



Draft Framing Materials Essentials for Childhood

Framing 101 on Child Abuse and Neglect Prevention

How issues are framed in public discourse influences how people reason about the cause of and solutions to those issues. We all know that both media coverage and popular culture portrayals of child abuse and neglect (particularly sexual abuse) focuses very narrowly on victims and perpetrators. Further, the media environment tends toward sensationalism and horror stories. These kinds of portrayals narrow people's focus to victims and perpetrators when considering causes and solutions. It is no wonder the public does not readily think abuse and neglect can be prevented, and tend to blame parents for failure to keep their children safe from harm. It doesn't help that national campaigns (e.g., Stop Abuse, Enough Abuse, No More, Shaken Baby campaigns, etc) suggest the causes are uninformed and/or bad actors, and the solution lies with individual behavior change (including bystander participation).

This communications context presents a challenge for practitioners and advocates of prevention who wish to gain support for community-based and collective solutions to child abuse and neglect. Fortunately, framing research¹ suggests that if we deploy certain framing strategies, we can improve understanding. The messaging recommendations that you will find in this document include well tested values, causal stories, and metaphors that have been shown to significantly improve the public's understanding of what promotes and derails healthy development in children, and the prevention of abuse and neglect.

The Frame We've Got v The Frame We Need

At the reverse site visit workshop in May, I provided the following summary of the frame we've got for prevention of child abuse and neglect, and the frame we need. The frame we've got represents the dominant themes in public discourse on the issue. Of course, many of you are already implementing elements of "the frame we need." The chart below serves as a reminder.

The Frame We've Got	The Frame We Need
Values of Safety/Protection/Sympathy	Values of stewardship for next generation/innovation in addressing challenges
Cause is personal/private	Causes are contextual
Solution is fix the person	Solution is to create a supportive context for children and families in order to prevent or reduce toxic stress
Violence is inevitable	States, businesses, and communities can invest in children and families/provide resources in ways that reduce risk

Crisis framing/criminal atrocities dominate news stories	Translation of developmental science via causal stories
Not my problem	Collective problem with solutions

How can we frame the issue to improve understanding and support?

All communications answer four questions for readers/audiences, either explicitly or implicitly. Below I have identified these questions, and given an example of the themes to tap into when answering these questions in other communications. These are derived from the framing science on early childhood issues and have been shown to significantly improve support for early childhood policies.

**Note that it's not necessary to make ALL the points listed under every bullet in precisely this way, these are examples – but the recommendation is that the overall shape of the communication should follow this order and these concepts and themes.*

Master Frame Outline

1. WHY does this matter?

Our state's future prosperity depends on how well we, as adults, foster the healthy development of our youngest generation. Raising happy, competent children who will lead our communities tomorrow requires smart and innovative thinking today.

2. WHAT is the problem/challenge?

- Recent advances in developmental science provide us with a blueprint for how to ensure children get what they need for healthy development.
- We now know that early experiences literally build the architecture of the brain, and that stable, responsive interactions with caring adults at home and in the community are the key ingredient in building a solid foundation for future growth (*brain architecture, shaped by interactions with adults*)
- We also know that not all children have access to the kinds of experiences that will most benefit their development - some children are exposed to conditions or events that are so severe and persistent as to produce toxic stress responses that damage the brain's developing architecture (*toxic stress that weakens brain architecture*)

3. HOW do we solve it?

-By providing the kinds of experiences in early care, education and family support settings that will help parents and provide sturdy foundations for children's development.

-By investing in and supporting the programs that provide the resources and support shown to prevent or alleviate the conditions known to produce toxic stress.

**After setting up the broader child development solution, you can show how your EfC work specifically addresses the problem.*

4. WHO can solve it?

Have an “ask.” Explain what your audience can do to be part of the solution. It might be as simple as, “visit our website to find out more.” If you are targeting a specific group, be as direct as possible about the kinds of actions they might take.

Sample Frame

Preparing [OUR STATE] for a prosperous future begins with recognizing that our youngest residents must get what they need today to become the adults who will strengthen our communities and build our economy.

Fortunately, what our children need is not a mystery. Recent advances in the science of early childhood development tell us that the early years are a time when the brain is literally building itself from the ground up, in much the way a house is constructed. And, it is the relationships and experiences that children have early in life that are the building blocks. When children have stable, responsive relationships with caring adults at home and in the community, children get off to a good start with a strong foundation for future development.

When children don't have these experiences, because of exposure to violence, untreated parental mental illness, or other chronic challenges that produce what is now known as “toxic stress,” children suffer—and we put our future well being as a state at risk. That's why [*insert what you are doing in EfC*] is so important. When we strengthen family economic security and make high quality child care and education available to the children most in need, we are preventing such adverse experiences from becoming toxic.

We know what to do. The question is whether we will approach our challenges with a “can do”, not a “can't do” attitude.

These strategies are making a difference here in the state and are prime examples of investing in what works. We must work together to ensure that all children and families have a strong foundation for their lives and approach our challenges with a “Can do!” not a “Can't do” attitude.

Essential Dos and Don'ts for Communications on Child Abuse and Neglect Prevention

DO:

- Begin your communication with a collective **vision** or value statement that underscores WHY addressing childhood adversity, abuse or neglect matters to all of us. You should first, and always, answer for your audience: *Why does this matter?*
 - E.g., “Assuring safe, stable, nurturing relationships and environments for all children is essential for our nation’s/state/s future prosperity”
- Improve public understanding of the what development is and how it can be derailed by relying on the research-based metaphors of *the brain’s architecture being built over time*, and the explanation that certain kinds of experiences can produce *toxic stress responses* that derail development.
- Make sure the **solutions** you articulate sound achievable. Even if the problem requires many solutions, always offer a solution or step forward.
- When **attributing responsibility** for helping solve the problem, appeal to people’s civic sensibilities – show how they might engage on a community or political level, not just a personal level or out of sympathy
- If you have a print piece, make sure your **visuals** tell the same story that the text tells – show happy, thriving children. Include photos of children with non-familial adults in communities (child care providers, coaches, teachers, grandparents).

DON'T

- Engage in **crisis** framing – such as saying the child welfare system is in crisis or is broken beyond repair.
- Use a highly vivid **story of an individual person** – such as a victim of abuse or neglect, or even a program or service recipient. This strategy keeps us stuck in the “frame we’ve got” articulated on page 1.

ⁱ Bales, Susan Nall. (2009). *Summary Research Memo: FrameWorks' Analysis of Frame Effects on PCAA Policies and Implications for Messaging*. Washington, DC: FrameWorks Institute.

Davey, L. (2010). How to talk about children's mental health: A FrameWorks MessageMemo. Washington, DC: FrameWorks Institute.

Erard, M., Kendall-Taylor, N., Simon, A., & Davey, L. (2010). *The power of levelness: Making child mental health visible and concrete through a simplifying model*. Washington, DC: FrameWorks Institute.

National Scientific Council on the Developing Child. (2005). *Excessive stress disrupts the architecture of the developing brain: Working paper 3*. National Scientific Council on the Developing Child.