

**What Kids Need and What Kids Give Back**  
**A Review of Communications Materials Used by Early Childhood Development Advocates**  
**To Promote School Readiness and Related Issues**

Axel Aubrun, Ph.D. and Joe Grady, Ph.D.

**CULTURAL LOGIC**

May 2002

This research analysis was commissioned by  
The FrameWorks Institute  
supported by a grant from the  
David and Lucile Packard Foundation

## I. INTRODUCTION AND SUMMARY

Advocates on behalf of young children realize that our communities face daunting challenges if they are to put in place the programs that would significantly improve early childhood development (ECD) outcomes. The scale of the investment required is apparent in the cost of effective programs. To take one example, the projected cost over the next eight years for improving the quality of early care and making preschool available to the lowest-income children of a single city, Philadelphia, is estimated at nearly 1.5 billion dollars (see "Early to Rise," p.29). Although public support for programs to help children is generally high, advocates still face a formidable communications challenge, given the scale of the need.

This paper reports on an analysis of advocates' current communications strategies, from a cognitive and cultural perspective.

Communication pieces, ranging from brochures, to informational videos and PSAs, to annual reports, articles, press releases, from several dozen organizations form the material for the study. Materials were collected through two different channels, as follows. Requests for materials were posted to the following groups:

- KIDS COUNT Network (through their list serv)
- Connect for Kids weekly (through their weekly emails)
- National Association of Child Advocates (in their Member Mailing)

In addition, web searches were conducted, using the following search terms:

- School readiness
- Brain research
- Early childhood development
- Early childhood education
- Preschool

The goal of the study was to identify the patterns in what advocates are currently trying, any important gaps (i.e. what they are not trying), and to compare these with what research – both from the larger FrameWorks Institute project and from major traditions in the cognitive and social sciences – suggests might work. Conceptual metaphor analysis of these materials, and of selective interviews with the lay public (see “Promoting School Readiness and Early Child Development: Findings from the Cognitive Elicitations,” Cultural Logic for FrameWorks, March 2002) further contributes to these findings.

The goal of this report is not to provide a critique of each of the many communications pieces that we examined, but to consider the implications of some key conceptual assumptions – both explicit and implicit – that are shared across a wide variety of the communications materials, in light of the deeply rooted conceptual expectations which the American public brings to these same communications pieces.

### *Two basic appeals: Nurturance and Reciprocity*

Communications strategies aimed at increasing public support for children's causes are inevitably rooted in one or both of the following basic appeals: "We should help kids because they need and deserve our help;" and "When we help kids, we are helping ourselves." Both appeals are grounded in conceptual models that are so widely shared that they can be said to be characteristic of "human nature." It is not difficult to get people to agree in principle that kids need and deserve our help – Konrad Lorenz demonstrated in the 1930s that merely the sight of infantile features (including facial and body proportions, as well as the characteristically clumsy movements of infants, etc.) elicits a strong nurturant response on the part of most adults. Similarly, the idea of a kind of basic reciprocity between parents and their children is a strongly held value in the vast majority of the world's cultures – kids depend on their parents when they are young, and the roles are later reversed. (The category "parents" in this model can be extended to include other nurturant adults, and even the community as a whole, so that the idea of reciprocity can be applied, for example, to what children are able to give back to the community.)

Although any communications strategy ultimately rests on one or both of these appeals, each strategy is subject to factors that are specific to contemporary American culture. Two factors are especially important in understanding the effectiveness and limitations of advocates' materials.

### *The Science of "Children's Needs" vs. Traditional Notions of Parenting*

First, recent decades have provided a tremendous amount of new scientific research on early childhood development in general, and early brain development in particular. This research has provided a large and ever-increasing battery of evidence in support of the Children's Needs argument: Besides the fact that it seems intuitively like the right thing to take care of kids, the science provides an intellectually compelling theory about why and how we must do so. The science argument is increasingly being used, and is enormously powerful, especially in public policy debates. As this report discusses, however, it is not yet being wielded in the best possible way where communicating with the public is concerned. In particular, the science of ECD has important impacts on traditional and useful models of parenting.

### *Individual Autonomy vs. the "Caregiver/Child Reciprocity"*

Second, the Caregiver/Child Reciprocity model is being increasingly challenged in our culture by the powerful model of individual autonomy. Briefly, the goal of child-rearing has shifted from a costly investment in a person who will gradually contribute more and more to our and the community's well-being, to the creation of an autonomous individual – someone who will eventually not need us (and whom we will not need). The decline of the Caregiver/Child Reciprocity model in American culture means that a powerful rationale for expenditure on young children – in which cost is transformed into investment – has become less obvious. One irony of the recent emphasis on the science of development and on the needs of the child is that it reinforces the Individual Autonomy model over the Caregiver/Child Reciprocity model. A goal of advocates' materials should be to try to accommodate the Reciprocity model within the New Science framework.

### *Structure of the report*

Following a summary of key findings and recommendations, this report first discusses some of the liabilities of the scientific emphasis in many of advocates' current materials and then moves on to a discussion of the "Caregiver/Child Reciprocity" model, with suggestions for reinforcing this important way of framing early childhood development. The recommendations at the end of the report center on ways of integrating presentations of new scientific findings with the public's current understandings of children and child rearing.

## **Key Findings and Recommendations**

### A Flood of Information

#### *Findings*

- Too many messages

There is an astonishing range of information and policy goals expressed in the materials, thanks to the pace of new research findings, the complexity of the expert models familiar to advocates, and the range of parties active on the issue. Downsides of this richness include:

- Some issues are more likely to become popular causes or concerns, at the expense of others.
- The public is likely to focus on the "trees" rather than becoming more aware of the "forest" – advocates may miss an opportunity to convey overarching messages.
- Some people are likely to "tune out" the messages altogether if the stream of information is too complex and diverse.

- Mixed messages

The diversity of information and perspectives on this issue leads to some cases where advocates create mixed messages that may leave consumers of the materials uncertain how to think about an important topic: For example, parents are variously portrayed as "natural" experts, whose instincts are their best guide; as their children's "most important teachers," in a sense which suggests something like the professionalization of parenting; and as students who have a lot to learn from the true experts.

#### *Recommendation*

Through coordinated effort, advocates should be able to move a set of simpler and more coherent frames into public discourse – both "Level One Messages" about values, and explanatory "simplifying models" that allow people to "put the pieces together" in their own minds.

### The science of early childhood development vs. Traditional understandings

The explosion of scientific findings on the importance of early brain development has created a powerful rhetorical tool for convincing policymakers and the public to support efforts to promote early childhood development. The findings lend themselves particularly well to winning debates (e.g. on public policy), but it is important to be aware of the impacts of a science-based rhetoric on traditional notions of parenting and development. Setting up an either/or frame that forces the public to choose between traditional (and natural-seeming) approaches on the one hand, and modern (and unnatural-seeming) approaches on the other, risks leading to rejection of the science

in favor of traditional models, or to a complete displacement of useful traditional models, or even more likely, to a sense of conflict between old and new approaches to parenting.

### *Findings*

- Raising the bar on parenting

The emphasis on scientific education in the materials risks creating a wider gap in public discourse between good parents (i.e. well-informed "superparents" who usually happen to have higher incomes and levels of education) and inadequate ones (who don't know or care enough to provide quality daycare for their children, etc.). One effect of raising the bar on parenting is to reinforce the widely held "Parent Deficit" model – i.e., the idea that if children aren't getting what they need, it is because their parents are failing them.

- Challenging traditional views

The frequent message of "new and important information!" is a double-edged sword – especially when it is framed in terms of debunking outmoded thinking. People respond well to new scientific information if it is understandable, credible and relevant, but if people feel their fundamental instincts are being challenged in an area like child-rearing, they are likely to reject new information, to lose confidence in their sense of "what feels right" and natural, or to have mixed feelings about it.

- An overemphasis on cognitive/intellectual development.

While new scientific findings about the conditions which can impair cognitive development are both important and compelling, advocates run a risk when they focus too much attention on this information. Specifically, they make it harder for a picture of "whole child development" to emerge into public consciousness. Again, parents are likely to reject the idea of infant academics, or to feel a conflict between what they strongly feel is right (no academic pressure before kindergarten at the earliest), and what they hear advocates telling them.

### *Recommendation*

- It is critical to blend the scientific findings with traditional notions of parenting and development, and to avoid an either/or approach. The notion of Nurturant Love, for example, should be recruited and elaborated to include attention to almost any issue which effects children's development. Similarly, the notion of Nutrition should be extended to include cognitive stimulation. Communications should reinforce the fact that the cognitive and social/emotional/regulatory tracks of development are closely linked.

## Effects of Individualism on understandings about early childhood development

### *Findings*

- Lack of emphasis on the "Equation of Giving"

Advocates' materials emphasize persuasive evidence about what children need but make little use of the Caregiver/Child Reciprocity model. This is an important and underexplored way of framing the issue.

- Loss of the "village"

When young children are depicted with adults other than their parents, these are usually professional daycare providers. Due to American attitudes about family and daycare, respectively, these depictions are likely to suggest that "community" is relevant when and only when the family is incapable of providing adequate care, reinforcing a deficit orientation.

### *Recommendations*

Advocates can more effectively tap into this powerful source of motivation by choosing words and pictures that remind the public of what children give back (to adults in general, as their metaphorical parents, as well as to their real ones) – from a child's smile to a responsible teenager's contributions to the household and the community. Here again, the specific models are critical. In particular it is important not to confuse reciprocity with investment – the example of children who grow up to earn a lot of money does not work in the same way as the example of children who grow up to give back to the family and community in non-material ways.

By showing children with people other than their parents or professional daycare providers – including family friends or members of their extended family (older siblings, grandparents, aunts and uncles, etc.) – advocates could emphasize children's role as a focus of community sharing, rather than a cause of isolation.

## II. A FLOOD OF INFORMATION

Perhaps the first conclusion that comes of examining the communications materials currently used by advocates is the astonishing number of policy and communication goals expressed. A (small) sampling gives some sense of the range concerns that face anyone concerned with the welfare of our young children:

- *Parenting is difficult*
- *Children should be immunized*
- *Early intervention services are critical*
- *Parenting has lasting impacts*
- *Education is about individualized service*
- *Children need to be protected from unintentional injury*
- *Parents are teachers*
- *Parents are students*
- *Parents need to create time for breastfeeding and parenting*
- *Zero to three is the key period*
- *A stable family life is critical*
- *Parents are the final authority*
- *Schools need to take responsibility*
- *All parents are good*
- *Children are made for learning*
- *Parents are experts*
- *Educated parents are good decision-makers*
- *Brain research has changed our views of early childhood development*
- *Infants become "persons" at a very early age*
- *Infants need lots of stimulation*
- *Kids are very complex*
- *Trained coaches are needed for parents*
- *Children need to be protected from abuse and neglect*
- *Easy access to primary services is important*
- *"Everything counts" in early childhood development*
- *Preschool replaces poor home environments*
- *The brain is not developed at birth*
- *Early childhood development is a national concern*
- *The issue of childcare affects more people than ever before*
- *Stronger families lead to better early childhood development*
- *Early childhood development is a moral issue*
- *Brain capacity increases with stimulation*
- *Neural connections increase with stimulation*

***Too many messages***

There are several good reasons why such a bewildering variety of messages appears in advocates' communications materials:

#### Complexity of the topic:

Recent scientific findings make it clear that early childhood development depends on a very wide variety of factors, existing in a number of different causal spheres – e.g., social, environmental, family, political, economic, etc. The developing child is at the nexus of many forces, and subject to all of them. In this sense, the multiplicity of goals and messages seems almost inevitable, given that the phenomenon of early childhood development is inherently complex.

#### Complexity of expert models:

The *science* of early childhood development introduces "expert models" into the materials of advocates, which are intended to displace inaccurate "folk models" about early childhood development. Where folk models are relatively simple and easy to understand, expert models are characterized by complexity and detail. Scientific descriptions of almost any phenomenon typically include multiple levels of description, and multiple causal mechanisms.

#### Variety of perspectives:

Finally, the existence of a large number and wide variety of stakeholder groups, each with its own agenda – including background, means, capacities, interests, language, expertise, etc. – is another factor in the multiplication of messages. (At the same time, it is important to note that there is a surprising degree of coherence and agreement between the different sets of communications materials, a testament to the success of communication between the various groups.)

#### *Downsides of detailed information*

There are good reasons for letting the public know about the multiple causalities that impact early childhood development – it would seem that the more the public understands about the subject, the more likely it will be to support constructive policies. There are, however, also risks involved in providing too many reasons why ECD is important, and too detailed a description of how it works.

(Note: This discussion is not meant to suggest that parents of young children might stop listening to useful information. Instead, it focuses on reasons why important messages may be less likely to make it into public discourse or into the discourse of decision-makers on the issue; both are important prerequisites to enacting broad-scale, systemic change. Several of the factors here also make it less likely that parents will learn the general perspectives which advocates are trying to communicate, even if they do take in particular "tips.")

- There are limits to the number of issues that people can keep in mind at any one time. The public (and advocates) tend to respond to an overload of "critically important factors" in early childhood development by selecting some and ignoring others. This is unfortunate for two reasons:

- Some issues are more likely to become popular causes or concerns, at the expense of others.
- The public is likely to see the "trees" rather than the "forest." That is to say, the process of educating the public will be impaired.
- Overwhelming people with a model of early childhood development that is too complex can lead them to reject the advocates' materials altogether. That is to say, rather than absorbing *part* of the new picture on ECD, some people will find it more manageable to "tune out" the messages altogether, as they sometimes do with warnings about environmental toxins, for example.
- Communications that provide many different pieces of information, without a very limited number of core messages, miss the opportunity to strongly establish a small set of "Level One Messages," defined according to strategic frame analysis as messages tied explicitly rooted in familiar values.
- The diversity of information also means that advocates are missing an opportunity to establish a user-friendly conceptual "big picture" that allows people to "put it all together" in their own minds. The last 30 years of findings from the cognitive sciences make it clear that this is not a trivial issue – without a unifying conceptual picture, much of the new information simply isn't likely to stick.

In borrowing from a scientific discourse, then, advocates are on the one hand providing themselves with the authority of science and on the other hand introducing a level of complexity which makes it harder for the public to grasp their message.

The introduction of new expert models is a double-edged sword, and is typically accomplished in the form of what we refer to as "simplifying models." Since average Americans currently have a scattered and incomplete understanding of early childhood development, they need vivid analogies to help them understand important messages from developmental experts and put them together for themselves in coherent ways (see Recommendations section at the end of the report).

### ***Mixed messages***

Inevitably, the stream of so many messages from advocates in the field (see list above) has resulted in some contradictions. We focus here on one important instance, the status of parenting as presented in the materials.

On this topic, consumers of advocates' web sites, brochures and so forth are likely to come away with a mixed impression, rather than a coherent message. The materials are consistent on some points, such as the one expressed in the following example:

*"Parenting is the most important and most difficult job there is. How children are 'parented' has a lasting impact on the kind of adults they will become."*

However, expert materials also reflect the complex and sometimes contradictory role of parents. For example, on the one hand parents are often portrayed in the materials as being "naturally"

suited to the role of parenting (in an echo of the classic reassuring opening line of Dr. Spock's baby book, "you already know more than you think.").

*"Parents are the experts on their own children!"*

This framing emphasizes the importance of a strong bond between parents and children – it reinforces the traditional model that the most important thing you can do for your children is to love them:

*"The single most important factor in quality care is the relationship between the child and the caregiver."*

In this framing, then, parenting is a natural, unproblematic and reassuring process.

On the other hand, one important goal of many of the materials is to educate parents so that they do a better job of parenting. In this frame, parents are not naturally expert in parenting, but are rather *potentially* good parents:

*"All parents want to be good parents!"*

Good parents, many of the materials imply, must unlearn old attitudes, and learn new facts and skills. For example, they are expected to maintain an objective distance from their own children, in order to make the best (most coolheaded and rational) decisions for their children. In other words, they need to be more like professionals (teachers or nurses, for example).

*Goal: "To help parents become better observers of their children."*

*Goal: "To increase parents' feelings of competence as they 'parent.'"*

*Outcome: "Parents will be able to make their own decisions about parenting based on their increased understanding of child development as it relates to their child."*

The implications of the materials for understandings of parenting are explored further in the next section.

### III. THE SCIENCE OF EARLY CHILDHOOD DEVELOPMENT AND THE NATURE OF "PARENTING"

#### *The usefulness of Science on attitudes to ECD in policy debates*

It is clear that the "new consensus" on ECD provides advocates with a powerful tool in their policy battles. The weight of numerous and highly convincing scientific studies provides advocates with the leverage they need if they are to impose a certain point of view on "laissez faire" policy makers.

Part of the political process involves establishing clear distinctions between differing positions. This is characteristic of rhetorical mode generally, and the case of early childhood development is no exception. As previous Cultural Logic elicitation research has shown ("Business Leaders and Early Childhood Development: Findings from Interviews," 2001), members of the business community can default to a "black box" understanding of how ECD works. This could almost be called the "vegetable" model of ECD: As long as infants are fed and kept warm and safe, they should develop just fine. Setting up the opposition between the "new consensus" and the "vegetable" model of ECD has powerful advantages, especially in public discourse: the "old view" needs to be thrown out in favor of the "new view."

#### *The dangers of science on attitudes to ECD for ordinary people*

##### *Average individuals and "rhetorical mode"*

On the other hand, there isn't always a clear distinction between messages that are designed for parents and messages designed to educate policymakers and other advocates, and elements of this rhetorical opposition carry over into the process of educating the general public about the new consensus on ECD.

Promoting the new consensus on early childhood development has different consequences when intended as *political rhetoric* or intended to affect the *private understandings* of individual members of the public. Previous work by Cultural Logic ("Informing and Engaging the Public: 10 Cognitive Challenges to Communicating Global Warming," 2001) has demonstrated that people tend to operate in two distinct cognitive modes, and that predictable patterns of thinking are associated with each.

*Rhetorical mode* exaggerates differences between views on the issue, and is characteristic of public discourse. *Reasonable mode* reflects private thinking and has a number of constructive consequences, including making people more open to learning new ideas and less concerned with defining their position in opposition to other groups of people.

#### *The potentially damaging impact of the science of ECD on the cultural model "Parent"*

While this is probably not advocates' intention, current materials sometimes create a rhetorical effect by suggesting that current findings invalidate all previous perspectives. Some materials seem to say, "Forget everything you thought you knew" about parenting.

*"Knowing how to parent doesn't happen magically when your baby is born. Good parenting is something you learn. The suggestions in this booklet are a starting point for learning about parenting your new baby. As you learn more about your baby, your parenting skills will grow.*

*"To understand what you see your baby doing, it is important to be aware of the mental development that is going on during the important first year of life.*

*"Your baby has most of the neurons, or nerve cells, he or she will ever have. ...*

*"Take your cues for active times and quiet times from you baby! By careful observation, you will learn to understand your baby's communications of needs for cuddling, food, changing, sleep, or play."*

This type of framing has the effect of setting up a strong opposition between what regular folks thought they knew about parenting and ECD, and what the new consensus suggests. Members of the public are in effect being told that they should replace their old views with new expert models, and that parenting is contingent rather than natural.

This is a narrow line to walk. People are likely to respond well to new scientific information if it is understandable, credible and relevant, but when science appears to pose challenges to well-established beliefs – especially in such a personal area as raising very young children – it runs the risk of being rejected. Alternatively, it runs the risk of being accepted so whole-heartedly that it displaces useful traditional notions associated with parenting. It is most likely to create a sense of conflict between what one feels is right and what one is told is right.

### *Transforming parents into teachers; raising the bar on parenting*

Two models (Parents are Natural Experts, and Parents are Apprentices) coexist somewhat uneasily in the advocates' materials. The conflict surfaces clearly in references to parents as "teachers:"

*You, your child, and your child's school are partners in her education. Remember, you are still her most important teacher!*

There are a number of helpful implications of referring to parents as "teachers": It elevates their status and reminds them of some important things they need to do for their children. While one of advocates' goals is to assure parents about their inherent capacities for parenting, the overall emphasis of the materials aimed at them is on developing self-awareness on the part of parents, educating and "professionalizing" them, turning them into more effective parents. The main lesson of the advocates' materials is that there is a lot that parents can do better. One danger of an approach that draws attention to all of the different things that must go well in order for early childhood development to succeed is that we raise the bar too high.

A possible negative outcome, which many advocate materials do try to take into account, is that parents will be intimidated by the complexity and difficulty of the task of parenting. If parenting becomes interpreted as a job for experts, authorities, teachers – who must know the latest research on neural development and pedagogy and much else besides – the idea that parenting is *natural* is directly challenged. If parents are intimidated the primary result is likely to be a kind

of alienation on the part of parents, a sense that they are not good parents. A secondary result can be a backlash against the professionalization of parenting (and by extension of childcare), and a rejection of this model of parenting. That is to say, particular styles of parenting can be linked to different socio-economic statuses, and the split between regular folks (poorer and less educated) and fancy parents can be accentuated.

Another consequence of raising the bar, and probably the most likely, is that the parent deficit model may subtly be reinforced: Considered as “teachers,” for example, parents are more likely to be deficient than when considered as “parents.” Even if an individual parent feels she measures up, the idea will be reinforced that there are many parents out there who do not.

### *Reinforcing the Parent Deficit Model*

The message that "we now know that strong families have better early childhood development," when coupled with the ideas that "the period from zero to three is critical," and that "most daycare does not promote optimal early childhood development" acts to underscore the separation between successful individuals and poor, single parent families.

At worst, having children can itself become contingent, understood as a kind of luxury for those who can afford the immense costs, rather than something expected, appropriate only to highly qualified people. In other words, raising the bar on what constitutes adequacy in parenting provides another way of articulating the differences between the privileged and the others.

We recommend that, as much as possible, advocates go about their business of educating parents in a way that accommodates their understandings of their own roles, explicitly acknowledges that people in different circumstances (e.g. economic) are able to do well for their children, and includes references to positive aspects of traditional parenting.

### *Displacing helpful traditional models; e.g., Nurturant Love*

While the authority of the scientific findings on child rearing has enormous usefulness in shifting the culture in the right direction – often by its use of effective rhetoric (see previous section), it carries with it the risk of "throwing out the baby with the bath water."

One of the unintended effects of making strong use of new scientific evidence is to displace or devalue long-standing folk models about parenting. This is in part due to the long-standing role of science in our society, which has generally been to challenge old views and to replace the traditional with the new. In some cases, the science of child development *should* cause the public to change its views about ECD – babies shouldn't be expected to share their toys; parents shouldn't worry about spoiling infants; we shouldn't worry about the moral capacity of infants, or spank older children. But in some cases, we run the risk of undermining traditional models that are fundamentally sound, if only because we emphasize the science rather than the folk models.

The model "Nurturant Love," for example, has the potential to accommodate much of the recent scientific knowledge about ECD, and has the tremendous advantage of already holding a strong place in the public's mind. The notion of Nurturant Love has the power to provide an automatic "big picture" model for the a host of facts about the "whole child." An automatic implication of Nurturant Love is that "everything counts." That is to say, it is inherently receptive to new facts

about lead levels, proper stimulation, not hurrying a child, providing immunization, etc. This preexisting model is compatible with the New Consensus on ECD, and efforts should be made to include it rather than de-emphasizing it in favor of harder, more authoritative scientific information. Similarly, the model Nutrition has the capacity to more specifically convey the idea that children need a stimulating environment in order to develop – that their minds need to be fed as well as their bodies.

### *Overemphasis on intellectual development*

Treating parents as teachers is one way in which the materials seem to overemphasize the importance of cognitive or intellectual development. Advocates like Shonkoff et al. believe, and Cultural Logic's previous research confirms, that the prominence of school-type learning often pushes other equally important types of learning and development out of people's awareness. Other aspects of the materials also reinforce this tendency through their uses of the word *cognitive*, for example, or by discussing the brain, which is closely associated in lay people's minds with notions like intelligence, but not with other aspects of mental activity such as feelings, social interaction, etc. Of course, many of the materials do present a well-rounded picture of the development of the "whole child" – but lay people's tendency to associate "learning" and the brain with intellectual development is so strong that special care needs to be taken to avoid this trap.

This trap is particularly challenging to negotiate given the focus of the science of ECD on the development of the brain. There is a powerful link in American folk models between the brain and thinking (and a similar link between the heart and feeling). As a result, even when advocate materials mention the brain's other functions, there will be a powerful tendency for readers to hear what they already know – that the science of ECD is about trying to create smarter kids, whether appropriately or not.

#### IV. THE CONSEQUENCES OF AMERICAN INDIVIDUALISM

The understanding that children offer many "returns" on the investments we make in them is a powerful one throughout the world, but has lost ground in American public discourse because of the increasing power of the idea of Individual Autonomy. Nonetheless, the model of Caregiver-Child "reciprocity" is still alive, and capable of doing important work for children's advocates if it is tapped into.

##### *A universal understanding of exchange between parents and children*

For all of human history, raising children has entailed daunting expenditures of resources, by both individuals and groups. The biological costs and risks entailed in bearing children are substantial, and either or both parents must typically make very real personal and financial sacrifices in order to raise their children.\*

A simple adaptive response to this challenge has been to interpret the enormous expenditures involved in child rearing as part of a *reciprocity* between adults and children, or sometimes as an *investment*: "Children cost their families and communities a great deal now, but give back even more, in both emotional and material support down the road." This culturally universal cognitive model has many variants: Children bring joy to the home, work in the fields, are a source of pride, provide security in old age, and so forth. In each case, the flow of support is understood to move in both directions, from parent to child and from child to parent. The model is held by parents and learned by children, who internalize the idea – with more or less guilt involved – that they should "give something back." In all of its forms, the model acts to reframe the costs of child rearing in a way that makes having and caring for children a rewarding and sensible option. It is a model that has powerful motivational force in encouraging caregivers to provide for the needs of their young.

It is important to realize how flexible and general the Caregiver/Child Reciprocity model is: Unlike the economic model on which it is based, the "return on investment" is not in this case limited to material support that an adult child can provide to his or her parents. It includes a broad range of rewards and age-appropriate token gifts, many of them symbolic rather than material, including smiles and hugs. Furthermore, Caregivers in the Reciprocity model can include metaphorical parents – e.g., taxpayers who care about kids in general. The essence of the model is the idea that the flow of giving goes in both directions.

##### *Caregiver/Child Reciprocity vs. American Individualism*

Cultural Logic's research ("Promoting Early Child Development: Findings from Cognitive Elicitations," 2002) shows that the Reciprocity model has lost much of its force in American public discourse. Very few people, for instance, refer in specific ways to what their children will end up "giving back." The model has lost ground in American culture to notions of personal autonomy, which have redefined the roles of both parents and children and the goals of child-rearing itself, with important consequences for the work of ECD advocates. Put briefly, where

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\* When asked why he had never written novels, the short story writer Raymond Carver replied that he would have preferred novels, but that once he had children, he simply couldn't sustain the concentration necessary for a book-length work.

the traditional goal of child rearing has been to establish a life-long relationship based on reciprocity between parents (or communities) and children, the current trend is towards the fostering of independence of both children and parents from each other.

Understandings about the relationship between adult children and parents have been strongly impacted by the value placed on mutual independence in American culture. It is, for example, typical for adult Americans to dread having to depend financially on their children, a strongly motivating value that is exploited by the financial planning industry.\* And on the other side of the coin, it is highly atypical for "successful" American adult children to continue living with their parents.†

### *Raising self-reliant children*

This "Mutual Independence" model has also had real effects on our behavior with even very young children. Consider that the practice of infants and parents sleeping in the same bed ("co-sleeping"), is typically regarded in American culture as inherently unhealthful, psychologically damaging to the infant or child, and potentially threatening to the husband-wife relationship.‡

The power of this relatively new cultural model is apparent when we consider that co-sleeping is a nearly universal practice in most cultures (it seems to be typical of humans as a species), and is known to have a number of beneficial effects – for example, it both reduces the incidence of Sudden Infant Death Syndrome and significantly promotes breastfeeding function.

Encouraging the development of self-reliance in children – even very young children – is currently a main goal of child rearing for most Americans. The measure of success in parenting, for example, is the production of children who are "successful," "smart," "achievers," able to "leave the nest," as opposed to those who "stay at home," and remain "dependent."

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\* This direct reversal of the traditional idea that we raise children as part of planning for our old age is captured in the expression "nest egg" – where the metaphorical nest used to harbor offspring, it now harbors money.

† Consider the amused disapprobation of journalist Mike Wallace in a segment of the television show "60-Minutes," when confronted with the phenomenon of adult and financially independent Italian men who *choose* to live with their parents. The newsworthiness of this phenomenon illustrates the idea that extended close interdependence between parents and children now seems unnatural to most Americans.

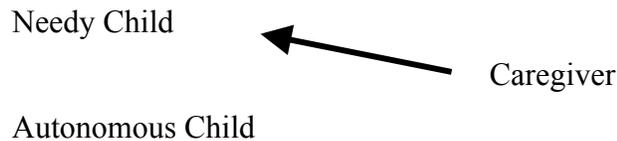
‡ E.g., Spock, 1985



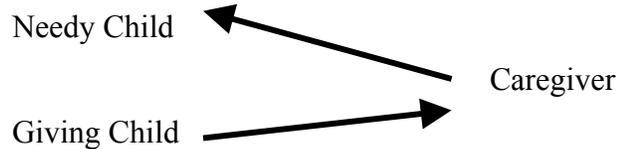
*Advertising depictions of children: The messages reinforce the idea that the goal of development is a self-reliant and goal-seeking individual.*

Cultural Logic's elicitations research indicates clearly that while the Mutual Independence/Autonomous Child model predominates in the public's thinking about ECD, the Reciprocity model has not disappeared, but rather has become less salient in people's minds.

The two models can be summarized as follows (arrows represent flow of support):



Autonomous Child Model (Dominant)



Caregiver/Child Reciprocity Model (Latent)

(Note again that in both of these models "Parent" and "Caregiver" can refer to actual parents, but also to members of the public who are not literally parents. As the elicitations make clear, taxpayers often see themselves, metaphorically, as something like extended "parents" or "caregivers" to children in general.)

### *Strategic Implications of the Two "Level-One" Models*

In our view, the Autonomous Child and Caregiver/Child Reciprocity models provide different and complementary avenues of motivation for encouraging members of the public to support ECD policies. Both of them function as "Level-One" models – understandings which relate to a person's fundamental values, motivations and identity.

- The Autonomous Child model suggests that we motivate Caregivers and potential Caregivers by emphasizing the needs of the Child, for example by emphasizing the requirements of ECD. Values of Decency and Nurturance, for example, demand that we do all we can to promote successful development.
- The Caregiver/Child Reciprocity model adds a second dimension to the communications strategy: Evoking this model by drawing attention to what the child is capable of "giving back" is a potentially powerful way of motivating Caregivers (or potential Caregivers). This is not just an appeal to self-interest, but also to Practicality and to an appreciation of Community.

The research suggests that advocates not restrict themselves to emphasizing the needs of the developing child, for example by educating the public about such things as the workings of the developmental "black box." This approach is necessary – in the sense that no matter how motivated people are to help kids develop properly, they need to understand something more about that process in order to put their energy and resources in the right directions – but it may not be sufficient.

The preceding analysis provides us with a guide for reviewing the communications materials currently being used by ECD advocates. The next section has two goals: First, to refine the dominant strategy of drawing attention to the importance and contingency of ECD. Second, to expand and develop the complementary strategy of drawing attention to what adult caregivers can "get back" from investments in ECD.

## V. RECOMMENDATIONS

**To the extent possible, integrate the Science argument with current models, rather than seeming to reject traditional thinking.**

In order to avoid creating the impression of rhetorical mode when communicating with the public, we recommend working as much as possible with rather than against accepted views of child rearing.

Many of the current materials do an effective job of balancing the new with the familiar, the scientific with the personal. Here is an example:

*"Loving Touch:*

*A gentle touch, a warm hug, skin to skin contact, gentle caressing of an infant's feet, fingers, and cheek, infant massage – These simple interactions are tremendously beneficial to a baby's healthy development."*

Other materials, as we have noted, stress the idea of educating parents about important new science to the point that traditional understandings which could be quite helpful (like Nurturant Love) are dismissed.

Here is an example of another way in which this approach might be applied:

Development as a Health issue: Any research on public attitudes confirms that health is one of the conceptual frames that dominates people's thinking about young children. Framing developmental issues as aspects of a child's health taps into a powerful existing motivation in people's minds. It also connects the issue to a world, i.e. the world of healthcare and pediatrics, that most Americans still strongly associate with trust. Other advantages include the fact that information about healthier practices typically comes across as practical rather than moral (and therefore appeals to a broader cross-section of people) and the fact that there is a natural connection between science and health.

**Use "simplifying models" for explaining the science.**

Simplifying models are simple, vivid analogies that convey the essence of an expert understanding. The materials sometimes use this approach, such as in references to babies getting "wired up" in response to experiences during the first years of life. Average Americans lack an understanding of such topics as brain development, and the "whole child" – including social, emotional, physical and intellectual development, and the ways in which these are interconnected – and need these ideas presented in concrete and familiar terms.

**Motivate people to become engaged with the issue by reminding them of what they (and we as a whole) "get back" when they/we nurture children.**

In part because the advocates' materials are designed to educate the public (and others) about the new consensus on ECD, they spend little time reminding us of the rewards that accompany the process of nurturing children. If the goal, however, is to motivate people about the value of promoting good ECD, this tool should not be neglected. Several examples can illustrate the range of strategic opportunities that exist:

### *The investment metaphor*

Explicit understanding of the Caregiver/Child Reciprocity model allows us to better control the appeals to Investment that are often used by advocates. Consider the following example:

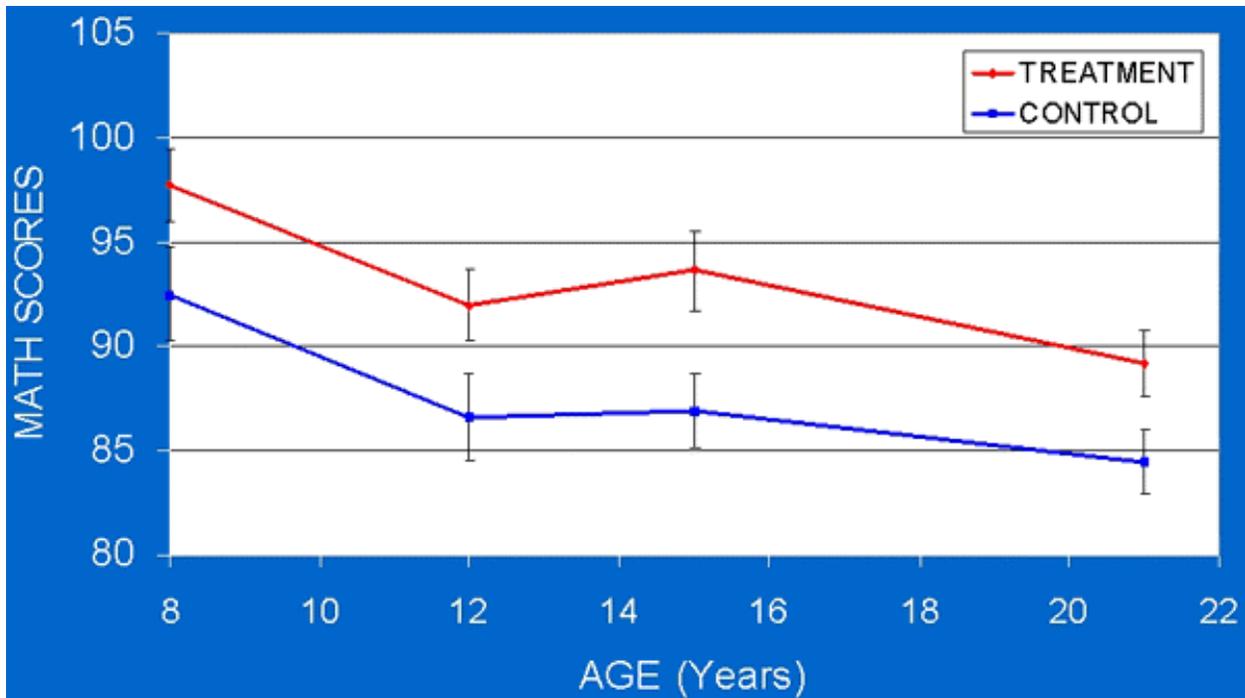
*In 1993 researchers for the High/Scope Perry Preschool Study conducted a systematic cost/benefit analysis to estimate the effects of a high quality early childhood care and education program. High/Scope found that the \$12,356 investment per participant provided a total return to taxpayers of \$88,422, which is \$7.16 for every dollar invested.*

Taken on its own, however, this example presents an economic argument, that does not tap into the Reciprocity model. Dollars are invested and dollars are recouped – there is no real sense of reciprocity between the parties, and less engagement as a result. In other words, the argument is likely to seem “cold” and “unfeeling” to average people.

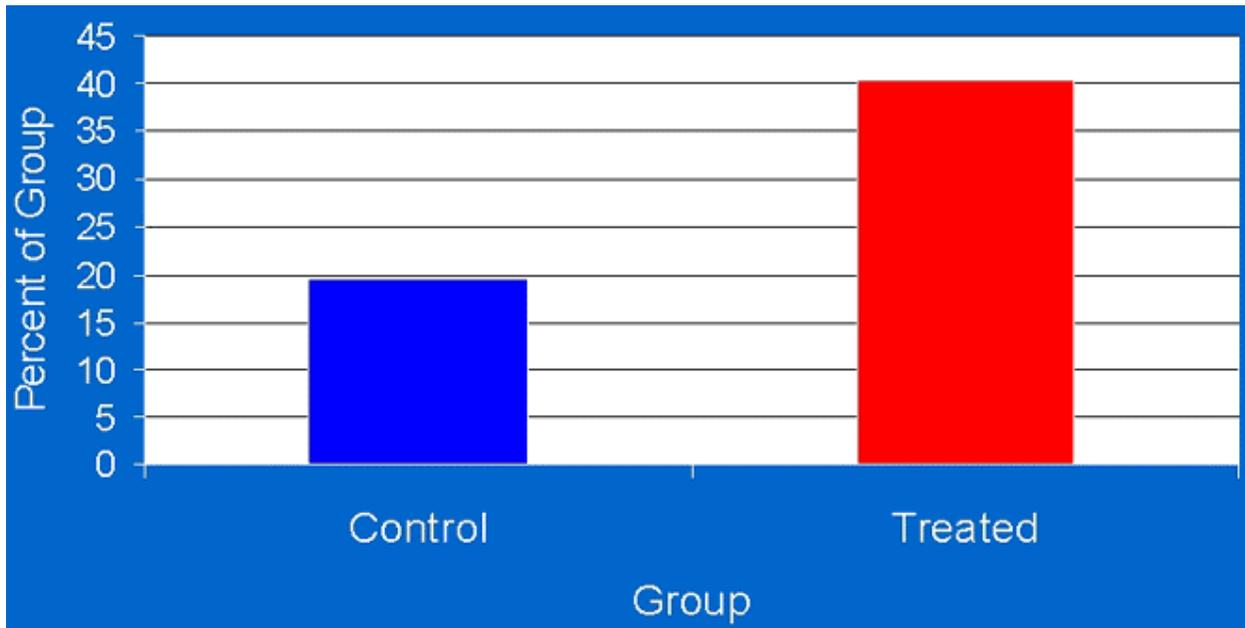
There are a number of ways in which the Investment model can be misused. Some of the advocates’ materials tend to set up a strong dichotomy between, for example, gang-members and surgeons, or model students and teens who plant bombs in their schools (an Extortion model). *Because the Extortion model is so vivid, it seems to be a constant temptation to advertising agencies.* While in a logical sense, this sort of argument is based on the idea of Investment, it should not be confused with the Caregiver/Child Reciprocity model.

Similarly, the advocates’ materials often refers to the desired outcome of early childhood development in ways that exclude reciprocity. The reference is often (in accordance with contemporary ideas about parenting) to successful individuals – for example, someone who makes a lot of money. From a “product” point of view, this makes perfect sense: We invest in methods and approaches that produce superior products (e.g, productive members of society). From a Reciprocity point of view, however, the frame fails completely. The choice between surgeon and gang-member leaves out the possibility of “good citizen” or “decent person.” This is unfortunate because the “decent person” is both an easier goal to achieve (and to demonstrate), and more motivating to members of the public (including especially Conservatives), than is the idea of a successful (and in many ways, selfish or even predatory) individual.

For example, studies of the long-term effects of early intervention programs typically show small gains in cognitive/intellectual development, but even stronger gains in citizenship. Consider these results of an Abecedarian study:



*Results of Abecedarian study: Math Scores over time*



*Results of Abecedarian study: Attending school*

The math score show a difference on the order of 5 percentage points. The school enrollment figures show a difference of 20 percentage points. Of the two measures, the school enrollment is both a better proxy for "good citizenship" and better evidence of the effectiveness of the program than are the math scores.

Several conclusions can be drawn from this example:

- It seems as though a big part of what children get from proper nurturance (or good ECD) is the ability to give back pro-social behavior. "Nurture in = Nurture out," we might say.
- By foregrounding the Caregiver/Child Reciprocity model, we can take advantage of more compelling data than if we limit ourselves to cognitive indicators.
- Finally, the Reciprocity model provides a closer fit than the Autonomous Child model with the idea that early childhood development is a holistic process that requires a broad variety of connections and relationships.

### *Show the "Village"*

It seems clear that parents are, as advocate materials say, their children's most important teachers. It is also clear that parents can teach each other. American public discourse depicts the nuclear family as the norm and the ideal, especially for families with very young children. The context in which young children are shown near people other than their parents is usually daycare. Because daycare is often seen as an institution that makes up for the failure of the nuclear family, the discourse sets up an unhelpful inference – community occurs when the nuclear family fails.

An alternative would be to show children with members of their extended family (including older siblings, grandparents, etc.), and to show more than one nuclear family together. That is to say, children can be seen as a focus of community sharing, rather than a cause of isolation.

### *Think Longitudinally and Metaphorically*

An integral part of the Caregiver/Child Reciprocity model is its ability to accommodate age-appropriate exchanges, and to take a long-term view of the adult-child relationship. We enjoy it when infants smile at us, and the same principle holds true for older children and teens – for each phase of development there is a range of giving that children are capable of. Previous FrameWorks research has shown that adults have more positive feelings about teens who are involved in arts activities (music, dance etc.) than in any other context (including work, sports, homework, shopping, etc.). One interpretation of this finding is that adults prefer teens who show a willingness to produce something (a work or performance) that can be shared with us, even more than teens who are working productively towards greater autonomy and self-reliance. In any case, the link should be made between infants and what kind of older children (not just adults) they will become.

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Advocates' materials overall reflect a community of informed, caring and enlightened people with a wealth of important ideas about how to improve children's developmental outcomes. While average Americans are sympathetic to advocates' positions, they are not as informed or

active as they might be; by focusing more attention on the ways in which not only children but adults as well can gain from implementing child-friendly policies, advocates stand to increase public engagement. And by framing new information in ways that are as unified, vivid and coherent as possible, and as consistent as possible with current (i.e. traditional) views of child rearing, they will maximize their chances of injecting new concepts, terms and perspectives into public discourse on this critical subject. Importantly, these principles will not only help raise the engagement of lay members of the public, but also decision-makers on the early childhood issue.

### **The Authors**

Cultural Logic, directed by anthropologist Axel Aubrun and linguist Joseph Grady, is an applied cognitive and social science research group that helps organizations frame their messages for maximum effect. Working with a network of experts and partner organizations including the FrameWorks Institute and Public Knowledge, we focus on research relating to public interest issues. Topics have included global warming, violence reduction in communities, conserving the Chesapeake Bay, global interdependence, gender equity in schools, and toxins in the domestic environment.

Axel Aubrun, Ph.D. is a psychological anthropologist whose research and publications take an interdisciplinary approach to problems of communication and motivation. Joseph Grady, Ph.D. is a linguist whose research and publications focus on the relationship between metaphor and other aspects of thought and communication.