

## **Early Childhood Development: Getting Our Message Across Effectively**

### *An Introduction to Strategic Frame Analysis*

#### **WHAT IS A FRAME?**

A frame is “the way a story is told—its selective use of particular values, symbols, metaphors, and messengers—which, in turn, triggers the shared and durable cultural models that people use to make sense of their world” (from Power Point presentation by Lynn Davey, former National Field Director, FrameWorks Institute).

To be effective, messages must be framed to:

- Define the community’s responsibility and explain the role for public policy;
- Include the brain architecture simplifying model, which helps people understand child development;
- Incorporate the idea of plasticity so damage does not sound irrevocable;
- Define the economic consideration as prosperity and workforce development;
- Refer to values such as stewardship, future prosperity for society, or reciprocity, all of which allow people to respond both morally and rationally.

#### **EIGHT ELEMENTS OF THE FRAME**

##### **(1) Values**

- Always begin with a Level One value (big ideas).
- In the case of the child development frame, the Level 1 values that resonate best are:
  - Future prosperity
  - Ingenuity
  - Responsible Manager
- These will help to avoid bringing up “dominant frames,” which don’t get us to where we want to be:
  - The family bubble (bad parents)
  - Early education (hurried child)

- Safety (physical focus)
- Self-made child (development is automatic)
- Avoid starting a discussion with a Level Two (e.g. children’s issues) or Level Three value (e.g. Child Care Financial Assistance Program, childhood immunizations, Children’s Integrated Services).

**(2) Context:** Early childhood development or child development are the best terms to use because they conjures up new frames that connote public responsibility and other Level One values to which people can relate.

**(3) Simplifying Metaphors and Models**

- In order to take responsibility, you have to be able to picture yourself as an actor in a system/scenario. Metaphors or a simplifying model bring big issues down to earth for people and enhance their engagement and responsibility.
- The most effective simplifying model for early childhood is “brain architecture.”
  - Example: “The early years of life matter because early experiences affect the architecture of the maturing brain. As it emerges, the quality of that architecture establishes either a sturdy or a fragile foundation for all of the development and behavior that follow—and getting things right the first time is easier than trying to fix them later.”

**(4) Stories:** When telling a story, link it to thematic frames (issues, trends, political/environmental, public, appeal to citizens, better policies, fix the condition) so the emphasis is on changing public policies rather than on changing individual behavior.

**(5) Numbers (Social Math):** “Uninterpreted numbers tell a story of random mayhem. Most people can’t interpret size or meaning. Use fewer numbers and incorporate ‘social math’ to embed frames in numbers.”

- Here is a good example of social math used well: Texas is the largest emitter of carbon dioxide in the USA. If Texas were a country, it would be the 7th largest producer of carbon emissions in the world.

**(6) Messengers:** The right messengers make a difference. FrameWorks’ research suggests that kindergarten teachers and businesspeople are good messengers when talking about child development.

**(7) Visuals:** Use visuals that illustrate your simplifying metaphor/model.

**(8) Tone:** Be reasonable. Avoid rhetoric.

## **STRUCTURING YOUR COMMENTS: ORDER MATTERS!**

### **Start with a Level One value, such as:**

- “A sound investment in our society’s future requires that all children have the opportunity to develop intellectually, socially and emotionally.”
- “Children are our future. They will inherit our institutions and steward our nation. We give to them now so that they can give back in the future.”

### **Move to science and a simplifying model:**

- “But science tells us that many children’s futures are undermined when stress damages the early brain architecture. That stress may result from family tensions over a lost job or a death in the family [or insert another specific example]. That stress makes babies’ brains release a chemical that stunts cell growth.”
- “What science can now demonstrate is that the earliest stages of life require an environment...[see pg. 26]

### **Briefly state the problem**

Here’s one example: “Many young children in Vermont do not have access to affordable, high-quality child development services. This compromises future learning and the future workforce.”

### **Conclude with solutions:**

- “When communities make family mental health services available so that early interventions can take place, they put in place a preventive system that catches children before they fall.” (If you choose a different example in the “metaphor” section, you would probably want to use a different solution, such as early childhood education, access to health care, strong public and private environments that promote experiences that build health brain architecture.)
- “Science shows that training, knowledge and skills of consistent caregivers are critical to the solid foundation...”

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This overview was prepared by the Kids Are Priority One Coalition based on materials provided by the FrameWorks Institute.

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