Framing COVID-19

Topic #9: Talking about what young people need during the pandemic

Our future depends on whether youth grow, develop, and learn. When we support young people’s wellbeing, they build the foundation for their social and civic participation—and a better, more inclusive future for us all.

The pandemic has upended much of what we have in place to help kids thrive: child care, schools, mentoring, sports, the arts. From before birth through the early twenties, while children and youth are actively developing, these community resources and relationships remain absolutely essential.

The way we talk about young people now will shape whether response policies and restoration packages reflect the needs, concerns, and voices of the next generation. We need to get this right to boost—rather than break—our chances of sensible and science-informed approaches to early learning, education, and youth development.

1. Connect family experiences to wider contexts and the policies that shape them

People tend to assume that "the family bubble" is all that really matters to children’s development: It all comes down to parenting, and good parenting is a matter of strong values and personal choices. This way of thinking obscures the vital role played by policies and programs.

Stay-at-home and school-at-home measures could easily narrow our long-term policy focus to what happens inside the household. Or they could widen our view to take in all that surrounds families and shapes children’s development.

It can be tricky to center the experiences of families without reinforcing the idea of the family bubble. Highlight how our recent experiences reveal the vital role played by policies and institutions, such as early education, schools, or community supports.
Instead of zooming in on household dynamics and struggles

"The same scene is playing out across the country. Moms are consumed by back-to-back conference calls, bored toddlers are screaming for attention, and normally surly teenagers have descended headlong into full-blown depression. Parents are suddenly being called upon to be teachers, sports coaches, and playgroup leaders at the same time they are juggling new work routines or the stress of unemployment. This situation isn't healthy for any of us, and it's untenable at a societal level. Our response policies must put families first."

Show how the plot is shaped by the characters missing from the story

"The same scene is playing out across the country. From preschoolers missing interactions with gentle and attentive playgroup staff to high schoolers bereft without their friends and activities, our children are reminding us that young people grow in an environment of relationships. We're all seeing with fresh eyes that the way we, as a society, set up education has everything to do with child wellbeing. We're also recognizing just how much employment policy is family policy and vice versa."

2. Connect what children and youth need to what we all need

There is unique power in aligning social issues with children's issues. The opposite stance—being against or indifferent to children—is untenable. But there is a risk in talking about issues as if the only reason they matter is because they affect children. It makes the issue about them, not us. It leaves the door open to blaming "bad parents" for leaving the rest of us to deal with problems they caused.

Pair policies that support children and youth with big ideas that matter. Focus on collective outcomes and future impacts. A broad, forward-looking story keeps big-picture policies and services firmly on the table.

Instead of starting and ending with the impact on children

"As COVID-19 ravages communities across our nation, more children are going to bed hungry and worrying about where their next meal will come from. Hunger in our nation didn't start with COVID-19, but the pandemic is making hunger and poverty more widespread. It's a moral imperative to ensure that all children can access the nutritious food they need to stay healthy and strong. Our children and families deserve expanded benefits now and in the future."

Show where we all need to go—and remind us that children can't wait

"This moment calls us to make sure that everyone can weather this storm. We can start by shoring up our nation's anti-hunger programs. Even before the pandemic, patchy food policies made it hard for people to get enough healthy food. Now hunger is increasing—and we need to step in. For children and adolescents, whose bodies and minds are still under construction, missing meals could have a long-term effect on health and learning. For everyone's wellbeing, we need to set up and maintain strong nutrition assistance programs."
3. Emphasize developmental sensitivity—not just vulnerability

Young people's experiences right now matter, and many face extreme challenges. But the way we talk about those challenges matters. A narrow focus on problems could hem in our thinking, sending us into a collective defensive crouch. From this posture, we are less likely to think proactively. We struggle to imagine how we might achieve breakthrough outcomes.

Much of the coverage of children during the pandemic has focused solely on young people in grave peril. We are immersed in a steady stream of stories about risk: that infants will become victims of child abuse, that foster youth will be displaced, that children with special needs will be neglected. In this moment of global crisis, these stories risk compounding despair and determinism.

We can build motivation for change by telling stories that include what promotes healthy development—as well as what undermines it. This helps people see that the right actions can make a real difference.

Instead of filling the frame with vulnerability

"During adolescence, peer social contact is a vital protective factor against mental health disorders. As school closures create long periods of social isolation, we must prepare for a surge in youth anxiety, depression, and suicide. For the millions of teens already dealing with a mental health issue, the sudden disruption of relationships could be life-threatening. But in this moment of global crisis, all youth are vulnerable. This short period of loneliness could have lifelong mental health implications with cascading effects for our health system, workforce participation, and economy."

Explain what's developing—and what's shaping it right now

"School-at-home programs are doing their best to support academic growth, but most are doing too little to foster young people's social development. This is a mistake. Friendships boost young people's ability to manage stress and work through problems. Without social contact, the risk of adolescent mental health disorders increases and youth miss out on developing vital skills, like teamwork. Young people always need connection—not just content—but this is especially true right now. Our distance learning policies must include social and emotional learning opportunities."

For more on centering youth issues in this moment, see this new brief on Framing Adolescent Development During the COVID-19 Pandemic. To dig deeper into strategies that show the connection between families and communities, explore this toolkit on Reframing Family, School, and Community Engagement.
About this series

In this uniquely challenging moment, we need to connect people to the bigger picture. We need ways to explain health, enhance community, and offer hope.

We're pulling guidance from twenty years of framing research and practice to help advocates and experts be heard and understood in a time of global crisis. Every week, we'll share a few ideas that can help us all amplify the values of justice, inclusion, and interdependence.

To suggest topics, share ideas, or ask questions, talk to @FrameWorksInst on Twitter. You can review previous topics or share the sign-up link with a friend.

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