Reframing Early Childhood to Strengthen Systems That Impact Children and Families

A Communications Toolkit

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FRAME WORKS

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Contents

About This Toolkit

Welcome to *Reframing Early Childhood to Strengthen Systems That Impact Children and Families*, a communications toolkit. This toolkit is the product of a collaborative effort by many partners joining forces through the United Way of Greater Cincinnati Early Childhood Framing Fellowship.

We are a group of parents, teachers, advocates, direct service providers, supporters, champions, and amplifiers who work with a variety of stakeholders to support prenatal and early development and strengthen the systems that affect the overall health and wellbeing of children and families in our region.

We designed this toolkit to reframe our region's conversation about children's overall health and wellbeing in the context of what is known about positive prenatal and early child development and how investing in the early childhood ecosystem yields social and economic benefits—not only for families with young children, but also for entire communities.

We hope this toolkit will be used by communications professionals, parent-leaders, volunteers and staff working with and within child care agencies, parent-support organizations, schools, nonprofit organizations, businesses, health care, and other types of community organizations. We invite you to use this toolkit to guide communications trainings and the creation of messages in various forms, including, for example, testimony to government entities or other public bodies, public talks, talking points for meetings with policymakers, blog posts, program brochures, flyers, annual reports, newsletters, videos, op-eds, and web content.

This toolkit offers communicators a set of practical framing recommendations for achieving four strategic communications goals:

— **Elevate the issue**, building broader understanding of why strengthening systems that affect children's prenatal and early development is a matter of public concern that demands public policy solutions.

— **Foster a sense of collective responsibility**, emphasizing why we must act together through institutions such as government agencies and showing the collective benefits of fulfilling our collective responsibility.

— **Navigate unproductive assumptions and attitudes**, expanding the public's mental model of how policies and programs can support families, children, and children's positive development in ways that yield collective benefits.

— **Highlight solutions**, emphasizing that effective systems-level approaches to supporting families, children, and children's positive development are within our reach.

These empirically tested communications strategies are based on insights from FrameWorks' Core Story of Early Childhood Development and the research behind it. The Core Story of Early Childhood Development translates key concepts within the body of science on early childhood development into a set of frame elements that together build public understanding of factors that support positive development in the early years. This core story has been used by communicators across the United States and around the world to close the gap between what people working in the early childhood sector know about children's positive development and what we as a society do to support it. For an overview of the entire Core Story, see *The Science of Early Childhood Development* (The National Scientific Council on the Developing Child, 2007).

We hope this toolkit will inspire a strong, shared messaging strategy that resonates beyond the choir by translating the science of early childhood development into memorable, plain language and emphasizing the impact of positive prenatal and early child development on our region's collective prosperity. With consistent, coordinated framing, we can more effectively shift community norms, perceptions, and policy toward embracing the importance of strengthening systems-level investments in children that enhance their overall health and wellbeing while strengthening families and our communities.

Part I: Getting Started

Framing involves making choices about how to deliver a message: what to emphasize, how to explain critical concepts, and even what to leave unsaid. The framing strategies and messages this toolkit offers can help you communicate more effectively with policymakers and members of the public about issues related to prenatal and early childhood development.

The toolkit is designed to be used by both communicators who are new to framing and experienced framers. We invite you to mix and match the strategies for fostering a sense of collective responsibility in Part III with the metaphors in Part IV and the key ideas in Part V.

If you are new to framing and have already created a message that you would like to reframe, we recommend starting with Part VI: Framing Checklist. If you are new to framing and are about to draft a new message, we recommend starting with Part II: Know Before You Go. These two sections are designed to function as toolkit navigation aids.

The recommendations and examples you'll find in this toolkit are not scripts that must be adhered to at all costs. Use them as guides. Let the framing strategies help you say what you want to say while avoiding common traps in public thinking about issues related to prenatal and early childhood development.

Start small. For example, try including the *Brain Architecture* or *Serve and Return* metaphors in the next message you create. Once you're comfortable with that, try out additional framing strategies.

If you would like to learn more about how to use the research-based frames and messages in this toolkit, we invite you to watch FrameWorks' video series, Fast Frames. This series consists of an introductory video and five episodes, each under two minutes:

- *Fast Frames* - Introduction
- Episode 1: Solutions-Oriented Framing
- Episode 2: Framing Data
- Episode 3: Alternatives to Vulnerability Framing
- Episode 4: Use Visuals to Spark Big-Picture Thinking
- Episode 5: How to Tell More Effective Stories About the Success of Your Work

For helpful and salient background on the research supporting this toolkit, we invite you to read *Framing Child & Youth Development*, *Why Aren't Kids a Policy Priority? The Cultural Mindsets and Attitudes That Keep Kids Off the Public Agenda*, and *Framing and Policy Making: How Does Framing Help Advance Our Public Policy Goals?* These resources were written by FrameWorks.

To learn more about the power of a collaborative approach to changing public conversations and increasing systems-level investment in early childhood, see *The Impact of Strategic Framing on Early Childhood Advocacy Efforts in Colorado* by Hanna Nichols.

Part II: Know Before You Go

People have a difficult time breaking out of their established patterns of thinking about children, families, teachers, and the government's role in supporting the overall health and wellbeing of infants, toddlers, and children.

Even when true, unframed or poorly framed messages (like the ones in the "When you say ..." column in the following tables) can unintentionally activate these unproductive patterns, increasing the likelihood that the message will be misunderstood or backfire entirely.

In the "They think ..." column, you'll find some unproductive responses and ideas that we've repeatedly encountered over the years. The "What helps?" column refers to framing strategies in this toolkit that you can use to avoid crafting messages that trigger these unproductive assumptions/ideas.

When you say ...

Early childhood educators deserve better pay, better working conditions, and more respect.

They think ...

But isn't it just babysitting?

What could be triggering this kind of response?

This message introduces the concept of *deservingness* and so unintentionally invites people to default to their assumptions about who *deserves* what and why.

The concept of *deservingness* is closely associated with *Individualism*, the idea that the outcomes we experience are the exclusive result of our choices, willpower, determination, and effort.

People using *Individualism* to make sense of the world are likely to assume that people who are poorly compensated for their work should "just get a new job" or "earn a raise." *Individualism* makes it difficult to understand why systems-level changes are necessary.

Gendered and racialized assumptions about whose work is valuable can also lead people to underestimate the importance of early childhood education and the critical role played by early childhood educators. Also underlying the false idea that early childhood educators are "babysitters," is the assumption that children's "real" learning begins around the time they start kindergarten. Before that, so the thinking goes, children don't require much attention beyond being kept clean, fed, and physically safe.

What helps?

Establish issues related to the early care and education workforce as a matter of public concern by opening your message with one of the propositions described in Part III. See particularly Proposition 5: Investing Wisely Works.

Represent child development as an active process that early childhood educators support.

Using the metaphors described in Part IV—particularly *Brain Architecture*, *Serve and Return*, *Scaffolding*, and *Weaving Skills Ropes*—will help you build understanding of (1) how the foundation for all future development, learning, and behavior is laid during the early years; (2) how early childhood educators support that process; and (3) what we can do to support them as they support our children's positive development.

Avoid using *naked numbers* to make your case. See the "Framing Data" episode of *Fast Frames* for tips on how to use data in ways that do not unintentionally cue up unproductive assumptions

Offer concrete, collective solutions instead of simply naming desired results. For example, name or describe policies that will result in better working conditions for the early education workforce rather than naming better working conditions as a desired result. See the "Solutions-Oriented Framing" episode of *Fast Frames* for tips.

When you say ...

Early childhood educators deserve better pay, better working conditions, and more respect.

They think ...

They shouldn't do it for the money!

What could be triggering this kind of response?

In our country, many people assume that good teachers *care more* than bad teachers and that caring is a reward in and of itself.

When people reason from this assumption, systemic factors recede as unrealistic expectations about what *caring more* can accomplish remain in the foreground, leading to unproductive thinking about what we as a society can do to support children's positive development.

These unproductive patterns of thought emerge from a narrow understanding of *care* as interpersonal. This perspective can lead to skepticism about the role of government in the lives of children and families, making it difficult to see why we as a society should push for systems-level changes that will improve the early childhood ecosystem.

What helps?

Expand the public's understanding of what counts as *care* while establishing social issues related to the early education workforce as a matter of public concern by opening your message with one of the propositions described in Part III. See particularly Proposition 1: We Share Responsibility for Our Region's Children.

Use the strategies below to build understanding of how the work that early childhood educators do supports all of us.

- Be sure to explain how the foundation for all future development, learning, and behavior is laid during the early years using the *Brain Architecture* and *Serve and Return* metaphors from Part IV.
- Use the *Weaving Skills Ropes* metaphor to help people imagine what can happen in a high-quality early learning environment and to counter the false assumptions that early childhood education is either a fancy name for babysitting or only about developing academic skills.
- Use the *Scaffolding* metaphor to describe the early childhood workforce as brain builders and to explain what they need to be effective in that role.

Conclude with concrete, collective solutions. For example, describe policies that will result in higher compensation rather than simply naming higher compensation as a desired result. See the "Solutions-Oriented Framing" episode of *Fast Frames* for tips.

When you say ...

We need to provide families of young children with the programs and tools they need to ensure their children's positive development.

They think ...

Here's an even better solution: Moms should just stay at home.

What could be triggering this kind of response?

It's common to assume that the family and the family home are all that matter during early childhood and to chalk up disparities in developmental outcomes to differences in parenting.

Assumptions like these can lead people to judge mothers who work as uncaring and to prioritize policies that would make it easier for mothers to stay home with their children.

Parents do play a vital role in supporting positive child development. However, when people overfocus on parents, they tend to think about parenting in *Individualistic* terms and forget about how external conditions—for example, the cost of housing near one's place of work—can influence what can and cannot happen in the home.

Additionally, many Americans have a fuzzy understanding of what the process of child development entails and tend to assume that *kids just grow*. This assumption can lead people to worry that early learning programs "rush" children to do things they aren't ready to do.

What helps?

Establish social issues related to early childhood as a matter of public concern while expanding the public's understanding of what counts as *care* by opening your message with one of the propositions described in Part III. See particularly Proposition 1: We Share Responsibility for Our Region's Children and Proposition 5: Investing Wisely Works.

Use the *Brain Architecture* and *Serve and Return* metaphors from Part IV to help people understand the science behind your claim.

Use the *Resilience Scale* metaphor from Part IV, along with concrete examples of positive supports to help people imagine what we as a society can do to promote positive child development.

Offer concrete, collective solutions. For example, describe policies that will result in increased access to programs and tools that support positive development rather than naming increased access as a desired result. See the "Solutions-Oriented Framing" episode of *Fast Frames* for tips.

When you say ...

We need to provide families of young children with the programs and tools they need to ensure their children's positive development.

They think ...

I didn't have all that stuff, and I'm fine.

What could be triggering this kind of response?

The belief that if a person is having difficulties, it is because they have not made the right choices or put in enough effort. From this *Individualist* perspective, we as a society can do very little to help children reach their full potential.

Related to this kind of thinking is *Determinism*—the idea that some kids are simply doomed to experience hardship and there is nothing we as a society can do about it.

What helps?

Establish increasing access to programs and tools that support positive development as a matter of public concern by opening your message with one of the propositions described in Part III. See particularly Proposition 2: Positive Development for All Children = Regional Thriving and Proposition 3: We All Need a Strong Foundation.

Use the *Brain Architecture* and *Serve and Return* metaphors in Part IV to help people understand the science behind your claim.

Use the *Toxic Stress* metaphor in Part IV, along with concrete examples, to build public understanding of the kinds of stressors that threaten positive development.

Use the *Resilience Scale* metaphor from Part IV to help people understand that resilience is not a trait, but rather something that is built over time. Use concrete examples of programs and policies that increase access to supports that tip the scale toward positive outcomes to help people imagine what we as a society can do to promote positive child development.

See the FrameWorks resources *Bringing Equity to the Conversation* and *Framing Adversity, Trauma, and Resilience* for additional guidance.

Be sure to offer concrete, collective solutions. For example, describe policies that will result in increased access to programs and tools that support positive development rather than naming increased access as a desired result. See the "Solutions-Oriented Framing" episode of *Fast Frames* for tips.

When you say ...

Public investments in quality early childhood care and education can produce important long-term improvements in the intellectual and social development of disadvantaged children.

They think ...

Yes, but children are resilient. What doesn't kill you makes you stronger.

What could be triggering this kind of response?

When we invoke disparities in outcomes without also explaining their root causes, we open the door to deficit-based thinking about caregivers and families of color or those with low incomes.

When we talk about child development without explaining it, the public tends to assume that "normal" development just happens. This false assumption often goes hand in hand with the false assumption that if children struggle, it is because they or their parents are not trying hard enough or making good enough choices.

What helps?

Establish early childhood care and education as a matter of public concern by opening your message with one of the propositions described in Part III. See particularly Proposition 2: Positive Development for All Children = Regional Thriving and Proposition 3: We All Need a Strong Foundation.

Use the *Brain Architecture*, *Serve and Return*, and *Toxic Stress* metaphors from Part IV to build understanding of how development works and why developmental outcomes vary.

Widen the lens to put behavior, decisions, and choices in social and historical context, building public understanding of the contextual conditions, supports, and relationships that affect children and families beyond the micro-environment of the home setting.

Use the *Resilience Scale* metaphor from Part IV to help people understand that resilience is not a trait that people possess, but rather something that is built over time.

Use concrete examples of programs and policies that increase access to supports that tip the scale toward positive outcomes to help people imagine what we as a society can do to promote positive child development.

Avoid using *naked numbers* to make your case for equitable access. See the "Framing Data" episode of *Fast Frames* for tips on how to use data in ways that do not unintentionally cue up unproductive assumptions.

Describe what equitable solutions look like to build understanding of why a more equitable society is a boon to all of us. See the FrameWorks resources *Bringing Equity to the Conversation* and *Talking About Racism in Child and Family Advocacy* for additional guidance.

When you say ...

We should provide equitable access to the resources and opportunities that kids need to thrive now and in the future.

They think ...

People who can't take care of their kids shouldn't have them.

What could be triggering this kind of response?

People assume that the key to children's wellbeing is care, and they see parents as the people who are solely responsible for providing such *care*. When children don't do well, it is assumed to be a result of inadequate care and other parental failures. This false assumption opens the door for racist and classist stereotypes, as families of color and low-income families are blamed for their children's struggles.

Additionally, FrameWorks research has shown that most Americans do not understand what *equity* means or why it matters.

What helps?

Establish equitable access to resources and opportunities that support children's positive development as a matter of public concern by opening your message with one of the propositions described in Part III. See particularly Proposition 3: We All Need a Strong Foundation and Proposition 5: Investing Wisely Works.

Interrupt biased thinking by offering concrete examples of the complicated trade-offs that some families currently have to make as they care for their children.

To avoid prompting judgment of parents, widen the lens of your message to put behavior, decisions, and choices in social and historical context, building public understanding of the contextual conditions, supports, and relationships that affect children and families beyond the micro-environment of the home setting.

Describe what equitable solutions look like to build understanding of why a more equitable society is a boon to all of us. See the FrameWorks resources *Bringing Equity to the Conversation* and *Talking About Racism in Child and Family Advocacy* for additional guidance.

Avoid using stories about individual children or families to illustrate the need for interventions. Individual stories reinforce notions of willpower and family autonomy. Instead, tell stories that position systems and structures as the heroes and villains.

When you say ...

All across the country, including in our region, early child care centers are barely breaking even.

They think ...

They just don't know how to run their businesses.

What could be triggering this kind of response?

Bootstraps thinking and the *Individualistic* idea that individual success is purely a matter of individual effort, willpower, and good choices can make it difficult for people to imagine the factors that contribute to thin profit margins in the business.

Individualism legitimizes *what is* by suggesting that those people who have money, success, power, status, etc., have it because they worked hard for it and therefore deserve it. This kind of thinking makes it difficult for people to understand why social change is necessary. Instead, they see individual people as the source of "their problems."

What helps?

Prime a *we* mindset and offer a vision of collective prosperity by opening your message with a proposition like Proposition 3: We All Need a Strong Foundation from Part III.

Use storytelling strategies to help people understand how child care centers work as businesses and what we as a society can do to support them.

In other words, be sure that your message *sets the scene* by explaining a paradox: Why are profit margins in the business thin while child care costs for families are high? Make the villain in this story a systems-level cause of this paradox and make the hero a policy or program.

For example, your story can explain why early care and education must be labor-intensive to be effective. It could make current policies around who is and is not eligible for child care subsidies a villain and position financing reform as a hero.

See "What helps?" in the section below for guidance on how to establish high-quality early child care as a necessary public structure.

When you say ...

We must enact comprehensive legislation that infuses enough funding to improve working conditions for the early child care workforce, promotes high-quality services for our children, and reduces costs for low- and middle-income families.

They think ...

Sounds nice, but we just can't afford it.

What could be triggering this kind of response?

Government budgets are difficult to understand, so people often make sense of them by comparing them to household budgets. This comparison leads people to focus on budget balancing. Budgets, the thinking goes, are good when spending does not exceed income.

Americans also tend to believe that government should play a limited role when it comes to children and family issues.

What helps?

Open your message with a vision of collective prosperity. Use Proposition 5: Investing Wisely Works from Part III to direct thinking toward long-term gains and extend the typical cost-benefit analysis time frame from quarters to decades.

Redefine a *good* budget as one that supports our future needs by describing budgets as *tools* that governments use to create and maintain necessary public structures, like highway systems, schools, bridges, and health and safety agencies.

Align systems-level investments in early childhood with easy-to-recognize public structures like highways by describing investments in early childhood as investments in *care infrastructure*.

Describe taxes as support for budgets. For example: "A good tax structure allows our country, states, and communities to pay for the necessary public structures and services that we've planned for in our budgets. Sometimes we're tempted to put off spending for public structures, but that risks leaving us in a position in the future when costs will be higher and meeting the increased need will be unaffordable."

Remember that messages that make the case for investments in early childhood by describing these investments as cost-efficient are likely to backfire if these messages do not also use *Brain Architecture* and *Serve and Return* metaphors to root their case for investment in clear cause-and-effect relations.

Part III: Strategies for Elevating the Issue and Fostering a Sense of Collective Responsibility

One of the most important decisions that changemakers in this field can make is to **consistently frame supporting children's positive development as a shared responsibility with shared benefits**. Without explicit cues to consider child development as a public problem that demands public policy solutions, the public tends to understand this issue as something that concerns only children and their families. When people understand the issue in this narrow way, they may feel critical or compassionate, but they won't see policies and programs as solutions. They may also conclude that there are no real public policy solutions because the only thing that matters are caregiver choices.

Over the past decade, FrameWorks testing has consistently shown that two principles are extraordinarily effective for fostering a sense of collective responsibility: *Collective Prosperity* and *Ingenuity*. Both principles help communicators adopt a tone that balances urgency with possibility and shift attention away from what we're up against and toward what we can achieve when we work together. Testing has shown that invoking these principles early and often in communications about strengthening the systems that affect children and their families increases receptivity to these ideas.

The principle of *Ingenuity* redirects thinking away from *Fatalism*, the idea that longstanding problems are longstanding because they are just too big or complex to solve. As a principle, *Ingenuity* reminds people that it's part of American culture to find innovative solutions to challenging problems. Invoke *Ingenuity* when talking about what other states and localities have done to solve problems in prenatal and early childhood development. The principle of *Collective Prosperity* addresses the problematic tendency to assign responsibility for children's positive development to children, their parents, or to nature. Invoke this principle to remind people that effective interventions are possible and benefit all of us.

The propositions and explanations below invoke these two principles in ways that prime a we mindset while avoiding sympathy pleas, crisis messaging, and other forms of emotionally charged appeals. Feel free to lift language verbatim or communicate these propositions in your own voice or the voice of your organization.

For guidance in choosing which proposition is most likely to fit your communications needs, see Part II: Know Before You Go.

PROPOSITION #1

"We Share Responsibility for Our Region's Children"

Every child is filled with remarkable promise, and we have a collective responsibility to ensure that the children living in our communities can develop into theirs. Because human brains are built in stages, with more complex structures built on simpler structures, it's crucial to get the early years right. When we help the children in our communities get off to a strong start, we set the stage for our region to realize new possibilities.

PROPOSITION #2

"Positive Development for All Children = Regional Thriving"

We have a collective responsibility to create and maintain conditions in our region that support positive development for all of our children. Because brains are built in stages, with more complex structures built on simpler structures, it's crucial to get the early years right. Unfortunately, not every family in our region has what they need to consistently provide their children with access to brain-nourishing opportunities for early learning and responsive caregiving.

The decisions we make as a society determine the opportunities that individuals and groups have. To make our region healthier and fairer, we must work together to provide supportive opportunities for every child, family, and community according to their needs. When we work together to ensure that our children have what they need to develop into their full potential, our region thrives, because today's children are tomorrow's community members, workers, and leaders.

PROPOSITION #3

"We All Need a Strong Foundation"

Family stability matters to us all. Programs and policies that address the needs of children and their families at the same time provide the stability families need to harness their full potential, starting a cycle of opportunity that puts the entire family on a path to permanent economic security. By supporting public policies and human service programs that support every family and every child according to their needs, we can ensure the wellbeing of our region's children and our collective civic, social, and economic future.

PROPOSITION #4

"Children Are Our Future—
We Must Invest in Their Potential"

Today's children are tomorrow's neighbors, leaders, and workers. For our region to reach its potential, we must make sure all of our children reach theirs—no matter their zip code, race, or background.

PROPOSITION #5

"Investing Wisely Works"

Our region's future prosperity will be determined by how the adults in our region foster the health and development of our children. If we want our region to thrive, we need to pay serious attention to how children develop and invest wisely in making that process go well. Fortunately, there is now a strong evidence base to help us meet the challenge of creating conditions in our communities that support positive child development. By supporting public policies and human service programs that support every family and every child in every community according to their needs, we can ensure the wellbeing of our region's children and our collective civic, social, and economic future.

Part IV: Metaphors

Metaphorical language can be a powerful tool for social change communicators when we use them to build understanding and shape the conversation.

Metaphors that work in this way rely on everyday objects or experiences to help communicators introduce unfamiliar issues or explain complex ones. They are particularly helpful when we need to put a new issue on the public agenda or ensure that sound science informs policy decisions.

For guidance in choosing which metaphors will be especially useful for your communications needs, see Part II: Know Before You Go.

Metaphors for Anchoring Your Advocacy in the Science of Child Development

The set of metaphors you'll find below have been tested by the FrameWorks Institute to make sure they faithfully represent important concepts in early childhood development and positively influence public attitudes and policy preferences.

Brain Architecture: Early Experiences Build Brains

Contrary to popular belief, the structure of our brains as they develop in early childhood is determined by more than just our genes. The experiences we have in the first years of our lives also affect the physical architecture of the developing brain. Because brains are built in stages, with more complex structures built on simpler structures, it's crucial to get the early years right. Just as a house needs a sturdy foundation to support the walls and roof, a brain needs a good base to support all future development. Building better brains is possible by exposing children to positive, nurturing interactions at a young age. These positive experiences are the bricks that build sturdy brain architecture, leading to improved learning and behavior as well as better physical, mental, and social wellbeing throughout life.

Kids can't build strong brains by themselves. Just like building construction, brain construction requires a crew to lay the foundation, frame the rooms, and wire the electrical system. The decisions we make as a society determine whether all of the children in our region have the work crews they need during this ongoing construction process. By supporting programs and policies that increase very young children's opportunities for positive engagement with family and early educators, we can ensure that our children build sturdy brain architecture.

Once the architecture is built, repairs to the foundation are more costly. That's one reason why investments in the early childhood ecosystem make sense.

Serve and Return: Positive Interactions Build Sturdy Brain Architecture

One way a solid brain foundation can be built and maintained in a developing child is through *serve and return* interactions. Serve and return works like an imaginary tennis match between a child and a caregiver. But instead of hitting a ball back and forth, various forms of communication pass between the two. A child reaches out for interaction. Caregivers can *return the serve* by speaking back, playing peekaboo, or sharing a toy or a laugh. These interactions exchanged throughout a young person's developing years are the bricks that build a healthy foundation for all future development.

Scaffolding: What Helps the Early Care and Education Workforce Build Better Brains

We can think of protective factors, such as skill-building opportunities that bridge home and school practices and caregiving experiences built upon serve and return interactions, as building blocks of brain development. Our early care and education workforce is a critical component of this construction process. As brain builders, early educators need scaffolding such as fair compensation and quality opportunities for professional development. When we support our early care and education workforce, they can provide children and families with the types of experiences that promote learning and build trust.

Air Traffic Control: The Brain's Executive Function System

Strong brain architecture supports the development of integrated cognitive, social, and emotional skills called *executive function*, which operates like *air traffic control* in a child's mental airspace. Think of a young child's brain as the control tower at a busy airport. All the planes landing and taking off simultaneously demand the controller's attention to avoid a crash. A young child faces similar challenges when learning to pay attention, plan ahead, deal with conflicts, and follow rules at home or in the classroom. Children require strong air traffic control skills to help regulate the flow of information, prioritize tasks, and find ways to manage stress and avoid mental collisions along the way. Fortunately, these skills can be built throughout childhood and into early adulthood through practice and coaching.

Weaving Skills Ropes: Cognitive, Social, and Emotional Skills Develop Together

Learning skills is like weaving a rope: No single strand does all the work. To develop a strong rope, each strand must be strong and woven tightly with others. The development of social, emotional, and cognitive skills begins in early childhood is a similar process. Our brains weave these skills together into *ropes*, which are then used to develop and strengthen other skills, like solving problems, collaborating, forming and expressing ideas, and learning from mistakes. Children need a lot of opportunities to weave strong skills ropes through interactions and experiences with the people around them. When families, schools, and communities partner together, they can reinforce these interactions and experiences to support skill-building in early childhood.

Resilience Scale: Tipping the Scale Toward Positive Outcomes

Resilience is the ability to stay healthy even in circumstances of severe stress. The foundations of resilience are strong brain architecture and air traffic control skills, which develop over time, based on the interaction of genes and life experiences.

You can think of a child's life as a scale with two sides. The things stacked on either side shape that child's development. The positive side is stacked with supports and protective factors like serve and return interactions, supportive relationships, skill-building opportunities, and access to quality health care and early learning opportunities. The negative side is stacked with risk factors like poverty, stress, neglect, and violence. You can think of resilience as a scale that tips toward the positive even when there are many things stacked on the negative side. To help children turn out well so they can build and strengthen their communities, we can support programs and policies that stack the positive side while offloading weight from the negative side. We can even shift the fulcrum with targeted interventions.

Anyone can become more resilient at any stage of life, but it's easiest to build the foundations of resilience in early childhood.

Toxic Stress: A Force That Disrupts Brain Architecture

Stress is one of the forces that shapes brain architecture in a developing child. Whether it strengthens or weakens a child's brain architecture has to do with the kind of stress, its intensity and duration, and whether supportive caregivers are present in the child's life. Not all stress is bad. Events that create *positive stress*—like meeting new people or starting the first day of school—are healthy when supportive adults are around because they help prepare young brains and bodies for future challenges. Other, more traumatic events, like a natural disaster or losing a loved one, aren't good for us. But if supportive caregivers are around to buffer the stress response, these situations won't do lasting damage to the brain. That's called *tolerable stress*. A third kind of stress weakens brain architecture and can disrupt healthy development. This is *toxic stress*. Toxic stress occurs when no supportive caregivers are around to buffer the body's response to repeated negative experiences. Things that cause toxic stress may include abuse, neglect, parental addiction, violence outside the home, or chaotic environments. Young children whose brain development has been disrupted by toxic stress are at a much higher risk for later physical and mental health problems, including addiction.

Roots: The Nurturing Role Played by Stable, Responsive Relationships in the Process of Child Development

Just as a system of roots supports and nourishes trees as they develop and grow, responsive relationships with adults nurture a child's development and provide necessary stability. In the early years, especially, these growth-promoting relationships play a crucial role in almost all aspects of development—including physical, cognitive, emotional, social, and behavioral.

Very young children benefit from forming stable, responsive relationships with their primary caregivers, other children, and other adults in their community (such as caregivers in child care settings or early educational settings). Serve and return interactions strengthen these relationships while laying a strong foundation for brain construction. This is one reason why the physical and mental health of a child's

primary caregivers will influence that child's development and why high turnover rates in early child care centers (which leads to repeated *detaching* and *re-attaching*) can pose a risk of harm.

Stable, responsive relationships are most likely to take root when very young children and families are supported by policies and structures that encourage serve and return interaction and reinforce developmental relationships rather than undermine them.

While the nature of these developmental relationships will change over time, we never outgrow our need for them. Stable, responsive relationships with loved ones, peers, and other caring adults nurture self-expression, critical reflection, and social skills in children. Because developmental relationships can sprout in many places, they can open up new opportunities to make a difference.

Developmental relationships are the roots of our children's success. These relationships are needed early to provide strength, stability, and nourishment. They also help build up resilience to stress and adversity, helping young people stay rooted and be better able to withstand life's storms. Let's do a better job of making sure all children—regardless of race, ethnicity, income, geography, or other life circumstance—have the developmental relationships they need to grow and thrive today and tomorrow.

Additional Metaphors

Benefits Cliff: A Systems-Level Problem Leading to Sudden Losses in Spending Power

When states apply eligibility criteria without considering an individual family's true financial picture, a modest increase in income (from working more hours, getting a raise, taking on a new position, etc.) can leave families ineligible for needed benefits, putting them in an overall worse position financially than they were before.

Space Launch: Learning and Development Involves Planning, Coordination, and Communication

Just as launching rockets into space requires a team of people working together to plan and complete the mission, families, schools, and communities need to work together to launch children's learning. Like a team at *mission control*, families, schools, and communities need to engage with each other in a systematic fashion to plan, implement, and complete their shared mission.

That's why policies and programs that make it easier for families, schools, and communities to interact with each other in an ongoing, systematic way are so important.

Currently in our community, there are barriers that make it hard for some families to engage with schools—for example, if school events are scheduled for times when parents can't get away from work or if parents and teachers don't speak the same language or don't come from the same culture. To promote family engagement, schools need practices that allow all families to be involved, regardless of background or circumstances. For example, schools can translate materials for non-English-speaking parents and hold events at different times of the day to allow families with different work hours to attend. They can also provide teachers with training that helps them understand the needs and goals of parents from different circumstances and backgrounds.

When everyone on the mission control team engages in regular, reliable coordination and communication, especially during the early years, student learning and development takes off.

Part V: Key Ideas to Advance

The talking points and explanations below are research-based frames and messages that have been proven to garner broad public support for issues connected to healthy early childhood development, prevention of adversity, mitigation of toxic stress, promotion of resilience, and strengthening of families.

Use this section as a resource for choosing words, phrases, and ideas that tap into the public's knowledge and helpful assumptions about why and how we as a society should support children and families.

If You're Talking About Supporting Positive Development

Laying a Strong Foundation for Mental Health and Overall Wellbeing Begins Early

An example using the *Brain Architecture* metaphor

Healthy brain development is a building process that begins before we are born. Positive experiences and loving relationships create a strong foundation that helps ensure that a child builds the skills necessary for a lifetime of strong mental health. Some children experience developmental delays. Connecting families to community supports and programs helps ensure that these children get back on track. Investing in practices, policies, and services that promote children's healthy development and support children who experience developmental challenges ensures that children build the skills they need to be successful.

Environments and Experiences Affect Children's Development and Mental Health

An example using the *Resilience Scale* metaphor:

Circumstances and experiences influence children's development and mental health, even in the early years. Think of children's development and mental health as a scale with positive experiences like stable relationships and supportive communities stacked on one side and negative experiences like family stress and poverty stacked on the other side. To make our region healthier and fairer for all children, we must work together to connect families to community supports and programs that tip kids' scales toward the positive side. By doing so, we are helping children build healthy brains and bodies, making them more resilient and able to deal with stressors now and in the future.

When Parents are Supported, Kids and Communities Thrive

An example using *Shared Prosperity* as a shared principle:

All families need support from the community to raise happy, healthy children. Services and policies that provide parenting support and coaching help to strengthen families and ensure that children can reach their potential and fully realize their contributions to society.

Parents and Caregivers Hold Valuable Expertise

An example using *Ingenuity* as a shared principle:

Being a parent takes knowledge, experience, and commitment. We can gain fresh insight from parents about how to meet our responsibility as collective caregivers. When it comes to designing and redesigning systems-level policies that affect the lives of families and children, the meaningful inclusion of the expertise and perspectives of parents from a range of backgrounds is well worth the effort and patience it will require. It is the only way we will be able to build a care infrastructure that can extend collective care to all children, no matter who they are or where they live.

An example using *Ingenuity* as a shared principle and Space Launch as a metaphor:

Just as a space launch relies on a team of people working together to plan and complete a mission, families and schools can work together to launch children's learning. When team members communicate and collaborate regularly, rather than only during times of crisis or at certain times of year, everyone benefits.

We Can Reimagine How We Establish and Manage Child Care Subsidy Policies

An example using the *Benefits Cliff* metaphor:

Evidence shows that high-quality early childhood development services, particularly from the prenatal period to 3 years old, bring lifetime benefits to children, their families, and communities. However, the cost of quality child care is out of step with average wages and salaries. While subsidies are available to address this problem, they aren't funded at the level needed to accomplish the twin goals of supporting parents' workforce participation and children's early development. When states apply eligibility criteria without considering an individual family's true financial picture, a modest increase in earning can leave families ineligible for needed benefits, causing them to fall back rather than move ahead. We need to expand access to high-quality early childhood development programs to give all kids the brain-building opportunities they need to thrive now and in the future. This will involve reimagining how we establish and manage child care subsidy policies and aligning existing funding streams, regulations, and policies to create more accessible, comprehensive, and high-quality child care settings and teacher training programs.

If You're Talking About How Stronger Communities Support Overall Child and Family Wellbeing and Promote Shared Prosperity

Connecting with Each Other Strengthens Communities

An example using *Shared Prosperity* as a shared principle:

Humans are social creatures, and we're happiest and healthiest when we regularly spend time with others. Close personal relationships and a sense of community are strongly linked with physical and mental wellbeing. Connecting with other people can reduce stress and help us remember that there are people out there who care about us.

Much is known about the importance of building connections among adults, and in particular parents, to improve the health of a community and strengthen families. Communities have a great influence in families' lives. When parents don't feel like they are part of a community and, in turn, feel isolated and unsupported, it should be a concern for all those looking to support child mental health and overall wellbeing, as well as those concerned with the economic wellbeing of our region. The well-documented solution to addressing these issues lies in building social connections.

If You're Talking About Childhood Adversity

Resilience is Built

An example using the *Resilience Scale* metaphor:

Resilience is the ability to stay healthy even in circumstances of severe stress. Resilience is built and strengthened by factors like social relationships, community resources, and opportunities to thrive. But when those materials are not available, people and communities may have difficulty weathering life's storms. Communities can help families construct and maintain resilience by investing in programs and policies that provide timely interventions and support to families experiencing adversity. Investing in programs and policies that support families to overcome and bounce back from life's challenges also enables children to reach their potential and fully realize their contributions to society.

Community Resources Strengthen Families

An example using *Shared Prosperity* as a shared principle:

All families need support from the community to raise happy, healthy children, and we all face challenges in our lives when we could use extra support. When families have information and timely access to available local resources to meet their needs, we strengthen the foundation for families, children, and communities to thrive.

Part VI: Framing Checklist

Use this framing checklist to check your communications and determine the extent to which they are *on frame*. We invite you to work through this checklist with your team.

— Does this message position **positive child development as an issue that matters to us all,** or only to those who are immediately affected?

☐ Yes ☐ No

If NO, choose one of the alternative strategies for elevating the issue in Part III. See also "When parents are supported, kids and communities thrive" in Part V for additional inspiration.

— Does this message use sympathy pleas, crisis messaging, or other forms of emotionally charged appeals to build a sense of urgency? For example, does it use deficit-based language (e.g., "at-risk children," "disadvantaged children," "the working poor," "minorities"), emphasize disparities without explaining their systemic causes, or talk about "saving" or "protecting" the "vulnerable"?

☐ Yes ☐ No

If YES, see Fast Frames Episode 3: "Alternatives to Vulnerability Framing," choose one of the alternative strategies for elevating the issue in Part III, use the metaphors in Part IV to build understanding of the problem you're addressing, and borrow from the "Supporting Positive Development" ideas in Part V to build your case.

— Does this message cue thoughts about *deservingness*? That is, does the framing cue up the false idea that families who face challenges have only (or mostly) themselves to blame and, as a result, don't deserve public support?

☐ Yes ☐ No

If YES, choose one of the alternative strategies for elevating the issue in Part III and use the *Benefits Cliff* metaphor or "Supporting Positive Development" ideas in Part V.

— Does this message **build public understanding of the science of child development**?

☐ Yes ☐ No

If NO, see "Metaphors for Anchoring Your Message in the Science of Child Development" in Part IV.

— Does this message offer j*ust the facts* and/or data without context or interpretation?

☐ Yes ☐ No

If YES, see Fast Frames Episode 2: "Framing Data."

— Does this message **build public understanding of how policies can restrict access to resources that support children and families,** leading to negative or disparate outcomes in child development?

☐ Yes ☐ No

If NO, borrow from the "Supporting Positive Development" ideas in Part V and see the FrameWorks resource, *Bringing Equity into the Conversation*.

— Does this message offer a **compelling alternative vision of how we can act together through public institutions to support positive child development** in the region?

☐ Yes ☐ No

If NO, see Fast Frames Episode 1: "Solutions-Oriented Framing."

About FrameWorks

The FrameWorks Institute is a nonprofit think tank that advances the mission-driven sector's capacity to frame the public discourse about social and scientific issues. The organization's signature approach, Strategic Frame Analysis®, offers empirical guidance on what to say, how to say it, and what to leave unsaid. FrameWorks designs, conducts, and publishes multi-method, multidisciplinary framing research to prepare experts and advocates to expand their constituencies, to build public will, and to further public understanding. To make sure this research drives social change, FrameWorks supports partners in reframing, through strategic consultation, campaign design, FrameChecks®, toolkits, online courses, and in-depth learning engagements known as FrameLabs. In 2015, FrameWorks was named one of nine organizations worldwide to receive the MacArthur Award for Creative and Effective Institutions.

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A Communications Toolkit

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