

Reframing Child Abuse and Neglect: A Practical Tool Kit

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Recommendations for Talking About Child Development *Adapted from "Making the Case for Child Abuse and Neglect Prevention"* *By Susan Nall Bales (FrameWorks Institute, 2004)*

Key Challenges

The biggest challenge in using the Child Development frame is the simple fact that the general public does not have a solid understanding of child development. The public often views children in an emotional way that obscures an understanding of physiological development. This misunderstanding is one of the biggest hurdles advocates face in advancing a social movement to prevent child abuse and neglect. According to the FrameWorks Institute, this frame poses the following challenges:

- The public's view of children in an emotional way is illustrated by the overuse of folksy terms in discussions about children (i.e., all you need is love, children are like sponges, the apple doesn't fall far from the tree, etc.).
- The misperception that children are capable of intentionality at very young ages increases the likelihood that age-inappropriate discipline will be used (e.g. corporal punishment).
- Spoiling becomes a bigger concern than over-discipline.
- There exists the notion that children can "pull themselves up by their bootstraps," and "get over" bad experiences in life; that their success is a matter of character not related to healthy physiological development.
- In addition, there is the misperception that the cycle of abuse is a result of "having learned bad habits" instead of as a consequence of developmental damage caused by the abuse or neglect.
- Ultimately, the misunderstanding of child development leaves no room for understanding the lasting, damaging effects abuse can have on the development of a child.



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Key Message Elements

Crafting messages that center on the importance of an increased understanding of child development offers some of the most promising opportunities for child abuse prevention advocates. If the public better understood child development, advocates could more easily frame child maltreatment as a detriment to it, giving people scientific – rather than purely emotional and moral – language and frames to use in understanding its causes and solutions. When discussing child development, the FrameWorks Institute recommends that advocates consider the following elements when developing communications:

- **Use new research on child development to get people into the conversation and to reconsider what they know.** Use this new information in a non-judgmental way establishing an informative and reasonable tone. This also connects to Americans' insatiable desire for more and better information.
- **Use simple but highly descriptive models** to help people understand how the brain develops (see section below on Brain Architecture). Do not leave scientific jargon un-translated.
- **Describe the process of child development as affecting the whole child.** As Cultural Logic writes, “messages that incorporate information about the brain must be carefully framed in order to affirm that they are about emotion, character and values, and not just about a child’s intellect.”
- **Avoid directly addressing highly charged issues like spoiling and spanking.** This is likely to cause people to defend the importance of discipline, even if the techniques are not perfect. Instead, counter them through indirection. For example, describe developmentally appropriate behavior as necessary to increase the odds that a child will thrive and succeed, or describe spanking as a technique that doesn’t work well because it makes children weaker in developing self-discipline.
- **Demonstrate alternatives.** Don’t tell people what not to do without telling them why and what to do instead and why the latter is preferable. Educate, don’t lecture.



- **Tell a developmental story**, by using effective metaphors and models to help people understand that the developing brain is a system that can be damaged and needs nurturing from its environment in order to grow.
- **Back up experts with front-line messengers.** When you rely on scientists and new reports, back this up with people from the community (the unexpected messenger) who can attest to the validity with their own eyes, such as people who run programs for kids, pediatricians or teachers.

Brain Architecture

In FrameWorks' and its partners' research regarding public perceptions of early childhood development, they identified several barriers to the public's understanding of the topic. A top concern was the aforementioned tendency to think about children in an emotional way often using folksy terms in discussions about children. As a result, the public overlooks the important physiological development of the brain. Cultural Logic researchers developed and tested a simplifying model – a metaphor to increase understanding of a complex issue – regarding brain development. After extensive testing, researchers found the model “Brain Architecture” to be the most effective in conveying the essential features of child development. Researchers caution that simplifying models are not silver bullets to explaining issues. However, when used in conjunction with careful messaging, they can help the public better understand the point, in this case the importance of healthy brain development.

FrameWorks has not yet tested the model's efficacy in furthering specific policy proposals. However, researchers did find that once primed with the model “Brain Architecture” people moved away from thinking about children only in emotional ways, which reinforce the “Family Bubble.”

For instance, according to Cultural Logic, which developed the model:

“When lay people are told that *stress releases chemicals in the brain*, and that these chemicals *weaken brain architecture*, or *hinder its development*, they find this explanation important and memorable. When they understand the situations that can cause a baby to feel stress – including lack of interaction, or interaction



with an adult under stress – they are able to extrapolate to the kinds of situations which are detrimental to the development of a baby’s brain architecture, including the effects of poverty on families.”

There are several benefits to using this simplifying model in addition to the other key findings and recommendations from the reframing research:

- Helping the public understand child development, could aid in alleviating people’s discomfort in interfering with the “Family Bubble.” If brain development is understood as physiological, not just emotional or intellectual, then providing information to parents seems less intrusive and less judgmental regarding their parenting skills.
- When children’s development is viewed in terms of building or stagnating the brain – the effects of which benefit or cost society – then we all have a stake in the healthy development of children. Ensuring that parents know how to deal with stress, understand nutrition and so on is not intrusive in this view, but helps to ensure the health of society’s future citizens.
- The research that FrameWorks completed will be widely distributed among those in the field of early childhood development. As a result, advocates and communicators from the field will begin to work “Brain Architecture” into their messages, giving it that much more credibility. This concerted effort could ultimately impact the public’s views on child development and help put programs that promote healthy development on policy agendas.

Sample Brain Architecture Messaging

Following is some language that was developed and used by FrameWorks and its partners to test the term “Brain Architecture.” It illustrates the importance of communication tools such as messengers (doctors are mentioned first, parents very briefly) and tone. It also shows that the term “Brain Architecture” is not a quick fix for explaining development, but a tool that can help people understand the issue better.

“More and more doctors are talking to parents and communities about what they call ‘Brain Architecture.’ Brain architecture refers to the structure of the brain.



We now know that if a baby doesn't have the right kinds of interactions in the first few years of life the baby's brain architecture doesn't build itself properly. And if the brain architecture doesn't build itself properly, kids can be at a disadvantage in long term ways. We know a lot about what helps and hurts the growth of brain architecture. What weakens and damages brain architecture is frequent stress – from fear, hunger, or interacting with a parent under stress, for example. Stress releases toxic chemicals in the baby's brain. These chemicals corrode and weaken brain architecture. This stops brain cells from growing and forming connections with each other.”

Conversely, this language can be used to show how positive interactions strengthen and develop the brain. It clearly explains the benefit of early intervention in a child's life without blaming parents. This paragraph cleverly brings the issue of child abuse – though not the *words* – to the surface, providing an opportunity to discuss preventive strategies without triggering ideas that will lead the reader down the wrong path.

For more information on the FrameWorks Institutes' child development project and research please visit <http://www.frameworksinstitute.org/clients/coalition.shtml>.

The research reports are available for download at <http://www.frameworksinstitute.org/products/ecdreports.shtml>.



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