



Educating, not Advocating:
An Analysis of Qualitative Research
Exploring Public and Policymaker Views
of Early Childhood Policy: Arizona Case Study

A FrameWorks Research Report

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By

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Strategic Overview

The National Scientific Council on the Developing Child (the Council) is uniquely positioned to inform state legislators' decision-making process concerning early childhood policies through the judicious application and explanation of science. According to Arizona policymakers, few state legislators have the time or resources to develop expertise on more than one or two important issues under their charge. Furthermore, partisanship causes them to be suspicious of new information, so they are more likely to rely on ideology than science.

To have an influence on state legislators' understanding of early child development, the Council needs to carefully construct communications concerning the issue and concerning what the organization *is*. Fortunately, the current participant make-up, organizational structure, and philosophical approach of the Council are ideally suited to the task. The Council needs to communicate that it is a group of *independent and non-partisan* scientists from across the country who are leaders in their diverse fields, who are *focused on educating*, not advocating, and who *work closely with experts and legislators at the state level* to close the science-policy gap. Furthermore, the organization is committed to arriving at conclusions after significant discourse, to basing conclusions on the weight of evidence, and to communicating honestly both what science knows and what it does not know.

Policymakers are not experts on every social issue and it is unrealistic to assume that state legislators as a whole will become expert on this issue. Therefore, the Council should consider communicating to policymakers at different stages and levels of involvement. First, the Council should work to develop a few key issue champions in the state legislatures, and provide those champions with detailed information and training to help them explain the science that informs their policy positions to their peers. Second, legislators as a whole would be benefited by easily digestible fact pieces that provide basic background information. Finally, the organization's influence on the public dialogue will also influence policymakers, since policymakers are exposed to the same cultural influences as the public and are sensitive to public interest and concern.

In communicating early childhood issues to the public and policymakers, this research finds those messages framed as the Convergence of Neuroscience and Economics are effective in building public understanding and support. The Child Development Frame helps people to understand *why* interventions in early childhood matter, while the Economic Frame provides a rationale for why early childhood should be a collective responsibility. 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 irreversible,
- Define the economic consideration as prosperity and workforce development, and

- Refer to values such as stewardship, future prosperity for society, or reciprocity (giving to children who give back to society later), all of which allow people to respond both morally and rationally.

Once primed by the Child and Economic Development Frame, the public begins to use a child development lens to reason about policies. It is not a silver bullet, however. Other frames, such as Parental Responsibility, are readily available and continue to exert strong influence. Displacing these dominant frames with a child development perspective will take considerable time and significant resources, but will likely re-shape public discourse for the long-term, once this new frame takes hold.

Method

This phase of qualitative research was designed to compare and contrast public and policymaker perceptions about early childhood and policies for young children, particularly such programs as early childhood education. To determine these perceptions, two focus groups were conducted in November 2004 with citizens and two with policymakers in a single state (Arizona).

The citizen focus groups were conducted with those who met an engaged citizen profile (i.e., people who say they are registered to vote, read the newspaper frequently, are involved in community organizations, and have recently contacted a public official or spoken out on behalf of an issue.) The public focus groups were divided by party identification, with one group consisting of Democrats and one of Republicans. The groups were recruited by a professional focus group facility, using standard procedures.

Specifically, the research with Arizona citizens was designed to explore answers to the following questions:

- When people think about policies for very young children, what associations come to mind?
- What are the barriers to support for early childhood policies?
- What frames advance support for early childhood policies?
- Can an economic frame effectively build support for policies?

The group discussions with policymakers included a range of people engaged directly in creating policy (current and former state legislators, legislative staff, lobbyists, and think tank staff). Each group consisted of a mix of Democratic and Republican participants. They were invited to attend the discussion through personal contact, in this case, by St. Luke's Health Initiatives. The discussions were held in a professional focus group facility.

Specifically, the research with Arizona policymakers was designed to explore answers to the following questions:

- How do policymakers perceive early childhood policies?
- How do they learn about these issues?
- What are the barriers to support for early childhood policies?
- What needs to happen to build support for early childhood policies (what kind of information, relationship-building, messengers, etc.)?
- What are the likely impacts of various messengers – economists, neuroscientists, advocates, the public, and the National Scientific Council on the Developing Child?

Finally, it is important to note that there was significant concern about whether or not group discussions would be an effective research method with policymakers, particularly across party lines. Hence this pilot study in a single state. Contrary to our concerns, we found that the group discussions were lively, open, and candid dialogues. There are a few elements that are critical for success if this approach is replicated in the future:

- Use a known, trusted intermediary to recruit policymakers.
- Do not conduct the discussions during the legislative session, when most policymakers are too tightly scheduled to attend.
- Consider location – policymakers out of session are not likely to travel to the state capitol if it is far from their districts.
- Ensure complete confidentiality and describe the objective of the discussion as research broadly, not state specific.
- Do not mix state legislators with other policymakers such as legislative staff or think tank staff. Staff members tend to defer to the state legislators. (An exception could be made for a particularly senior staff member or lobbyist.)
- Limit the group size to no more than seven participants so that all policymakers have the opportunity to share their views in depth.
- Ground the discussion in a specific issue, but not a specific piece of legislation.

All groups were conducted by Public Knowledge LLC in collaboration with the FrameWorks Institute. They were commissioned by the National Scientific Council on the Developing Child and supported by a grant from the John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation.

The focus group guides for both groups are included in the Appendix.

Summary of Findings

The objective of this research was twofold: 1) to understand the role that the National Scientific Council on the Developing Child (The Council) could play in providing information on the science of early child development to help inform the policy process at the state level; and 2) to determine if combining elements of an Economic Frame with a Child Development Frame would effectively advance public understanding of, and support for, policies for very young children.

Importantly, this phase of research draws on several years of FrameWorks Institute research concerning children and families, including research investigating public understanding of child development, adolescent development, and child abuse. Based on prior findings, the research team took into account the following conclusions in developing test materials for this phase of research:

- Parents are viewed by many adults as solely responsible for children. Even when prompted, few members of the public can see a role for the broader community in helping children to develop well. Therefore, communications needs to define the community's responsibility, and explain the role for public policy.
- The public has little understanding of the process of child development and the impact of positive and negative influences on that process. FrameWorks Institute collaborators at Cultural Logic created and tested a simplifying model¹ to help the public understand the process of child development. Their conclusion, further confirmed by the Arizona research, was that the Brain Architecture model needs to be incorporated early in communications.
- The dollar cost to society for children who do not become successful adults, and the dollar gain for children who become successful members of the workforce, can sound cold and calculating and undermine public support. Values such as stewardship and future prosperity for society, and a mechanism such as giving to children who give back to society later, temper the tone of cold economics and allow people to respond both morally and rationally.

For more information on the research that informs these conclusions, see www.frameworksinstitute.org.

¹ Simplifying models are a kind of metaphorical frame that both capture the essence of a scientific concept, and have a high capacity for spreading through a population. Numerous studies in the cognitive sciences have established that both the development and the learning of complex, abstract or technical concepts typically rely on analogies. An explanation that reduces a complex problem to a simple, concrete analogy or metaphor contributes to understanding by helping people organize information into a clear picture in their heads, including facts and ideas previously learned but not organized in a coherent way. Once this analogical picture has been formed, it becomes the basis for new reasoning about the topic. For more on simplifying models, see the FrameWorks Institute e-zine, Issue No. 19, "Opening Up the Black Box: A Case Study in Simplifying Models" by Axel Aubrun and Joe Grady for Cultural Logic, with Susan Bales of the FrameWorks Institute, available at www.frameworksinstitute.org.

The Political Context

Prior research on children's issues, conducted by members of the FrameWorks Institute research team, relied heavily, though not entirely, upon research with members of the public. Public perceptions provide an indication of the dominant frames across the culture, as well as the media frames that the public incorporates into its understanding of the issue. Furthermore, the dominant frames in public discourse are the frames likely to influence policymakers, as they meet with constituents, hold town hall meetings, and interpret issues in the news.

The Arizona research confirms that:

- Few state legislators are experts on early child issues. On this, as on many other topics, they are influenced by the same cultural forces that influence the public.
- Policymakers need information on child development to inform their policy decisions, yet time, resources, and partisanship constrain their education.
- Ideology and partisan politics strongly influence state legislators' policy decisions, but public pressure is an even stronger influence.

This section reviews key findings from the focus groups with policymakers.

Policymaker Issue Knowledge

Child advocates need to realize that, when it comes to early child issues, state legislators' perceptions are closer to public perceptions than they are to expert understanding. State legislators are likely to have no more knowledge than a member of the public. Typically, they rely on first-hand experiences, ideology and values, and constituent opinions and stories to inform their thinking. One policymaker shared her recent experiences in visiting childcare centers. "I have a grandchild that needed to get a little bit of pre-school, and so I started visiting pre-schools," she shared. "I haven't done that, obviously, for years and years and oh my God. I wouldn't put a bad dog in some of these places where the kids are being warehoused." Some public views, such as fear of government intrusion, can be even more pronounced among policymakers. One Republican policymaker noted that "some of the people that I talk with, people are very much afraid of taking away parenting from parents."

At the same time, policymakers realize that trustworthy policy education is a critical need, and that legislators are not likely to get that education on more than one or two issues. Turnover makes it even more challenging for state legislators to gain expertise. "With term limits, I'm finding out that many of my brethren and sisters who are not up to speed at all on most of these issues may never be up to speed before they leave," noted a policymaker.

According to policymakers, there is currently no process for new state legislators to get a thorough education on critical issue areas. Note the following conversation among policymakers:

Moderator: How does a new member of the legislature get up to speed on these issues now?

Informant 1: Baptism by fire. There is an orientation process. Speaking about evaluating education programs, I think we could start with the legislative orientation. It stinks.

Informant 2: And then we go into what are supposed to be 100 day sessions. . .

Informant 1: Which they're not.

Informant 2: . . .to get our work done and I've always described it as jumping on a moving train. The state government is ongoing and then we bring on a new board of directors who is supposed to direct this process with absolutely no depth of knowledge except the personal experiences that they bring with them when they come.

Informant 1: No knowledge of the state government as a system so that even people who want to learn don't ask the right questions that get them the information they are seeking. I think that's a real issue.

Therefore, a state legislator's level of learning depends largely upon his or her individual desire to spend the time and resources in gaining new knowledge. "They are trying to cram it all in, in 100 days," a policymaker explained. "They are saying, 'I can only take so much time to learn about certain things and that one just isn't my deal.'" "With the salary of \$24,000 a year and . . .the additional expense of coming back and forth, the pull you feel to honor your family obligations and your earning obligations, you get extra time and you do the other things," said one policymaker. It may be difficult for child advocates to understand why any person would not take the time to learn about children's issues, but there are numerous competing issues that are also not getting legislators' attention. "Every group that is out there would love to have the opportunity to go before a committee the beginning of session before they get into the decision making mode and brief them on what they're doing," a policymaker noted. One lobbyist shared his own perceived failures in trying to engage legislators through conventional means. "For about 10 years we put together Water 101, which was just the basics of water," a policymaker shared. "We invited every legislator and, after every election we invited every freshman legislator, and in those nine years we had one person come to our office."

Since they have little time and few resources, state legislators need easily digestible information that can give guidance about the state's unique needs. "Even if we are a chairman we only have one full-time staffer," a policymaker noted. "So we need information that is in a form that is understandable to us and recognizes the need within this state versus another state."

Importantly, however, many state legislators are more influenced by ideology than by science. They believe that science can be used to support any point of view, so they are reluctant to rely upon sources outside their political party or outside the state. "The

problem is there is so much information available that you can find anything to support your point of view,” noted one policymaker. “In Arizona, the legislature as a whole does not like outside people coming in especially from oh my God, the East Coast and telling them what they should do,” stated another. In addition, some explained, there is a conservative wing of the Republican party that actively works against science-based knowledge. “Some of our conservative colleagues in the legislature want us to put a disclosure statement on the teaching of evolution. That's who we are dealing with and they want creationism to have equal place in our textbooks with evolution,” a policymaker warned.

Problematically, policymakers report that data are rarely influential in policy decisions. One policymaker expressed her frustration at a recent legislative debate: “I was so angry about legislation, once again, being made based on gossip at worst, anecdote at best, rather than science that could be replicated. To say something that passes the peer review journal. What's that?” Another added, “But it's the same thing you hear from legislatures all over the country. You make decisions without data or even when there is data, you make the different decision.” “And it is key to get it away from the academic environment and into the reality environment. The academic environment is not necessarily well thought of, at least in the Arizona legislature, and I would think almost any conservative legislative body,” warned a policymaker.

Influences on the Policy Process

The political parties are obviously dominant influences on the development of policy and the support for specific legislation. Once an issue is determined to be a “Democratic” or “Republican” issue, partisanship dictates the outcome of legislation, not careful deliberation. “It's really a game of politics when it comes right down to it. Am I going to support my chairman? Am I going to support the leadership? What about the people in my district?” a policymaker asked. Another added, “Last year we had 20 Republican freshmen in a Republican Congress. These people were lockstep with leadership because of politics.” It is frequently difficult for science messengers to overcome the partisan perspective. According to policymakers, some legislators believe “all these foundations are a bunch of commies, socialists,” and “universities are just those liberal universities.”

Some advocates inadvertently add to the partisan divisions in state legislatures by categorizing legislators as either “for” or “against” an issue. “They will approach you with a certain issue and if you don't happen to jump aboard with that right away, not realizing that you have a learning curve ahead of you, then all of a sudden they walk away,” a policymaker explained and then went on to describe the words of another legislator: “When you walk the halls do you get inundated with lobbyists? Do they gravitate towards you and attack you as you walk in the door?” I said, ‘No...’ ‘Yeah, they already know or at least they perceive that they know how you are going to vote and what you think, so they are not going to spend any time with you.’ In general, advocacy organizations are considered good resources for information, but are not seen as politically astute. In describing one organization, a policymaker stated that it “is

wonderfully informative and active on children's issues. How they mobilize public opinion and the public awareness and education is probably minimal.”

While partisan politics is a strong influence on policymakers, all agreed that public pressure is a stronger influence. “If we could find a way to deal with 70 percent of people that are not the 15 on the left and not the 15 on the right that believe no matter what the information is, they're ready. If we can find a way to get that other 70 percent informed and activated, that would solve a lot of problems right away because I don't care whether you're a right wing politician or a left wing politician, when you go to your primary election [you listen],” a policymaker insisted. “Objectively, you do the right amount of education, do the right amount of meeting and greeting and everything else. That ain't what it's about,” explained a policymaker. “It's about where the political will is and how much passion there is around the issue by a wide enough audience that these guys will say this train is going and I don't want to be off the train.”

In fact, policymakers underscore the importance of showing legislators the impact of an issue on their district, viewing this as perhaps the most effective way to break new legislators from the party line. “These people were lockstep with leadership because of politics,” one policymaker reflected. “And it took us a year and a half to get them connected through experiences in their district to find the reality of the issues...you've got to have...an expert from their district that can speak that language and say this is how it impacts your district.” In fact, in Arizona it was local businesspeople that got early education on the legislative agenda. “It's the business community that initiated that conversation; the workforce issues actually opened the door to these conversations. They're saying our kids aren't getting to us – ‘your workforce in Arizona is not adequate to support the type of industry that we want to grow in Arizona, so we need to retool the public education system in a way that begins to produce those kinds of students who become that kind of workforce,’” a policymaker explained.

Once legislators are motivated to address an issue, the next step in building support in Arizona is determining the economics of the issue. “First, you have to identify how you are going to pay for it, and then of course it has to be totally voluntary,” a policymaker stated, only somewhat facetiously. “Conservatives are on to ‘invest.’ ‘Invest’ is another word for increasing taxes,” a policymaker noted.

Changing the Legislative Conversation

Since state legislators (as a group) have no more knowledge of early child issues than the public, and since there are myriad issues competing for their limited attention, it is unrealistic to assume that advocates can develop true expertise among an entire body of state legislators. “You have to realize that, other than the chair maybe of a committee and a couple others, there is not a lot of analysis done on even major issues,” noted one policymaker. Instead, advocates’ time would be better spent working to develop a few champions who can become deeply knowledgeable about the issue and are willing to explain the issue to their colleagues. “Trained and competent legislators, leaders who know the issues is hugely important. There are not many of the members of my caucus

who have challenged me on children's issues because I know it better,” stated another policymaker. “That is what happens within the caucuses, too,” suggested a policymaker. “We rely on our colleagues who work on certain issues to communicate that information to us.”

The National Scientific Council is in a strong position to develop issue champions and to have a dramatic impact on state legislators generally. First, this research reinforces the wisdom of the Council's decision to be a non-partisan educator rather than a policy advocate. For state legislators, the messenger is just as important as the message. They scrutinize every piece of information for the ideology of its source. This means that the Council needs to carefully guard its image as an independent organization of scientists. It must guard against being perceived as aligned with either political party or with advocacy organizations that have a partisan image.

Second, policymakers have become accustomed to the “dueling scientists” approach to data, meaning that each side relies upon one or two studies to make the case for or against a certain policy. “You put a study up against another study then the policymakers are confused...and legislators don't have time to sort through,” one policymaker explained. Again, the Council's approach to conveying scientific evidence offers a clear benefit to policymakers, since it relies upon the weight of evidence, not just one or two studies. This also suggests that discussing the Council’s approach – multi-disciplinary, struggling together to come to consensus, being honest about what is known and not known, and suggesting implications without recommending specific policies – is likely to be compelling to state legislators and reinforce the organization’s authority. This process is, therefore, an important component of messaging.

Third, Arizona policymakers insist that state-level experts are more influential than “East Coast outsiders.” This strongly held perception would suggest that the Council communicate its broad geographic base and also work to develop state-level partners (developmental scientists, pediatricians, economists) in those states where it has no presence. These state-level partners would also have to have a credible, independent image in their state to be effective.

Finally, since policymakers are influenced by the public discourse, it is important to develop communications that are effective in building broad public support for early child policies. That is the focus of the next section.

Changing the Public Conversation

As noted earlier, the objective of this research is to develop a communications framework that will build public support for early childhood policies. To that end, focus group participants reacted to a series of “news articles” that were specifically designed to represent different frames to organize the discussion.² The mark of success was not which frame focus group participants *liked* best. Rather, the goal was to determine how focus group participants’ dialogue and understanding of the issue changed as they considered each frame. By determining the strengths and weaknesses of each frame, it is possible to determine the mix of frame elements that will result in public support.

Importantly, while participants in the policymaker groups were also exposed to several news articles, they were not asked to comment specifically on the content of the articles. Rather, the articles were used to determine the efficacy of different messengers and to assist the broader conversation about policy knowledge and the policy process. Therefore, all the findings in this section are based upon citizens’ responses. Each tested news article is included within the section that discusses reactions to that article.

Cost Efficiency Frame

The Cost Efficiency Frame was designed to communicate that early child education programs save money in the long run because they prevent problems before they start, thereby reducing the need for special education, etc. Without an understanding of child development, the prevention message is largely lost because focus group participants do not understand *why* investing early matters. Furthermore, they are skeptical that government could use this funding effectively, since they believe the government has failed to provide a quality public education system. The messenger is seen as unbiased and knowledgeable.

Taxpayers Save by Investing in Kids

Art Rolnick, Senior Vice President, Federal Reserve Bank of Minneapolis

With money tight in state legislatures and with budgets shrinking every year, each dollar invested needs to have a significant impact. Research clearly demonstrates that investing in quality early child education programs has cost benefits that are seen both immediately and in the long-term, and the pay-off is seen by everyone. For every dollar invested in early child education, over \$7 is returned to society. Because if a child gets an early education they are less likely to need special ed, less likely to be retained in the first grade, and so on. Crime rates are lowered, graduation rates increase, businesses benefit from educated and committed workers, and the state sees a huge return in tax revenue from the increase in a more highly-skilled workforce. The phrase, “invest in kids,” is thrown around a lot, but when taken literally, it can be the smartest investment a state can make.

In the absence of an explanation for *why* investing early matters, the conversation centers on whether or not the research can be believed. Focus group respondents question the validity of the statistics, the motivations of the research sponsor, and the details of the methodology. Even when provided with additional information about the study

² The articles are fictional and were adapted by the FrameWorks Institute and Public Knowledge from numerous unverified sources. They should not be used as a source for factual information.

methodology that is the basis for the analysis, focus group participants continue to question it. “Then you would want to know more information about the study. When and where was it done? How many people? How many kids was it done on?” a Democratic man asked. Several focus group participants view research as partisan persuasion rather than objective information. “I read this and I get very suspicious of this guy's motive. I would want to know his political party,” remarked a Republican man. “We just saw a case here not too long ago in the papers where a drug research report said such and such drug was very good and then it turned out the drug company paid for the research and they found out it had been slanted in its favor,” a Democratic man stated. “So when I see something like this, I take it with a great dose of salt.”

Since they have little understanding of child development, several do not naturally come to the conclusion that early education is important. Several participants dismiss these efforts as babysitting and “playtime.” “A lot of times I think funded pre-schools are people's way of not having to deal with child care anymore,” a Republican woman complained. Another added, “Because at three and four year old, they are socializing. They're not ready to learn A, B, Cs, 1, 2, 3s and do those things yet. They learn by experience and play, so they can do that in places other than tax subsidized [childcare].” Even some of those who support public early child education do so because of their own convenience. “I think it's wonderful because my daughter is in kindergarten, my youngest, and this year they finally had full day kindergarten and we didn't have to pay. Before it was \$250 a month or \$300 a month and a lot of people can't afford it,” a Republican woman explained.

Most focus group participants immediately assume that this article is leading up to a request for a tax increase. While they believe the concept that spending money to prevent problems is more efficient and cost effective in the long run, they do not trust government to enact this program successfully. On one hand, focus group participants say that a prevention message makes sense. “The possibility of this being true, invest (and) then in the long run it will pay off -- really, it's a very logical conclusion,” stated a Democratic man. “I think most people -- if the dollars are going to either be taxed or taken out of our pocket in one way, shape or form, I'd much rather pay \$1 today than \$7 twenty years from now,” a Republican man suggested.

However, they do not believe government is capable of using the funding effectively. Focus group participants' perception of a failed public education system influences their support for spending resources on public early child education. “There are a lot of studies out there that contradict what they're saying about more money spent. Some of the better schools don't spend as much money per student as some of the others. It's how it is spent, not how much is spent,” asserted a Republican man. If government can't get K-12 right, they assert, why would it get this right? “It doesn't work that way,” a Republican man argued. “You get the politics involved, taxation involved. You get social issues and everybody has got their pet [project]. What happened to the bands? Where are the bands? Where is gym? No gym. What's going on in our education system? By the time you get done with this, it's been diluted.”

During the discussion focus group participants were asked to assess the effect of the message and the messenger separately, since an effective messenger may deliver an ineffective message and vice versa. In this instance, focus group participants reacted negatively to the message, but positively toward the messenger. Generally, the messenger is effective in part because a person with this occupational profile is an unlikely spokesperson for this issue. “He is not just a do gooder, so to speak, like maybe a social worker or someone like that,” a Democratic man remarked. “In other words, here is someone who has looked at balance sheets, who knows the black and white, the financial ramifications of things just by his position. He's very analytical, probably.” However, some question why financial expertise is valuable in a conversation about child development. Without a clear rationale for why early education influences human development long-term, some find it difficult to accept the cost efficiency argument.

Child Development Frame

The Child Development Frame was designed to explain the science of brain development, and tie experiences in the early years to outcomes later in life. After exposure to this message, focus group participants express a better understanding of child development and tend to see the value of early education. However, Democrats and Republicans have very different reactions to the role of society in helping children develop well. Democrats are motivated by the value of stewardship and see public responsibility for youth. Republicans are highly suspicious of intrusive government and worry that parental responsibility is being usurped.

The Child Development Frame is particularly compelling for Democrats. They are drawn to the stewardship values expressed in this approach. “In the very last paragraph, the very first sentence: ‘we want our children to be good parents and be decent citizens giving back to society.’ I think

Developing the Future

By Jack Shonkoff, Pediatrician and founding member of The National Scientific Council on the Developing Child, a multidisciplinary collaboration comprising many of the nation's leading scientists in early childhood and early brain development. Its mission is to bring sound and accurate science to bear on public decision making affecting the lives of young children.

The future of society depends upon how we raise our youth. But right now, we are not doing everything we could to make sure that the future of our society will be in good hands. There is an enormous gap between what we know about early child development and what we as a society do with that knowledge.

From birth, a child's brain architecture is growing and developing. Interactions with caring adults, a sense of security, and stimulating environments help tiny neuro-circuits make good connections, while high levels of stress and deprivation result in the development of faulty circuits that we then live with for the rest of our lives. To ensure optimal development, the National Scientific Council on the Developing Child strongly supports pre-kindergarten for all 3- and 4-year olds that centers on social and emotional development, not just academics. In addition, the NSCDC says state agencies need to make sure they are providing preventive interventions that can make kids' brains more resilient, even in environments that threaten a child's development.

If we want our children to be fully prepared to be good parents and to be committed and decent citizens who give back to society, then we need to lay a foundation for that behavior, starting with the earliest years. There's no question we can shift the odds toward more favorable outcomes for more children. The question is whether we have the political

that's what we really want for our children. I think the focus is more on making them a better person so that they can be a good parent, a better member of society," a Democratic woman explained. A Democratic man added, "Just the medical aspect that [the Council] was showing us how the brain is continually developing and if we don't do this, it's a waste of something."

The Brain Architecture simplifying model reminds some focus group participants of studies they have heard in the past about the influence of experience in the early years. "I think they've done studies way back," a Democratic woman remembered. "Those are like way back in orphanages where children weren't touched and children weren't held and their development was stunted -- their emotional development, their physical development, their motor skills, so that has been a study that has gone way back." "I've heard different things from being in college and going through the different programs and learning about the stimulation of the mind and how very important that is...from very small to very old," added a Democratic man.

The Brain Architecture model also helps Republicans see the value of pre-school. They begin to see social time as developmental, rather than frivolous. "I think people push too much academics on three- and four-year olds and that is not what three and four year olds need," a Republican woman explained. "They do need really just social interaction, learning how to get along, maybe follow simple directions and more in a group so yes, I think kids need that support and things if they're in a setting like that."

However, some Republicans are highly sensitive to the implications of the brain science. For example, some interpret this description as overly deterministic, implying that people cannot overcome early problems. "Obviously, they are forming while you are young and once they are there, they are cemented and you can't adapt or evolve from whatever that core is," a Republican man remarked. "I disagree with that," a Republican man vehemently replied. "That's saying that once we're programmed at youth, we can't change no more until you die." "We're intelligent people, intelligent human beings. We're not driven by instinct or things like that," added another. In addition, a few Republicans worry that this is really advocating some kind of secret manipulation of children's brains. "Well, we've all agreed that the three- and four- year old's mind is a sponge. It will absorb everything that is being put into it. It's how that person is pushed, into what direction, social or whatever direction, they are being pushed is going to determine what that person is going to do with that knowledge. This is just getting very, very close to manipulation," a Republican man explained. "This is the National Scientific Council. It could be the National Socialist Party," a Republican man warned.

Most important, Republicans listen carefully for any indication that government would become involved in family life. First, they worry that "interventions" is really a code word for government intrusion. This reminds them of child abuse charges and the intervention of child protective services. "The state is a mandated agency," a Republican man warned. "They have cut and dry rules, regulations and this is the way they're going to do it. There is no choice once the state agencies are involved."

In addition, several Republicans believe that parents are already abdicating responsibility for their children by paying child care centers to raise their children. The call for government action to support early child care encourages a negative trend, they believe. “That’s the part that makes me angry. They are just opening up more places for these kids to go so they don’t have parental [responsibility]...The greatest kid you can raise are kids that are raised by their mom and dad,” stated a Republican woman. “They’d rather pay somebody else to do the job that they should be doing,” a Republican woman insisted. “I have a friend; she is our neighbor. She sends her kids and pays extra to keep them longer at day care because she can’t deal with them. I’m like you know, that’s sad.”

They feel that parents are being left out of the conversation. Since there is no subsequent reference to parents, the phrase “caring adults” causes focus group participants to be even more aware of the absence of parents in the message. A Republican woman asked, “Why send them to be nurtured and learn all these things when parents are the ones who are supposed to be doing it?” “Where’s the parents, you know. Those are the caring adults and how come they don’t say that?” a Republican man argued. Messages that begin with parents place responsibility solely with parents, but once community responsibility is established, it is important to follow with a reference to parents so it does not seem that parents are being displaced.

The phrase “political will” makes no sense to Republicans, who see children as solely the domain of the nuclear family. To them, “political will” says “government intrusion.” “When it says ‘political,’ to me it sounds like somebody is going to tell you what to do,” stated a Republican man. “If you’re not giving your children this pre-kindergarten, extra support, we’re going to mandate it on you,” added another Republican man. They worry that government is trying to dictate what is best for children, which could lead to dictating “formula versus breast feeding. I mean it could. It could mean anything, if it is state mandated, heaven forbid what it could mean.” (Republican man)

Finally, a pediatrician from a scientific organization is an effective messenger for Arizona Democrats, but is less effective for Arizona Republicans. Democrats have respect for a pediatrician on this topic, and generally express faith in science. The Council sounds “lofty. It sounds official,” stated a Democratic woman. Arizona Republicans, however, voice more skepticism about science. “They come across cold and just like this is what it says, and this is how it is, and that is how it is going to be,” explained a Republican woman. “[Public policy] is not science’s role,” a Republican man suggested. “They should just present the facts and let the facts stand on their own.”

Child and Economic Development Frame

The Child and Economic Development Frame was designed to represent the convergence of neuroscience and economics. It makes an economic case for early childhood policies, but includes enough of the Child Development Frame to help the public understand why early childhood matters. The Economic Frame element positions early childhood as a societal responsibility, rather than just an individual concern, and does so in a way that conveys less government intrusion than the other approaches. This approach is particularly persuasive for Republicans.

This frame causes focus group participants to think about the changing national economy. “There is a different skill set in the 21st century that is needed economically in the workplace, and [the author] looks at the way our society is and we're not preparing our youth with education for that work setting in the 21st century,” a Democratic man noted.

After hearing the Brain Architecture model for child development, focus group participants can better understand the economic opportunity and prevention messages. “An ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure...If we do A, B, C now at a fraction of the cost of X, Y, and Z later...hopefully, if everything goes according to plan, we've got all the other letters of the alphabet,” a Republican man explained.

“You give a man a fish, you feed him for today. You teach [a man] to fish, he can support himself for all time,” a Democratic man remarked. “This in here says just because you teach a kid to read doesn't make him smart. You teach him how to read and what to read and it helps him learn for himself.”

Child Development is Economic Development

By James Heckman, Nobel Laureate in Economic Sciences from the University of Chicago

As we look for ways to ensure future prosperity, we need to begin to think of early education as economic development. The workforce of the future will need a different set of skills than was needed in a manufacturing economy. To be successful, future workers will need to have strong social skills so they can successfully work in teams to solve problems and get along with diverse groups of people.

Economists are now landing in the same place as our colleagues in neuroscience, in understanding that these social and emotional skills are influenced very early in life, as a child's brain architecture is developing. In fact, it is clear that one's quality of life and contributions to society can be traced back to childhood. Stable relationships, stimulating environments, and opportunities to develop socially, help build strong supports in the brain that then support the next stage of development. On the other hand, high levels of stress and deprivation result in the development of weakened brain architecture that become harder and harder to overcome. Children who are started on a strong skill trajectory continue to develop even more skills, so benefits multiply over time – skill begets skill. New economic research demonstrates that the real benefits of early childhood education are not from making children *smarter*, but from nurturing children's non-cognitive skills, giving them social, emotional, and behavioral benefits that lead to later success in the workforce. It's not just about reading proficiency; it's about social competence.

The 21st Century economy requires a workforce with these skill sets. It is easier and more cost-effective to develop social and emotional skills in young children as they are developing, than to provide college grants to cognitively disadvantaged teens or job training to adults. The returns to investments are greatest for young children for two reasons: (a) skill begets skills, and b) younger persons have a longer horizon over which to recoup the fruits of their investments.

This approach is particularly compelling for Republicans because it sounds less like intrusive government than the Child Development Frame alone. “I think that he doesn't talk about government mandated or taxing. I think he just talks about what can be done with children,” stated a Republican woman. In addition, when combined with the child development explanation, the economic case conveys accountability. “It also gives me results, the return on your investment. It says it right there. This is the reason why we're doing this,” noted a Republican man.

Most focus group participants understand the Brain Architecture simplifying model and find it to be a useful way to talk about development. Note the following comments by Democrats:

Moderator: What does it mean to you?

Building of the brain. (Democratic woman)

They say learning another language, if you learn it in the early years it is a lot easier because we lose that connection or like some of those tasks, the left brain, right brain. That's what it means to me is that there is a little road map in there but we could miss the road and lose that. (Democratic woman)

The brain chemistry is constantly changing and evolving so that would -- I think they compare -- they use the word architecture in computers a lot. (Democratic woman)

It's like a building. The beam goes up, the beam goes up and one goes across and one goes sideways. I think the way the brain develops, as you use it, these pathways are built, connected and they are there. (Democratic man)

When participants understand child development, they can understand the cost efficiency argument that they rejected earlier in the focus group conversation. “I think if you invest more money while they are younger like they are saying, you are going to save money in the long run so you are going to be able to cut all these extra programs,” noted a Republican woman. In addition, while some focus group participants struggled with some of the language in the message, most understood the basic point. Note the following comments:

Moderator: What do you think he is saying when he says children who are started on a strong skill trajectory?

“It's the beginning of their learning.” (Republican man)

“The pathway.: (Republican woman)

Moderator: How about the phrase, skill begets skill. How did you react to that?

“You teach somebody how to learn and they will be able to learn more.”

(Democratic man)

There are three elements included in this frame that may cause it to be less effective with Republicans. First, the Republicans in these groups rejected the notion that teamwork is critical. Some believe this statement is suggesting that individuality will become less important – they imply in their remarks that teamwork and individuality are mutually exclusive. “This country and you look at all of your great civilizations were built on the quality of the individual not the team,” a Republican man argued. “Teams are in Japan.

They work great in teams and their industry fell apart by a team structure. They found out it doesn't work.” “We have our scientists who invented this and invented that. What if we all weren't allowed to think?” a Republican woman questioned.

Second, Republicans continue to be concerned that these statements seem to ignore the importance of parents. “But I look at this and say well from 0 to 5, the biggest influence in a child's life is the parents,” a Republican man suggested.

Third, they reject the determinism they read into the brain development explanation, because they believe that anyone can rise from adversity. “You talked about times of stress and adversity, deprivation; in 1929 we had a Depression, and that was about as deprived as you could get,” one Republican man argued. “We had people starving and yet some of the greatest thinkers and the greatest minds in our country...” They worry that this is yet another excuse for failure. “There are a lot of people that I've come to know who use where they come from as maybe an excuse for where they are. There are so many people that rise from adversity,” a Republican woman remarked.

Finally, an economist is an effective messenger, because the focus is on the economist's specialty (the economy) and he is recommending action on an unexpected solution outside his own profession (child development), so he appears to have no vested interest in the solution. “He put it in terms of his profession, just his profession. He didn't use any political views and the other social science things, he used just the terms from his profession to address the problem,” a Republican man stated. It makes sense for an economist to comment on this issue, they say, because he is talking about the future workforce. “Because you don't think of economists thinking of the warm and fuzzy aspect. He is looking at it very clinically, almost I think,” a Democratic woman remarked. However, an economist label does not keep some skeptics from wondering about the messenger's political leanings. “Karl Marx was an economist...so was Engels,” a Republican man warned.

Impact on Policy Support

This research demonstrates that combining a Child Development Frame with an Economic Frame is an effective approach to building public understanding and support for children's policies. Democrats gravitate toward the Child Development Frame, while Republicans gravitate toward the Child and Economic Development Frame. Importantly, however, the Child Development Frame is more influential in creating new public understanding of early child policies. It is an essential component of effective communications on these issues.

At the end of the focus groups, after focus group participants had considered all three frames, they were asked to provide the best reasons to support a range of policies. Repeatedly, focus group participants relied upon developmental arguments to make the case for policies. Democrats moved from lukewarm support for universal, voluntary pre-K, to insisting that it should be mandatory. Some Republicans moved from opposition to talking about the importance of pre-K for social development.

In considering a policy to “require that early childhood educators have training in child development and in how to structure the learning environment to match what children need developmentally,” some Republicans were stunned to hear that it is not already a requirement. “Children that age don't need to be academically emphasized. . . They learn by experience. Hands on things. Socially, borrowing, sharing, that is what kids that age need,” a Republican woman explained.

The Child and Economic Development Frame is not a magic bullet, however. Other frames compete for dominance. For example, in considering changing welfare requirements to allow a young mother to stay home with a baby, focus group participants were adamantly opposed based on fairness – working mothers get no such benefit.

Similarly, in considering an expansion of the Family and Medical Leave Act, focus group participants toggled between the employer’s perspective and the child's perspective. “It's not a cut and dry situation,” a Democratic man struggled. “I was a union man and frankly I was against this when it first came out, but I saw the results from some of the ladies that took the time off to be with their kids. . . In a smaller company, I just think it would be a terrific hardship on the company itself.” When they look at the issue from the needs of the child, focus group respondents readily admit that the advantage of this policy is “more bonding with that child.” (Republican man) However, focus group respondents easily revert back to parental responsibility as a reason to oppose expansion of this policy. “I think that choice is not up to the employer or the government. It's up to that parent,” stated a Republican man. “That parent should say where is my priority? Is it my child or my job?” “You make a choice,” a Republican woman insisted. “You are going to have a child. Are you going to take on that responsibility? Why is it anybody else's responsibility except your own?” It will take time and hard work for the Child and Economic Development Frame to become the dominant frame in public discourse on these issues

Recommendations

The National Scientific Council on the Developing Child needs to put as much emphasis on communicating what the organization *is*, as it does in communicating the issue. The Council is:

- A group of independent and non-partisan scientists from across the country who are leaders in their fields, who are focused on educating, not advocating, and who work closely with experts and legislators at the state level to explain current scientific conclusions and to close the science-policy gap, and
- Committed to basing its conclusions on the weight of evidence through significant discourse.

Policymakers are rarely experts on social issues and it is unrealistic to assume that state legislators as a whole will become expert on this particular issue. Therefore, the Council should consider communicating to policymakers at different stages and levels of involvement:

- Basic child development, which can be communicated to policymakers and the public through news stories,
- Easily digestible explanatory materials, which can be broadly disseminated to policymakers,
- More detailed information and training, which might be limited initially to those few policymakers in both parties who will become issue champions.

A frame expressing the convergence of neuroscience and economics is an effective frame for building public understanding and support. The Child Development Frame helps people to understand why interventions in early childhood matter, while the Economic Frame provides a rationale for why this should be a collective responsibility. To be effective, the Child and Economic Development Frame needs to:

- Define the community's responsibility, and explain the role for public policy,
- Include the Brain Architecture simplifying model, which has been shown to significantly help people understand child development,
- Incorporate the idea of plasticity, so damage does not sound irreversible,
- Define the economic consideration as prosperity and workforce development,
- Refer to values such as stewardship, future prosperity for society, and reciprocity (giving to children who give back to society later), all of which allow people to respond both morally and rationally.

About FrameWorks Institute: The FrameWorks Institute is an independent nonprofit organization founded in 1999 to advance science-based communications research and practice. The Institute conducts original, multi-method research to identify the communications strategies that will advance public understanding of social problems and improve public support for remedial policies. The Institute's work also includes teaching the nonprofit sector how to apply these science-based communications strategies in their work for social change. The Institute publishes its research and recommendations, as well as toolkits and other products for the nonprofit sector at www.frameworksinstitute.org.

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