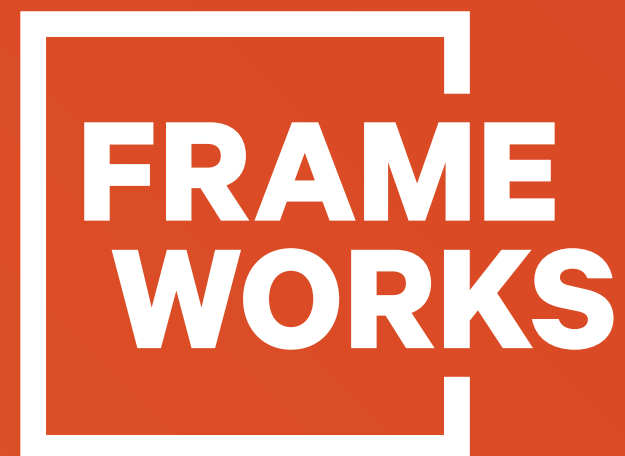


# The power of a shared story

Lessons from the early childhood movement

Julie Sweetland, PhD, Senior Advisor



September 4, 2024

Prepared for the United Way of Greater Cincinnati Knowledge Exchange

# FrameWorks is on a mission...

to advance the nonprofit sector's capacity

to **frame the public discourse** on social and scientific issues

# Reframing an issue catalyzes change that can be sustained



What we say



What people hear



How people think



How institutions respond

how can we tell  
if a social movement's framing is working?



Ways to measure  
impact of a social  
movement

**Policy changes**

Successful influence on legislation or other forms of government policies

**Societal shifts**

Cultural mindsets, public opinion, and social norms have shifted in favor of the cause

**Institutional changes**

New organizations are established or existing institutions change in line with goals

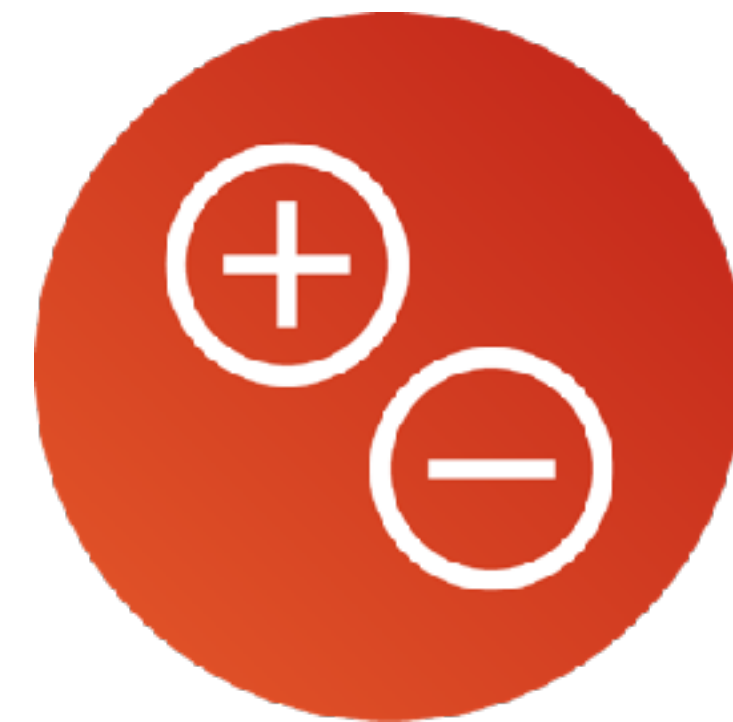
**Ongoing activism**

The movement continues to thrive and adapts to new challenges

## **Key lesson**

**Identify key mindsets to move — and work continuously on moving them.**

# cultural mindsets are...



# Some Target Mindsets for Core Story of Early Childhood

*dominant mindset*

Child development happens inside the “family bubble.”



*target mindset*

Children develop in an environment of relationships and experiences.

Meaningful learning begins when children enter school.



The earliest stages of life have a profound impact across the lifespan.

Negative experiences can “toughen up” a child — and have no effect if they can’t remember them.



Early adversity can disrupt children’s development, unless adults provide timely support.



# Mindsets can move in different directions

Change in boundaries



Less salient over time



More salient over time

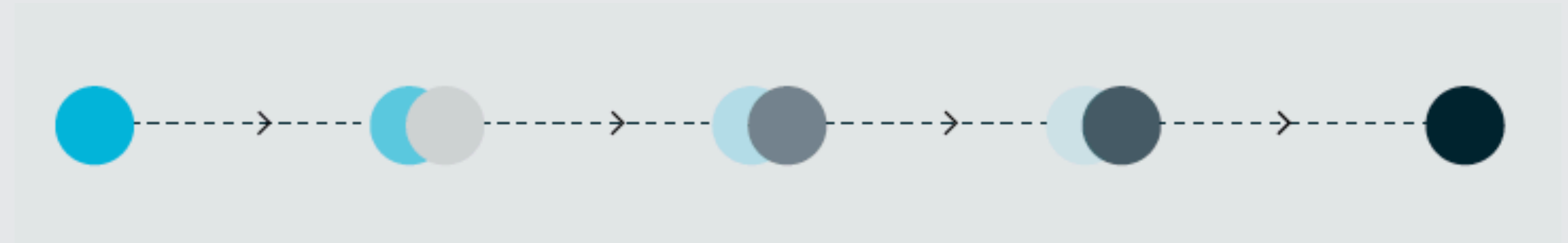


Permanent replacement



# Family bubble: a mindset that could stretch

Change in boundaries



*dominant mindset*

*target mindset*

Child development happens inside the “family bubble.”



Children develop in an environment of relationships and experiences.

*dominant framing*

*reframing*

“Parents are children’s first teachers.”



“In the end, it all comes down to parents.”

“The presence of responsive caregiving — whether from parents, grandparents, child care providers — is a key factor in healthy early development.”

# Mental models of early adversity needed fundamental change

*dominant mindset*

Negative experiences can strengthen a child — and have no effect if they can't remember them.



*target mindset*

Early adversity can disrupt children's development, unless adults provide timely support.

*We needed to make dominant mindset less salient over time*



*We needed to build a brand-new mindset over time*



# The concept of “toxic stress” helped to reframe early adversity

Center on the Developing Child  
HARVARD UNIVERSITY

About Science Innovation & Application Collective Change Resource Library

Key Concepts

## Toxic Stress

▶ Watch the Overview Video

The future of any society depends on its ability to foster the healthy development of the next generation. Extensive research on the biology of stress now shows that healthy development can be derailed by excessive or prolonged activation of stress response systems in the body and brain. Such **toxic stress** can have damaging effects on learning, behavior, and health across the lifespan.

morning joe msnbc

msnbc PHILADELPHIA



DOCTORS' ORDERS TOXIC STRESS THE EFFECT ON YOUR BODY

## The New York Times

The Opinion Pages

### Opinionator

FIXES

## Protecting Children From Toxic Stress

By DAVID BORNSTEIN OCTOBER 30, 2013 11:55 AM



# Consistent framing of early adversity moved mindsets over time

	2010	2016
Percentage of US parents who incorrectly believe that infants could not experience feelings such as sadness and fear until after they were 6 months old	<b>69%</b>	<b>51%</b>
Percentage of US parents who know that an infant can sense whether their parents were angry or sad and can be affected by their moods.	<b>44%</b>	<b>54%</b>

# Consistent framing of early adversity moved mindsets over time

	2000	2016
Percentage of US parents of young children who know that a child aged six months or younger can suffer long-term effects from witnessing violence	<b>23%</b>	<b>51%</b>

# Public thinking and public discourse can allow decision makers room to make tough calls

UNITED STATES DISTRICT COURT  
SOUTHERN DISTRICT OF CALIFORNIA

Ms. L.; et al.,  
Petitioners-Plaintiffs,  
v.  
U.S Immigration and Customs  
Enforcement ("ICE"); et al.,  
Respondents-Defendants.

Case No.: 18cv0428 DMS (MDD)

**ORDER GRANTING PLAINTIFFS'  
MOTION FOR CLASSWIDE  
PRELIMINARY INJUNCTION**

Excerpt from 2018 federal  
injunction that ordered a halt to  
the practice of separating infants  
and children from their families at  
the US border

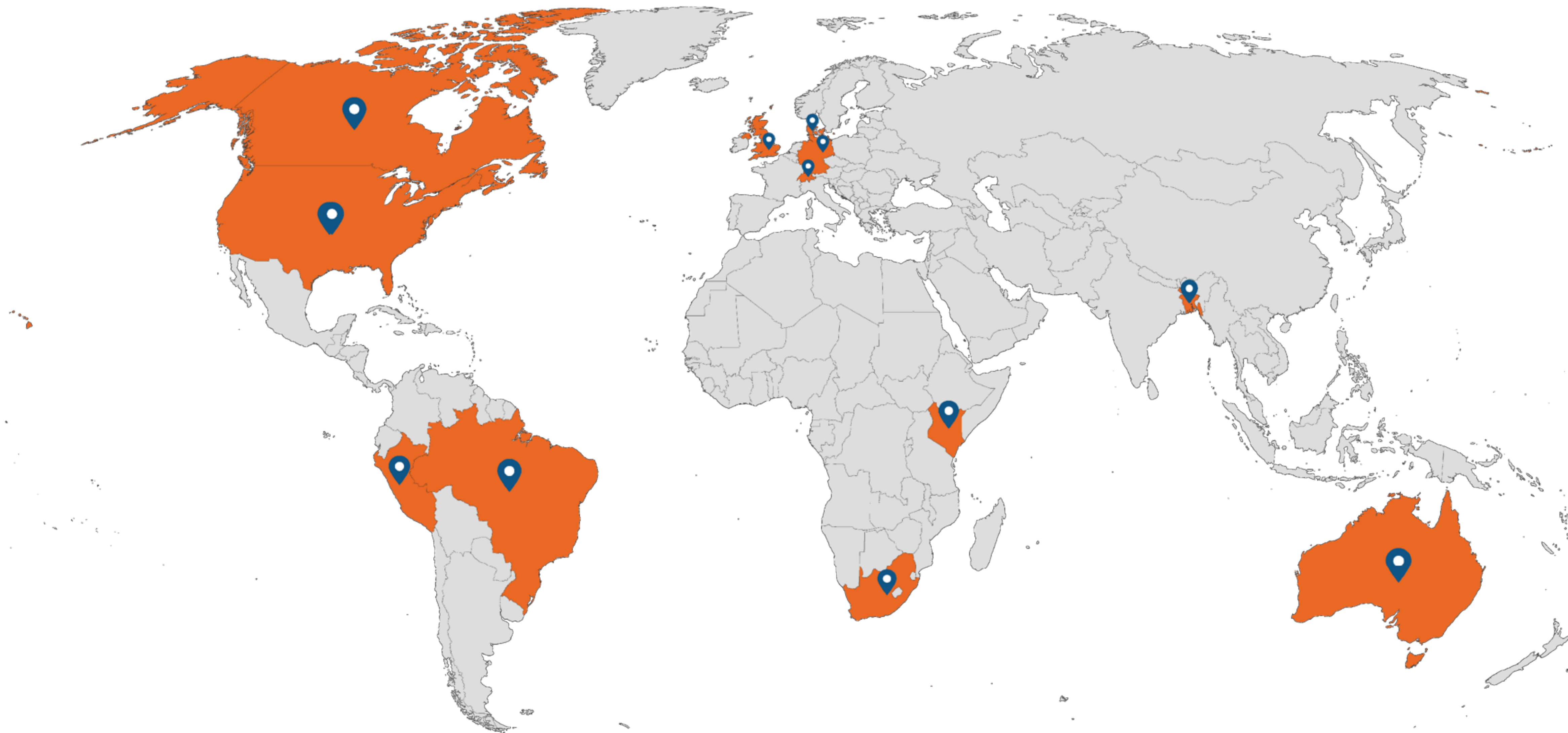
Separation from family leaves children more vulnerable to exploitation and abuse, no matter what the care setting. In addition, traumatic separation from parents creates **toxic stress** in children and adolescents that can profoundly impact their development. Strong scientific evidence shows that **toxic stress** disrupts the development of **brain architecture** and other organ systems, and increases the risk for stress-related disease and cognitive impairment well into adult years. Studies have shown that children who experience such traumatic events can suffer from symptoms of anxiety and post-traumatic stress disorder, have poorer behavioral and educational outcomes, and experience higher rates of poverty and food insecurity.

## **Key lesson**

**Put your ideas on repeat - without sounding repetitive.**



The 'Brain Story' is now part of a global narrative shift



# Expand people's mental model of *who* affects children



**During the first three years of life, emotionally nourishing relationships lay the foundation for lifelong health and well-being.**

Research and clinical experience demonstrate that a baby's earliest relationships and experiences with their parents and other caregivers dramatically influences brain development, social-emotional and cognitive skills, and future health and success in school and life.

### *Zero to Three*

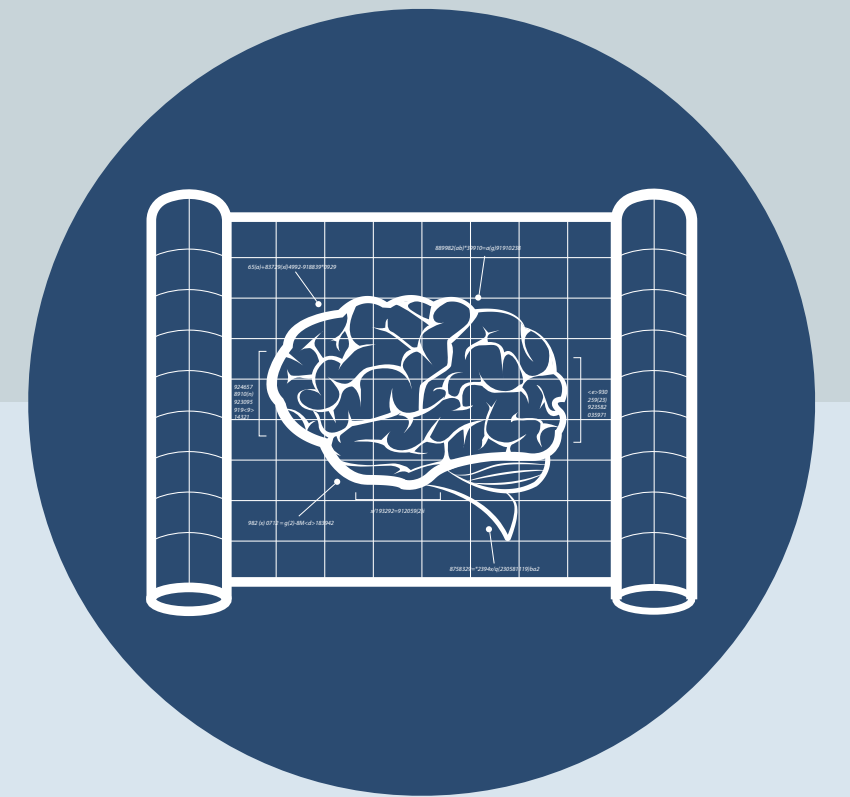
A baby's early experiences in relationships, whether at home or in an early education environment, set the stage for future brain functioning. The information gathered in these early relationships is at the heart of a rich and complex brain-building process. As babies experience responses from their caregivers, their brains start to form expectations for how they will be treated and how they should respond. For example,

*NAEYC (National Association for the Education of Young Children)*

# Brain Architecture

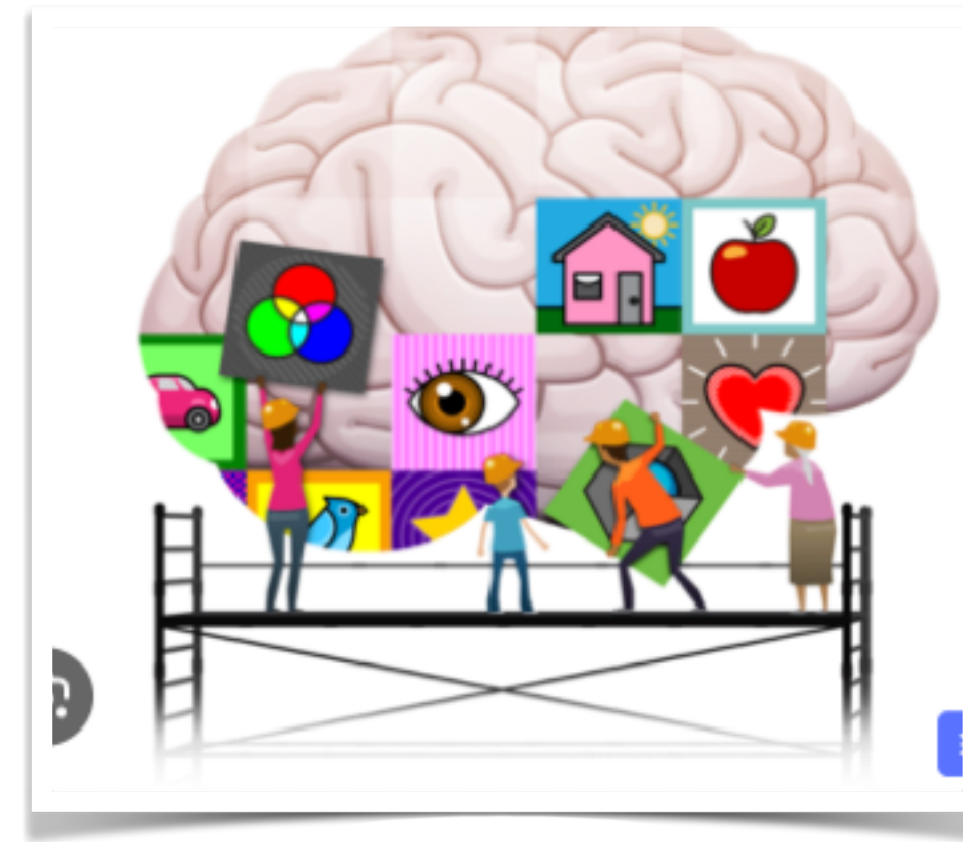
*A metaphor for the process and impact of rapid early neural development*

- **Early matters:** “The basic architecture of the brain is constructed like a house - foundation first.”
- **Experiences matter:** –“Early experiences build the brain, and establish either a sturdy or a fragile foundation for all of the development and behavior that follows.”
- **Later matters, too:** – “This construction project starts in the earliest stages of life, and continues through early adulthood.”
  - “In fact, recent research shows that the brains of new parents undergo a rewiring process - a time when new skills and emotional capacities can develop.”

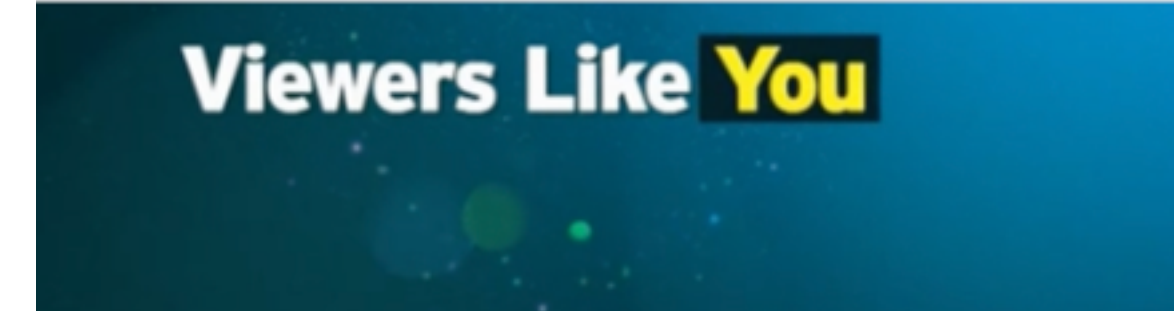




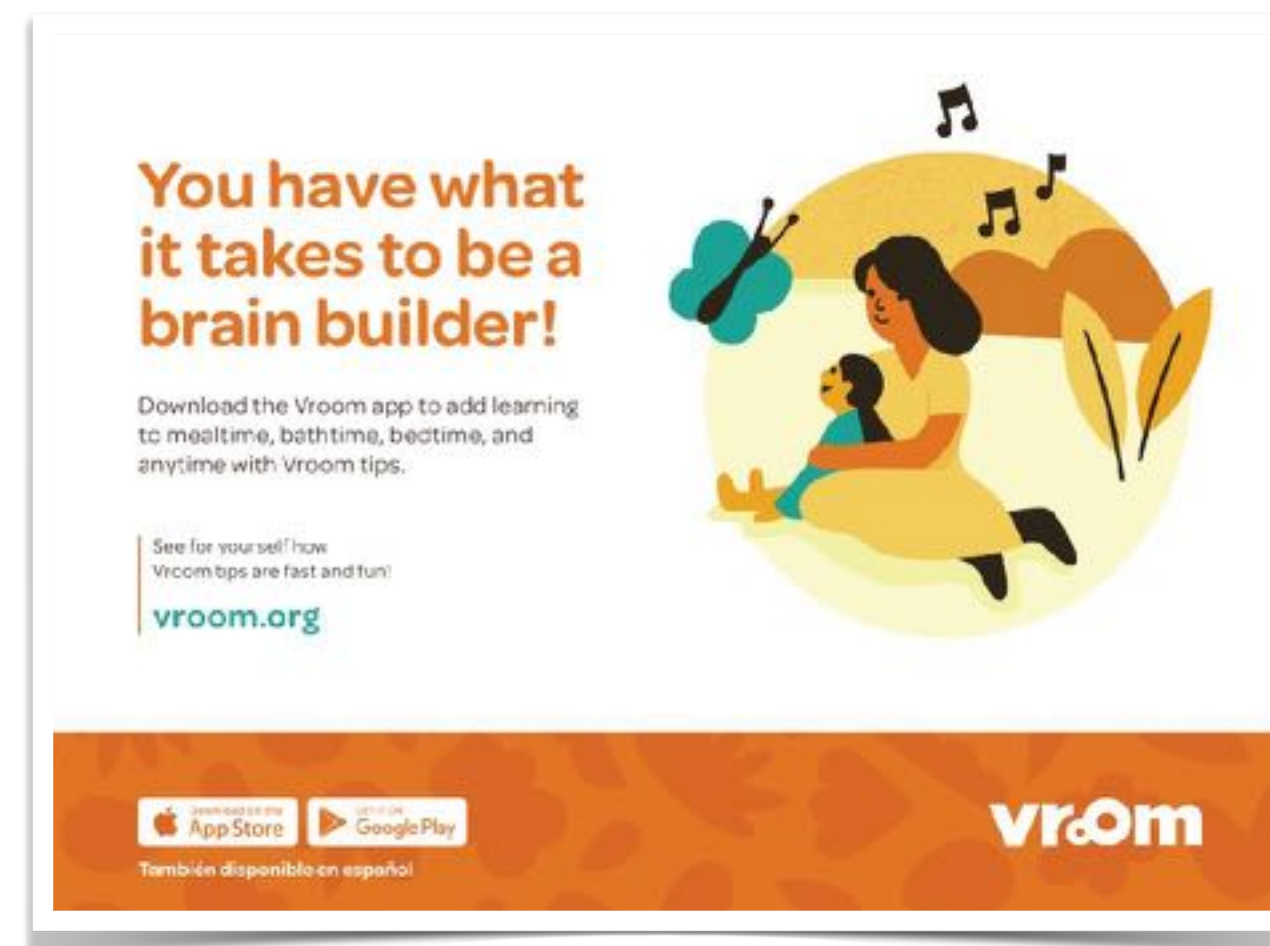
*TN Legislators playing The Brain Architecture Game*



*Hospital waiting room video*



*Local PBS documentary series*



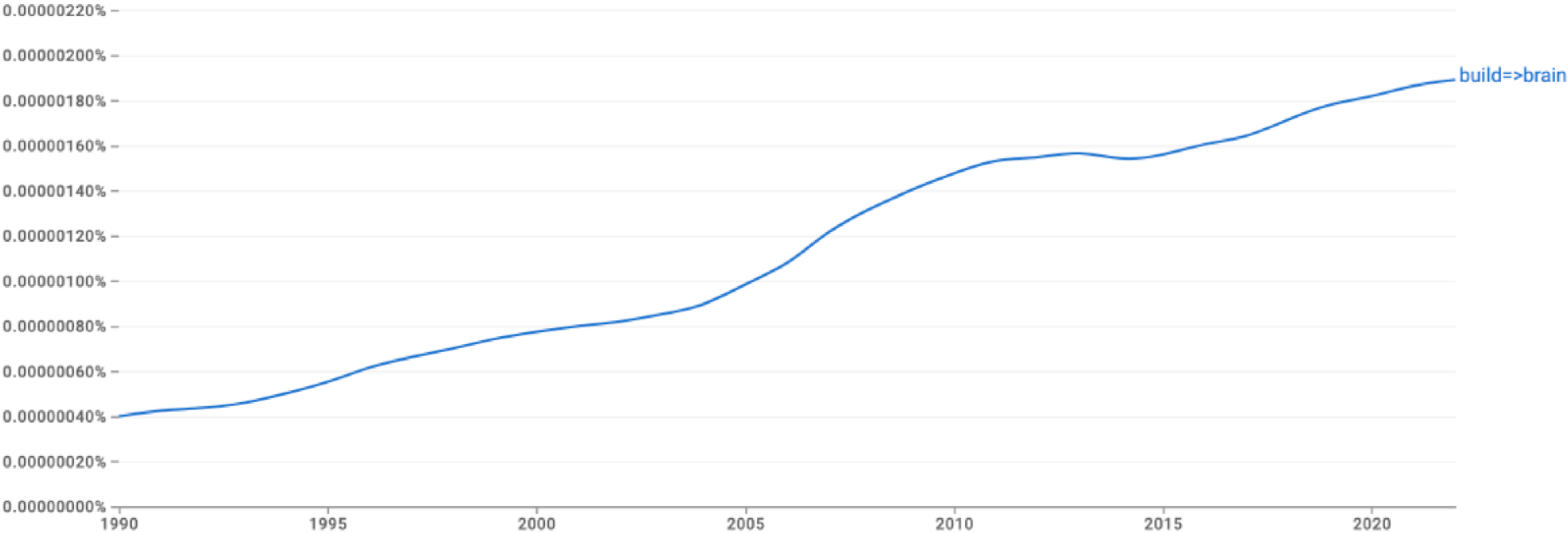
*Screen shot from Vroom app for parents*

# Over time, the concept of “brains as built” has become ubiquitous

Google Books Ngram Viewer

Q build=>brain X ?

1990 - 2022 English Case-Insensitive Smoothing





There is an art to flocking:  
staying separate enough to not crowd each other, aligned enough to maintain a  
shared direction,  
and cohesive enough to always move towards each other...



**adrienne maree brown**  
***emergent strategy***

## **Key lesson**

**Make a consistent claim about shared fates and collective benefits.**







Science shows that life is a story for which the beginning sets the tone. That makes the early years of childhood a time of great opportunity, but also great risk.

Children's brains are built, moment by moment, as they interact with their environments. In the first few years of life, more than one million neural connections are formed each second – a pace never repeated again. The quality of a child's early experiences makes a critical difference as their brains develop, providing either strong or weak foundations for learning, health and behaviour throughout life.

*UNICEF*

Decades of neuroscience and behavioral research illustrate why a child's first five years of life are the most critical periods in their brain development.<sup>1</sup> Brains are built over time; the basic architecture begins at birth and grows the fastest over the first five years, before continuing into adulthood.<sup>2</sup> One's earliest experiences affect the quality of that architecture by establishing either a strong or fragile foundation for the learning and behavior that follows. Just as a weak foundation compromises the quality and strength of a house, adverse experiences early in life can impair brain architecture, with long-term and negative effects that last into adulthood.

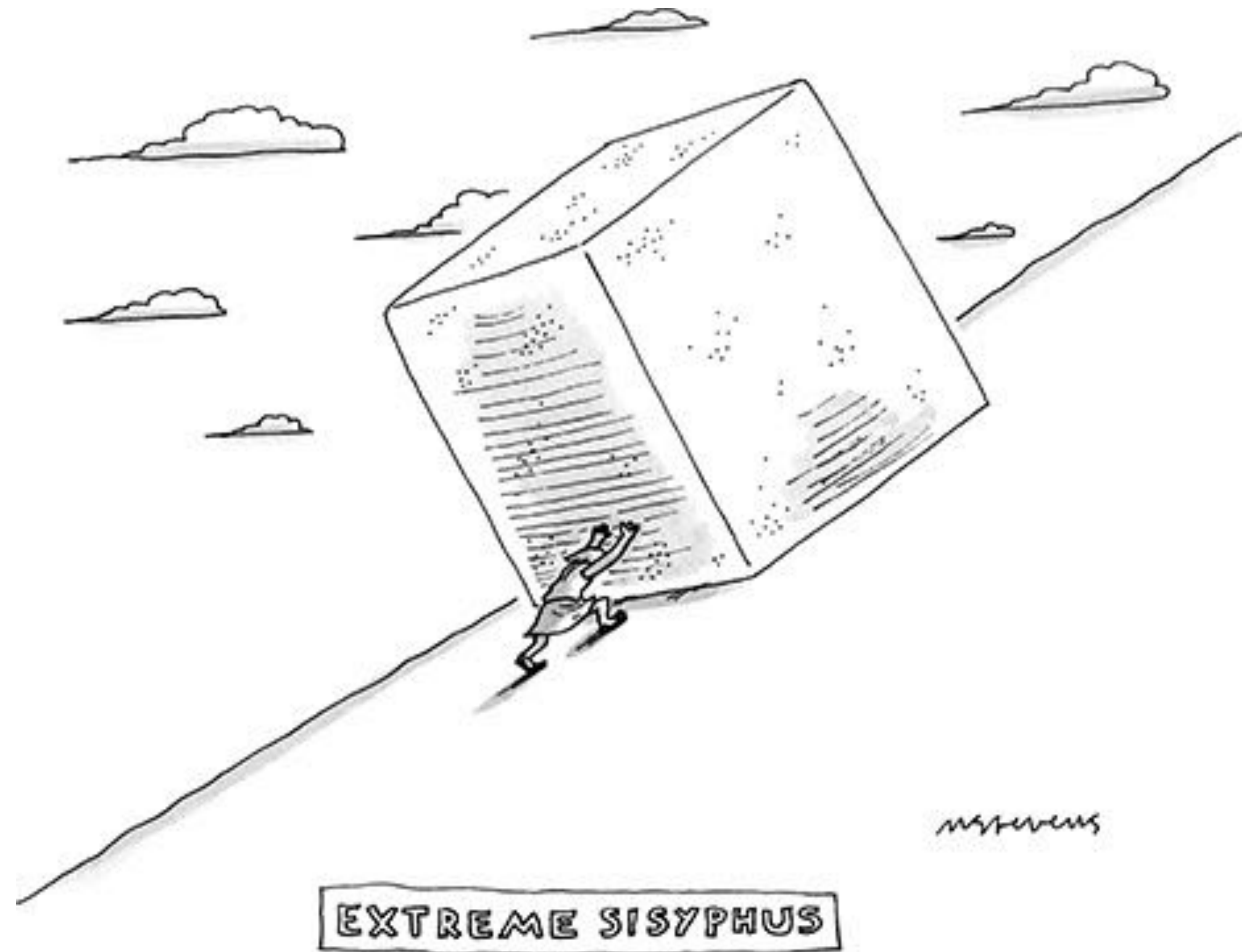
*Bipartisan Policy Center*

## **Key lesson**

**Go for the short wins, but stay focused on the long-term changes you need.**

**Movements need framing strategies that work for the long-term effort of moving mindsets.**

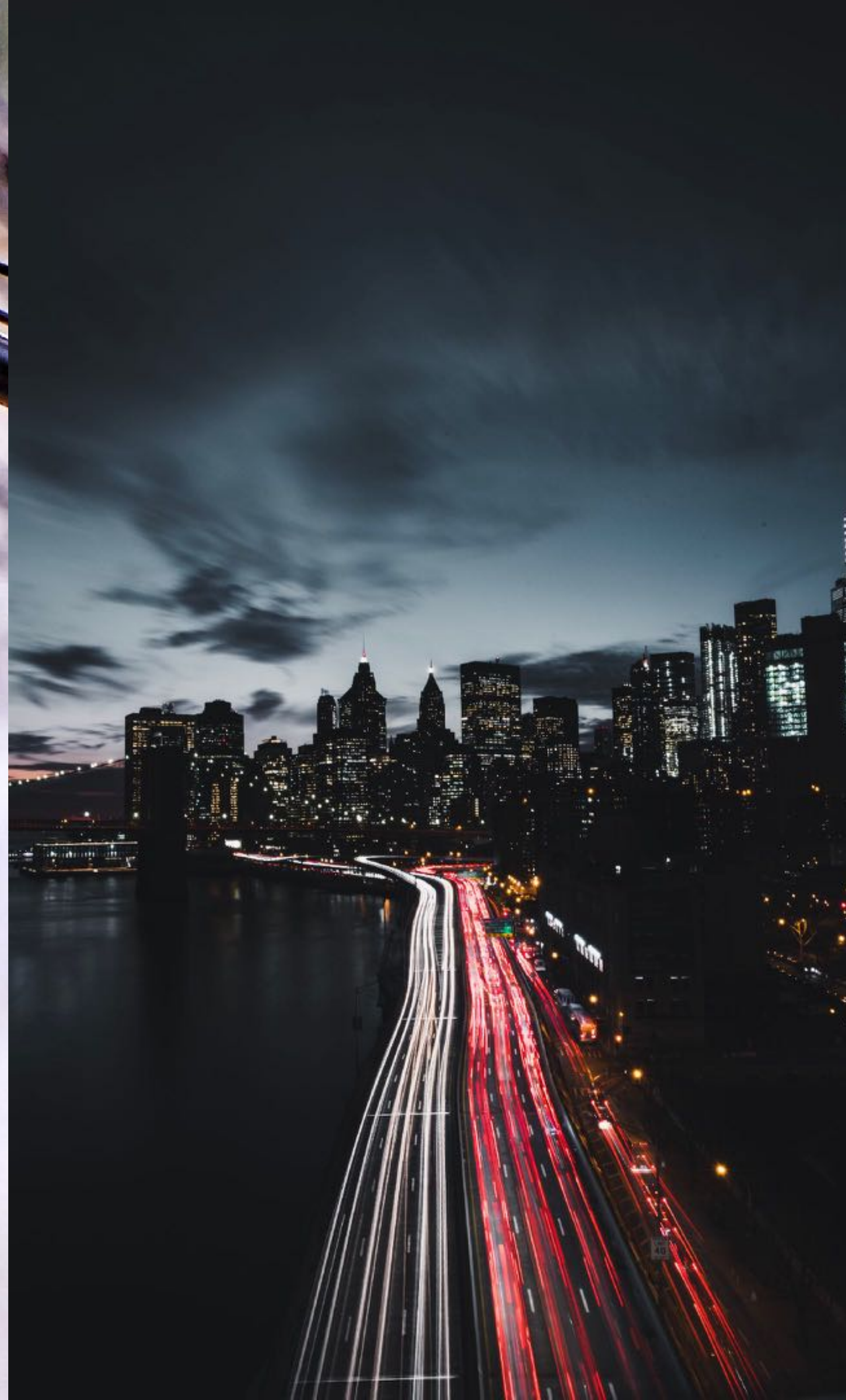
**Without one, the difficult task of social change is even harder.**



## **Social movements engage in “meaning-making”**

“Movements are engaged in ‘meaning-work’ ...the struggle over the production of ideas of meaning...The failure of mass mobilization when structural conditions seem otherwise ripe may be accounted for by the absence of a resonant master frame.”

- Snow and Benford (1998)



## **Recap**

**What can we (all) learn about framing  
from the modern early childhood  
movement?**



**Prioritize mindsets & mindsets work.**

Identify key mindsets to move — and work continuously, using communications science, to move them.

**Repeat, repeat, repeat.**

Develop and test “sticky” ways to explain core concepts and reframe understandings... and use them again and again and again.

Recap of lessons from the modern ECD movement

**Make the story about shared fates.**

Rely on a tested way of showing that society has a stake in the issue — not only the group that would benefit most from change.

**Play the long game.**

While you work toward short-term goals, keep in mind the meaning-making work, which unfolds over a decade or more.



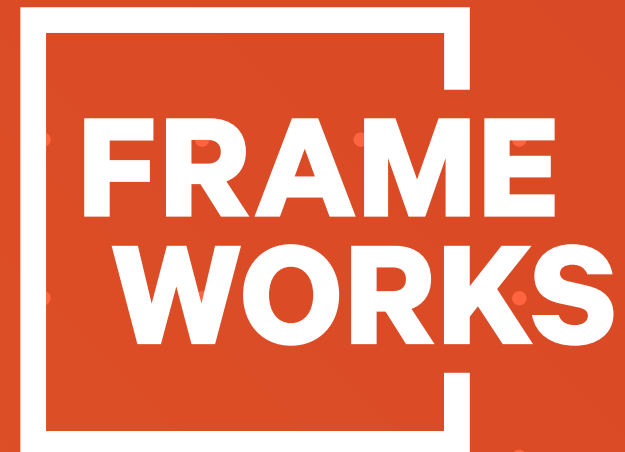
The world changes according to the way people see it, and if you can alter, even by a millimeter, the way people look at reality, then you can change the world.

**James Baldwin**  
**New York Times interview, 1979**



Thank you!  
Let's continue the conversation.

[jsweetland@frameworksinstitute.org](mailto:jsweetland@frameworksinstitute.org)



[frameworksinstitute.org](http://frameworksinstitute.org)  
 FrameWorks Institute

© 2024 FrameWorks Institute

Slides in this presentation were developed by the FrameWorks Institute for individual use and cannot be represented, adapted, or distributed without the express written permission of FrameWorks. All images in this presentation are licensed for the purpose of this presentation only and may not be reproduced elsewhere.

# 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<sup>®</sup>, 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<sup>®</sup>, 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.

**Learn more at [www.frameworksinstitute.org](http://www.frameworksinstitute.org)**