

Reframing Child Abuse and Neglect: A Practical Tool Kit

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General Guidelines on Reframing Child Abuse & Neglect

As a result of the reframing research conducted by the FrameWorks Institute and its partners, Cultural Logic and Public Knowledge, four frames were identified – parenting, child abuse and neglect, child development and community – that the field can use to advance a variety of policies and behavior changes. All four frames have assets and liabilities advocates must be aware of when talking about this issue, but the child development and community frames do present the most promise for advocates. There are recommendations for using each frame, which can be found in the Implementing the Research section. However, there are some guidelines relating to general recommendations on graphics and messaging, evaluation, and working with the media and consultants that will also be useful in developing a more effective strategy for communicating about, and advocating on behalf of, child abuse and neglect prevention.

General Guidelines

While one should follow appropriate recommendations for each frame, the FrameWorks Institute recommends the following general guidelines when developing messages and communications strategies¹:

- **Solutions must be spelled out early and often, and must match the problem.** Don't choose imagery to talk about a problem like child deaths from abuse and offer a solution of preventative actions for individuals to follow. In most cases, people find child abuse deaths too extreme a problem to help prevent it from happening in the first place. In addition, start communications by focusing on the solutions to child maltreatment, not the problem. Talk about programs and services that help keep families strong and children safe.

¹ Making the Public Case for Child Abuse and Neglect Prevention: A FrameWorks Message Memo.
Susan Nall Bales, FrameWorks Institute (April 2004)



- **Define the role of community taking into consideration the challenges of the “Family Bubble.”** Remember that parenting is seen as an individual responsibility of the parents that takes place within the privacy of the family. Outside help is seen as inappropriate and judgmental. Try to bring community in without excluding parents. And don’t cross the line by boldly asserting a prominent role for government or reinforcing the widely held fear that someone will come and take your children away for arbitrary reasons.
- **Be clear and consistent in your calls to action.** Don’t have a call to action asking people to report suspected abuse, in other words “turn their neighbors in,” while asking people to reach out and support parents and families in their community.
- **Choose thematic stories** that deal with issues, trends, the public realm and fixing the condition rather than episodic frames that only deal with individuals, events, the private realm and fixing the person.
- **Avoid triggering cognitive mistakes**, such as portraying children as willful or defining abuse as an internal flaw in people.
- **Choose messengers carefully.** Use unexpected messengers to broaden the discussion to the community and give people a new angle from which to view the issue. For example, use teachers or pediatricians to explain child development, bring in front-line program directors who have worked with kids and families, or use law enforcement officers to speak up for prevention programs. Using a variety of messengers helps reinforce the idea that all members of a community are responsible for the wellbeing and safety of children.
- **Use images that portray a positive, engaged community.** Visuals that accompany a message are strong triggers of existing frames or values and must be in line with reframing recommendations. For example, avoid tight shots of only kids and parents as this image reinforces the “Family Bubble,” and excludes community. Instead, choose visuals that illustrate community interaction with children and families. Be sure to include unexpected messengers in the images as well. Avoid using parents as messengers – except when promoting a parenting program or program retention – as this further validates the “Family



Bubble” and the existing tendency to look to other family members or non-experts for advice.

- **Wherever possible, tell stories of efficacy.** Demonstrate how programs and policies have worked for the benefit of children by predicting and addressing abusive situations before they happen. Doing so increases the idea of situations, not people, as the appropriate focus for child abuse interventions. For additional resources on what works in prevention, see the Child Welfare Information Gateway’s Prevention page (formerly the National Clearinghouse on Child Abuse and Neglect) <http://childwelfare.gov/preventing/>.

Campaign Evaluation

In order to have an effective communications campaign and to truly shift public will around child abuse and neglect prevention, advocates must make evaluation a priority. Budgeting for effective evaluation is well worth the time and money involved. It is a critical way to ensure that the campaign reaches the outcomes determined at the onset. Research prior, during and after the launch of new communication strategies will help advocates reach their audiences with the most effective messages. There are a variety of methods that can be used to evaluate the effectiveness of a communications campaign. For example, you could track media coverage of the issue in your community, gauge public opinion of your issue through opinion surveys, and use focus groups to test messages and understand the public’s frame of reference.

Evaluating communications is imperative to gauging the outcomes of the campaign and the effectiveness of the messages and strategies. Was your message or strategy effective in changing public will? Did you succeed in shifting the public’s frame of reference regarding child abuse and neglect prevention, parenting or child development?

To gauge effectiveness, FrameWorks suggests that communicators ask the following five questions when evaluating communications:

- **What does the suggested message tell people this issue is about, or connected to?** (Is it about child abuse and thus protection and punishment, or is it about healthy child development?)



- **Does the suggested message expand or narrow the constituency for this issue?** (Do we just need to fix bad parents, or do we owe all parents appropriate support and resources?)
- **Does it promote a frame on the issue that favors your position, or does it default to a negative frame?** (The child abuse and “blame the parent” frames aren’t as helpful as the “we all have a stake in healthy children” frame.)
- **Does it increase or decrease the salience of the issue?** (Why should the audience be interested? Why should they act?)
- **Does it assign responsibility for the problem to those who have the power to solve the problem?**ⁱ (Bad parents should learn how to correct their behavior vs. Community members should recognize the value of and support resources for families.)

Guidelines for Talking to Media

When working with media, the following guidelines will help advocates be more effective in getting their desired messages to the public:

- **Stay on message.** Narrow your message to one or two central points that you want to get across and stick to them. You do not have to explicitly answer every question a reporter poses. Answer each question in such a way that it reflects your key message. Do not repeat something a reporter says that is not part of your point, even to disagree with it. For example, by saying “child abuse is not just dramatic cases of parents killing their children,” you remind your audience of parents killing children.
- **Emphasize solutions to child abuse.** It’s about prevention, but don’t leave the word “prevention” unexplained. Describe the solutions. Keep in mind that reporters will usually try to move you back to drama and tragedy, but you can stress that child abuse is a problem with solutions that don’t receive the attention they should. Explain that the American public cares deeply about child abuse, but doesn’t know what can be done about it.
- **Reporters will want statistics.** Instead of supplying them with the traditional child abuse statistics on reports, substantiations and deaths, give them stats on



- efficacy. What works? How many people do you reach with services? What has been the impact of such services?
- **Letters to the editor are a great way to reach a general audience.** Keep them short and focused and be sure to include a call to action whether it is to support specific legislation or to learn more about a program.

Guidelines for Working With Consultants or Agencies

Many organizations choose to work with an outside public relations or advertising agency on a contract or pro-bono basis to produce marketing materials and communications campaigns. However, communications professionals will not necessarily know and understand the reframing research on child abuse and neglect prevention. This information is relatively new to the child advocacy field and it introduces an entirely new perspective on promoting the issue of child abuse and neglect prevention. Make sure that the communications professionals hired are informed and have a strong understanding of the strategic frame analysis research and how to apply it to the development of your campaign. Following are some guidelines from Childspeak Creative President Anne Durham for increasing consultants' understanding of the reframing research:

- **Provide background information on reframing.** Supply resource materials on reframing at the first meeting with your communications specialist. This toolkit will be helpful, as will the research reports and white papers. The Frameworks Institute website, www.frameworksinstitute.org, can also provide a thorough background on the philosophy of strategic frame analysis.
- **Use materials from reframed campaigns as examples.** If possible, show consultants before and after samples of materials that have been reframed both nationally and locally. Point out the nuances of reframing in each piece – the messages, the design, the photos, etc. These examples can provide consultants with an excellent starting point for creative development.
- **Be clear about expectations and desired outcomes of the campaign.** Many consultants will be tempted to employ strategies that have been successful for a number of years in evoking emotion and garnering public attention in order to clear through the communications clutter. Sensational stories and images only



reinforce the horrors of child abuse and neglect, and do nothing to advance a message of prevention.

- **Review and test reframed messages at different stages of the process.**

Developing a reframed campaign may take longer than past initiatives simply because a new way of communicating is being used. Plan to review materials at several points in the development phase and test them with representative groups of the target audience. If formal focus testing is not affordable, look for alternative ways to test the messages with similar audiences, such as childcare programs, parent groups, etc.

Working with an outside agency or consultant to reframe messages can be an exciting yet challenging effort. Make note of what you are learning and share this information with others in the field. This is an excellent opportunity for the child abuse and neglect field to create new messaging together and change the way our culture supports and protects its children.

ⁱ (<http://www.frameworksinstitute.org/products/issue3messages.shtml>)

