



## Summary of Research on the Framing of Early Childhood Development in International Child Advocacy and Journalism

At the request of the Harvard Center on the Developing Child, the FrameWorks Institute, a nonprofit communications research think tank founded in 1999 to advance the communications capacity of the nonprofit sector, conducted a series of investigations into how international media and NGOs understand and explain early childhood development (ECD). Building on more than a decade of significant research on children's issues generally including child health, child poverty, child abuse and neglect, early childhood development, school readiness, education and child mental health, FrameWorks produced a series of reports based on the following studies:<sup>1</sup>

1. *A Map of Field Thinking*, based on in-depth interviews with 14 leaders in the international child advocacy community conducted and analyzed by cognitive anthropologists to identify consistent patterns in the way that field leaders conceptualize the problems, issues and solutions that contextualize their engagement in ECD issues.
2. *An Advocacy Field Report*, based on an analysis of 135 materials pulled from 11 leading NGOs to identify the dominant and alternative narratives supported by the field as these relate to ECD and children's issues.
3. *A Media Content Analysis*, reviewing the dominant and alternative narratives in use by U.S. and international media in covering children's issues and ECD, coding more than 365 newspaper/online articles and 237 broadcast news transcripts

from 11 media outlets commonly read and viewed by global decision makers from January 2010 – January 2011.

The prevailing research question uniting these studies was: to what extent and in what ways has the science of early childhood development been incorporated into arguments for child-focused international aid and resource allocation?

The strategic question that underlies this inquiry was: what are the benefits, opportunities and challenges in incorporating early childhood development more robustly into the communications of international NGOs?

## How Leaders in the Field View ECD

Despite the fact that they are diverse in many respects, leaders of the field of international development nevertheless share critical understandings and assumptions that guide the way they think about their own field of work, children's issues in general and early childhood development:

1. **Leaders share a *Hierarchy Of Needs* model, which underlies thinking about the science of ECD, and poses a major obstacle to valuing ECD, despite the evidence that ECD policies and programs support positive outcomes for children.** When thinking in this model, concerns comprising foundational levels of the hierarchy must be satisfied *before* issues on subsequent levels may be addressed. Issues pertaining to *child survival* constitute the base of the hierarchy and issues of child development represent some level above this foundation. Putting these spatial and content assumptions together, leaders assume that issues of child survival must be satisfactorily dealt with *before* work on child development can be prioritized. Thus, while leaders may acknowledge that ECD is important, they may not act upon this knowledge because of competing demands that are perceived as prerequisites to beginning serious work on ECD issues.
2. **Leaders of the field think of their work as “investments.”** Resources are perceived to be limited, so the goal of their allocation is to realize the largest return possible. Importantly, returns must be “visible” and “measurable,” must occur in relatively close temporal proximity to the investment made, and must be significant (i.e., be “larger” than the amount of the investment). The *Investment* model presents a particular challenge for translating the science of ECD, which emphasizes the *long-term* and diffuse trajectory of effects that begin in childhood.

3. **Leaders apply a *Zero Sum* model of discrete and competing sectors comprised of health, education and justice/rights in conceptualizing the field of international child advocacy.** As ECD does not comprise a sector, this assumption suggests that communications that talk directly about the importance of ECD and the need to fund ECD-based initiatives will not fit into the existing structure of the field. The sectors are perceived to be *discrete* and *siloed*.
4. **Leaders perceive a set of core *systemic* factors — including education, the economy and the health infrastructure — as having consistent wide-ranging and diverse effects on child outcomes.** This *Branching-Effect* model of causality structured an understanding that differentiated between symptoms and “root causes,” with the best investments in child outcomes addressing the latter. Core issues were, therefore, systemic by definition, and ECD was seen as one of the factors (albeit in a nebulous causal story) affected by these systemic contexts.
5. **Leaders understand ECD as being part of everything, but nothing on its own.** In other words, ECD is seen as being part of all the field’s sectors but, at the same time, not being its own stand-alone concept. The acknowledgement of its shared centrality may facilitate the embedding of ECD in other topical areas — a tactical strategy that avoids running up against the *Zero Sum* model mentioned above.
6. **Leaders are not fully fluent in communicating the *process of development*, including key science tenets.** Once the conversation went beyond “early matters,” “supportive relationships are key” and “having a big payoff down the line,” the science of ECD dropped out and was largely inaccessible. Relatedly, many informants thought about ECD as a “natural” process that “just happens.” This assumption supported views that development occurs optimally when interventions secure the basic safety of a child, and then stand back to let development “run its course.” In addition, the assumed “naturalness” of the process allows leaders to disengage from thinking actively about how development *happens*.
7. **Leaders see physical growth and health as the “what” that develops during development.** This explains the dominant focus among our informants on nutritional programs as the silver bullet intervention. It also demonstrates the importance of developing appreciation for ECD as a *process* separate and apart from either health or education, but one that serves as the foundation for both of these domains.

8. **Leaders tend to take a deterministic approach to development.** Once the process of development has been perturbed in some way, they said, there is nothing that can be done. A well-documented assumption in past FrameWorks research, this *Damage Done is Damage Done* model offers communicators an opportunity to introduce the science of neuroplasticity and to demonstrate how interventions that are grounded in developmental science *can* change the developmental trajectory.
9. **Leaders see assuring positive development as relying most centrally on protecting and finding ways to insulate children from their surrounding environments.** This assumption creates an understanding of the relationship between children and contexts that makes it hard to see attempts to encourage *positive* interactions between children and their environments as effective interventions. This, in turn, sets up the nuclear family as protector in opposition to everyone/everything else as the locus of threat. From a developmental perspective, this way of thinking limits the range of supportive experiences and contexts that come to mind, and solidifies the *Hierarchy Of Needs* model described above.
10. **Leaders predominantly employ the *Family Bubble* model of development.** ECD is also seen as the narrow provenance of the family. At times, this assumption crowded out other factors of importance and led to relatively narrow views of determinants and outcomes, especially in comparison with some of the more general, systemic models of causation described above.
11. **Leaders' tendency to focus on the *nuclear family* limits broader definitions of responsibility and recruitment of additional adult actors in child rearing.** Even when informants knew that there were other actors and factors engaged, there was a tendency to assume a two-parent household as the norm and to evaluate that child's risk in light of threats to that model. This common mental model of "family" may be problematic in light of the fact that many of the contexts in which the science of development will likely be applied are not characterized by familial structures that approximate this mental model.
12. **Leaders employ a *Children Are People Too* model, which may run counter to a developmental perspective.** This perspective, closely associated with a rights orientation, may make some of the key science messages — about critical developmental periods, for instance, or the importance of developmentally appropriate interventions — difficult to incorporate into existing perspectives. While this idea is most commonly framed in terms of rights, it is also inherent in a

common narrative used in NGO materials that equates child developmental success with long-term national viability; these two approaches — one moral, one pragmatic — represent important framing choices that have profound implications for ECD. In the former, ECD is less relevant as children are automatically “aged up” by the discourse, while the latter allows for a more robust discussion of the staging of development with long-term consequences.

## How International NGOs Frame ECD

In terms of general communication patterns on children’s issues, we found that advocates:

- Mention a plurality of children’s issues in their materials without an overarching value — leaving the public without a clear understanding of how any these issues are interrelated or why they are important.
- Prefer to use the generic term “children,” rather than specify certain age groups — making the science of development, with its focus on windows of opportunity and the importance of a developmentally relative approach to intervention, difficult to integrate.
- Frequently cite organizational representatives as messengers in their materials — leaving out researchers as a way of bringing the science of ECD into this arena.
- Rarely explain how the formation of brain architecture and early biological development take place, making it hard for the public, media, and policymakers to appreciate the underlying mechanisms that are essential to creating support for ECD policies.
- Focus on conditions that negatively affect children’s *immediate* state of well-being — leaving out important understandings about positive development and long term effects.
- Discuss child development and ECD primarily in the context of school readiness, expanding educational access and increasing literacy rates — framing the issue of child development as one that is narrowly about education and excludes the wide-ranging impacts of developmental processes in such other domains as health.
- Rely on two “norm entrepreneur” organizations for the majority of ECD information — making the communications employed by these two organizations of central importance to reframing the issue of ECD in media.

## How the Media Frame International Children's Issues and ECD

1. **American media discusses children in greater depth than non U.S.-based media. Furthermore, most media stories that discuss children's issues, even those from international sources, focus on children in the United States.** This study included four U.S.-based news sources known for their international focus and importance to global policy and advocacy groups (CNN, *The New York Times*, *Foreign Affairs* and *The Wall Street Journal*). The data indicate that these news sources discuss children more extensively than the non U.S.-based media in this sample. In addition, while it is expected that American-based media refers more often to stories about children that take place in the United States, the data also reveal that even non-American news sources refer to U.S. children more often than children based in other regions. By focusing on issues related primarily to children in the United States, the media reinforces an American-centric focus on children that precludes public attention to children in other regions and the specific factors that impact early childhood development in those regions.
2. **In discussing children's issues, the media predominantly uses the generic term "children" and does not focus on distinctions based on sex, race or socio-economic standing.** By presenting children as one undifferentiated, homogenous group, the media creates a concept of "child" that makes it difficult to see the importance that developmental differences play in relation to children's issues in this coverage. In only 12 percent of the media stories do reporters refer specifically to young children (ages 0 to 5). This increases the likelihood of "aging up" children among the reading audience — that is, the tendency to think about "children" using a mental model most typically represented by older children and young adolescents.
3. **The "family bubble" frame is dominant in media discussions of children's issues.** By framing discussions of children as *parental* and *familial* issues, the media communicates that children's issues are of concern to immediate families, but not necessarily to society at large. This, in turn, renders discussion of *public policies* aimed at addressing children's issues difficult to consider.
4. **The media also commonly uses the "imperiled child"<sup>2</sup> frame in discussions of children's issues.** When they *are* discussed in terms of larger societal concerns, children are presented as vulnerable to external circumstances over which they lack control and agency. Portraying children as victims of crimes, abuse and violence encourages decision-makers to support measures designed to

protect and safeguard children, rather than, for example, programs that build children’s developmental capacities and resilience.<sup>3</sup>

5. **The media’s use of an episodic storytelling style and a crisis tone reinforces the effects of the “family bubble” and “imperiled child” frames.** The media tends to treat children’s issues as singular, isolated events rather than as ongoing trends of larger concern (73 percent) and to adopt a crisis tone (37 percent). The effect of this double whammy is to reinforce the notion that children’s issues are intractable and unlikely to improve as a result of public policies.
6. **Media coverage of children’s issues rarely discusses early childhood development.** In only a small percentage of media stories (2 percent), is there any discussion of children from a developmental perspective. While an in-depth focus on child development was relatively infrequent, brief mentions of ECD programs or research were found in 11 percent of the media stories in the sample. This means that the media is more likely to address early childhood development in relation to other children’s issues or in a superficial way, rather than as a focal point in the story.<sup>4</sup>
7. **Parents, researchers, non-profit organization representatives and government officials are the most frequently cited messengers on children’s issues.** In addition to these four, eight other types of messengers regularly provide expert opinion on children’s issues in the media. This cacophony of agents creates the notion that almost everyone is an expert on children’s issues and, consequently, that there are no *real* experts. However, the presence of researchers as messengers indicates that there is a space in the international media for members of the scientific community to weigh in as important spokespeople on children’s issues.

## Conclusion

The science of early childhood development remains relatively invisible in media and international communications. The challenge of increasing its visibility is compounded by a monolithic approach to “the child” that obscures distinctions among sensitive periods and age-appropriate development. Because the science of ECD is sorely lacking in this arena, it is unable to permeate those issues that do receive more in-depth treatment, such as education, health, economic viability and civic engagement — issues that would benefit and likely garner greater support from a developmental perspective. The tone and format of

media coverage further undermine public understanding of the importance and viability of early interventions that focus on developmental processes. A small number of issue entrepreneurs are responsible for challenging this discourse. They stand to be met not so much by overt resistance to their message but by understandings like the *Hierarchy Of Needs* model or powerful senses of determinism that undermine the salience of ECD as an issue. This is regrettable, as a deepening appreciation for the science of ECD is a powerful tool in strengthening public support for the topical issues that are currently supported by international NGOs.

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<sup>1</sup> Reports from each of these studies are available from FrameWorks and the Harvard Center on the Developing Child.

<sup>2</sup> <http://www.frameworksinstitute.org/ezone22.html>

<sup>3</sup> <http://www.frameworksinstitute.org/ezone22.html>

<sup>4</sup> In FrameWorks Institute related research, entitled *Where is Early Childhood Development on the International Child Advocacy Agenda?*, we also found that child advocacy organizations mention ECD more often in conjunction with other children's issues. Those issues include education, health and violence.