

Talking about child separation in Bulgaria

A FrameWorks UK brief

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1. Background

How we talk about child separation matters

Our communications - what we say, how we say it, and what we leave unsaid - can make a radical difference in how people think, feel and act. We call these communication choices, framing.

This brief is a summary of three workshops run by [FrameWorks UK](#) in 2021-22. It explores how people working to end child separation can use framing to reform policy and practice in Bulgaria.

FrameWorks has not done research in Bulgaria, so this briefing draws on pertinent findings from research in countries across Europe and the Americas. This means that the recommendations are evidence based and in time they should be tested to ensure they hold in Bulgaria.

1.1 About FrameWorks UK

FrameWorks UK works with mission-driven organisations to drive social change. We research how people think about social issues and what affects this thinking. And use our research to create communications advice, strategies, and content.

FrameWorks UK is the UK-based sister of FrameWorks in the US. Together, we have over 20 years' experience helping professionals and advocates shape stories that change hearts and minds.

2. What are the key challenges for communicators?

People aren't blank slates. They draw on a range of mental shortcuts to make sense of the world. And these beliefs impact how our communications are heard and understood.

Mental shortcuts are shared across culture. They are activated and strengthened by the things we see and hear - like news stories, radio, and TV shows. When a particular shortcut is triggered, it's harder for people to think differently.

Research shows that people hold highly consistent beliefs about early childhood and poverty across a number of countries.

We need to avoid triggering these beliefs in our communications. And tell a different story.

2.1 People don't understand the importance of the early years – and the role communities can play

| Common beliefs about child development | What this means for communicators |
|-------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Child development happens automatically | – People don't understand how important early experiences and interactions are for children or see the need for early support |
| Parents need to take more responsibility | – People don't always see that circumstances shape outcomes |
| What doesn't kill you, makes you stronger | – People underestimate the effects of chronic stress and adversity in childhood – and don't recognise the importance of reducing this stress |

Some children just don't grow up in good families — It's harder for people to see how change can happen – or what would make a difference

2.2 People blame families in poverty for their circumstances – or think that poverty is inevitable

| Common beliefs about poverty | What this means for communicators |
|---------------------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Poverty happens when people are lazy or make bad choices | — People can't see the systems and context that shapes lives. 'Try harder' or 'make different choices' become the only solutions |
| Some communities choose not to work | — People see educating or punishing communities as the only sensible solutions |
| The system is rigged in favour of the rich | — People see poverty as inevitable – and don't believe anything can make a difference |
| Poverty happens because of external forces out of our control | — People see poverty as too big a problem to be solved – and disengage from programmes to end poverty |

2.3 Individualism dominates stories told from first-hand experience

Individualism is the belief that our circumstances are shaped by willpower and choice. It makes it harder to see the role of systems in people's lives. And easier to justify poverty and inequality as a parent's fault.

This mental shortcut is often triggered accidentally, with phrases like:

- ‘I was able to fight for my child’
- ‘He found himself unemployed and lost his house’
- ‘This programme helps people to improve their lives’
- ‘We need to teach parents how to look after their children’
- ‘I couldn’t cope’

When this belief is active, it blocks people’s ability to see *how* and *why* family separation happens. And what could be done in our society to prevent it.

3. How can communicators overcome these challenges?

We can overcome these challenges with a new story. If we:

1. Explain how what surrounds us, shapes us
2. Stand *for* something; and
3. Support people to tell their stories safely and strategically.

3.1 Explain how what surrounds us, shapes us

Explanation is powerful. It helps people understand how something works, what role it plays in our lives, and how it could work differently.

Without explanation, people often believe that ‘this is just how things are.’ Or that problems are too big to solve. We become vulnerable to misinformation to help fill in the blanks.

Use metaphor to explain the importance of the early years

Use the metaphor of ‘**building brains**’ to help people see that child development starts early - and is an active process that needs input from caregivers.

What this looks like:

Babies' brains are built from their first days - even in the womb. The experiences children have as babies and toddlers lay the foundations for them to grow and thrive.

Watch this building brains video: <https://youtu.be/VoN-Gbmn7ws> (in English).

Use the metaphor of '**tipping the scales**' to talk about how external factors - like experiences within families and in our communities - can influence a child's resilience.

What this looks like:

Positive experiences - like calm environments and supportive relationships - can tip the scale for children towards resilience. If we stack enough on the positive side, a child's scale will tip positive even in tough times.

Watch this tipping the scales video: <https://youtu.be/EW20A962wd4> (in English)

Use the metaphor of families being '**overloaded**' to explain how child neglect can be caused by external factors - and support for parents and carers can make a difference.

What this looks like:

Parents who are overloaded by illness, work stress, job loss and bereavement can break down and find it difficult to care for children. We can lighten the load for parents by providing support when they need it most.

Watch this overloaded video: <https://youtu.be/hbRuzRS4AoY> (in English).

Place individual stories in context

Context is powerful. It drives people's attention to the systems and conditions that need to change.

When we tell stories about people affected by external forces, it's harder to blame individuals.

Like this: Low wages and high food and fuel prices make it harder for families to put food on the table.

When we tell stories about our shared experiences, it's harder to dismiss individual stories as one-offs.

Like this: In my community, all of us have been affected by the pandemic. Like a lot of families in Kocherinovo, we had to...

When we name the systems and conditions that shape lives and decision-making, we show that change means fixing those systems and conditions.

Like this: Energy companies have raised fuel prices - and this means many families across Bulgaria will struggle to heat their homes this winter. State support to insulate older buildings will make a big difference to...

Use the **restricts and restrains** metaphor to explain how external forces can push us into poverty - and what can set us free.

What this looks like:

Low wages and high bills mean many families are caught in a daily struggle to make ends meet. Families need help to break the constraints poverty places on people.

Talk about someone's **options**, instead of their choices. This makes it easier to think about what is and isn't available in a person's environment. And how this can hold us back.

3.2 Stand **for** something

Often, we make our case for change by talking about what we're against. Like 'end violence against women' or 'stop the war.' Or we talk about how bad things are - and how bad things could be.

We need to talk more about the world we want to see. What it looks like. And what it could mean for each and every one of us. This helps people to see that change is both possible and desirable.

Avoid myth-busting

Myth-busting rarely works. It often backfires and strengthens mistaken beliefs. When we remind people of the myths around family separation - even to correct them or say they're not true - we still activate and reinforce them in people's minds.

It's better to start with the story we want people to hear - and tell it across our communications.

Like this: Children thrive when families get the support they need.

Balance urgency (we need to act) with efficacy (we can act)

Crisis language rarely does the work we need it to. It triggers disbelief (this can't be true) or fatalism (this can't be solved).

When we talk about a problem, we also need to say and show how it can be fixed. We need to explain how things work - and more importantly, how they can be made to work differently.

This means talking about how things can change. And that we have confidence in our ability to make change happen.

Like this: The challenges facing families are urgent - and made worse by the pandemic. Here's how we can overcome these challenges...

Make solutions about all of us

It's easy to ignore solutions that are about other people. Or that don't seem relevant to our lives and the things we care about.

If we only focus on individual families who are struggling, it's harder for people to see how they have a role in making change. And the difference that change will make to all of us.

This means sharing stories about families - but also about communities, organisations, policies, and programmes. And explaining the vital role they can play in ending family separation.

Like this: We can all work to end family separation in Bulgaria - and make our communities stronger. Here's how...

3.3 Support people to tell their stories safely and strategically

Narrative is powerful. Who tells a story - and how they tell it - can shape who people see as responsible for a problem. And who needs to solve it.

Lift up as many voices as you can

We need to include stories told by people of different genders, ethnicities, family compositions. With different access needs and resources. From different areas.

Different voices sharing the same story will amplify it. And make it more likely to be heard. It helps us to cut through the noise. We can use framing to help people tell their stories safely and strategically.

Different people sharing the same experience will collectivise it. And make it harder to assume that experience was caused by *who* a person was. It reduces stigma and stereotypes.

Watch this video of people sharing their experiences of poverty in the UK:
https://youtu.be/ORO67LjN_ks (in English).

Make opportunities accessible

We need to adapt how we work to fit people's lives. This takes time and resources - and is vital work. It could include:

- Paying people for their time and skills in ways that won't make life harder
- Scheduling meetings outside normal working hours
- Recruiting more people than you need (in case people need to drop out)
- Building in different ways to have conversations and get feedback.

Create a 'ways of working' document to set expectations in advance. Agree how much work is involved, how (and how often) you'll keep in touch, and how you'll relate to each other. Review and update it often.

Remember the origins of someone's story

Often we start a person's story part-way through. When someone is already struggling - with poverty, exclusion, or family separation.

We need to start our stories at the beginning. To fill in the gaps and help people understand *why* someone is struggling in the first place. If we don't, people will often make assumptions - assign blame.

We can start by asking questions that bring in context and causation. Instead of questions that narrow our focus to individuals and the choices they make.

| Questions that don't (always) bring in context | Questions that do |
|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none">- What happened to you?- What did you do when this happened?- Why did you act in that way?- What choices did you make?- What could you have done differently? | <ul style="list-style-type: none">- Does this affect a lot of people [in Vratsa/single-parent families/with a condition/etc]? Why?- Are there lots of people in your [town/city] who were affected by [X]?- Can you tell me about your life, the things that happened to you early on?- What support did you have when....?- What support should you have had?- What options did you have then / do you have now? |

Build in practical communications expertise

Not everyone with a story to tell will identify as a communicator. We need to combine strategic insight with building practical expertise.

Build framing into practical communications training.

Like this: In media training, replace 'bridge and pivot' with 'spot, position and move'.

'Bridge and pivot' is a technique used in interviews. It means we bridge away from a question and pivot towards the answer we want to give. We can use framing to 'spot' the mental shortcuts that would be activated by a question - and tell a different story.

Spot what mental shortcut a question is activating like ‘individualism’ or ‘child development happens automatically’

Position ourselves to tell a different story e.g., one about context or ‘building brains’ instead

Move to make our carefully framed point.

Prioritise choice and control

Safety and wellbeing come first. Often storytellers are sharing personal trauma. And risk further harm by sharing their stories in public.

Use the recommendations in this brief to help protect storytellers. And have deliberate conversations about what people are prepared to share - and what they need to keep private. Take a trauma-responsive approach. Talk about limits and triggers beforehand - and the support that’s available.

Use the **hand of cards** metaphor to help storytellers set boundaries.

What this looks like:

Your story is like a hand of cards. You control the cards you play - and what you share. Play the cards that will get you the outcome you want. And keep what needs to stay private close to your chest.

Use this checklist before, during and after opportunities to tell stories:

Before

- What is this for? Why am I choosing to do it?
- How can I feel ready for this?
- Logistics: who, what, where, when, how long - and who has approval over what is used
- Boundaries: what I’m willing to share - and what I want to keep private

- Practice: telling my story, answers to tricky questions
- Who is my support network?
- Find: someone to call if I need to, someone to go with me, someone to spend time with after.

During and after

- Am I comfortable? It's okay to ask an interviewer to repeat themselves, to get some water, or to stop entirely
- Am I telling the story I want to? Use spot, position, and move if it's off track
- What do I need now?
- Check in: how did it go? how am I feeling?
- Follow up: am I worried about anything I've shared?
- Relax: what can I do to give myself a break?

...and if it's published online, don't read the comments, or look on social media (yet).

4. Resources

More resources, including the research this brief draws from, can be found at frameworksinstitute.org (in English). In particular:

[A Storyteller's Checklist](#)

[Wide Angle Lens](#)

[Framing 101](#)

[Our research on poverty](#)

[Our research on child development](#)