with no backup because they've never had a long-term foster family to rely on. This is why we need to create strong partnerships between the foster care system; services that help adults with housing, education, and jobs; and programs that offer supportive, ongoing relationships—to ensure that transition age foster youth have a gradual path to follow on their way to adulthood.

Toolbox. All teenagers need a set of tools to build their adult lives. When teenagers have the resources and supportive relationships in their families to rely on, they can start building their lives with a well-equipped toolbox. But transition age foster youth don't have access to these

tools because they've have never had a long-term foster family to rely on. This is why we need to create strong partnerships between the foster care system; services that help adults with housing, education, and jobs; and programs that offer supportive, ongoing relationships—to ensure that transition age foster youth have the tools they need to build a successful adult life.

Appendix B: Sample Demographics from Survey Experiment

Demographic Variable	Wave 1 (n=2,949)	Wave 2 (n=2,259)	National Benchmarks
Sex			
Male	58%	44%	51%
Female	42%	56%	49%
Household Income			
\$0–\$24,999	15%	18%	23%
\$25,000–\$49,999	24%	26%	24%
\$50,000–\$99,999	35%	33%	30%
\$100,000–\$149,999	16%	13%	13%
\$150,000 or more	10%	9%	10%
Educational Attainment			
Less than high school diploma	2%	3%	14%
High school diploma	28%	30%	28%
Some college or associate’s degree	33%	34%	29%
Bachelor’s degree	23%	22%	18%
Graduate degree	14%	12%	11%

Demographic Variable	Wave 1 (n=2,949)	Wave 2 (n=2,259)	National Benchmarks
Race and Ethnicity			
White	70%	68%	61%
Latino	8%	13%	16%
Black/African American	13%	11%	11%
Asian	6%	4%	4%
Native American/Alaska Native	1%	1%	1%
Hawaiian/Pacific Islander	<1%	<1%	<1%
Other/Biracial or multiracial	3%	2%	8%
Political Party Identification			
Democrat	44%	50%	34%
Republican	33%	41%	25%
Independent/Other	24%	9%	41%

Note: 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
Attitudes about individuals in foster care	<p>Imagine a young person in the foster care system. To what extent do you think each of the following words or phrases would describe them?</p> <p>[5-point Likert scale: <i>Not at all</i>; <i>A small amount</i>; <i>A moderate amount</i>; <i>A large amount</i>; <i>A very large amount</i>; randomize order of words and phrases]</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none">1. Lazy2. Selfish3. Hard to deal with4. Threatening5. Angry6. Friendly7. Intelligent8. Caring9. Motivated
Policy support	<p>When it comes to supporting young people leaving foster care, do you think the government should be doing more, doing less, or doing about the same?</p> <p>[<i>Doing much less</i>; <i>Doing less</i>; <i>Doing slightly less</i>; <i>Doing about the same as it is now</i>; <i>Doing slightly more</i>; <i>Doing more</i>; <i>Doing much more</i>]</p>

Scales	Sample questions
Saliency	<p>How concerned are you personally about whether young people leaving foster care succeed in life?</p> <p><i>[Not at all concerned; Slightly concerned; Moderately concerned; Very concerned; Extremely concerned]</i></p>
Understanding of structural causes of entry into foster care	<p>How important do you think the following factors are in explaining whether or not children and their families become involved in the foster care system?</p> <p><i>[Not at all important; Slightly important; Moderately important; Very important; Extremely important]</i></p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Parents' experience of poverty 2. Parents' experience of stressful life events 3. Parents' mental health issues 4. Disability or death within the family 5. The poor values that some communities hold about families and parenting 6. Parents' inability to make good choices about their lives 7. Parents' lack of care and concern for their children's welfare
Collective efficacy	<p>How realistic is that that we, as a society, can make sure that young people leaving foster care do just as well as other young people?</p> <p><i>[Extremely pessimistic; Pessimistic; Somewhat pessimistic; Neither optimistic nor pessimistic; Somewhat optimistic; Optimistic; Extremely optimistic]</i></p>
Individual and collective benefits	<p>How much of an effect do you think the <i>[pipe in name used in treatments]</i> Act would have on the following?</p> <p><i>[No effect; A small effect; A moderate effect; A large effect; A very large effect; randomize order of issues]</i></p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. The health and wellbeing of individuals with foster care experience 2. The development of individuals with foster care experience 3. The strength of the US economy 4. The ability of individuals with foster care experience to earn a good salary later in life 5. Reducing inequalities in US society
Collective responsibility	<p>In your view, how much of an obligation does our society have to ensure good outcomes for young people leaving foster care?</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

Overarching Recommendation: Contextualize the term “transition age youth” with the word “foster.”

An important framing task was determining whether the term “transition age youth” was meaningful for members of the public. Because people have a relatively shallow knowledge of the foster care system, they are often unaware that this category of young people exists. Using a term that helps them quickly identify transition age foster youth is the first step toward stronger understanding of who they are, what their needs may be, and how to support them.

To identify the most helpful term, we conducted a naming experiment. The experiment included 1,200 participants, who were recruited using Amazon’s Mechanical Turk platform. It was designed to explore which term was most easily understood and most effectively captured who this group is and what their needs might be. To do this, we crossed three terms to describe these young people—“young adults,” “youth,” and “foster youth”—with four terms describing their experience—“aging out,” “aging up,” “transition age,” and “leaving foster care.” This created 12 names to test with each treatment group (for example, “young adults aging out,” “youth aging up,” etc.).

Participants in the different treatment groups were exposed to different names and then asked to answer a set of open-ended and close-ended questions that measured how accurately they understood the term before and after a definition was provided.

The results showed that when presented with just the term “transition age youth,” participants struggled to understand what it meant and who it referred to, identifying the correct meaning only 25 percent of the time. Many of them correctly inferred that the term referred to the transition from adolescent to young adult and therefore spoke about this group’s need for financial support, job training, housing, etc. But the term “transition age youth” alone rarely called to mind foster care. In contrast, the term “transition age *foster* youth” was much more successful, and participants provided an accurate definition of the term 51 percent of the time.

Importantly, the understanding of all 12 terms increased significantly when participants received an accompanying definition of the group. This suggests that the term “transition age youth” *may* be appropriate, but only if advocates follow it with a clear explanation of exactly which group of young people it refers to. If hearing the name in isolation, it is much more intuitive for members of the public to hear “transition age foster youth.”

Recommendation #1: Talk about how programs and policies for transition age foster youth can and will support their healthy development.

Recommendation #5: Make it about addressing inequality.

In the survey experiment, we tested different issue frames relevant to transition age foster youth. Issue frames establish what a topic is about. For example, one could say that supporting transition age foster youth is, at its core, an issue of healthy development. Alternatively, supporting transition age foster youth could be considered first and foremost a matter of addressing racial and economic inequality. Experts recognize that there are many dimensions to any 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.

In the survey experiment, we tested three issue frames:

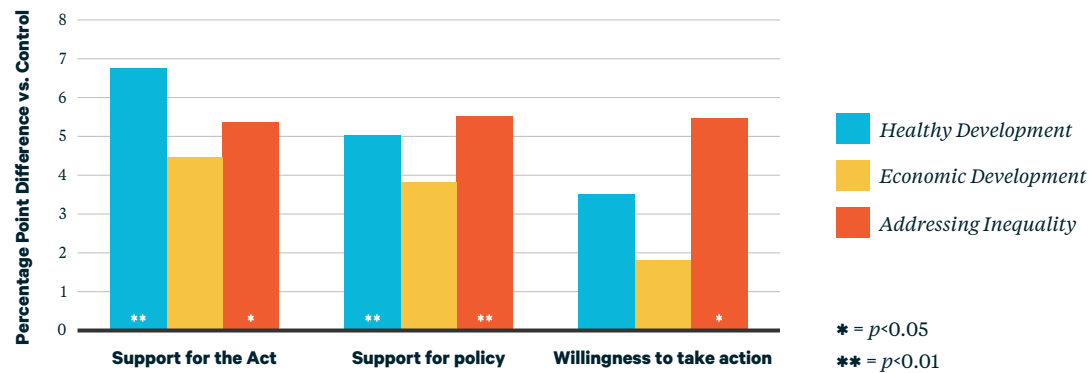
- *Healthy Development*, which focuses on how supporting transition age foster youths can support their healthy biological, psychological, and emotional development;
- *Addressing Inequality*, which focuses on how supporting transition age foster youth addresses racial and economic inequality; and
- *Economic Development*, which focuses on the economic benefits of supporting transition age foster youth.

As shown in Figure 2, both the *Healthy Development* and the *Addressing Inequality* issue frames led to increased support for policies to support transition age foster youth. The *Addressing Inequality* frame also increased participants’ willingness to take personal action to support this group of young people (for example, by writing a letter to a government official or signing a petition). In contrast, the *Economic Development* issue frame had no statistically significant effects on understanding, attitudes, or policy support compared to the control group.

Following the results of the survey experiment, we further tested the *Healthy Development* and *Addressing Inequality* frames in peer discourse sessions. In separate groups, participants were asked to discuss both of these frames. They were then asked to discuss what they understood them to mean and how they might use them to advocate for different types of programs and policies that support young people transitioning out of foster care. Participants in these sessions engaged more productively with the *Healthy Development* frame because they viewed improving development as being more feasible than addressing inequality and contributing to further thinking about effective solutions.

Participants in the peer discourse session and feedback interviews with transition age foster youth said both frames accurately reflected their experiences and needs. Several were particularly interested in the *Addressing Inequality* frame, explaining that racial discrimination was an important aspect of their experiences in and out of foster care.

Figure 2: Effects of Issue Frames



Recommendation #2: Talk about how transition age foster youth need the same things all young people need to thrive as they become adults.

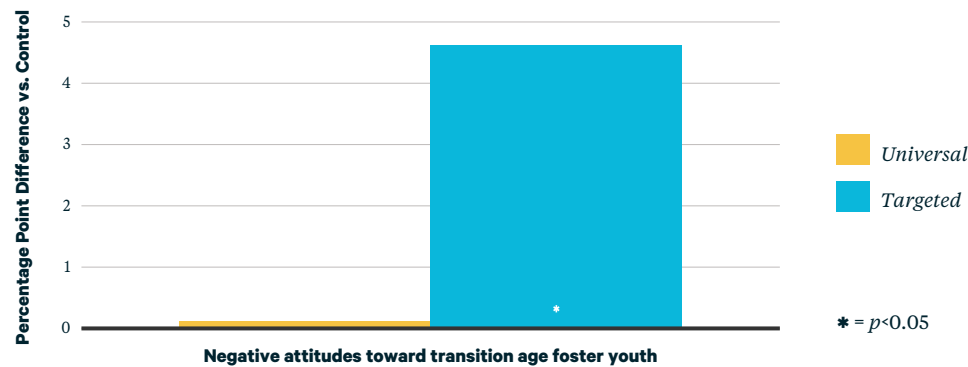
In the survey experiment, researchers tested two contrasting messages to determine which was more successful at cultivating positive attitudes toward transition age foster youth. The first message emphasized that transition age foster youth have needs that are fundamentally similar to the needs of all other young people (a *Universal* message). In contrast, the second message foregrounded the ways in which transition age foster youth have fundamentally different needs than their peers, due to the unique nature of their background and life experiences (a *Targeted* message).

The results demonstrated that the *Targeted* message, which described the unique needs of transition age foster youth, backfired—actually increasing participants’ negative attitudes toward these youth (see Figure 3). These findings were further explored in peer discourse sessions. We found that focusing on the unique needs of transition age foster youth often

led to “othering” and increased stigmatizing thinking. In contrast, the *Universal* frame resulted in a much more positive outlook on this group’s needs and society’s ability to support their development and wellbeing.

Importantly, although the frame emphasized universal needs, participants in the sessions recognized and discussed that transition age foster youth needed *more* of these supports. This suggests that the *Universal* message still leaves room to talk about the particular needs of transition age foster youth once the similarities to other young people are established.

Figure 3: Effect of Universal vs. Targeted Frames



Recommendation #3: Talk about how we can support transition age foster youth as they become adults using the *Steep Climb* metaphor.

Recommendation #7: Explain how we can create a grid of essential services that transition age foster youth can and should be *Plugged In* to.

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 can have the power to change the way a topic is understood.

At the beginning of the prescriptive research process, we identified a key reframing task that was suited to an explanatory metaphor. This generated an understanding of the challenges transition age foster youth face as they become adults and the ways in which effective programs and policies can support them. Candidate explanatory metaphors were tested with members of the public using both qualitative and quantitative methods, including on-the-street interviews, survey experiments, and peer discourse sessions.

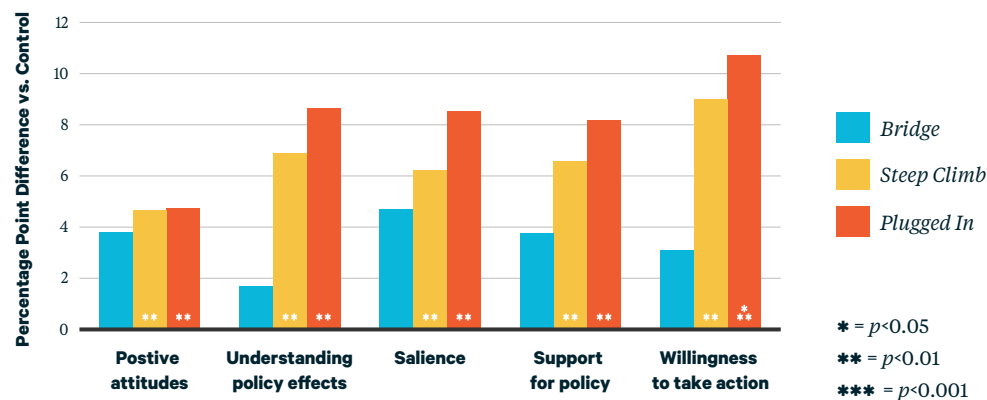
Across these qualitative and quantitative methods, we found that two metaphors were particularly effective: the *Plugged In* metaphor, which explains how and why transition age foster youth are connected to supports, and the *Steep Climb* metaphor, which explains the

challenges these young people face as they become adults and the ways in which supports help them make that transition successfully. Both metaphors tap into accessible ideas about the things young people need as they become adults and how to attend to those needs, but they approach those ideas from different angles.

In on-the-street interviews and peer discourse sessions, participants who received a version of these metaphors used them with ease. The language of both metaphors stuck in people’s minds and was easily picked up and used in dialogue with the researchers. This indicates that these metaphors have a strong capacity to enter and shape public discourse about transition age foster youth. In the survey experiment, both metaphors performed well across a range of measures when compared to the control. They increased policy support, salience, and understanding of how effective supports improve outcomes for transition age foster youth and also improved attitudes toward transition age foster youth (see Figure 4).

Feedback from transition age foster youth confirmed that both metaphors were accurate in depicting their experiences and were usable in their own communications. Based on this analysis, both metaphors are recommended as ways of explaining what transition age foster youth need and how we can support them as they become adults.

Figure 4: Effects of Metaphors



Recommendation #4: Link support for transition age foster youth to the importance of building community connections.

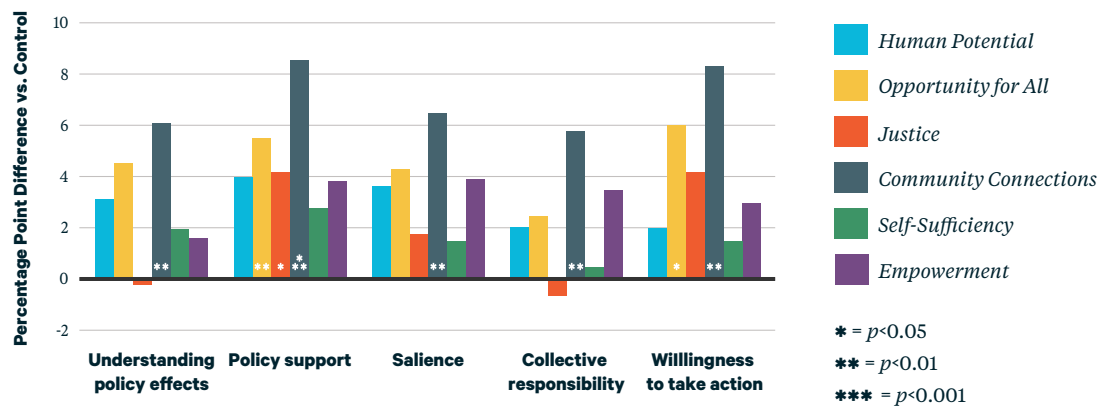
Recommendation #6: Show what all young people need using the *Opportunity for All* value.

Values tap into people’s shared commitments and priorities to make a case for why people should care about a particular issue and should 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* and *Opportunity for All* were more effective than any of the other values tested. As shown below, both led to significant positive effects on support for policy, collective efficacy, and salience (Figure 5). Both values also performed well in peer discourse sessions, where they led to efficacious thinking about how transition age foster youth can be supported. Notably, both values have been effective in other work directly related to this research: The *Community Connections* value was particularly useful in raising support for policies that support young people’s wellbeing in our project on [reframing adolescent development](http://www.frameworksinstitute.org/publication/from-risk-to-opportunity-framing-adolescent-development),* and the *Opportunity for All* value proved effective in our research on [developmental relationships](http://www.frameworksinstitute.org/publication/reframing-developmental-relationships-a-frameworks-messagememo)**.

Transition age foster youth who participated in feedback on the framing tools also responded positively to both values. Several explicitly linked the *Equal Opportunity* value to the *Addressing Inequality* issue frame and the *Plugged In* metaphor, suggesting that these three frames in combination may be particularly useful for advocates.

Figure 5: Effects of Values



* www.frameworksinstitute.org/publication/from-risk-to-opportunity-framing-adolescent-development

** www.frameworksinstitute.org/publication/reframing-developmental-relationships-a-frameworks-messagememo

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Advancing Wellbeing and Expanding Opportunities: Reframing Transition Age Foster Youth

August 2020

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