



Reframing Youth: Models, Metaphors, Messages

Prepared for the Frameworks Institute
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I. INTRODUCTION

This report begins with the assumption that public attitudes towards teenagers have an impact on teenagers' well-being. Adults' prevailing ways of thinking about teenagers shape their actions, both public and private, in ways that affect the lives of young people. Public consciousness is in turn shaped by a number of factors, including images presented in the media, everyday experience, and even innate aspects of universal human nature; some of these factors are difficult to manipulate, but one of the most important, public discourse, can be shifted, if new ways of framing teenagers are effectively promoted.

With an eye towards the W.T. Grant Foundation's mission of promoting the well-being of American youth, the report presents a number of ways of talking and thinking about teenagers that have the potential to shift public attitudes in a positive direction.

Based on cognitive/cultural analysis

The work presented in the report is based on the authors' previous analysis of American understandings of teenagers (Aubrun & Grady, "How Americans Understand Teens: Findings From Cognitive Interviews" 2000), which identified framings (including metaphors) used to talk and reason about adolescents. The framings recommended here are rooted in ways people already think — and in particular, those elements of public understandings that most closely match the views of experts such as developmental psychologists, sociologists and anthropologists. The framings we recommend constitute "bridges" between public and expert views, and highlight those perspectives which are most productive from the point of view of teenagers and their advocates.

Frames vs. language

The list of models and metaphors we present here should not be confused with final copy. While some of the language that follows might be used as-is by W.T. Grant and other advocates, the main purpose of the paper is to point to conceptual frames — i.e. ways of thinking about the world. Many different words (and images) could be found to effectively express the same frames. This work should therefore be seen as input both to creative efforts (such as the work of copywriters and designers) and to research, such as testing with focus groups.

It should also be noted that part of the process of bridging involves taking account of people's various, and often contradictory cognitive models. The toolkit of suggested frames that we provide reflects this variety, and as a result not every suggested frame is compatible with every other.

II. SUGGESTED FRAMES

1) TEENS WANT TO BE RECRUITED – TEENS NEED CONNECTION

An important finding from our previous report is that while most other cultures recognize teenagers' need for mentoring from an adult outside the nuclear family, this principle has lost force in the American consciousness. The cross-cultural evidence suggests that in virtually all human societies adolescents (especially boys) are recruited and mentored at some stage by authority figures other than their parents.

A dominant contemporary American model, by contrast, seems to be that the nurturing role of parents should be stretched to include the job of mentoring. Even informed researchers tend to put almost exclusive emphasis on the need for more *parental* involvement with teens, a sign that the cultural understandings have shifted on this point (see e.g., Zill 1998).

The emphasis on parental responsibility is counterproductive in two ways: First, it obscures the role of a social context beyond the nuclear family in adolescent development. Despite this unusual aspect of American culture, outside mentoring should probably still be seen as an invaluable ingredient in adolescent development. Maintaining an emphasis on parents' exclusive responsibility for their teens' development means that less attention is paid to providing real mentors. In their absence, and because adolescents lack the experience and judgment of adults, teens' eagerness to be recruited can lead them in unfortunate directions. Thus, a teenager who sees no better options may allow himself to be "recruited" by a gang.

Second, there is reason to doubt that parents *can* be as much of an influence as many contemporary Americans would like them to be. Teenagers are probably predisposed (in a biological sense) to look beyond the nuclear family for mentoring, i.e., to look for the opportunity to be "recruited" into a group that gives them a satisfying sense of identity. Furthermore, parents are probably predisposed to expect (on some level) that people or groups outside the immediate family will take on a mentoring role for their child.

Productive framings will imply that the adult population as a whole bears a responsibility for giving teenagers a degree of attention, input and guidance. Thus, while communications efforts that promote the Nurturant Parent model (see Lakoff 1996) are likely to help teens, we strongly recommend that this model be supplemented with the Mentor model. Framings should suggest, among other things, that the job of adults is to provide context, either by "adopting" individual teens, or by supporting institutions that offer guidance to teens. This perspective emphasizes the importance of a connection that extends beyond the family, and therefore addresses the "family-is-responsible" canard.

One natural advantage of this approach will be that it cuts across the American political divide. Conservatives as well as liberals feel that context is important — what they disagree on is the *nature* of the mentorship (e.g., boot camps vs. Big Brothers).

Teens want to be discovered.

Teenagers often dream of being noticed by a sports scout, talent scout, or modeling agency. Less dramatically, and more practically, they want to be discovered by a capable adult or institution capable of taking on a mentoring role. In typical media representations, teens are loud and conspicuous: They dye their hair and "act out." In fact, though, many teens do everything they can to avoid standing out, to become invisible; they nonetheless crave validation from a worthy authority.

Teens are waiting to be invited.

Many teens come across as passive and stand-offish. But this is due to a natural shyness more than to true negativity. Teens' natural inclination is to wait to be recruited, rather than actively to seek out a "team." They have to be brought aboard.

Isolation is a natural hazard for teens.

Despite the public image of teens as traveling in packs, cliques, or gangs, social isolation is a real danger for many teens, perhaps especially in this age of "electronic connectivity." Finding a group to identify with can be a slow and bumpy process. Adult mentors can ease this problem.

Gangs are sometimes the best recruiters in a teen's field of vision.

When positive mentoring from outside the family is not available, teens will look elsewhere for recruitment. Gangs make real efforts to recruit. There is a natural rivalry or competition between negative and positive mentors (consider the immense popularity of the *Star Wars* series, in which powerful mentors, one evil one good, compete in recruiting a teenaged boy).

It takes a mentor (from outside the family).

This language plays off of the slogan "It takes a village." It implies parental responsibility for selecting a suitable mentor for their child. Given the importance of the authority relationship entailed in the mentoring process, it is much less likely than the previous slogan to alienate conservatives.

Teens are pulled in different directions.

Social pressures are like physical forces pulling teens towards different sorts of lives. Communities have some structures that pull teens — e.g. night basketball

and other mentoring programs. A variant of this framing is the idea that a mentoring vacuum is dangerous for teens.

Teens are natural apprentices.

Despite their apparent standoffishness, teens are generally eager to learn from more experienced adults. Mentoring is more a question of breaking the ice than of going against nature.

Teens are ready to earn their status.

This model is related to "Teens want to be discovered." While young children expect to be loved by their parents for who they are, teens expect to be recognized for their achievements or for their potential. They are often looking for someone to prove themselves to.

2) MOST TEENS ARE REGULAR PEOPLE

Unfortunately the media, by its nature, tends to depict teenagers who are extreme in some sense – e.g. “monsters” who have committed outrageous crimes, or “heroes” who have achieved extraordinary feats; what counts as newsworthy usually means that which is unusual. Public consciousness often reflects these extreme images, with important negative consequences. In particular, the media distortion of what most teenagers are actually like reinforces the idea that teens are fundamentally disconnected from ordinary life and people. It is, for example, hard to imagine oneself mentoring either a monster or a hero.

Reframes are needed which can strengthen people’s awareness of the fact that most teenagers do not fall into either extreme category. The purpose of these reframes is to "reawaken" the model — held by most Americans, if often overshadowed by media portrayals — that teens are regular people. Fortunately, the task of reframing teens is made easier by the fact that a positive interpretation already exists in the public's mind. In many cases, simply reminding the public of salient truths about teenagers will go a long way to undermining the negative effects of the media's portrayals.

Teens are just as responsible as ever, only sometimes in different ways.

One-on-one elicitation revealed a model in which teens are fundamentally different today than in generations past. One component of this model posits that today's teens work less hard, and are slower to take on adult responsibilities than yesterday's teens. In fact, teenagers hold jobs in high numbers, often do volunteer work, and so forth. It is important to remind people that teens have not changed fundamentally, though the social and cultural context has.

Most teens are good, and not newsworthy.

The media's preoccupation with extreme teens is influential when it substitutes for people's actual experience with teens (Aubrun & Grady 2000). People with teens of their own, for example, are less likely to buy into the media model of teens.

Unfortunately, due to increasing age-based social segregation – e.g. teens spend much of their day in large, public schools, surrounded only by other teens – more and more adults have less and less experience with teens and are therefore more susceptible to the media portrayal.

At the same time, the dominance of the current media picture provides an opportunity to reintroduce the typical (good) teen into the public discourse: There is “news” in the fact that most teens are regular people.

Most teens do their homework and help in the kitchen.

Recent surveys have established that most teens are much more committed to doing chores (personal and household) than the public portrayal gives them credit for. This fact effectively reawakens the non-media model of teenagers held by many Americans.

A silent majority of teens.

This model alludes indirectly to a classic conservative model (the "silent majority"). As in the case of the slight reframe "It takes a mentor," this formulation potentially borrows some of the force of the original without taking on the political baggage.

Most teens are middle of the road.

Fads like tattooing and body-piercing are only followed by a high-profile minority of teenagers. The same is true for excessive drug and alcohol use.

Teens cause small problems.

While in the public portrayal, teens are the most unstable and even antisocial element in society, the fact remains that with the vast majority of serious social problems (e.g. unemployment, urban decay), teenagers are victims rather than “perpetrators.”

3) TEENS AS LEARNERS

Categorizing is a natural feature of human thought, and it is a natural tendency for adults to think of teenagers as a specific kind of person that fits a particular stereotype. Just as mothers are stereotyped as unconditionally loving and overly protective, teens are often stereotyped as lazy, irresponsible, standoffish, rebellious, lacking a moral compass, etc. In short, there is a natural tendency for the public to view teens as

morally defective adults. Teens are often physically developed, and equipped with various accoutrements of power (cars, cell phones, etc.), but are not yet completely socialized. This combination makes them seem like vaguely threatening figures, free from the various obligations (career, debts, marriage) that make most adults seem like known quantities.

One aspect of teens that bears constant reinforcing is that they are involved in a learning process. Frames that emphasize this aspect of adolescence strike a positive chord of self-improvement, and suggest that the job of people around teens is to be good “teachers.”

Teens are immigrants/strangers/out of towners/newcomers.

This model points to the fact that teens have plenty to learn about being adults, no matter how much they seem to feel they know. They are leaving the old world of childhood and entering a new world of adulthood. They cannot be expected to know all of the rules and dangers of that new world, and we must be patient with them, giving them “directions” when they need them.

Teens are rookies, apprentices.

They are new to the job, green, raw. This model implies that, on the plus side, teens are eager to prove themselves. Teens are highly motivated, even if not always in the directions adults want.

Teens have limited vision (as opposed to corrupt vision),

In most cases, it's not that teenagers are perverse in their view of the world, but rather that they are able to see only a very small piece of the picture. In particular teens have trouble understanding all the causes and effect, for example of an activity such as driving a car or dating.

Teen idealism and cynicism are both forms of oversimplification.

Teens live in a simple world.

This is a variant of the idea that teens have limited vision. It suggests that teens are still forming their picture of the world. By adult standards, they are still largely uninformed (e.g., they are not very good at mapping causal connections).

Teens are stepping onto the world stage for the first time.

This model echoes the idea of the debutante, a new social actor presented to the world. While the status of debutante is limited to one sex and to a certain American subculture, the notion of the neophyte can be applied to teenagers in general.

Teenagers are leaving the protection of the domestic sphere and entering a world of adult consequences.

Teens don't get to rehearse.

They've never been adults before, and their initial efforts mostly happen in public. Your role is to coach them rather than to judge them.

Teens are learning to play their instruments.

Teens have been issued their tools, but don't yet know how to use them.

Teens see the world as unknown territory.

For teens, the world beyond the family sphere is a strange new place. In most cases they are ready to explore it.

Teens are unafraid of limits.

Because they lack the experience of adults, experience which can often be discouraging in its cumulative effect, teenagers tend not to understand limits in the ways that adults do. Teens' unrealistic expectations about how fast they drive a car, and also the unwillingness of teen volunteers to be deterred by the magnitude of a social problem, both come from the same tendency to be unafraid of limits. This approach throws a positive light on a characteristic of teens that is often used to reduce teens to the heroic or the monstrous.

4) TEENS ARE IN PROCESS

As we saw in the last section, frames are needed that can remind people that teenagers are still in a developmental stage, rather than being some special, bad category of person. The expert model of adolescence emphasizes the rapid and dramatic physical, psychological, and social changes that take place during the teenage years. This model provides a key to understanding many of the particularities of teen behavior and appearance, and therefore to humanizing teens in the public mind. It provides another way of fighting the view that teenagers are a particular, unsatisfactory breed of person by emphasizing that they are undergoing a process of change and development — what they are today is not what they will be tomorrow.

From parents' point of view, one of the difficult challenges of raising a teenager is that they are "autonomous dependents." That is, they still require nurturing while they are asserting their independence. This frame suggests that this is a normal stage of development, rather than evidence of moral or personal inconsistency on the part of adolescents.

Most importantly, this general model elicits an empathetic stance toward teens (see Aubrun & Grady 2000).

Teens are kids in adult bodies.

or,

Teens look like they're fully developed, but they're not.

Adolescence is a process of uneven development, in which bodies typically develop before minds and social skills. An inner child in an outer adult is easily illustrated.

Teens are undergoing a process of metamorphosis.

The image chrysalis provides a simple visual of the difficult and not always pretty process of becoming an adult. It also suggests the naturalness of the "in-between" stage.

This model is linked to culturally salient ideas about ugly ducklings who turn into beautiful swans.

Teens are changing fast.

This frame closely echoes the expert model, and connects with the idea that adults have a role to play in forming teens.

Teens are like sponges.

This frame works like the previous three, but focuses in particular on the idea that teens are all ears (even if they pretend not to be).

The hormonal rocket sled is normal

There is a powerful hormonal force propelling teenagers towards adulthood, which they can't completely control. Interest in sex, for example, is part of the ride. We want them to be on the sled, and need to recognize that much of teen behavior that we disapprove of is the result of natural development.

Teens' development is uneven.

Mental maturation is like physical maturation — there are spurts and unevenness. With the body, this can mean one person's voice changes earlier while another grows big feet. Internally, it can mean that one teen's sense of responsibility has not kicked in yet, even though that teen is feeling adult urges for freedom, products etc.

Believe it or not you're looking at a future breadwinner.

The purpose of this frame is simply to remind adults that today's (irresponsible) teenagers are tomorrow's (responsible) adults.

Teens are pseudo-adults.

Although they seem hostile, standoffish, surly, large, and scary, teens are often childlike (e.g., scared, unqualified, unknowledgeable) inside.

One effect of this model is to counteract the negative of teens as powerful yet irresponsible actors on the social stage (the image of the Child-King).

"Child or adult?" (ad slogan).

This reframe points to the fact that the developmental line between children and adults is not always clear. Teenagers are usually a mix of features, some adult and some child-like.

A simple way of expressing how difficult it is to draw the line between child and adult is to start with a young teen and imagine adding a week to their age, and then another and another. At what point can we say that the child has become an adult?

Not kids, not adults, but still people.

This reframe alludes to the liberal idea that we should recognize and accept previously marginalized groups of people, particularly people who do not neatly fall into traditional social categories (e.g., gays and lesbians, mixed-race children).

Between high school senior and college freshman.

This model emphasizes the idea that teenagers typically spend a good deal of time oscillating between two social statuses (and two frames of mind). They are cocky kids some of the time and insecure adults some of the time, and it is easy to mistake them for the other at any time.

5) TEENS ARE SEARCHERS

Teens are often seen as negative and contrary; they seem to reject adult behavior and society's values for no good reason. They are rule-breakers, disrespectful, antisocial. The counter to this view is that teens are actively trying to figure out what *their* world will look like, as opposed to ours. This process inevitably involves exploring a lot of dead-ends and false starts.

Teens are idealistic.

Teens are dreamers. They spend a fair amount of time in private thoughts. They are often deeply idealistic, and their apparent cynicism comes from their disappointment with the world as it is.

Teens look more different than they really are.

There is an important difference between how teens look and their character. Part of the process of searching involves trying on various "looks" as one would try on hats. Where with an adult you often *can* judge a book by its cover, in the case of teens the old saying is much more true.

Teens have to spread their wings.

When teens seem to be rejecting their parents' values, or even their parents themselves, it's not really personal. Teens have to clear the slate, so to speak, as part of the searching process. (Parents can take comfort in the fact that once teens become adults, more likely than not they will return to values learned as a child.)

Teens are at the start of a new chapter.

One metaphor that usefully describes the developmental process is that life is a book with many chapters. In this case, the metaphor has the advantage of suggesting that teens have a clean slate, and should be treated as such.

6) TEENS ADAPT TO THEIR ENVIRONMENT

Experts on adolescent behavior and development emphasize that teenagers' behavior depends largely on the contexts they find themselves in — i.e. their environments are as important as their inner leanings.

Despite much political rhetoric, most Americans do believe that context makes a huge difference in what kind of adults teenagers become.

Teens are unfinished sculptures.

or,

Teens are saplings/are straightened at the stake.

These frames counteract the essentializing view that teenagers are either good or bad, and that the main job of the public is to figure out which category any given teenager (or group of teenagers) falls into. It shifts the focus to the role that their context plays in their development, and indirectly supports the idea of mentorship.

Teens are subject to many pulls.

The empathetic stance easily leads people to recognize that teens do not determine their own agenda. They listen to many voices, including those of the street, the family, and increasingly, of consumer marketers.

Teens gravitate.

A variant of the previous reframe that places the emphasis on teens as actively orienting towards certain voices and messages.

7) TEENS ARE WORKING HARD

Adults often think of teenagers as living easy, hedonistic lives. To counter this view, which makes teens seem immoral according to a core American value, it should be pointed out how hard teenagers are working in a variety of senses, working at real jobs, dealing with pressures people in other age groups don't have to deal with, and facing the hardships that come with the steep learning curves of adolescence.

Teens are working hard on the inside.

This model echoes the idea that teens are in process. Even if it's not obvious on the outside, teens are in a constant process of reshaping their bodies and minds. It's tiring. It's homework. It's nothing you can see.

Many teens hold down jobs.

This reframe falls in the category of simple truths that the public should be reminded of with an eye to counteracting the idea that teens are lazy and spoiled.

Teens are under lots of pressure, even if they look laid back.

or,

Teens have a lot on their plate.

This frame reminds adults that although the teenage years seem from the outside to be remarkably free of adult pressures and responsibilities, teens in fact face a wide variety of pressures, which range from doing well in school to avoiding drugs to making decisions about the future, all in the context of undergoing tremendous physical, emotional, and social transformation. When you combine the inner work with the outer work, teens are busy folks.

Teens are willing to pay the price.

One aspect of adolescence that does not appear much in the public discourse is its willingness to self-sacrifice. Teens are willing to work hard, and endure significant hardships to reach the adult state.

8) TEENS NEED TO BREAK AWAY

A corollary of the idea that teens need an adult mentor outside the family is that teenagers must break away from the family, as a natural step forward in maturing. Given the universal tendency for teens to be recruited by individuals and institutions outside of the family, there is reason to believe that adolescents are predisposed to keeping their family at arm's length.

From the perspective of the Nuclear Family-centered model, this predisposition is seen as a sign of (a) the selfish or bad character of some teens, and/or (b) the defective character of a particular nuclear family. Of course if a teen with the desire to break away is bad, then an uncomfortably large proportion of all teens are defined as bad. And it is interesting to note that in popular culture, the prototypical examples of mentoring are associated with defective nuclear families — consider the Boy's Town priest, the classic film "Angels with Dirty Faces," or the Big Brother program. In each case, the mentor more or less replaces an absent parent.

An important part of the reframe that we propose is undermining the zero-sum relationship between Good Parent and Mentor — it is possible and desirable to have both.

Teens are fledglings/need to spread their wings.

These well-worn frames emphasize the naturalness of the adolescent urge to develop one's own identity; teens' interest in things and voices from outside the nuclear family is normal. They also emphasize the difficulty and challenges of the natural and inevitable process of leaving the parental nest.

III. PROBLEMATIC FRAMINGS

There are some ways of framing teens that are positive on some level but problematic in other ways. We mention several here.

1) Teens are an asset not a liability.

A core theme of the W.T. Grant Foundation is that youth should be considered an asset rather than a liability. While this metaphor has the advantage of implying that teens — like other assets — should be valued, it is worth examining its entailments in more detail.

The term "asset" is a financial metaphor, which in this frame suggests a model common in American business culture: "human capital." The problem with this metaphor is that its natural implication is that teens are something to be exploited.

This conflicts with the idea that teens are developing and in need of further positive investment from adults, such as mentoring.

2) Teens are at a fork in the road

This frame is constructive in that it suggests the importance of adolescence as a stage of life, and implies a possible role for adults in helping teens make significant decisions.

On the negative side, this frame reinforces the idea of moral irreversibility, which is closely linked to ideas about the essential goodness or badness of individuals. In other words, it reinforces the idea that some teens have already made their choice and thus that we should "give up" on some teens.

3) Adopt a teen.

This frame is constructive to the degree that it promotes the idea of mentoring.

The danger is that it subtly reinforces the notion that when adolescents need to be mentored by someone outside the family, it is because the parents are failing to their job.

4) Teens need boot camp.

The currently popular idea that boot camps are useful in bringing teens into line merits a substantial analysis of its own, which would be beyond the scope of this report. Put briefly, the problem with this frame is that boot camps — which are modeled on the military version of a rite of passage from adolescence into adulthood — are taken out of context. That is to say, they emphasize the hazing, but fail to follow up with the next step: conferral of an enhanced social status, accompanied by enrollment in a social organization. Boot camps provide the unpleasant part of the rite, but very little in the way of real *passage* into adulthood.

About the Author

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, Cultural Logic focuses 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.

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