Talking about Early Childhood

Research insights for communications

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FRAME WORKS UK

Introduction

This briefing recommends six ways to talk about early childhood. Evidence shows these approaches will help to win hearts and minds for change:

1. Trigger our shared value of social responsibility for children and families.
2. Explain how child development works by showing what surrounds us, shapes us.
3. Encourage support for parents, not judgement.
4. Show change is urgent and possible.
5. Don't use unexplained data or repeat myths.
6. Use images that reinforce the importance of early experiences and environments.

These recommendations are designed to help make the case for why the early years matter and to inspire changes in how people think, feel and act. For each recommendation we set out what to do and what to avoid, we explain why it works, and give practical examples.

FrameWorks research

Each recommendation is grounded in research from FrameWorks – a not-for-profit communications research organisation based in the UK and US. Over more than 20 years FrameWorks has involved hundreds of thousands of people in research about how we can change how people think about early childhood. Much of this research has been done in the US but we have conducted research in over ten countries, including the UK; and this research has been applied extensively in practice (see, for example, the work of the Harvard Center on the Developing Child and Blackpool Better Start).

Our research uses qualitative research methods to understand how the public think about early childhood. We focus on understanding their 'cultural mindsets'. Mindsets are predictable ways of thinking that allow people to understand and reason about the world. Mindsets are held in common in cultures. If we shift mindsets, we can increase understanding, boost support for change and even change culture.

FrameWorks research then uses qualitative and quantitative methods to test ways to communicate about early childhood to bridge the gaps between scientific and public understandings of the early years. We recommend the communications approaches that are the most effective in increasing understanding and winning support for change.

Over the last 20 years, we have seen discourse about early childhood shift profoundly in the US as our recommendations have been increasingly applied in practice. For example, the US public now has much more understanding that the early years matter.

This briefing summarises what we know about how people tend to think about early childhood, and how we need to frame communications in order to increase understanding and shift ways of thinking.

Recommendations

Recommendation #1

Trigger our shared value of social responsibility for children and families

What to do

— As early as possible, trigger the idea that young children are everyone'*s* responsibility.

— Remind people that when babies and young children thrive, all of society thrives.

— Avoid implying young children are the *sole* responsibility of parents.

Why it works

— Evidence shows that in the UK, we have a shared value: we believe we have a collective, social responsibility to enable children to thrive – as well as to prevent harm to them. Triggering this value helps people see early childhood as an issue for collective concern and action – about which something can and must be done.

— Triggering the value of social responsibility helps avoid activating the common – but unproductive – pattern of thinking that 'some children simply don't grow up in good families and so are unlikely to do well in life'. Thinking about 'bad parents' makes children's outcomes an issue of 'human nature', this makes efforts to change things hard to see as worthwhile, and easy to reject.

— What we say first matters most so triggering the value of social responsibility early in our communications establishes a productive and engaged mindset. We should then recall this idea at intervals.

— When we imply young children are the sole responsibility of parents, it squeezes out the space for thinking about other people and things – like health services, parks, childcare, friends and family, decent housing and so on – that also have a role to play.

— If we make the early years an issue for parents only, people can't see – and actually resist – calls for social policy and practice reform (because in this way of thinking all the solutions lie with 'better parenting').

How to do it

Avoid	Advance
Avoid starting your communication with direct reference to parents/carers.	Early in your communication refer to our shared responsibility. Call back to this value in different ways over the course of your messaging.
Avoid terms like 'their children', 'these parents' that can create distance and make it feel like this is an issue for 'other' (kinds of) people.	Use collective nouns like 'us' and 'our'; and terms like 'together' that reinforce the idea of collectivism.

For example:

Before	After
"A lack of a good quality relationship between parent and child can impact on the future health of a baby."	"We all have a responsibility to help children thrive. When we support families, we help children to have the best possible start in life."
"We need to support parents and carers so they can do the best job in raising their children."	"When we do the right thing and support parents and carers, babies thrive."
"Parents, especially those in poverty, need better access to childcare so that they can give their children the stimulating experiences they need in order to develop."	"Together, we can give all very young children the stimulating experiences they need to thrive by increasing access to high quality childcare."

Recommendation #2

Explain how child development works by showing what surrounds us, shapes us

What to do

— Explain that early childhood development is an *active* process in which development happens *in response to* relationships and environment.

— Talk about the importance of *stable, secure relationships* and *stimulating environments* as the *universal* building blocks that *all* very young children need to thrive.

— Talk about the development of the brain *and the rest of the body*. Emphasise that physical, social and emotional development matter and involve the whole body, not just the brain.

— Use tested metaphors such as 'overloaded', 'brain architecture' or 'serve and return' to explain how development works and accurately and memorably bring the science to life.

— Talk about challenges in *places* rather than among particular groups of people or types of families to show that the environment that surrounds us, shapes us.

Why it works

— Explaining the process of *how* development happens is key to helping people see *why* the early years matter – and how early development can be actively supported by parents, communities and society by changing the circumstances in which children develop.

— People often see development as an automatic, passive process guided by genes. This leads people to reason that we can't really affect it. So we need to explain how relationships and environments actively shape development. This allows people to see that when we change the relationships and environment around young children, we change their outcomes.

— Talking about the brain *and the rest of the body* helps show that early development influences all aspects of who we become, including our *physical and mental* health. When we focus on the brain,

people tend to only think about learning – but development is also about health and social wellbeing.

— Emphasising that all very young children have the same developmental needs helps prevent 'othering' and the idea that support is only needed for some children and some families. Emphasis on the universal reinforces the idea that action in early years will help everyone.

— A focus on place prevents people from activating stereotypes of certain groups of people (such as those often held about people in poverty or immigrant communities). When we focus on groups of people, people attribute differences to stereotypical characteristics they see as innate. When we make comparisons between places, this is much less likely to happen.

Use the 'overloaded' metaphor to explain why and how families can sometimes struggle

When parents become overloaded or weighed down by things like job loss, debt or illness they can have a hard time staying on track – and giving children the care and attention they need to thrive. At times like this we can help by lightening the load on parents.



This metaphor works by showing that our circumstances shape our behaviour – and how when we can change the circumstances, we change how people are able to cope and to parent. It can be used more expansively, or in light touch ways, such as: "More support with childcare can lighten the load for families" or "Together, we can share the load and help babies thrive".
Image credit: NSPCC

How to do it

Avoid	Advance
Avoid technical or scientific language to describe child development.	Use tested metaphors like 'brain architecture' or 'serve and return' to describe the process of development.
Avoid terms like 'disadvantaged' or 'vulnerable'. They focus attention on individuals or particular families and create a sense that this is about 'other' types of people.	Talk about what all children need to thrive, show these are universal needs and processes. Show that some children get their needs met, others do not.

Avoid language that suggests child development is fixed and automatic.	Use active language to explain development is a dynamic process that responds to environments, experiences, and relationships.
Avoid focusing solely on brain development.	Talk about the development of the brain and the rest of the body. Talk about health and social wellbeing – not just learning.

For example:

Before	After
"In the first few years of life, more than one million new neural connections are formed every second. Social, emotional, and cognitive capacities are essential aspects of this period of rapid brain development."	"Babies' brains are being built from their earliest days as they learn and grow in response to their relationships and environment. In the early years, stable, caring relationships help lay the foundations for all of our children's futures."
"Children develop rapidly in the early years – they acquire new skills all the time."	"Under 5s are developing at an amazing rate. Relationships with supportive adults are the active ingredient that helps them learn and grow every day."
"It's important for children to have access to quality childcare in the early years. Without it children can struggle to communicate and be ready for school."	"The experiences children have as babies and toddlers lay the foundations for their future learning, health, and wellbeing – this is why high quality childcare is so important."

Recommendation #3

Encourage support for parents, not judgement

What to do

— Explain the role of parents and carers without judging. Explain *why* certain things are important – don't just say that parents should do them.

— Explain how circumstances can shape the kind of care and support parents and carers are able to provide. You can use the overloaded metaphor to do this.

— Talk about parents and carers of course, but don't make them the sole focus. Include wider relationships like friends and the role of others like childcare professionals.

— Again, talk about challenges in places rather than among particular groups of people or types of family.

Why it works

— Parents often feel judged and this can stop them from seeking help or support. This means that parents will often tune out or reject communications that judge them – even implicitly.

Judgemental communications also encourage others to judge parents and this does not help bring about change as it sparks individualistic, good parent/bad parent thinking.

— People see parents as having primary responsibility for children so reinforcing this with a sole focus on parents misses an opportunity to widen the lens and show how other people can play an important and positive role either in influencing parents or young children directly.

— Talking about groups of people can lead to stigma. A focus on places helps us to avoid this.

How to do it

Avoid	Advance
Avoid talking about specific types of family or groups.	Talk about places where very young children and their families may experience difficulties.
Avoid talking about 'choices' and 'interventions'.	Talk about differences in 'opportunities', 'chances' and some children 'not having the same chances to thrive'. Talk about 'support'.
Avoid asserting that parents should do more of this or that (e.g. spend more time talking to their baby) without explaining why this is important.	Use the 'serve and return' metaphor to explain why warm, responsive interactions between carers and very young children are crucial for healthy development.

For example:

Before	After
"Babies are learning all the time. Parents should spend less time looking at their phones and more time playing with their babies."	"Parents and caregivers are building children's brains with every interaction."
"Some families – who may be facing poverty or other hardship – struggle to give their children the experiences they need."	"Some very young children have fewer opportunities to develop because of where they live."
"Top tips for parents."	"Top tips to help babies thrive."

Recommendation #4

Show change is both urgent and possible

What to do

— Establish the urgency of taking action on early childhood issues and balance this by saying how we can address the challenges.

— Show the early years matter but don't leave people with a sense that problems early on are irreversibly damaging.

— Offer concrete and specific solutions to the issues you are highlighting. Don't leave people hanging at the problem or imply 'it's just the way things are'.

— As well as talking about the importance of children's early years for the future, establish the immediate positive impact for children and families of getting it right in the early years.

Why it works

— While most people do understand that the early years are important, they tend not to see increasing investment in the early years as a priority or as an urgent issue. We need to make the case for the impact it can have immediately as well as in the future.

— If we highlight social problems without articulating concrete solutions, people tend to think the problem is an inevitable characteristic of human nature or our capitalistic society. When we offer solutions we counteract this mindset and increase people's sense that this is a problem we can fix.

— People see good early childhood as a worthwhile outcome in itself and it's important to acknowledge this. They can often be suspicious of purely economic arguments – e.g. spend now, save later – for investing in the early years.

How to do it

Avoid	Advance
Avoid only talking about problems.	Find the balance between showing the urgency, importance and scale of the problem with showing solutions are possible.
Don't narrowly focus on the economic arguments or solely the *future* impact of getting the early years right.	Talk about the impact on lives and wellbeing now and in the future.
Avoid deterministic statements about the impacts of adversity in the early years.	Use 'can' or 'may' rather than 'will' or 'does'. Use 'brain architecture' to explain how our brains and bodies are 'built' and the importance of early 'foundations'. Just like with building a house, issues can be fixed later, it's just better to get it right in the first place.

For example:

Before	After
"Children who are not exposed to quality experiences and learning opportunities before age five are at a disadvantage. Children who are behind when they start school, stay behind."	"Experiences in the early years lay the foundations for future health and learning. Positive interaction, play and quality childcare help children thrive – now and later in life."

"Early adversity damages children's lives and future. We need to invest in early interventions that help break the cycle of disadvantage and dysfunction."	"We share a responsibility to help children get off to the right start in life. When families are overloaded with stress, money problems and ill health they can struggle to look after their children in the way they'd like."
"A lack of investment in children's early years comes at much greater cost to society later on. The numbers tell us we need to spend more."	"By working together to improve early childhood, we all feel the benefit – now and for years to come."

Recommendation #5

Don't use unexplained data or repeat myths

What to do

— Don't use data without explaining it. It doesn't speak for itself and people are likely to interpret it in a way that reinforces their existing beliefs – which may not be helpful to what you are trying to achieve. Always explain how the data you are using should be understood –even when you think it's obvious.

— If you use very large numbers, provide a way for people to relate to that number e.g. the same as the number of people who live in Birmingham, the size of a football pitch etc. This is sometimes referred to as 'social maths'.

— Do not repeat myths, even if your purpose is to rebut them. For example, don't say: 'it's not nature versus nurture' or 'it's not a case of what doesn't kill you makes you stronger'. Instead, make the point you want people to understand and accept. Don't repeat what you want people to forget.

Why it works

— People consistently interpret data according to what they *already* think ('motivated reasoning'), so we need to provide explanation of data if we wish it to be understood in a particular way.

— People struggle to conceptualise very large numbers so the data simply bounces off, comparisons make the numbers easier to conceptualise and, as a result, more impactful.

— The number of times we hear something is the most significant predictor of whether or not we believe it to be true ('the availability heuristic'). So when we repeat a myth – if only to rebut it – we can actually reinforce it.

How to do it

Avoid	Advance
Avoid giving facts or stats without clear cues to their interpretation.	Provide interpretation of numerical data or other facts to guide understanding.
Avoid articulating or even nodding to the thing you don't want people to think about.	Focus on the message you *do* want to communicate.

For example:

Before	After
"We now know that nurture plays a far greater role in child development than nature.'	"Our early experiences and relationships shape who we are today."
"A child's early development isn't just down to their parents, we all have a part to play."	"We all have a part to play in helping children thrive from their earliest years."
"By the time a child is two years old, they will have a 150–300-word vocabulary."	"Babies are learning from day one. By the age of two, they'll know between 150-300 words – all from the interactions we have with them every day."

Recommendation #6

Use images to reinforce the importance of early experiences and environments

What to do

— Be explicit you are talking about babies and children under five. And specifically refer to pregnancy as a period of development. Back this up with images of pregnant women, babies and very young children.

— Use images of *groups* of adults and young children wherever possible.

— Use a range of people and situations across your communications to build a holistic picture of child development and the role we can all play.

Why it works

— People tend to 'age up' so we need to be very explicit that we mean under fives. When we say: 'young children', people think 'primary school age children'. When we say 'learning' or 'child development', people think that's only relevant to older children. When we say 'childhood', people often think of the times they remember – from school age up.

— Images of groups help to reinforce the idea that we need the support of others – it's not all down to mums/pregnant women. 'Headless' images can also be dehumanising which allows us to 'other'.

— Images of individual children or individual parents are likely to cue individualistic thinking which closes down the space for thinking about how systems, policies and all of us can make a difference.

How to do it

Avoid	Advance
Avoid exclusively using images of mothers on their own.	Show diverse groups of men and women.

Avoid images of children in school settings or wearing school uniform-style clothes.	Use images of young children in informal settings including childcare.
Avoid only showing children towards the older end of the 0-5 spectrum.	Show a range of children from 0-5 years old, and pregnancy.

For example:



Images from Shutterstock and by Kelly Sikkema, Kris Len Lu, Brooke Balentine, Amanda Costelloe and Duy Nguenn Ngọc on Unsplash.

Further reading

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About FrameWorks UK

FrameWorks UK is a not-for-profit, mission-driven organisation, specialising in evidence-based communication strategies that shift hearts and minds. We help charities and other organisations communicate about social issues in ways that create progress, through practical guidance underpinned by our framing research.

We're the sister organisation of the FrameWorks Institute in the US, which has been conducting framing research for more than 25 years. FrameWorks started working in the UK in 2012. And we established FrameWorks UK in 2021.

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