

How Are Children's Issues Portrayed in the News? A Media Content Analysis

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Luis E. Hestres, PhD, Senior Researcher
Abigail Rochman, Research Analyst
Daniel Busso, PhD, Director of Research
Andrew Volmert, PhD, Senior Vice President for Research

**FRAME
WORKS**

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Preface by David Alexander, Leading for Kids

Kids are having their media moment. Whether focusing on the effects of the pandemic on child development and mental health, the debate over masks in school, child poverty, or climate change, the news media are covering children's issues in ways that we have not seen for many years. For those of us advocating for kids, this is fantastic and long overdue. Although having kids in the spotlight is great, we also need to consider how they are presented. Are these issues being positioned in ways that will move our society toward considering the best interests of children in all our decisions? Will this coverage push us toward a sense of collective responsibility for ensuring that every child reaches their full potential?

This is the third report from the [Framing a New Narrative for Our Kids](#) project, which has been generously supported by the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation and the Children's Hospital Association. The first report, [Why Aren't Kids a Policy Priority](#), describes the cultural mindsets and attitudes that keep kids out of our public discourse and off our public policy agenda. [The second](#) report discusses how advocates are currently framing kids' issues and suggests ways that our cultural mindsets might be interacting with these frames to hinder the effectiveness of their advocacy efforts. This new report examines the frames embedded in news media—past and present—and offers recommendations that advocates can use to navigate these narratives.

One historical example with some real parallels to our current environment is the history of child labor in the United States. It is hard to imagine, but at the turn of the 20th century, 18 percent of the US workforce was younger than 16 years of age. The children in the workforce at that time were mainly from poor, rural, immigrant families. Although advocates worked for decades on this issue, historians give much of the credit for the eventual ban on child labor to photojournalist Lewis Hine, who spent decades photographing child laborers. Thousands of these images were published in newspapers and magazines across the country, pushing the public and elected officials to act. A federal ban on child labor was finally passed in 1938.

This report suggests ways to frame the hard work of our colleagues in journalism so that it has the same powerful impact on kids' lives that Lewis Hine's work did a century ago. The grandchildren of the kids in Lewis Hine's photographs are not working in factories today because he and others told their stories in ways that generated public action. Let's find a way to do that again.

Introduction

Children in the United States lag behind their peers in other wealthy countries on important indicators of wellbeing, such as poverty, education, health, and nutrition.¹ This disparity is the result of systematic policy neglect: As a nation, we're simply not doing what it takes to ensure children's wellbeing.

This report, written in partnership with Leading for Kids and with funding from the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation and the Children's Hospital Association, is part of a broader project to understand why, as a country, we don't prioritize children and how we can change our narratives to move them up the agenda. In this report, we contribute to these broader goals by exploring how children's issues are and have previously been positioned in the news media. This report accompanies a strategic brief that lays out how existing cultural mindsets—the public's assumptions and implicit understanding—prevent people from prioritizing children in their consideration of policy² and a report on how children's advocates discuss children's issues.³

As we discuss in the strategic brief on public perceptions, most Americans have a hard time connecting social and economic policies to children.⁴ Americans locate children in spaces of care—home and school—and struggle to understand how policies that don't directly shape these spaces matter for kids. Moreover, individualism and antigovernment mindsets get in the way of support for collective action to support kids. These ideas result from and inform our public discourse on children and policy.

Mass media is a key source of public perceptions about children's issues. The media act as an information gatekeeper, magnifying certain kinds of messages and muting others.^{5,6} By echoing certain narratives, the media shape Americans' beliefs, attitudes, and policy preferences, including those related to children—a phenomenon known as the “drip, drip” effect.⁷ To shift our public discourse about children, advocates need to shift how children's issues are covered in the news. To accomplish this change, they must first understand how children's issues are currently portrayed.

In addition, advocates can benefit from understanding how children’s issues have been framed in the past. By looking back in time, we can trace the roots of our current discourse, gain clues about how framing contests about children’s issues tend to play out, and see promising but forgotten strategies from the past that differ from current practice.

In this report, we present findings from media content analyses of both current and past news coverage. This research maps how children’s issues appear in the news today and how in the past the media portrayed key legislation affecting children at the time of its introduction and passage. The report traces how this reporting often pushed kids off the public agenda, kept children’s wellbeing off the radar, discusses background questions of racial equity, and prevented people from seeing collective action on children’s issues as a priority. It also identifies more promising patterns in media coverage—patterns that encourage a more collective understanding of children that advocates may be able to resurrect, use, and build on.

After mapping patterns in media coverage, the report concludes with recommendations for shifting media discourse and questions for future research. Taken together, this report and the others from the project map the landscape of public thinking and discourse and lay the groundwork for the development of a new narrative on children’s issues.

Research Goals and Approach

This research was designed to explore the following questions:

- Which stories and framing strategies do the media use to communicate children’s issues?
- What are the implications of these contemporary frames for current public thinking about children’s issues?
- Historically, how have the media reported on major legislation that affected children?
- What does this history tell us about current and future ways of framing issues concerning children?

The contemporary media sample consists of 98 articles taken from a diverse set of US-based news sources, including national and regional newspapers and news websites. The sources include *Chicago Tribune*, *Daily News* (New York), *Los Angeles Times*, *StarTribune* (Minneapolis-St. Paul), *Atlanta Journal-Constitution*, *Arizona Republic*, *Boston Globe*, *Dallas Morning News*, *Denver Post*, *Detroit News*, *Houston Chronicle*, *Philadelphia Inquirer*, *San Francisco Chronicle*, *Star-Ledger* (Newark, NJ), *New York Post*, *New York Times*, *Wall Street Journal*, and *Washington Post*. We selected these sources based on their considerable circulation and readership and to ensure geographical and ideological variation in the sample. We did not include items from other online sources, such as social media, because typically there is no discernible difference among the narratives that dominate these sources.⁸ In fact, traditional news outlets, such as *New York Times* and *Washington Post*, tend to drive the narrative in other outlets. In other words, including other digital sources would produce nearly identical results from those presented here. The FrameWorks Institute researchers selected and downloaded articles from these sources using a search query designed to capture stories about children and public policy, not simply stories that happened to mention kids.⁹ Every 10th article from the search was selected for coding. Searches were limited to articles that appeared in these news sources between January 1, 2015, and December 20, 2020, to capture a variety of stories about children’s policies.¹⁰

The analysis of the contemporary media sample proceeded in three stages. First, researchers coded the sample quantitatively by using a predetermined codebook. Based on these results, they identified themes, trends, and patterns of meaning in the data that were used to shape a qualitative codebook. Second, researchers coded and analyzed articles qualitatively to identify specific frames in play. Qualitative analysis discerned patterns in both what was said (documents’ explicit language or content) and what was implied (ideas derived from interpretation and inference). These methods complement each other: The quantitative analysis gave us a high-level overview of the themes present in the data, while the qualitative analysis enabled us to discern patterns of meaning in the data that can’t be easily quantified.

Finally, the findings were interpreted against the backdrop of the public's assumptions about and implicit understanding of issues specific to children, which were identified in prior stages of research.¹¹ This analysis explored how media frames (1) cue and reinforce existing ways of thinking among members of the public; (2) conflict with or challenge existing ways of thinking; or (3) fail to address a topic, leaving people to "fill in the blanks" with existing patterns of thinking. This analysis enabled us to identify how frames embedded in articles are likely to affect public understanding of children's issues.

The sample for the historical analysis consisted of 88 articles spanning 85 years, from 1912 to 1997. They were sourced from *New York Times*, *Chicago Tribune*, and *Wall Street Journal*. We chose these three sources based on their circulation and function as papers of record. The stories covered five major policies affecting children: the establishment of the Children's Bureau (1912), child labor laws under the New Deal (1933–1938), Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC, part of the Social Security Act of 1935), Head Start (1965), and Temporary Assistance to Needy Families (TANF, 1996).

For the historical sample, each article was analyzed qualitatively. The analysis was designed to help us understand how major children's legislation was positioned at the time. After identifying frames, researchers considered how these findings enrich our understanding of contemporary discourse about children's issues. This consideration focused on three areas: (1) how the historical findings might deepen our understanding of the origin of current trends in how children's issues are framed; (2) what insight they provide into how framing contests specific to children's issues typically play out; and (3) whether any frames from the past that aren't currently used could potentially be useful today.

Findings: Seven Patterns of Media Coverage

This section of the report identifies the dominant framing strategies the media use to speak about children’s issues. For each finding, we discuss how the frames are likely to affect public thinking. Findings from the historical analysis are provided throughout to deepen the discussion and help illuminate their implications.

Finding 1. The Media Hold Government Responsible for Children’s Wellbeing

Although articles varied in how they attributed responsibility for children’s wellbeing—ranging from attributing responsibility to individuals alone to assigning responsibility primarily to society—a significant number of articles portrayed government or society as the guarantor of children’s rights and safety. This finding indicates a predisposition by reporters toward systemic thinking about children’s issues that could be advantageous to children’s advocates if cultivated properly. In other words, reporters and columnists are more likely to think about solving problems that pertain to kids through the lens of systems rather than through the lens of individual agency. Here are some examples of how articles attribute responsibility to government:

[This article is about the death of a teenager with autism.] His father and his father’s girlfriend are facing abuse and drug charges. But lawmakers have questioned how signs of abuse weren’t spotted earlier given the teen and his brother, who police said was also malnourished, were enrolled in Fall River schools and the family was involved with [Department of Children and Families].”¹²

On a broad scale, everyone can agree that no children should die from gun violence, [Dr. Stephanie] Chao said. She hopes state-level legislators will take notice of the research and act.”¹³

“It’s our responsibility to protect these kids,” [Jerry Hill, California state senator] said. *[This quote is from an article about child marriage.]*¹⁴

The government was the stakeholder (defined as a group of people or institutions with an interest in children's issues) most often mentioned in news articles, at 86.6 percent. The second-most frequently mentioned stakeholder was families, at 79.4 percent. This is evidence of the prominence of government in stories about children and public policy as well as the responsibility assigned to them for children's wellbeing in news stories.

Government's responsibility for the wellbeing of children often comes out in stories that highlight lack of funding or resources for government agencies to fulfill their responsibilities properly. Here's an example from a story about child sexual abuse imagery online:

The Times found that state and local law enforcement efforts were grossly underfunded, and that the federal government had failed to adequately enforce a 2008 law meant to curb the spread of the material. Many technology companies, moreover, were found to be doing very little to patrol their own platforms.¹⁵

This article, like others in the sample, takes for granted that government *should* be protecting children's wellbeing. It seems so commonsensical that it isn't stated explicitly. Collective responsibility here is implicit but clear: The majority of media coverage communicates the idea, tacitly or expressly, that it is government's job to ensure positive outcomes for children.

This focus on government responsibility represents a break with common attitudes about social problems in the United States, which tend to attach individualized solutions to social problems. In research about other issues, we have found that media coverage tends to hew closely to individualism, making this pattern in coverage about children's issues striking. Given that the public often thinks about children's issues in individualistic ways, this pattern in media coverage is doubly notable. We suspect that the reason coverage doesn't tend to be individualistic is that only those issues that are deemed of public, collective relevance are being covered in the first place. As we discuss later, media tend to talk about government's role in terms of prevention of serious harm to children rather than actively promoting wellbeing. This narrow focus likely reflects the assumption that other issues are matters of individual concern for parents and children. In other words, the reason we don't see a lot of individualism in coverage may be because, on this issue, individualism prevents some issues from seeming newsworthy, keeping them from being covered in the first place.

How this likely affects public thinking

The media's tendency to place responsibility for safeguarding children's wellbeing on government represents an opportunity for advocates. Although journalists tend to focus on government's role in protecting children and preventing harm (as opposed to *promoting* children's wellbeing), media emphasis on government's responsibility can potentially help counter Americans' tendency to think individualistically about children and hold parents and other direct caregivers responsible for children's wellbeing. Careful media outreach is needed

to reinforce and nurture media discussion of government’s responsibility and to expand coverage beyond discussion of protective and preventive functions. Such outreach can include op-eds or media briefings in which advocates cite examples where the government has taken a more expansive view of children’s wellbeing. This approach could help counter individualistic thinking and promote a more collective understanding of responsibility among the public.

Finding 2. The Media Use a “Broken Systems” Narrative That Portrays Government as Ineffective in Safeguarding Children’s Wellbeing

Even as the media hold government responsible for children’s wellbeing, they portray government as ineffective in fulfilling this responsibility. Articles used a familiar “broken systems” narrative in which government continually lets kids down and fails to live up to its responsibility. This narrative was used to talk about a wide range of issues, including foster care, education, and child abuse. Sometimes, this “broken systems” narrative is rooted in a depiction of government as deeply and inherently inept, such as in these examples:

“People really don’t understand how broken the foster care system is,” said Adam Smith, a former foster parent and a founder of Every Kid Deserves a Voice, an advocacy group.¹⁶

The Detroit lawsuit describes a shocking and comprehensively documented denial of access to literacy. These students attend schools all but exclusively serving children of color. Barely a pretense of education takes place there, under deplorable conditions that make teaching and learning nearly impossible: classrooms without adult teachers, wildly outdated books or no books at all, sweltering or freezing temperatures, rampant vermin infestation and other grossly unsafe physical conditions.¹⁷

In her experience, it’s not uncommon for social workers or police officers to fail to see signs of abuse or neglect while in contact with a child. “I hear these examples all the time,” she said.¹⁸

A closely related “partisan bickering” narrative describes children as collateral damage in legislative disputes and partisan gridlock. Stories that use this narrative talk about funding for children being held hostage in policy negotiations. In this narrative, the system is broken not through ineptitude but through crass partisanship that focuses on politics and leaves children out of the equation.

Ms. Trump, 35, faces a difficult challenge as she tries to use [her] voice to span the deep divides between Republicans and Democrats on these issues. Republican women in Congress, who often work at the fringe of their party on federal childcare matters, have still found themselves shunned by Democrats who dismiss their childcare and income equality proposals as insufficient.¹⁹

CHIP, a program that has had unusually strong bipartisan support since it was created in 1997, is now in limbo—an unexpected victim of the partisan rancor that has stymied legislative action in Washington this year. Its federal funds ran out on Sept. 30, and Congress has not agreed on a plan to renew the roughly \$14 billion a year it spends on the program.²⁰

How this likely affects public thinking

Although the media’s assertion of government responsibility for children’s wellbeing presents an opportunity for advocates, the “broken systems” and closely related “partisan bickering” narratives present a significant challenge. These narratives are likely to breed cynicism and despondency among the public and reinforce preexisting notions about the government’s inability (or unwillingness) to tackle problems. Advocates must be careful not to amplify these narratives and the idea that government is incapable of ensuring children’s wellbeing. Communicators must strike a balance between pointing out the inadequacies of government systems that serve children and building a sense of possibility and aspiration about our need and ability to reform those systems.

Finding 3. The Media Portray Children as Vulnerable and in Need of Protection

In a majority of articles, the media use a “vulnerable child” frame, emphasizing that children are susceptible to harm and must be protected. This frame casts children as objects to be protected rather than as active agents with their own motives, desires, and opinions and in their ability to act and engage.

This frame is also oriented negatively toward preventing *harm* rather than positively toward promoting *wellbeing*. This focus on preventing harm appeared frequently in discussions of the role of government policy, such as policies designed to prevent abuse, malnutrition, child poverty, and health challenges. In this way, the role of government is implicitly framed as being *protective*—stepping in to prevent harm to children rather than proactively promoting wellbeing. Consider, for example, the following headlines:

- EPA halts effort to ban pesticide; Order lets farmers continue to use chlorpyrifos, linked to nervous system damage in children.²¹
- Spanking Is Ineffective and Harmful to Children, Pediatricians’ Group Says²²
- Bold Strike Against Poverty: A Check for Every Child²³
- If Congress Changes Food Stamp Requirements, Kids Will Go Hungry²⁴
- \$5 Billion Proposal to Fight Online Child Sexual Abuse²⁵

Or these quotes:

While programs like this one are incredibly valuable, the futures of our most vulnerable children should not be left to the chance of having an innovative court or a sympathetic attorney. We can no longer allow these children to go unnoticed. We need to develop collaborative, interagency programs and protocols led by the child welfare system.²⁶

Section 230 of the Communications Decency Act, part of a major 1996 overhaul of telecommunications law, provides immunity for Internet companies for third-party content on their platforms. Ambrose accused Backpage and other such sites of “making millions of dollars exploiting our children,” warning that “our babies, your child, your nieces, your nephews” are vulnerable to web-based pimping.²⁷

While SB273 is still alive and moving through legislative committees, amendments have removed any age restriction. The measure in its current form increases family court oversight to ensure that a minor’s marriage isn’t coerced, including a requirement that judges interview individuals privately. “It’s a compromise,” Hill said, but still a positive step. “It’s our responsibility to protect these kids,” he said.²⁸

These articles consistently emphasize the vulnerability of children and their need to be protected, as passive objects, from harm. In this framing, media stories don’t talk about the positive steps government can take to actively promote children’s wellbeing.

How this likely affects public thinking

The “vulnerable child” frame poses a major challenge for advocates and communicators and explains much of the public’s current thinking about children. By focusing almost exclusively on protection from harm, the media reinforce the public’s conceptions of children as objects of care. The public thus has little practice and considerable difficulty thinking of children as active subjects—as people whose voices and concerns should be listened to. This protection framing contributes to our dominant ways of thinking about children as passive objects and makes many of the key points—particularly about children’s rights—that advocates wish to advance difficult to communicate.²⁹

In addition, the dominant focus on government's role as protecting children from harm narrows the scope of children's policies that the public sees as appropriate and viable. It limits policy considerations to areas where children face specific threats and require protection rather than focusing attention on the broader ways in which policy can support children's development and promote their wellbeing.

Advocates should be careful not to reinforce the vulnerability frame in their communications or interactions with the media.

Lessons from History. The Children's Bureau: An Early Framing Contest about the Role of Government

Early efforts among children's advocates in the United States focused on the most basic concern: the survival of American children. One of the field's earliest efforts revolved around the creation of the Children's Bureau in 1912. The bureau's stated mission was to investigate and report "upon all matters pertaining to the welfare of children and child life among all classes of our people."³⁰ The bureau's chief mandate was to investigate the causes of America's high child mortality rate and disseminate information about how to prevent premature deaths. The Children's Bureau involved the federal government significantly in the lives of American children for the first time, if only to ensure their survival. In reporting about Julia Lathrop's appointment to head the bureau, the *New York Times* said, "It is expected she will build up an institution which will be an important branch of the government service in the investigation of conditions of child life and in correlating and accelerating the activities of individual states in bettering such conditions."³¹

Coverage of the Children's Bureau included a frame contest centered on the proper role of government. Some articles about the bureau mirror contemporary framing in emphasizing the government's moral responsibility for preventing fundamental harm to children—in this case, preventing premature deaths. Other articles include the antigovernment rhetoric that remains dominant today. Opposition to the bureau centered on the idea that the bureau represented an overstep of the federal government into both states' rights and families' lives, claiming that the bureau was expensive or unnecessary. One opponent said, "The Federal Government has nothing to do, directly or indirectly, with [s]tate legislation on the subject of child welfare. That is a matter which concerns the states themselves."³² Even at this early moment in children's advocacy, we can see familiar frames used to argue for a more expansive or more limited role of government. This framing contest has appeared consistently in other debates over major children's policies.

Why this matters for children’s advocates today

This episode shows the roots of and continuity in media’s framing of children’s issues. Like today’s coverage, government was shown as having an important role in children’s lives, but that role was limited to preventing harm. It also shows that the themes that infuse today’s opposition to progressive children’s policies have deep roots in American history. The arguments that opponents leveled against the Children’s Bureau—the claim of infringement on individual and states’ rights and bloated government—are similar to those used today against any major social policy. We might imagine that these conflicts are more extreme in our polarized moment, but they have been a consistent part of our public discourse about children’s policy for more than a century, which suggests that any attempt to advance children’s issues will inevitably encounter similar arguments and opposition. Advocates cannot hope to avoid such frame contests, so they must find effective ways to engage and win them.

Finding 4. The Media Today Rarely Discuss Racial Equity in Relation to Children’s Issues

In our research on the framing practices of the children’s advocacy field, we found that advocates frequently highlight and discuss issues of racial equity. By contrast, media coverage of children’s issues largely ignores such issues. In our quantitative analysis, we found that race was discussed in just 12.4 percent of articles in the sample. By comparison, socioeconomic status was mentioned in 33 percent of the articles.

In the limited number of articles that did discuss racial disparities, those disparities were typically just stated or asserted. In these cases, articles provided readers with little explanation of the sources of racial disparities and no historical context:

The new discipline policy, proposed in part to curb discipline doled out disproportionately to black children, prohibits suspension of students in pre-kindergarten through second grade.³³

The heavy presence of school-based law enforcement too often leads to violent interactions with police and arrests of students for disciplinary infractions. Black and brown children and those with disabilities are most at risk of being funneled into [the] prison pipeline for simply misbehaving in class.³⁴

Meanwhile, the data on the detrimental impact of months of remote learning, especially on Black, Hispanic, and low-income students, is mounting. Those students can’t afford to lose another semester of in-person learning.³⁵

How this likely affects public thinking

The lack of coverage of racial equity issues affecting children presents an obvious challenge for advocates: It means that the news media are doing nothing to deepen public understanding of this issue. This fact is particularly troubling in light of the upheavals in American society after the 2020 murder of George Floyd, which has inspired a wave of antiracist activism across the country. By leaving disparities unexplained in the few cases where they are discussed, the media are leaving the public to fall back on their default preconceptions about children and race. For many, this means that racist stereotypes and assumptions about children and families of color will shape how people make sense of these unframed assertions.³⁶

At the same time, this void around racial equity in media coverage of children's issues is begging to be filled. Advocates can play a pivotal role in that endeavor, but they must be careful in how they communicate. Facts about racial inequities must be positioned carefully to forestall individualistic (and often racist) interpretations of them. Advocates and communicators must historicize and explain the sources of racial inequities so as not to trigger racial and ethnic stereotypes deeply embedded in American culture.

Lessons from History. How the Media Have—and Haven't—Talked about Race

During the New Deal era, when programs such as AFDC and child labor laws were enacted, the media described policies in largely positive terms, emphasizing the general benefits of such policies for the American people. These discussions used collective frames that portrayed those affected as a single group. The media did not discuss existing racial and ethnic disparities among children or how these policies would affect different racial and ethnic groups. This framing contributed to broad support for these policies, but it obscured the ways in which major racial inequities were built into these programs. New Deal welfare policies were intentionally designed to benefit white people and provide less support to Black people. This disparity was not discussed in media coverage.

Coverage of welfare reform in the late 1990s represented a significant shift in media framing. Articles covering TANF overwhelmingly positioned the policy as a way of promoting individual responsibility. The focus here turned away from the institutional, systemic issues that contributed to poverty and framed poverty as the result of personal choices and decision-making. This individualistic framing created space for racist tropes and stereotypes about who makes bad personal choices.

The emphasis on individual responsibility did not simply allow the American public to apply racist stereotypes but actively advanced a narrative that pathologized Black urban communities,³⁷ a narrative that was deliberately promoted through a concerted, decades-long campaign by conservatives. This narrative led to increasing public perception that welfare programs created a culture of dependence, particularly among Black Americans

and other people of color. This narrative was sometimes subtly cued rather than directly presented, as in a *Chicago Tribune* article that noted that the success of the program would be determined by the “people who have spent great chunks of their lives on public aid, among people who haven’t finished high school, who haven’t worked much or for long periods of time.” The prevalence of the pathology narrative left readers with little question about who these people are. The same article continued, “No one better understands the frustrations of living on government aid, the humiliations, the cheating, the lying and the inertia than the people [already on welfare].”³⁸

Why this matters for children’s advocates today

These findings show the importance of introducing race explicitly into the conversation in productive ways. The history of the New Deal shows that avoiding talk about race altogether can leave intolerable discrimination and racial inequities invisible and unaddressed. The history of TANF shows how racist narratives can be weaponized against people of color to diminish support for government action. As we note earlier, advocates must find accessible ways of talking about and explaining the sources of racial inequities and identify strategies for effectively countering racist tropes about Black people and other people of color because these will inevitably be brought to bear as part of the argument against major children’s policies.

Finding 5. The Media Largely Don’t Talk about Child Development, and When They Do, They Invoke It as a Value Rather Than an Explanation

The concept of “child development” is important to the field, yet the vast majority of articles in our sample did not even mention, much less focus on it. The concept was mentioned explicitly in only 21.6 percent of articles in our sample.

Even when child development was mentioned or alluded to in articles, it was talked about vaguely, without any discussion of the phases of development, different developmental periods, how development works, or its effects or outcomes. The articles below are characteristic of this. They mention development as a critical goal rather than explaining how it works, why it matters, or what it does. The media use child development as a value, a reason for taking action based on the assumption that it matters to everyone, rather than actually explaining what happens during development or the ultimate reasons why it matters, such as learning, relationships, and health. In other words, the media often talk about good development as the goal, leaving undiscussed all the ways in which development affects people’s life outcomes.

And all students lose out on counseling; they're socially isolated and lonely, and the youngest ones are missing developmental milestones.³⁹

A push to make kindergarten mandatory has the backing of educators and lawmakers who say it's vital to development.⁴⁰

Hardy said, "We know quite a bit from the child development literature about how these sorts of stressors really impede child development." While these early stressors predated the Covid-19 crisis, the effects of the pandemic and exposure to the deaths of these Black Americans will exacerbate the potential for toxic stress.⁴¹

How this likely affects public thinking

As we point out in the strategic brief for this project, members of the public more immediately recognize the importance of child development and are able to think about it in deeper and more accurate ways than they used to.⁴² This shift makes using development *as a value* a potentially viable strategy for at least some audiences. Because people can think about development in ways that are more consistent with the science and, in turn, recognize how important child development is to long-term outcomes, invocations of development as the reason for collective action are not necessarily unproductive.

Such invocations do little to address ongoing misunderstandings about development, however. Although members of the public recognize the importance of child development and better understand how it works than in the past, misunderstandings of development remain in wide circulation. If members of the public are not exposed to accurate explanations of development regularly, they may slip back into inaccurate thinking. In their media strategy, advocates must work with journalists to ensure that development is explained at least sometimes.

Lessons from History. Shifting Back and Forth between Moral and Instrumental Framing

Historically, children's issues have been framed in the media in two distinct and somewhat contradictory ways: moralistic and instrumentalist. For example, media coverage sometimes framed the Children's Bureau as a part of our moral responsibility to prevent premature deaths. Other stories about the bureau, however, made an instrumental case, arguing that the federal government should take action on child welfare because of the benefits it would offer American society. These stories argued that premature deaths reduced the American workforce and thus economic potential. According to Lathrop in the *Chicago Tribune*, the United States "cannot afford the loss of life of a high infant mortality nor the loss of vigor which a high percentage of physical defects indicates."⁴³ Such instrumental arguments also animated opposition to the

bureau. Its opponents feared that a federal organization tasked with overseeing the welfare of the nation’s children would lead to severe limitations on the employment of children in cotton mills and the outlawing of child labor entirely. The *Chicago Tribune* described their opposition: “It has been charged that southern opposition in the Senate and House was due to the fear of interference with the employment of children in cotton mills.”⁴⁴

Newspaper articles similarly made an economic case for child labor laws, arguing that the employment of children created an unfair economic environment that went against the United States’ economic interests. Under this framing, taking children out of the workforce would facilitate employment of currently unemployed men—and at higher wages—which would be good for the economy because families would have more to spend on goods and services. Outlawing child labor would begin to solve some of the economic issues facing the United States, particularly unemployment. The *New York Times* quoted a letter from the National Child Labor Committee that argued that child labor created “an unfair element of competition in the industry” and that any program to relieve unemployment should also eliminate child labor and replace those children with unemployed adults.⁴⁵

Why this matters for children’s advocates today

Advocates have long struggled to balance moral and instrumental arguments. On one hand, instrumental arguments can be powerful. Appealing to people’s interests may help build greater investment in the issue. On the other hand, these arguments threaten to make children seem important only as a means to other ends, which undercuts their inherent value and the respect and rights owed to them as human beings. Moral framing taps into this inherent value in a different, potentially powerful way. The instrumentalization of children seems to have peaked around the time of the establishment of child labor laws, after which the idea of a long childhood focused on education was firmly implanted in the minds of Americans. The combination of moral and instrumental arguments in favor of children’s wellbeing seems to have had a positive effect at one point in history, but that was more than a hundred years ago. More research is needed to find out whether and how this combination can succeed in today’s political climate.

Finding 6. The Media Focus on the Effects of Policy on Parents, Not Kids

The main focus of the articles in the sample was on parents or families, not children. Although the policies discussed affected children and these effects were sometimes noted, children were not at the center of these stories. In these articles, children and children’s issues were discussed in terms of their importance for their parents and, in particular, their parents’ ability

to contribute to the economy. This position occurred most often in articles discussing schools, childcare, COVID-19, and parental leave. For example, policies that provide quality child care were not framed as good for children’s early learning, health, or development but rather as a way to enable parents to hold steady jobs and participate in the economy. Similarly, stories about education during the pandemic tended to stress the toll that at-home education was taking on parents at least as much, if not more, than it was taking on children. (Quotes have been slightly edited for clarity.)

Obama’s economic team argues that family-friendly policies are good for business because they cut worker turnover, encourage higher productivity and boost investors’ perceptions of the value of a firm.⁴⁶

If we’re going to keep these women in the workforce—the way we’ve been boasting about more women in the economy, more women in the Congress, more women in boardrooms—we actually have to solve the problem of early childcare so that they’re not making tradeoffs about working and engaging in our economy and staying home [...] because it’s their only option.⁴⁷

Research has shown that paid leave not only brings health benefits; but it also has the potential to provide economic benefits, including saving companies money and adding billions of dollars to the economy by increasing women’s workforce participation.⁴⁸

How this likely affects public thinking

The focus on parents has potential upsides and downsides for public thinking. Our cultural mindsets research for this project found that when people think about parents, they see a broader set of policies and issues as relevant for families—and ultimately children—than when they’re focusing on children. As a result, the parent-focused framing may help people see that a wide range of social and economic policies can make a difference for families and, in turn, may well generate greater support for family-friendly policies.

In contrast, the focus on parents leaves children in the background. Media coverage in which children are invisible undermines collective concern about children themselves. In addition, people are more likely to apply judgments of deservingness to parents than children—to think that parents may not deserve support because they have, people think, made bad choices that have led to their situation. In these ways, parent-focused framing could potentially undercut support for policies that provide benefits to families.

More research is needed to determine the best way to bring both children and parents into messages and keep both in view in the most productive way. Parent-focused framing may have value, but it will be important for advocates to find ways to clarify the effects of social and economic policies on children so that they don’t remain invisible in our public discourse.

Lessons from History. Invisible Children

Children were relatively invisible in several of the policy debates we reviewed: AFDC, Head Start, and TANF. Each of these policies directly affected children, but the debates focused primarily on how adults were affected.

On the Social Security Act (of which AFDC was a part), the debate did not center on how this new program would help children in need. Instead, the bulk of attention was on how other aspects of Social Security would help American adults, especially older Americans. Similarly, although Head Start received some media coverage, the program was overshadowed by other parts of President Johnson's antipoverty effort. Most of the media coverage focused on how Great Society programs would affect adults. Finally, the TANF debate centered not on how changes to AFDC would affect children but on whether and how much single mothers should be expected to work and whether to place limitations on how aid was distributed to incentivize recipients to work. Although TANF had massive effects on children, the way it was framed kept these effects almost out of sight.

Why this matters for children's advocates today

The implications of this framing are not wholly clear. On one hand, it seems like the invisibility of children in the debate on TANF may have helped it gain passage. If effects on children had been placed in the foreground and the public had been made more aware of the dire consequences of welfare reform on children, it is possible that people would not have supported this reform as widely as they did. On the other hand, moving children to the background in the debates on the AFDC and Head Start clearly didn't hurt passage of these programs. In fact, focusing on adults may have helped these policies pass. If child-focused policies had been advanced on their own and children had been the center of these debates, there might have been less urgency to pass them because children were not a salient political constituency. In other words, there is no obvious and consistent lesson about whether using frames that keep children in the background is helpful or harmful in ensuring that policies actually benefit children.

From a framing standpoint, it makes more sense to think about how children should be brought into the story than whether they should. Although a real difference exists between moving policy effects on children or adults to the foreground—and it may be that, in some cases, it makes sense to emphasize effects on adults—the broader goal of fostering concern about how our collective decisions affect children can't be accomplished without talking about children somewhere in the story. Upcoming research can help people understand how best to work adults and children into the story.

Lessons from History. Poverty Reduction as a Master Frame

Project Head Start was part of President Lyndon Johnson’s War on Poverty legislation, and in its early years, Head Start was framed as an antipoverty program. Early education was described as a means to reduce poverty, which placed Head Start in a positive light. As communication and policy scholars have noted, media framing of the early years of the War on Poverty was largely positive. People experiencing poverty were talked about as “relatively blameless for their plight,” according to the political scientists Max Rose and Frank R. Baumgartner.⁴⁹ The media portrayed people in poverty as victims of an economic system that had no place for them. They were trapped in a vicious cycle, the result of poorly funded schools and barriers to economic progress.

The Johnson administration emphasized Project Head Start’s potential to reduce poverty rather than putting the emphasis on early learning. When the educational objectives of the program were mentioned, they were tied to the project’s goal of combating poverty, as evidenced by the description of the program by the *New York Times* as “the kindergarten project of the drive on poverty” and “the educational program designed to prepare deprived children for elementary school.”⁵⁰ In this way, poverty reduction was a master frame for talking about a host of social problems, including lack of proper education. Because progressivism was still in the ascendancy and poverty was not being stigmatized in the debate at the time, this frame fit the time: It helped people see the importance of Head Start. Later, when the discourse on poverty shifted, the framing of Head Start arguably shifted, as well, placing its role as an early learning program in the foreground and only secondarily mentioning that it was targeted at low-income children. This shift was, we assume, a strategic response to the increasingly toxic and unproductive discourse on poverty, which made poverty a less productive issue frame.

Why this matters for children’s advocates today

The framing of Head Start as part of a broader effort to combat a major social problem—poverty—arguably helped boost its salience. In subsequent years, as the program came to be disconnected from a broader antipoverty effort, in both policy and framing, the program arguably became marginalized. This shift suggests that finding ways to connect children-focused policies to broader social policy may be important for the political salience and durability of children’s policies.

The current debates on the child tax credit bundles this policy with a broader set of policies designed to ensure the economic security of Americans and their families. The example of Head Start suggests that framing the child tax credit in terms of a broader issue (economic security, poverty, or some other issue) could potentially help build and maintain support. Future research can provide insight into whether this is the case.

Finding 7. The Media Compare the United States Unfavorably with Other Countries on Children’s Issues

Many articles—op-eds, in particular—made the argument that the United States is uniquely deficient among Western, industrialized nations in its approach to child and family policy. This spin often took the form of a moral argument: that the United States, as the wealthiest country in the world, has a responsibility and the ability to do better. These articles appeared to be attempts to shame the country into doing better for children. Sometimes, as in the examples that follow, comparisons included less developed nations.

The United States is the only developed country that doesn’t guarantee all workers paid parental leave. Lithuania, for example, offers parents a year of paid leave. And Finland sends new parents gift boxes with onesies and diapers. Meanwhile, only a fraction of Americans can take extended paid time off to care for their newborns, and 23% of women must return to work within two weeks of giving birth⁵¹.

“Eleven percent of [Houston Independent School District] prekindergarten students hadn’t received their first dose of measles vaccine 90 days into the school year,” said Dr. Susan Wootton, a pediatrician at University of Texas Health Science Center at Houston who is leading an HISD task force on immunization delinquency. “That needs to be fixed. Nepal does better than that.”⁵²

American working families typically spend almost 30 percent of their after-tax income on childcare, compared with 10 percent or less in many other Western nations.⁵³

How this likely affects public thinking

Although it is true that the United States lags many wealthy industrialized nations (and behind some less developed ones) when it comes to children’s wellbeing, this framing may backfire. Framing children’s policies in this way may resonate with some in the field and the broader progressive community, but it is likely to trigger a pro-US backlash among many members of the public.⁵⁴ Talking about America as uniquely deficient directly challenges American exceptionalism—the idea that America is the best nation in the world—which runs deep in our culture, even among many progressives. To be sure, there value in building a sense of humility about the United States’ status in the world, but this won’t be accomplished immediately. In the short to medium term, framing that highlights our unique deficiencies is likely to make many people defensive and thus less open to hearing the message. To reach a broad audience, advocates must find more productive ways to point out the problems with US child and family policies.

Lessons from History. Building on Prior Success

As we discuss earlier, AFDC was rarely discussed in newspapers on its own. It was typically discussed only in longer articles about the Social Security Act. When it was mentioned on its own, however, the media presented it as a natural extension of the welfare work the federal government was already doing. Coverage emphasized that the government had already committed to protecting children's welfare through initiatives such as the Children's Bureau and child labor laws and framed the AFDC as a continuation of this existing commitment.

Why this matters for children's advocates today

Framing the AFDC as a natural extension of prior government action shifted the debate to how the government should promote children's welfare rather than whether it should. This shift arguably helped combat opposition arguments about the proper role of government. The same strategy could be used today to argue for new children's policies. Highlighting how new programs build on established commitments can potentially defuse claims that new policies are somehow radical or unprecedented uses of government power.

Moreover, highlighting the success of existing policies and programs can help build support for greater government action. By using well-known examples of our commitment to and success in promoting children's wellbeing, advocates can build a mental bridge for the public to recognize how new programs and policies would help, as well. In this way, examples of past success can help build support for new initiatives.

Recommendations

By understanding how children’s issues are framed now and in the past, advocates gain critical information about how they can shift the discourse and what strategies are likely to help. In light of the findings presented in this report, we offer the following recommendations for how children’s advocates can respond to media coverage:

- **Talk about government responsibility to promote wellbeing, not just prevent harm.** Advocates must emphasize that government has a responsibility to promote wellbeing, not just to prevent abuse, premature deaths, and other harms. Providing a more expansive vision of government responsibility is critical to counter the assumption that government should largely stay out of families’ lives except in the most extreme cases.
- **Don’t echo the “broken systems” narrative.** Although it is important to point out government’s deficiencies on children’s issues, stopping there will breed despondency and cynicism among members of the public. Go beyond simply pointing out that those systems are broken and propose concrete ways in which they can be repaired and improved to create better outcomes for children, families, communities, and society. This approach will build a sense of efficacy among the public.
- **Bring children back into the story.** The media’s overwhelming focus on parents makes children invisible. In their own communications and when working with journalists, advocates should strive to make children part of the story, either as the primary subjects or, in stories about parents, as stakeholders whose wellbeing is directly affected.
- **Talk about racial equity often and in concrete and accessible terms.** Contemporary media coverage of children’s issues barely includes talk of race or racial equity. When it does, the coverage typically provides inadequate context and explanation. When engaging with journalists or placing pieces in news outlets, advocates should strive to inject more discussion about racial equity into the conversation—and do so in ways that explain the sources of inequity and are concrete about what an equitable approach to addressing those issues looks like. We know from our historical analysis that conservatives are likely to mobilize racist tropes in opposition to more government action on behalf of children. Proactively advancing explanations of what equity involves and why it is important is critical to defuse this strategy and build broad public support for policies that advance equity.
- **Don’t try to evade polarization.** Although opposition to more government action on behalf of kids has ebbed and flowed historically, when major children’s legislation is proposed, it provokes ideological conflict over the role of government and polarized framing. In the current, highly polarized political climate, there is no realistic way to make an end run around polarization and avoid it completely. Practically, this means that advocates shouldn’t

veto possibly compelling frames and messages because they might trigger polarization. Doing so deprives the field of potentially effective strategies but won't achieve the benefit advocates hope for. Instead of trying to evade polarization, advocates need strategies to manage it.

- **Be careful not to frame children in purely instrumental terms.** Although it may be valuable to highlight the consequences for society of supporting or failing to support children, advocates must be careful not to talk about children in terms that reduce them to being only a means for economic development or other societal goods. This kind of framing is likely to undermine concern about children as actors and children's wellbeing as an end in itself. When highlighting consequences to society, advocates must be careful to simultaneously signal the need to support children for their own sake and to treat their current wellbeing as important.
- **Avoid unflattering comparisons with other countries.** There is truth in critiques that compare the United States with other countries on children's welfare, but these critiques also risk backlash prompted by feelings of American exceptionalism.
- **Keep child development in view.** Advocates do not need to push for heavy coverage of development, but they should, when engaging with news media, mention and briefly explain key facets of development, such as brain plasticity during specific developmental periods. This explanation is necessary to ensure that gains in public understanding of development are solidified and expanded and don't backslide.

Questions for Further Research

The recommendations presented in the previous section follow from what we have learned in the project to this point, but many questions remain about how to frame children’s issues effectively and shift the narrative in productive directions. In later stages of the project, FrameWorks will develop and test a more robust set of narrative strategies to help advocates, experts, and media communicators shift the public discourse, improve public understanding, and build support for the actions necessary to improve child wellbeing. This work will look to answer the following questions:

- How can advocates take advantage of the media’s tendency to see government as the guarantor of children’s wellbeing without reinforcing its “broken systems” narrative?
- How can advocates reframe collective responsibility for child wellbeing in a way that helps people see beyond harm prevention?
- How can advocates expand the conversation on racial equity and steer it in more productive directions?
- Are there effective ways of talking about the economic and social benefits of investing in children’s wellbeing without undermining concern for children as valuable for their own sake?
- How can advocates address the deep failings of the United States on children’s issues without triggering nationalist backlashes?
- When talking about children’s policies, how should framing bring adults and children into the conversation? When adults are moved to the foreground, how can children be kept in view?
- Which strategies can be used to manage the polarization that is likely to arise when children’s issues become politically salient?
- How should communications connect children’s policy proposals to other social issues (e.g., poverty or economic security) and the history of collective action to promote children’s welfare?
- How can advocates engage the public emotionally on children’s issues without relying on vulnerability framing, which can be problematic and counterproductive?

Conclusion

To enact policies that advance children’s wellbeing, advocates and communicators need to build salience, responsibility, and efficacy into children’s issues. Shifting public opinion requires first understanding the communications landscape in which advocates operate. In documenting media storytelling practices in the present and the past, this report takes an important step toward that goal.

This analysis of media coverage reveals some clear patterns that can help guide advocacy efforts. It shows us what the media focus on when it comes to children’s wellbeing: the government’s failures to live up to its responsibilities and how unfavorably the United States compares with other countries. It also tells us what the media *isn’t* talking about: race and child development. It found that public thinking is often mirrored in media discourse. Most notably, the media, like the public, connect major economic issues and policies primarily to parents, not to the kids themselves. Meanwhile, the historical analysis reveals how racist tropes have been used to build opposition to government action on children’s issues and how frame contests about the role of government accompany debates over major children’s legislation. It also reveals how the framing of children’s wellbeing has veered back and forth between the moral and the instrumental.

Above all, this overview of the media landscape shows the need for new frames and narratives capable of shifting our public conversations about children’s issues. In future research, FrameWorks researchers will test and identify a comprehensive framing strategy that communicators and advocates can use to talk effectively about children’s issues and wellbeing. This strategy can help create a more favorable climate for the systems reform and culture change needed to build child wellbeing.

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How Are Children's Issues Portrayed in the News? A Media Content Analysis

November 2021

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