



Early Childhood Development Meets Budgets & Taxes, featuring **SWAMPED!** A MessageBrief

Fiscal policy should be understood as every progressive issue advocate’s “second” issue. While early childhood development (ECD) advocates focus on specific policy objectives – from public investment in professional training, and retention of a high-quality early child workforce to increasing links between early intervention services – all depend on the successful negotiation of the state and federal budget process. When frames about ECD meet up with talk about budgets and taxes, bad things lurk in the “swamp” of public thinking. With funding from the John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation, the FrameWorks Institute created a game environment, called *SWAMPED!*, to allow you to navigate the swamp of public thinking for both ECD and budgets and taxes, and where you must frame effectively to survive! When you play *SWAMPED!*, you first take a tour of the swamp, using FrameWorks’ research to illuminate the traps and holes you will encounter in communicating these two issues. Then, your framing abilities are tested as you move around the obstacles in public thinking. Use FrameWorks’ proven framing strategies as you navigate the swamp.

As an additional resource, this Message Brief succinctly reviews and summarizes findings from FrameWorks’ research on both budgets and taxes and early childhood development. In particular, it serves to remind players of *SWAMPED!* the key *Do’s* and *Don’ts* for improving the public’s understanding of the linked topics of budgets and taxes in ECD reform, and for shifting support for ECD policy alternatives.

The “swamp” of public thinking about Early Childhood Development and Budgets & Taxes

In the “swamp,” there are three dominant cultural models that overlap between the two issues, creating toxic combos. These are the cognitive places where your communications are likely to break down because of the negative synergy between the two issues. Take a quick tour of each area of the swamp to learn how the issues combine to create obstacles to your mission. Each area includes advice to help you navigate these obstacles.

LITTLE PICTURE THINKING

Americans’ knowledge of both ECD and the budgets and tax system is limited. Americans tend to rely on their personal knowledge about childcare and to focus narrowly on children and parents, and occasionally providers (as “babysitters”). People also fail to associate public budgets

with taxes and budgeting goals. These “little picture” tendencies can be thought of as toxic combos, reinforcing each other at the cross-section of these two issues:

Early Childhood Development	Budgets and Taxes
People default to parents and children as the only key actors in early childhood development.	People default to household budgets to understand public budgets.
People discount the value of pre-school and believe “real” learning only happens in grades K-12 by “real” teachers.	People think about budgets in terms of meeting immediate needs and short-term goals.
People believe that early child development takes place primarily in the home and excludes the surrounding community.	People believe that public budgets only have an impact on their immediate surroundings rather than on society at large.
The relationship between experiences and environments that affect early child development are poorly understood.	The relationship between taxes and what they provide (budgets) is poorly understood.

HERE’S WHAT TO DO TO AVOID LITTLE PICTURE THINKING:

- 1. Discuss early childhood development using the values of “Prosperity” and “Ingenuity” and budgets with the value of “Prevention.”** “Prosperity” helps people understand that the prosperity of any society depends on its ability to foster the health and wellbeing of the next generation, while “Ingenuity” emphasizes our capacity to be innovative when developing solutions to our major social problems. Public budgets can be used to ensure a prosperous future – by funding early child development initiatives today, we prevent future problems before they occur. Together, all three values make the goal a collective one – it’s about our country – not an individual outcome.
- 2. Explain what child development is and how it develops, and the role of budgets & taxes in promoting it, using the metaphors of “Brain Architecture” and “Forward Exchange.”** The metaphor of “Brain Architecture,” which likens brain development to building a house, helps people imagine that brains are, in fact, built and that environments and experiences can either promote or derail development. The simplifying model of “Forward Exchange” helps people see how public goods and services are distributed in time, and how taxes make them possible. Talk about how we pay taxes forward, so we can have the goods we will need in the future, just as we benefit from those that were paid in the past to meet community needs now, such as child social programs and community-based services.

DON'T:

- 1. Don't call attention to the "family bubble" of parents and children when talking about early childhood development.** This cue inspires "little picture thinking" and obscures the societal benefits of ECD policies. Don't focus on parents or primary caregivers as this ignores the larger system of social supports and relationships families rely on as resources when raising healthy children.
- 2. Don't compare public budgets to household budgets.** The analogy of household budgets = public budgets evokes little picture standards of individual discipline and sacrifice that don't align with the value of "Prevention" and metaphor of "Forward Exchange."
- 3. Don't lead with traditional government frames or discuss taxes before or without budgets.** If you invoke government without framing it, people will be left with negative notions of vast bureaucracy, waste and corruption. Also, discussing taxes before or without budgets will feed into the conclusion that taxes are little more than the unfair takings of greedy politicians, not a means to a public end, such as funding our priorities for the future.

INDIVIDUALISM

Americans think about many social issues in distinctly individualized, consumerist ways. For early childhood development and budgets and taxes, Americans believe that "you should get out of the system no less than what you put in." People are wary of free riders that don't pay their fair share and take more from budgets and social services than they deserve. FrameWorks research shows that unfortunately, early childhood development as a *collective* investment is not on people's radar. These "individualist" tendencies are described below:

Early Childhood Development	Budgets and Taxes
People think children who fall behind can catch up in K-12, with determination.	People think government should work like a vending machine: you should get back what you pay in.
Blame for failure falls to parents who are not engaged with their children. "Giving" them ECD is rewarding bad behavior.	Blame for failures falls to government wastrels who lack the discipline and restraint of responsible individuals who must manage personal budgets.

People think in zero-sum ways, which leads them to oppose policies that seem to benefit parents that make poor choices at the cost of others who are “doing the right things.”	People think in zero-sum ways about budgets and taxes, which pits people who pay more against those who pay less.
People lack an understanding of early child development, assuming that a child’s development is automatic and deterministic (a self-made child).	People lack an understanding of the broader societal infrastructures that budgets and taxes support and provide to communities.

HERE’S WHAT TO DO TO AVOID INDIVIDUALIST THINKING:

- 1. Discuss early childhood development using the value of “Ingenuity” and budgets & taxes with the value of “Prevention.”** Values of “Ingenuity” and “Prevention” help people shift their individualist thinking toward the American ideal that we can be creative in finding ways to achieve society’s shared goals. Remember to be explicit that this is about our country, not just about individuals or parental choice.
- 2. Discuss brain plasticity using the metaphor “Serve and Return.”** The metaphor of “Serve and Return” helps people understand that child development is not static but influenced by the interaction between genes and experience, which shape the architecture of the developing brain. Thus, “Serve and Return” points to the nature of children’s engagement in relationships with parents, caregivers, and members of the community. This helps people to look at early childhood development as a system comprised of many actors.
- 3. Discuss the importance of addressing issues in development now as opposed to fixing them later through “Pay Now or Pay Later.”** Use the principle of “Pay Now or Pay Later” to emphasize the importance of making the long-term investment in early child development and how “getting it right early” is less costly to society and individuals than trying to fix it later. This de-emphasizes individual responsibility and competition that often undercut the efficacy of early childhood development policies and highlights how budgets and tax systems can help fund them. Preparing for our country’s future requires us to ensure that we attend to issues that support childhood development early on before they get worse.

DON’T:

- 1. Don’t reinforce consumerist thinking.** Encouraging people to consider what they’re getting in exchange for what they’re putting in makes people feel short-changed by government or individuals (i.e., parents) that are perceived to make poor choices and take advantage of our tax and childcare systems.

2. **Don't reinforce the notion that early child development is the responsibility of parents or children.** When advocates talk about the role of parents and/or caretakers in terms of early childhood development, they overlook what is at stake for society in having an integrated network of supports—i.e., nonprofits, early childhood teachers, community- and faith-based organizations—to help strengthen and educate entire families, and put policies in place to make the system work better for everyone.
3. **Don't talk about budgets and taxes as investments.** When people associate taxes with investments, they tend to focus on the risks associated with investing and the fact that investments are made through individual choices.
4. **Don't talk about early child development in terms of eliminating “the achievement gap” linked to family economic status.** When advocates use the metaphor of a “gap,” it tends to trigger zero-sum thinking, or the notion that any benefit enjoyed by someone else will be made at their expense.
5. **Don't talk about fairness as a goal for tax reform.** When fairness is evoked, it leads people to think the easiest and most available way to make taxes “fair” is having everyone pay the same amount (e.g., a flat tax).

CRISIS THINKING

Many Americans think our budget and tax systems are broken beyond repair. They also believe that our K-12 education system is in crisis, so funding another tier to the overall system (i.e., early childhood education) is premature until the “main” system is fixed. While one might expect these sentiments to fuel support for reform and policy, it doesn't help people see solutions to these problems. People grow overwhelmed, disengage entirely or default to little picture thinking. They fear innovation and transformation.

Here are the framing challenges associated with crisis thinking:

Early Childhood Development	Budgets and Taxes
People believe that schools are broken, so adding another imperative (i.e., early childhood education) will overwhelm them.	People believe that government is wasteful by definition, so funding it would be counterproductive.
People fear that new approaches to learning may neglect the “basics” that they believe to be necessary for developing skills and ability.	People think cutting spending and making painful choices are the best ways to fix budget crises.

There is no scalable reform that fits the size of the “crisis” in parenting; so, ECD programs are “a drop in the bucket.”	People lack a past or future context for the use of tax dollars and the budgets they fund; so any action is perceived as a “drop in the bucket.”
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The challenges of crisis thinking can be addressed by combining FrameWorks’ messaging strategies for both early childhood development and budgets & taxes, leaving us with several do’s and don’ts:

HERE’S WHAT TO DO TO AVOID CRISIS THINKING:

1. **Make clear the budget priorities and societal goals for early childhood development using “Prosperity” and “Prevention” values, and “Brain Architecture” and “Serve and Return” metaphors.** Use of the values “Prosperity” and “Prevention” will remind people of the broader societal goals that underlie the process of reform for both budgets and taxes and childhood development. Also, use of “Brain Architecture” (akin to building a house) and “Serve and Return” metaphors (akin to the volley exchange in a game of tennis) helps people understand how the developing brain works – what development is and how brains have plasticity. With adequate funding from our tax resources, practical results are possible when there is an integrated system of care that supports children and their families.
2. **Use social math to put the plan in context.** Without effective use of social math (or contextualization by analogy), numbers often seem arbitrary to the public, or worse, make people anxious about the size and scope of the reform. Presenting numbers in a way that gives people perspective helps to avoid these pitfalls.
3. **Explain budgets through “Pay Now or Pay More Later.”** The “Pay Now or Pay More Later” frame is effective at articulating a need for long-term budget decisions and shifting conversations away from both individualistic and short-term conversations.
4. **Talk about “the basics” PLUS innovative skills.** Use the value of “Innovation” to talk about what children will need as they grow and, ultimately, join the workforce in the 21st century—both basic skills and newer skills. These can be bolstered through the positive exchange relationship young children have with members of their family, providers, and community that minimizes the long-term effects of toxic stress.

DON’T:

1. **Don’t embrace crisis thinking.** “Crisis” frames play to familiar assumptions about children from poor and disenfranchised communities and the widely accepted condemnation of American government. “Crisis fatigue,” a kind of mental weariness that arises from exposure to the daily news drumbeat of societal crises, soon takes hold.
2. **Don’t assume you can talk about child development as a foundation for community and economic development without first framing the issue.** When people think about

early child development without aid of additional framing, they focus on childcare as “babysitting for working mothers” and have trouble seeing the value of making long-term investments in child development that benefit all segments of society.

3. **Don’t assume that more money will be appreciated as equating to innovation.** When people reason about the need for additional early child development programs or professional training for early childhood providers, without helpful framing, they are skeptical that more money will actually reduce crime, improve teacher quality, and advance children’s outcomes.
4. **Don’t frame the discussion in utopian or idealistic terms.** When people are confronted with what they consider to be impractical goals, they first consider the ideal and then they compare it to their impressions of how things really work. The perceived distance between the two drives people to see the problem as too big to resolve. This shuts down thinking about solutions.

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