



Making the Case for Youth Programs: the Minnesota Research

**A FrameWorks Research Report**

Prepared for the FrameWorks Institute

by

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This Memo reports on findings from the FrameWorks Institute's recent research on how Minnesotans think about adolescence in general and, more specifically, programs for youth that take place in non-school hours. Given recent cutbacks in after-school and summer programs, Minnesota philanthropies and nonprofits were eager to know how citizens saw these changes and what might get them to reconsider recent policies, which are clearly at odds with the recommendations of experts on adolescent development. At the same time, these same groups sought to understand the broader issue of how Minnesotans understand the educational and developmental needs of youth.

This research, conducted in 2004 with the support of the McKnight Foundation, complements a much broader study which included a comprehensive review of existing public opinion data, original elicitations, focus groups, news and entertainment content analyses, media effects experiments and a priming survey. The earlier work, conducted by the FrameWorks Institute from 1999 to 2001 with support from the W. T. Grant Foundation, was summarized in a FrameWorks Message Memo entitled "Reframing Youth Issues for Public Consideration and Support" (2001), which is available at [www.frameworksinstitute.org](http://www.frameworksinstitute.org). This earlier body of work served to describe in detail the public's antipathy toward teenagers, as well as tracing many of the images available to adults back to news and entertainment media. Additionally, it resulted in specific recommendations for reframing the public discourse about adolescence. Subsequent to this work, youth advocates in Minnesota sought to test the validity of those recommendations for advancing public opinion about youth in their state and asked the FrameWorks Institute to explore a series of questions:

- How do Minnesotans think about youth, their development, their developmental needs, and the policies and programs that would advance or retard their success?
- Among those dominant frames normally applied to youth, observed and codified in earlier FrameWorks research, which seem most in evidence in Minnesota, and with what consequences for public thinking?
- How do these public and private frames affect public choices in the state?
- How is public discourse, from advocates, media and policymakers contributing to and driving the public choices?
- How can youth and the role of community in advancing youth development be best reframed to evoke a different way of thinking, one that illuminates a broader range of alternative policy choices?

Beginning in 2004, FrameWorks conducted additional qualitative research to explore these questions. It is important to note that the earlier research on public attitudes to youth was not the only source of the reframing options tested in Minnesota. Very recent qualitative research on how Americans think about early child development, conducted for the National Scientific Council on the Developing Child and supported by the A. L. Mailman Foundation proved invaluable in suggesting framing elements that ultimately helped Minnesotans appreciate the developmental aspects of youth programs. Contemporaneous work underway at FrameWorks on how Americans think about race and government also proved helpful to this project.

This research is conducted from the perspective of strategic frame analysis, a multi-method multidisciplinary approach to communications that tests the impact of various conceptual frames

on public understanding of, and support for, policies and programs. The goal of this work is not merely to describe existing public opinion, but rather to experiment with alternative frames to determine which might result in broader community support for the kinds of programs and policies that experts in adolescent development have demonstrated to have beneficial effects on youth and society as a whole.

Goals of the Current Phase of Research

- Explore attitudes to youth in Minnesota in light of earlier research findings
- Explore the public's understanding of youth development and the programs that support it
- Discover the public's level of familiarity with recent program cuts in the state
- Test earlier conclusions against current public opinion
- Test conventional wisdom on ways to advance youth programs
- Report out recommendations for better messaging on youth issues and programs in Minnesota

This Memo is not intended to take the place of the research reports that inform it; indeed, FrameWorks strongly recommends that those who wish to improve communications about young people in Minnesota avail themselves of both the recent and the earlier research reports which provide a detailed exploration of public opinion about youth. Within each report are specific research findings and recommendations offered by the researchers. This Memo differs in that it attempts to look across the full body of research and to interpret these findings from the perspective of a communications practitioner.

These FrameWorks research reports and recommendations were developed for the Out-of-School Time Partnership and supported by the McKnight Foundation, 21st Century Community Learning Centers Program funds from the Minnesota Department of Education, and Federal Child Care Development funds from the Minnesota Department of Human Services in conjunction with the University of Minnesota.

FrameWorks wishes to thank Meg Bostrom of Public Knowledge and Axel Aubrun and Joseph Grady of Cultural Logic for the research and insights that inform this Memo. While this Memo draws extensively from the work of other researchers, the conclusions expressed here are solely those of the FrameWorks Institute.

## **Research Base**

The FrameWorks research in Minnesota was comprised of two complementary studies:

- Eight focus groups in Minnesota with engaged citizens (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). These groups took place in three locations -- Little Falls, Rochester and Minneapolis – in September 2004. Some groups were conducted with parents of children under 18 years of age, while others excluded those with children under 18. Two groups were conducted with minority residents – one African American group and one Hispanic, representing a mix of parenting status. The results are published as “A Developmental Perspective: An Analysis of Qualitative Research Exploring Views of Youth Programs,” Meg Bostrom/Public Knowledge for FrameWorks Institute, October 2004.

- cognitive elicitations, consisting of recorded one-on-one interviews conducted in fall 2004 by professional linguists and anthropologists with a diverse group of twenty average citizens in Minnesota recruited through a process of ethnographic networking. The goal of this research was to explore the shape of public reasoning about youth development and related programs. The results are published as “How Two Cognitive Biases Work Against Support for Youth Development Programs: Findings from the Cognitive Elicitations,” Axel Aubrun, Michele Emanatian and Joseph Grady/Cultural Logic for FrameWorks Institute, November 2004.

It should be noted that this relatively modest research base could not have achieved its descriptive and prescriptive goals without the extensive research studies conducted by FrameWorks over the course of the past three years, consisting of a meta-analysis of existing public opinion, simplifying models research, news and entertainment content analyses, focus groups, media effects experiments, elicitations with the public, a detailed priming survey, etc.

## **Looking Backward**

There were a number of specific observations and communications recommendations that resulted from the earlier FrameWorks research. We provide below a condensed and selective version of those that proved most important to the Minnesota phase of research.

### *Situation Analysis*

1. Americans are worried about teens and believe today’s teens grow up in a more dangerous environment than in the past, with more potential for risk-taking and destructive behaviors.
2. Americans believe youth today are different from past generations.
3. They believe the difference is the result of declining values among today’s youth.
4. They are unpersuaded by factual rebuttals that demonstrate most American youth to be respectful, engaged in volunteering, and in tune with adult values.
5. They suspect that parents are to blame by neglecting or spoiling their children.
6. Most Americans have little understanding of child development overall, and tend to think of teens as fully formed.
7. They toggle between a perception of teens as “the other” or an alien species and adolescence as a process we all go through.

And, from more than a decade of research on how Americans think about children's issues, we would add this persistent problem:

8. Americans struggle to accord a role to community in the rearing of children, which is seen as happening almost exclusively within the private domain of the family.

It was to address these problems in perception that FrameWorks made a number of specific recommendations, including the following (selected by their relevance to the Minnesota research):

- a) Avoid using the word "teenager," which triggers negative associations. Use young people, youth or adolescents.
- b) Remind the public that adolescence is a developmental stage.
- c) Show youth involved in sports, volunteer activities and other extra-curricular activities like performance arts as a way to demonstrate values and to get community into the picture.
- d) Make explicit the value of relationships such as mentoring, and the values of focus, responsibility and teamwork so that people can understand what is gained through these experiences.
- e) Connect adolescents to the broader community. Use coaches, volunteer leaders and seniors to attest to the importance of these experiences and the positive outcomes for young people and their communities.
- f) Show youth in situations in which their work and volunteer supports is altruistic and also helps to solve a social problem in the community.
- g) Use an exchange model to explain the mutual benefits that come from positive youth development, i.e. we give to them now so that they can give back to our communities in the future.
- h) Avoid the "hero youth" story which exceptionalizes the example and casts suspicion on the less accomplished majority.
- i) Prime the discussion with values like nurturance, community and future.

In addition to this research, directly oriented to understanding how Americans view youth, the FrameWorks research team drew upon observations that came out of its recent work on child abuse and neglect for Prevent Child Abuse America and from its work on early child development for the A.L. Mailman Foundation and the National Scientific Council on the Developing Child. This research is also available on the FrameWorks website. It resulted in several important recommendations that were then taken into testing to discern their applicability to the Minnesota project. These included:

- j) A recommendation that messages should carefully avoid a mentalist emphasis, in which the focus of development is moral and intellectual growth and should, instead, emphasize the unique material, developmental challenges that occur during adolescence, such as the brain's wiring with respect to judgment and foreseeing consequences.
- k) Relatedly, a recommendation that the simplifying model of "brain architecture," developed and tested to determine its explanatory power for early child

development, should also be tested for its ability to help advocates communicate about adolescent development.

Finally, the research was tasked with exploring the impact of several common tropes in use by advocacy groups and with discerning the best way to describe and present the programs that had proven effective. These tasks resulted in experiments that incorporated:

- A Crime Frame, in which after-school programs are seen as a preventive deterrent to juvenile crime, building on a popular national news story; and
- An Investment Frame, in which the country's economic development is tied to the successful development of its youth, building on a theme then current in Minnesota's business community.

### **Deepening our Understanding of the Conceptual Hurdles to Engagement**

The Minnesota research project might best be described as retesting old hypotheses and adding new ones. But most importantly, the fact that the Minnesota research could build on the earlier findings allowed it to avoid the costly and time-consuming distractions triggered by such frame traps as use of the word "teenager." This new round of research offers richer and deeper understandings of both the problems that attend to a conversation about youth development in Minnesota, and the relative advantages of old and new framing recommendations in overcoming those hurdles.

The result is a new situation analysis more pointedly about the situation in Minnesota. Importantly, there is little in this new assessment that runs counter to the earlier analysis, but it does provide greater detail on the specific questions raised by Minnesota advocates.

In sum:

- Minnesotans believe no program can or should supplant parents. Nor should programs serve to reward deficient parenting. Rather, programs need to be seen as "on the same side" as parents and communities, making families more effective and communities better. Getting this relationship right – among family, community and youth programs – is an important pre-requisite for engagement.
- Community actors (mentors, after-school programs, etc.) can serve as effective prompts to imagining the outcomes associated with youth programs, but they do not come easily to mind.
- While the images of youth in volunteer, performing arts and team sports did indeed get people over their immediate mental image of the terrible teen, there was some consistent resistance in Minnesota to coaches and coaching, which was perceived as having become too much about "winning" and less about fostering team-building skills.
- There is general agreement that self-esteem and depression constitute more important and primary threats to young people than drugs, alcohol and other widely touted risks; the latter are seen as the result of inattention to the former. Many adults appreciate the

importance of providing a healthy foundation to inoculate young people from risky behaviors.

- There is a widely held belief that youth programs are numerous and that the main obstacle to participation is parent/youth motivation. At the same time, there was a common assumption that programs might not be available in rural areas, poorer neighborhoods, etc. due to cost and transportation.
- These programs are deemed desirable but not necessary; most people cannot readily name a lost benefit or outcome associated with postponing or reducing program availability.
- Minnesota is assumed to be better than most states in its support of programs for young people. There was little awareness that programs had been cut or lost, except when prompted, and this knowledge was then largely confined to parents of adolescents.
- The question of whether programs were “government run,” compared to government funded, loomed large in the discussion of whether they were effective and cost-effective, as well as whether they were appropriate vehicles for guiding youth, or whether they were a response to failed families.
- Any message that connects youth programs to deficiencies in the schools runs the risk of being overwhelmed by the public’s concern that the core education system is crumbling and requires more immediate attention than the expendable add-ons that youth programs are perceived to be. Framing youth development as an adjunct to the K-14 education system, with an emphasis on individual success, academic achievement and global competitiveness, is more likely to prioritize investments in in-school basics than in out-of-school development programs.

Across the research, there were three consistent frame challenges that must be addressed consistently in all messaging about youth and youth programs in Minnesota:

- Making Explicit the Developmental Benefits to Communities of successfully integrating young people into community life, including the fact that communities are the beneficiaries of the solid, decent kids that emerge from programs that help them practice the roles they will need to assume as adults;
- Making visible the Developmental Impacts of Quality Programs on the lives of young people, in terms of extending parental values through the guidance of community actors and experiences, as young people enter the world through their community; and
- Explaining Adolescent Development in such a way that adults readily understand it as a biological phase with emergent competencies which are, in turn, dependent upon external experiences and relationships.

Finally, there are two important components of any message about youth programs:

- Parents must be acknowledged and their relationship to community made explicit, but not to the degree that responsibility is assigned uniquely to them or that parents are perceived as the main clients for programs; and
- The fact that good programs have been lost or rendered unaffordable, or that mediocre programs are not getting the job done and require transformation must be included in order to offer a reason for re-examination of this issue.

### **THE PROBLEM IN A NUTSHELL**

There IS broad if shallow support for youth programs  
 BUT limited understanding of how they work  
 SO powerful default trumps (dysfunctional government, criteria for public investment, competing demands of other better-understood public investments in kids, intrusion into family, etc.) often shut down engagement  
 BECAUSE community benefits are unclear, and this is  
 BECAUSE developmental benefits of programs are unclear, and this is  
 BECAUSE adolescent development is little understood

### **Strategic Observations**

It is important to begin this section by re-visiting and recredentialing the recommendations that emerged from the earlier round of research. Thus, it remains the case that those recommendations that are cited above are of critical importance in advancing support for youth and youth programs in Minnesota. From the elimination of the word “teenager” from our vocabularies to the inclusion of words and visuals that portray youth in team sports, group performing arts and volunteer activities, these thresh-hold framing elements must be in place in order to deflect the assumption that teenagers do not share the community’s values.

Building on these findings, however, we find a number of important new nuances that advance our understanding of how to talk about youth in Minnesota. The good news includes the fact that:

- We now know that people can understand adolescent development with the aid of the brain architecture simplifying model, as first developed by Cultural Logic for early child development and adapted to adolescence in the focus group research. This, then, is a critical new element in messaging.
- When Minnesotans understand youth development, they want to provide quality experiences. Exposed to messages about brain architecture and the environment of relationships that shape adolescent development, Minnesotans readily prioritized programs that build self-esteem, provide guidance at a critical, formative period, offer a training ground for young people to practice adulthood, etc. and makes these programs critically important to development, not nice “extras.”
- When parents are acknowledged, Minnesotans can recognize the important role that communities can play in shaping young people’s lives in a positive direction. While this directs that parents be included in the equation early in all messages, this must be done subtly in order to avoid triggering the deeply-held belief that parents are the only ones that matter. The importance of foregrounding community as the destination and ultimate beneficiary of positive youth development is an important outcome from this research.

- When programs are explained developmentally, Minnesotans want them to be widely available. There is a strong ethic of equality and opportunity that conveys to these programs once they are explained as critical to the successful integration of youth into the community. By demonstrating that programs are not available to all, such as to rural youth, or are being removed from the reach of youth whose parents cannot afford the high costs associated with these programs, people readily understand a public role and move beyond the idea that these are “babysitting programs for deficient parents.” Without these explanations, however, Minnesotans are left to fall back on these default stereotypes.
- When community is explained as the destination for youth, people can see the value of public investment. This requires, however, a clear demonstration of the exchange that is being made – we give to them now and they give back to their communities later, a quid pro quo that is critical to this outcome.

While these are useful new findings, it is critically important to put them into a broader context. For example, the fact that “brain architecture” helps us explain the importance of positive youth development doesn’t mean advocates can *substitute* it for a full explanation of what adolescents need and what youth development programs do. It is a valuable and useful tool if properly deployed. Similarly, understanding the limitations of talking about “time” and “place” should not send advocates hunting for another term. Rather, it should send them back to the core challenge of defining youth development programs.

One way to think about the broader message context is to map the core questions that any communications about adolescence must answer. Understanding why these questions arise and what instant defaults advocates incur when they don’t provide clear answers to people is an important prerequisite to reframing. While any particular communication may not answer these questions as literally as we do in the following section, it must nevertheless address these issues in some systematic and consistent over time. Indeed, practicing ways to address these core questions quickly and succinctly and sharing these answers across the field will do much to advance a refined communications platform. This is not just about getting the words right, but about getting the big ideas right, avoiding traps in language and reason that send people down the wrong conceptual path. In the FAQs that accompany this MessageMemo, we embed the answers to these questions in numerous examples. Our purpose here is not so much to develop message points as it to focus advocates’ attention on those aspects of the youth development literature that require their thoughtful consideration and translation.

*Q #1: Why is the community responsible for youth development?*

Here is an opportunity to examine the structure of thinking you are promoting before you answer. Consider where the current messaging leads people and how a different coherent message could promote broader collective responsibility:

<b>Old Frame: Adolescents</b>	<b>New Frame: Adolescents</b>
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Development = learning habits, values or skills	Development = community experiences, practice in taking on adult roles in society
Prime responsible party = parents or schools	Responsible party = Community plus parent
Benefits = self-mastery, achievement	Benefits = contribution, engagement
Ego-focused	Other-focused
Goal is individual fulfillment	Goal is maturity, mutuality, reciprocity
Development is about making choices between things to do with one's time	Development is about making and keeping commitments, taking on and sharing responsibility with others
Limited sphere for acquiring/imprinting skills	Multiple actors and opportunities
Obstacles are mental – determination, risks to be avoided, time to be filled	Obstacles are material - lost opportunities, brain connections
Responsible for my child	Responsible for community (all children)

In this schematic, community is a critical setting and source of experiences and guides for shaping the next generation of people who will become its citizens and stewards. Community is also the destination for realizing the promise of youth as they mature. Instead of “taking over where parents and schools leave off,” the community is seen as the third leg of the developmental stool and integral to the maturation process. It is important to recognize that “community” is defined here as society, with fewer negative connotations. We are not literally talking about a community, like Minneapolis, but rather the structure of communal activity. Because this is often a sensitive issue in an individualistic culture like our own, this is best described in terms of the civic sphere or the community, in order to differentiate from the predictable default of “government.” The goal of youth development, as Youniss and Yates (1997, p. 17) put it, “is to provide experiences that nurture the development of individuals who will give back not simply try to draw as much personal gain from society as present conditions will allow.”

*Q#2: What is adolescence and what do adolescents need?*

As Karen Pittman once famously argued, “We need to do a better job of saying what we mean and meaning what we say when we talk about youth development.” (Benson and Pittman, 2001, p. viii.) This is a problem observed across the materials submitted to FrameWorks for review. The process of adolescence is rarely defined in positive terms or as part of a coherent process. Rather, the risks that assail youth and their potential deficits are the focus of much of the material destined for the public. Youth appear to be defined either by strict chronological age or by the situational problems that assail them. Success, therefore, is getting through the process and avoiding disastrous outcomes. Advocates need to put forward a positive vision for what constitutes positive development, such as the one suggested in the Carnegie Commission’s Turning Points report (1989): “an intellectually reflective person, a person en route to a lifetime of meaningful work, a good citizen, a caring and ethical individual and a healthy person.”

This vision should include specific information on the special nature of adolescence – what parts of judgment and social identity are being connected in the brain. This is the advantage of the Brain Architecture Simplifying Model; it helps make this process tangible and material. But this doesn’t mean you can stop there. Advocates need to explain the causal connections between

experiences and enhanced engagement. They need to explain why we should not be surprised that service-learning programs show the strongest evidence of reducing teen pregnancy.

If ordinary citizens cannot grasp how youth development works, in the most rudimentary fashion, there is little hope that they will be able to distinguish good programs from bad, or understand why a safe place after school doesn't qualify as a stimulus. In this model, after school care becomes the successor to daycare – a babysitting service for children who, in the estimation of many citizens, have been selfishly abandoned by their parents. This is why defining youth development and making it real for people is one of the pre-requisites to successful advocacy for quality programs.

*Q #3: What constitutes age-appropriate development? What happens in these programs?*

In very few of the materials FrameWorks reviewed did we get a sense of the developmental transformation that is fostered by youth programs. Too often, the focus of the communication was on a single teen and his or her situation; s/he was protected from risk and had talents nurtured in a program with undefined characteristics and indefinite outcomes. This impression was driven home by the numerous cameo portraits of young people looking cute, serious, whimsical, etc. To borrow Harry Boyte's distinction, it is likely that people exposed to these publications understood these programs as being about "care," but not about "participation."

Given the wide array of programs that advocates promote under the banner of youth development programs – in school, out of school, summer, weekend, community, nonprofit, for-profit, informal, formal, etc. – advocates are going to have to settle on some commonalities, presumably the degree to which a program fosters development. This can only be done, of course, if Q#2 has been answered prior to this task. Once the focus on development is clear, the multitude of program designs and venues should serve as a strength, inoculating against Americans' distaste for one-size-fits-all solutions. Many kinds of settings can provide positive developmental opportunities for youth, but a core set of characteristics must be in place, such as an intentional program design, leaders trained to understand adolescence as a process, etc. This kind of discipline in defining what is truly developmental is necessary to distinguish the "anything goes" nature of some program materials, which tend to equate having a hotdog with one's uncle with participating in the school orchestra.

Put simply, you cannot inspire people to want more, better youth programs until they have a concrete image of what is being proposed. The paucity of vivid images associated with these programs requires that advocates move immediately to fix the topic in the public's imagination and to avoid defaulting to babysitting or remedial learning. What actually happens in a youth-led community symposium, or how does a senior-youth collaboration work? Advocates must develop these descriptions so that people understand the interaction between experiences and opportunities, on the one hand, and community and youth transformation, on the other. In sum, to drive home vividness, focus on the programs themselves and the way they transform communities and groups of youth in the process, and less on the individual youth and his or her circumstances.

*Q. # 4 What is the good parent in this context?*

Rules of interaction and relationship-building are inculcated first in the family, then in schools, and finally in the community. This represents a gradual widening of the horizons for testing one's abilities to get along and making a contribution. Good parents, then, "attempt to connect their children to the things they need." (Pittman, Irby and Ferber, 2001, p.34). By recognizing that children grow up in families but work and live in communities, we can begin to enlist parents in ensuring that opportunities are there for young people to try on and practice the adult roles that families have been preparing them for. "Optimal development occurs when families promote age-appropriate autonomy while maintaining strong family relationships" and, not surprisingly, when this happens, parental trust is enhanced, not diminished (Costello, Toles, Speilberger, and Wynn, 2001, p. 196). It will take work for advocates to carve out a role for parents that is not "hands off" or entirely missing from the radar screen, and not the fully responsible consumer ("tips for parents about adolescent development"). By using elders to speak to this critical process of maturation and belonging, of complementing the private self with a public self, advocates can use messengers as powerful allies in the message-delivery.

*What This Is About.* At the meta-level, what these findings suggest is that youth programs should be less about time to fill and places to go, and more about opportunities and settings that encourage and support positive youth development. There are three settings for development – the family, the school and the community. We don't fully use our resources to support youth when we ignore the quality of the interaction that takes place in parks, community centers, Boys and Girls Clubs, after-school programs, team sports, volunteering and arts programs. This is a vital third leg of the developmental stool needed to support youth.

There are consequences to ignoring these opportunities. Experts in youth development tell us that "adolescents test themselves through action and performance. The developmental process is thwarted...when youth cannot actually test themselves in a societal context that allows evaluation of their performance." (Youniss and Yates, 1997, p. 17) We know from a wide range of research on how young people mature that evenings, weekends, and summers "can be times of opportunity, risk or stagnation." (Pittman, Irby and Ferber, 2001, p.10). When young people are given opportunities to make community connections, they also make important connections in their brains, reinforcing their ability to collaborate in problem-solving, to make sound judgments, and to try on broader responsibilities.

Following this, youth programs should be less about individual youth and more about the community as a whole. They should be less about success and achievement and more about the decent, solid kids that all communities need to sustain themselves. While this scenario takes advantage of the dominant script of individuals on a life journey toward adulthood, it gets more people into the picture. It "fills in" the direction as being toward community, and exposes in great detail the developmental path necessary to get as many youth as possible through the process successfully. It exposes the connections they need to make in the community, the structures with which they come into contact, and their opportunities for successful integration. It examines these experiences to make sure that all these places are imbued with developmentally-appropriate cues and trained guides that can help young people enter the community. In this sense, youth development is seen as a critical aspect of community development.

*Audiences, Messengers and Allies.* It is in the light of this observation that we recognize the value of several findings from the research about messengers and target audiences. Both the cognitive elicitations and focus groups found enhanced understanding of community among minority Minnesotans. This is a powerful advantage that youth development advocates can build upon in these communities. And, while this finding is based on a limited sample, it is consistent with a wide array of social science research (Kagitcibasi, 1997; Munroe and Munroe, 1975). Second, both research venues found senior citizens to be highly receptive to conversations about youth and community. The advantage of seniors as messengers is both that they confer values to youth, and they reassure parents that it is OK to look to community for reinforcement in their child's transition to adulthood. Third, there is a critical role for scientists who study adolescent development to play in advancing the public's understanding of the physical and material changes that take place during these years and the way they are best met by communities in partnership with parents. "Programs that work" must be explained in the context of this developmental understanding.

Finally, the fact that out-of-school time and youth programs require a better understanding of adolescent development should be viewed as an opportunity, not a liability. It affords an important opportunity to make common cause with those promoting early child development and related programs. By explaining what happens at different stages of human development, advocates can make the case for age-appropriate programs, not "one size fits all." Every teachable moment about early child development should be a teachable moment about adolescent development, and visa versa. Brain architecture is the bridge; sensitive periods in human development are the focus. This is an opportunity to undo the damage done by the idea that kids achieve "success by six." Neither the early child movement nor those promoting positive programs for youth can make substantial progress without a better public grounding in the science of child development. This common ground should help to incite better and more integrated communications strategies.

### **Communications Recommendations**

In light of the earlier and contemporary research, FrameWorks wishes to advance the following recommendations for advancing the wide range of public policies and programs that experts and progressive advocates believe constitute an enlightened and effective investment in youth:

1. Don't use the word teenager, use young people or youth.
2. Remind people of adolescence as a developmental stage; use brain architecture to explain it as a biological and material process that which creates critical capacities. Young people need the right kinds of experiences and relationships in order to build the parts of the brain involved in setting priorities, weighing consequences, exercising judgment, avoiding risks, etc. But don't stop there; help people understand the documented positive impacts of meeting the developmental needs of young people. And do this by linking programs to developmental outcomes.
3. Don't explain the end-goal of adolescence as individual academic achievement or economic success; rather, talk about the community's need for solid, healthy, decent, productive, well-rounded young people who will be able to give back and sustain the

community.

4. Explain the interaction between young people and quality programs in developmental terms as developmental experiences. Help people see how youth development professionals and developmentally-appropriate programs guide youth toward making good judgments, and playing fulfilling roles in the community. Show young people in the community, interacting positively with other adults. Make these programs come alive for people. Do not, however, use individual life stories to exemplify the transformation.
5. Make explicit the status of such programs – underfunded, disappeared, too costly, unavailable in certain areas, etc. Make sure that people know that quality programs have been disappearing, or that old programs need to be updated to incorporate what we now know about adolescent development and what works to support it.
6. Get community actors in the picture early, from mentors and role models to youth program leaders. Explain their role as guiding young people toward the community, helping them move into the community and take up their roles as adults. Use photos that reinforce a broader context for youth development – young people with other adults and seniors in community settings. Visuals that convey values of teamwork, discipline and hard work – volunteering, team sports, and performing arts – continue to be useful.
7. Explain the role of programs as reinforcing parents. You might talk about community-parent partnerships that help kids develop into the kinds of people they, their families, and their communities would like them to be.
8. Explain the benefits to communities of providing these programs. By giving kids chances to interact with other adults and practice the roles they will take on in the community, we all win. Don't state this as a negative, i.e. by keeping kids off the streets or in good programs, crime will be reduced. This diverts their attention to the "bad teenager" stereotype and erodes their support for quality programs.
9. Use strong unlikely allies like seniors and scientists to, in the case of seniors, attest to the value of young people and to their need for community influences to welcome them into the community of adults and, in the case of scientists, explain the phase of adolescence and what contributes to a healthy outcome.
10. We have elevated the importance of the value of community as a result of the Minnesota research. The values of future and stewardship remain strong in reinforcing the responsibilities of adults and communities in playing an active role in supporting youth development; they need reinforcement, however, from other critical frame elements.

### **Examples of Messages that Overcome Conceptual Challenges**

This MessageMemo is accompanied by a full Toolkit of applications that attempt to demonstrate ways of tailoring materials to the research and recommendations. Additionally, framing techniques for supporting the message – such as social math and context – are further explained on this "Minnesotans Talk About Youth Issues" CD-Rom. We offer below three examples of how the conceptual hurdles associated with advancing youth programs can be overcome by deploying various combinations of the above recommendations strategically.

*Problem #1:* You must not supplant or ignore parents.

*Recommendation #1:* You have to acknowledge the role of parents and put community on their side. Try talking about community-parent partnerships and providing an explicit

role for parents as volunteers, mentors, etc. in programs.

*Example:* Community-parent partnerships help kids develop into the kinds of people they, their families, and their communities would like them to be. By giving kids chances to interact with other adults, and practice the roles they will take on in communities, we all win. The community reaps the benefits of solid, decent kids who grow up to give back. And parents get reinforcement at a time when young people are becoming more and more independent. Quality programs support parents in helping their children grow, support schools in preparing youth for the working world and support communities in encouraging active and responsible participation in civic life.

*Problem #2:* They believe the programs already are widely available. So what's the problem?

*Recommendation #2:* You must give them a reason to re-examine. This means showcasing both quantity and quality. Show the difference between trained and untrained programs.

*Example:* Important programs are not widely available, are being eliminated or are becoming too costly for parents (loss). Youth development programs need to be transformed to reflect what we now know about the architecture of the maturing brain, and the influence that communities can have in directing a young person at the time that they are becoming more and more independent of their family (transformation). Programs that help kids think before they act, build self-esteem and resilience to stress, practice teamwork and learn to put their own needs and desires in a larger perspective – these are programs that are built on a firm grounding in adolescent development. All youth programs need to offer these experiences. Doing that requires people trained in adolescent development, who understand the stage a young person's brain is going through and how to provide positive direction.

*Problem #3:* They are unclear about the goal of the programs. What is the desirable outcome that these programs address?

*Recommendation #3:* To garner support for quality programs, you must be able to explain adolescent development or they will default to crime, safety, babysitting, and bad parents. Use brain architecture and explain the sensitive and critical biological period in young people's wiring that comes with this phase of life. Do not confuse with success, learning or achievement. Also state benefits to society of solid, decent, well-rounded kids.

*Example:* Community connection reinforces healthy development which, in turn, builds community. When young people get involved in the community, they are shaped by those experiences. Scientists tell us that adolescence is another of the great building moments in the development of the brain's architecture. The parts of the brain that control judgment, foresee consequences and see complex interactions are all in play during this phase of growth. The opportunity to lead a discussion, to work with a group of seniors on a project, to mentor or be mentored in playing a musical instrument or performing in a play help make positive connections in the brain. These experiences literally build a

foundation in the brain that transforms a young person into an engaged member of our community. And our society, our quality of life, benefits from the programs that support that healthy development.

***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](http://www.frameworksinstitute.org).

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