

Communications Guidance

How to Talk about the Latest Research on Early Brain Development

When newly published studies on early childhood development garner significant media attention—as has happened recently with the pathbreaking **Baby's First Years** study—it's an important opportunity to shape public discourse, whether through our organizational messaging, op-eds and commentaries, or other communications.

The way we talk about new research matters. The framing that we use in these conversations can make the difference between findings that help move public and political discourse in positive directions, and findings that are underappreciated, misinterpreted, or outright rejected.

We hope this framing guidance will help those in the early childhood field make the most of novel research findings, especially those who rely on brain science.

1. In amplifying the significance of the Baby's First Years findings, emphasize the importance of *stability* and *predictability* in young children's lives.

For public audiences, make the story about much more than the specific dollar amounts or the possible implications of increased neural activity. Focus on the idea of **stability and its effects**, selecting an angle that fits naturally with your professional expertise and organizational mission. For some messengers, it will feel natural to turn to how important it is that children have predictable, stable environments and connections to responsive caregivers. For others, it might make more sense to talk about how policy interventions can alleviate stress and augment strengths, and why each matters for children's development. Whatever your take, follow that path to the big ideas of stability and predictability as features of brain-building environments for young children and new parents.

Steer clear of the tropes and traps that have derailed many other conversations about family-focused policy interventions. In the case of the Baby's First Years study, resist the temptation to argue that this study “proves” that moms can be trusted to make good decisions about how to use unrestricted cash assistance. When we defend parents' decisions, we implicitly invite people to evaluate them and their choices—and fall into a trap set long ago by the “deserving poor” narrative. Given that the Baby's First Years study's participants were largely women of color, worthiness frames give oxygen to racist tropes about welfare recipients. It's unhelpful to recirculate toxic ideas, even if the intent is to disprove them.

2. Connect to a broader narrative about brain development.

To move mindsets, we can't afford to look for a brand-new response to each new development in the field's evidence base. To do so risks splintering our story, detracting from the **shared narrative** that the field has been advancing, and missing opportunities to reinforce the big ideas we need to establish in the public and in policymaking discussions.

When fresh findings emerge, it's important to turn to trusted, effective communications strategies to connect the topic to timeless and time-tested themes. This is especially important when sharing results that involve brain measures. Connect findings that involve brain activity or brain waves to familiar construction metaphors, like **brain architecture and brain wiring**, which have been proven to help non-experts appreciate the critical importance of early biological development.

Take full advantage of new findings as a news peg or supporting point, but as you do so, connect to and center big ideas like:

- *Brains are built rapidly in the earliest stages of life.*
- *This construction process is shaped by resources available to kids, families, and communities.*
- *Early brain architecture sets a lasting foundation for children's physical health and overall wellbeing.*
- *Back-and-forth, "**serve-and-return**" interactions and **responsive relationships** build young brains and bodies.*
- *When our policies channel severe stress into the lives of adults, "serve-and-return" interactions can break down.*

By relying on these core explanations as we respond to fresh findings, we can put our ideas on repeat interactions—without sounding repetitive.

3. Use novel findings as an opportunity to model how to think and talk about scientific inquiry and evidence.

Every scientific study is a contribution to a larger line of inquiry—a single turn in a longer conversation. No individual study will provide definitive “proof” that policymakers, funders, or advocates may be seeking. When we frame research findings as incremental yet important, we reinforce the public mindsets necessary for evidence-informed policy and democratic deliberation. Every time we help the public get smarter about science, we make people less susceptible to misinformation and disinformation.

The challenge is to thread the needle. It’s not helpful to overstate a study’s implications, but it’s not productive to undermine or ignore its significance, either. Treat novel findings as an interesting, important addition to existing research—further evidence of things we already know, and a good reason to update the way we think and talk about our work.



Insights & Inquiry: “The first findings from a study of how income affects early child development are striking: When moms could count on an extra \$333 a month, it increased activity in the wiring of their babies’ brains. Now, researchers are exploring why. They’re looking to see whether more predictable income led to more time for brain-building activities, less-stressed moms, or better nutrition.”



Overhype: “A groundbreaking new study shows how just \$333 a month can save a child. Researchers studying the impact of giving single moms a basic income payment each month found evidence that the children’s development improved dramatically.”



Hedges and Caveats: “As a scientist, I’m fascinated by this new study. It’s provocative, and even promising, but ultimately preliminary. If I were a policymaker, I’d be interested, but I wouldn’t run out to sign a bill that gives every family \$333 a month. This method gives us a new kind of evidence, but I’d say we have more questions than answers at this point.”



Debating Deservingness: “The single mothers in this study—mostly Black and Brown women—weren’t told how to spend the money, but this shows we can trust them to do what’s best for their kids. A no-strings-attached payment of \$333 a month led to increases in baby’s brain activity that surprised even the researchers who designed the study.”