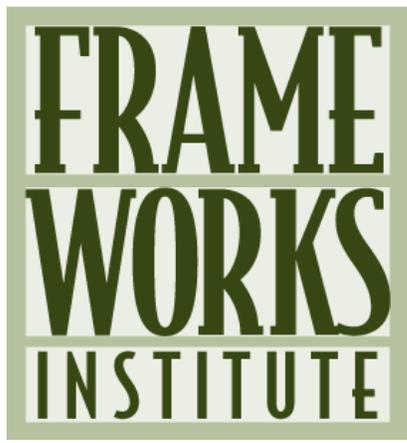




# Speaking a Common Language



Building a Community of Effective Early  
Biological and Brain Development  
Framers in Alberta, Canada

A FRAMEWORKS EVALUATION BRIEF

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## 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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## INTRODUCTION

Over the past several decades, there has been growing interest in both the United States and Canada in increasing public investment and support for programs and services that address the developmental needs of children. In Alberta, Canada, the public sector plays a leading role in shaping child welfare programs – and, as such, proposals to spur public investment and support must include effective and explicit appeals to policymakers.

The voices of Alberta’s child development experts, child advocates, practitioners, and nonprofit and philanthropic leaders are central in making these appeals. In recent years, many of these stakeholders have expressed an interest in increasing their capacity for effectively communicating about early child development and in developing a common messaging strategy for doing so. The emerging science of early brain and biological development – which has broad implications for public policy and strong potential for expanding public support – provides an especially opportune area for capacity-building in public interest communications. The science is solid, and the desire to communicate it is strong. The challenge is to develop and implement communications strategies that can introduce the public to the considerable evidence base around the benefits of early child interventions, while maintaining fidelity to the emergent science.

This challenge is not unique to Alberta, nor to the issues related to early child development. It is often the case that policy experts, nonprofit and government leaders, practitioners, and advocates struggle with how to communicate scientific findings in ways that are at once accurate, accessible and actionable from a public-policy point of view. Too often, there is an evidence base in terms of the scientific issue, but a lack of an evidence base in terms of a communication strategy. The FrameWorks Institute addresses this gap, in part by methodically investigating how the public already thinks about a scientific concept with public policy implications, and then developing and testing communications strategies that take existing public thinking into account. Strategizing about a communications approach requires (at the very least) an understanding of: (1) how existing frames trigger particular patterns of thinking, (2) whether those patterns are useful for advancing public policy goals, and (3) how alternative frames might serve up a wider range of opportunities to advance public support for effective early child development programs<sup>1</sup>.

For over ten years, the FrameWorks Institute has conducted extensive research in the United States on how to reframe the national conversation about early child development. This work resulted in a Core Story of Early Child Development, which is used extensively in the U.S. by groups who want to broaden the public discourse around children's development and who want to communicate the value-added of public support for such issues<sup>2</sup>.

In 2009, with support from the Alberta Family Wellness Initiative, FrameWorks expanded its focus to Canada with an ambitious research agenda to validate and modify the Core Story for its applicability to the province of Alberta. More specifically, FrameWorks conducted new research (using studies conducted in the U.S. as an initial base) to understand the unique patterns of thinking among Albertans that structure their thinking about early brain development and, relatedly, child mental health<sup>3</sup>. In doing so, FrameWorks validated the initial findings cross-culturally, and also added substantial depth and nuance to those findings through analyzing the substantive similarities and subtle differences between U.S. and Canadian thinking.

## **THE COMMUNICATION CHALLENGES**

FrameWorks' research on Canadians' thinking about early brain development revealed some significant communication challenges embedded in the public discourse on child development and child mental health. For example, whereas experts view child development as a series of complex stages, each with predictable and important developmental milestones, the average citizen had only a vague appreciation for child development as a process. Likewise, members of the public had more vivid understandings of mental *illness* than they did of mental *health*, and therefore struggled to conceptualize how public interventions might encourage mental health and well-being. Another pervasive way of thinking about children's issues was to focus on individual children rather than the ecologies around them.

These research findings about public thinking have important implications for public interest communications about children's issues. They predict that, at best, the usual strategies for explaining the value of child development programs and services will be out of sync with public thinking on these issues and therefore have little effect. In the worst case scenario, experts' and advocates' ways of presenting the issues might actually call up attitudes and beliefs that place more responsibility on the very families that their initiatives are meant to help. The overall point is that, without knowing how the public thinks about child development and where

predictable miscommunication might occur, policy experts' and advocates' communications can easily do more harm than good.<sup>4</sup>

## **PREPARING A COMMUNITY TO APPLY THE RESEARCH**

While this research was being conducted, FrameWorks began to familiarize Alberta's influential stakeholders with Strategic Frame Analysis™, a communications approach well-suited to equip the community's thought-leaders to more effectively share the science of early brain and biological development with the public. To accomplish this goal, the Institute facilitated two six-month-long Study Circles to teach diverse groups of experts, advocates, practitioners and policymakers in Alberta about the principles of Strategic Frame Analysis™ and how those principles could be used to catalyze a new public discourse about children's development. The Study Circles brought together about 40 people working across 20 organizations and from a wide cross-section of the Alberta province (including Calgary, Edmonton and Lethbridge). Participants were recruited by the Norlien Foundation. Selection criteria were established to limit participation to advocates with senior leadership experience and/or communications expertise. As a result, most participants held advanced or terminal graduate degrees, had worked in their sectors for five years or more, and were distinguished in their spheres of influence as thought-leaders.

In addition to the learning activities embedded in the Study Circles, there were two other initiatives designed to increase the influential stakeholders' collective capacity to foster greater public understanding of early brain development and its implications for sound public policy. First, there was a set of scholarly symposia – sponsored by the Norlien Foundation – that focused on the science of early brain and biological development. Most participants of the Study Circles were in attendance. Second, FrameWorks conducted spokesperson trainings, providing active practice and professional feedback in oral communications techniques. Again, participation in the spokesperson trainings overlapped substantially with Study Circle participation.

Overall, these outreach and training initiatives brought together a substantial number of influential community leaders with the potential to shape public discourse on early childhood development. Through three distinct, but related, training approaches, experts and advocates were afforded opportunities to build their framing fluency over time.

## **IDENTIFYING EXISTING COMMUNICATION HABITS OF THE FIELD**

To begin the process of helping influential community voices navigate public thinking more effectively, FrameWorks reviewed the communications materials in use by Study Circle participants, with an eye toward identifying how and when the messages fell into communication “traps.” Traps are common — and eminently plausible — ways of framing an issue that, upon investigation, fail to achieve the desired effect, or even turn out to do more harm than good. Traps are often habits of a field and, as such, can be difficult to notice and even harder to avoid. Once the field’s traps are identified, they provide the basis for concrete recommendations about how to avoid those triggers and improve the impact of messaging.

In the case of the Study Circles in Alberta’s early childhood advocacy community, FrameWorks’ materials review identified several principal challenges that informed the development of an intense and focused reframing curriculum.

- First, the materials submitted by the participants showed a “fact-based” approach to presenting the case for greater public support for child development programs. The telltale sign of this approach was a plethora of statistics, trend data and graphics attempting to explain why an issue was worthy of a broader base of public support. Facts are clearly important as part of an emerging story about science, but FrameWorks’ research has also found that uninterpreted facts (especially in the form of numerical data) are not likely to be helpful in lifting public support. FrameWorks suggests using fewer numbers and, instead, setting up a broader frame to orient thinking and convey its meaning, followed by an embedding of social math (or well-framed statistics and data) to give a sense of the magnitude and scope of the problem.
- Second, while participants’ materials almost always identified programs, interventions and policies that support child development, these descriptions of effective solutions tended to come so late in the messaging (typically after long descriptions of the problem) that they could easily have been missed. FrameWorks’ research has shown that lingering too long on the problems, without bringing the solutions into the picture early on, can distract policymakers and public audiences from the advocates’ examples of proven or proposed solutions.

- Third, although FrameWorks’ cultural models analysis showed that the Albertan public is much more primed to think about communities and ecologies around children than American audiences<sup>5</sup>, it was clear from the materials submitted as part of the Study Circles that the context of community was often missing, or myopically focused. Participants often struggled to consistently emphasize broader ecological contexts, backgrounding or omitting information about how environments shape both children’s development and the ability of parents to parent. FrameWorks’ research has shown that when there is an emphasis on parents creating environments, the public is more likely to default to children’s poor development as being a result of “bad parents.” Helping participants “widen the lens” was a goal that FrameWorks identified as critical for this group.
- Fourth, because of the invisibility of the ecologies around children and families, materials tended to suffer from two other communications missteps: (1) episodic messaging focused on individuals, and (2) visuals that re-emphasized individuals outside of context. Participants’ materials too rarely highlighted the thematic, or “systems,” elements in stories about populations they served. FrameWorks’ research suggests that episodic framing makes it difficult for the public to understand the call-to-action on policy issues or how policy reforms might help. Similarly, photographs in participants’ materials often (though not always) relied on iconic, familiar images to signal “children” or “mothers” incorporated into the accompanying text. FrameWorks’ research has shown that close-up photos do not automatically lead the public to consider context and policy solutions. In fact, they carry the risk of easily triggering key dominant cultural models that communicators are trying to avoid.
- Fifth, many of the pieces submitted needed values propositions and metaphors to explain complex scientific ideas about child development. In FrameWorks’ approach, values are the ideals that provide the organizing principles on the basis of which people reach decisions – so a value proposition in the messaging is critical. In addition to a value, almost all of the materials would have benefited from the inclusion of FrameWorks’ explanatory metaphors, especially the newer metaphor of *Levelness* to discuss children’s mental health and why the policies and programs experts advocate are likely to be effective.

- Finally, FrameWorks’ research suggests that, while Albertans fully accept the role of government in creating greater opportunities for child development programs, there is also room to advance public understanding of how to assess such programs. Albertans tended to understand needs around interventions as an issue of quantity (i.e., Alberta needs to increase access to programs for children, especially those related to mental health), rather than one of quality (i.e., Alberta needs to retool programs offered for children in light of a developmental, emerging brain science perspective). This is a nuanced distinction, and participants needed some help navigating this fine line in their messaging.

*“[The primary challenge is] conveying our message in a clear, concise manner that cuts through the conflicting messages, political noise, and emotional nature of health care discourse.”*

—Study Circle Participant

## **THE REFRAMING SOLUTION**

As participants built the ability to discern when messages were headed toward a predictable communication trap, they became eager to learn about more productive alternatives. The learning activities in both Study Circles focused largely on helping participants understand how frame elements could be marshaled to address these issues. Participants were encouraged to use these frame elements to redesign their own messaging and, in doing so, to reframe the public conversation in Alberta.

Study Circle participants met with FrameWorks faculty in a wide variety of contexts (e.g., in-person workshops, webinars, conference calls and Symposia sessions) to better understand how they could integrate strategic framing principles and the communications research on early child development and mental health into their materials. As part of those sessions, participants were offered strategies to address common communications challenges, as well as a greater explanation of the science of cognition and communications that undergirds the development of FrameWorks’ research methods.

FrameWorks faculty spent a great deal of time ensuring that participants could apply the key aspects of the Core Story of Early Child Development for Albertans. In FrameWorks’ approach, a “core story” is a narrative organization of essential expert ideas about a topic, presented through relevant frame elements — especially

values, metaphors and principles – which are sufficiently memorable to be picked up in public discourse, and which have been tested to ensure that they lead audiences toward a deeper appreciation for, and support of, effective programs and policies. The benefit of a fully framed core story is that it provides a consistent, narrative backbone for a wide variety of public interest communications – including press requests for information, speeches, working papers, reports and other materials. (See the final page of this case study for a full enumeration of the Albertan core story.) The Albertan core story begins with a set of empirically validated values, which are used in messaging to orient the conversation toward why early childhood matters, and is then elaborated through explanatory metaphors which clarify key scientific concepts related to child development.

Each session of both Study Circles focused on one or more of the concepts in the Core Story, and offered participants a chance to explore the research supporting each frame element and then practice integrating the elements into their messaging materials. Participants learned that the values of *Interdependence* and *Ingenuity* are effective in orienting public discourse on early child development and policy reform. For Albertans, the value of *Interdependence* triggered the pre-existing cultural notion of interconnectedness and emphasized the ways in which a successful society is created from the participation and contributions of all its members. *Ingenuity*, for its part, evoked the ideal that Albertans are able to invent and replicate high-quality programs for young children, and can solve problems in early childhood development and show significant long-term improvements for all children across the province. These values set the stage for the explanatory metaphors of *Brain Architecture*, *Levelness*, *Serve And Return*, and *Toxic Stress*.<sup>6</sup> Participants learned to use these easily grasped translations of scientific concepts to fill-in gaps in the public’s understanding, especially in communicating about the importance of brain development, brain plasticity and the role of environment.

As an illustration of how the Strategic Frame Analysis™ approach influenced participants’ communication practices, here is a “before” and “after” snapshot of one participant using the *Interdependence* value to reorient a press statement that

### **A Before Snapshot**

Our programs improve supports and early intervention for at-risk children, many of whom are not easily distinguishable from the general population, to improve their learning outcomes.

her organization released in support of a child development program.

### **An After Snapshot**

Ensuring children's healthy development through these programs is critical because what affects one part of Alberta affects us all. When we give greater support to our children, we all thrive. Because early experiences are critical to developing good brain architecture and a sturdy foundation for all of the learning development that follows, these programs support children's development in ways that are good for us all.

While the "after" snapshot is a bit longer, it allows for a brief articulation of a values proposition so that a shared sense of what is at stake in this issue comes to life. This "after" snapshot also provides a reference to the explanatory metaphor *Brain Architecture*, which provides a mental model for structural thinking about brain development and plasticity. Finally, it gives a much better sense of the early years of development as being critical, both to the advancement of the child and just as much for the advancement of "us all." Notably, it also lessens the emphasis on "at-risk children," which might easily have evoked zero-sum thinking, or an "us versus them" response. FrameWorks' research suggests that the sort of broad appeal seen in the reframed materials will actually do more to lift support for at-risk children than the explicit appeal in the original messaging.

Below is another example of a reframe written by one of the participants; its language was incorporated into the organization's strategic plan. Here, the value of *Interdependence* is combined effectively with several of the recommended explanatory metaphors to highlight recent research findings. Given FrameWorks' finding that the average citizen has only a vague understanding of the process of child development, the concrete grounding for thinking offered in this message is likely to further the audience's thinking on this issue.

### **A Good Example of a Participant's Reframe**

The latest research and knowledge on brain and biological development shows that the interactive influences of genes and experience literally shape the architecture of the developing brain. The active ingredient is the “serve and return” nature of children’s engagement in relationship with parents and others. Adverse childhood experiences can create toxic stress, which is associated with persistent effects on the nervous and stress hormone systems, leading to lifelong problems in learning, behavior and health.

Creating the right conditions for early childhood development is more effective and less costly than addressing problems at a later age. A child’s family has a primary role in supporting a child’s development; however, the support of their community has considerable influence on successful early development.

## **THE IMPACT**

The change in participant practice is evident in the work samples provided above. In addition to analysis of work samples, self-reporting measures were also used to assess the learning of participants in Study Circles, Symposia and Spokesperson Trainings.

### **Themes and Trends in Study Circle Participant Evaluations**

In anonymous and confidential follow-up surveys, participants identified several discrete areas where they felt the Study Circles had a notable impact. Here, we recount a few of the most frequently cited areas of influence that participants reported.

First, participants noted that the Study Circles had considerably broadened their understanding of messaging and communications. As one participant put it, *“It broadened my understanding of the importance of how issues are presented and how words and images can significantly impact the message.”* It was this expanded understanding of communications – not just as a source of information about the benefits of a developmental focus in early child programs and child mental health interventions, but more fundamentally about how narrative choices made in messaging can powerfully direct people toward specific types of solutions. Another participant put it this way: *“It makes issues much clearer so people can see the need for a solution. Takes blame away from individuals – which is totally [a more] productive approach.”*

Second, the attention to the importance of framing issues for the public moved participants to understand the value of having a common language in the field. Over and over again, participants talked about the real benefits of having the common message offered by the Core Story and clear ways of disseminating new information using this narrative. Perhaps most important, it was clear that participants understood this narrative as an important, even imperative, precursor to broader social change. As one participant put it, it is *“critical to have a common language and a clarifying one, prior to social change.”*

Third, of the specific concepts noted as useful to their thinking, the metaphors were most “sticky<sup>7</sup>.” In their assessments of the Study Circle, participants routinely mentioned specific metaphors in the Core Story and talked more generatively about the value of having practical ways to communicate complex scientific information to diverse audiences in the province. For example, when asked how her understanding of communications had changed after participating in the Study Circle, one participant described her growth as an increased *“attention to framing, metaphors, how they [the metaphors] engage the public.”*

Fourth, while awareness and appreciation of framing are important goals for participants, the more significant goals in terms of impact are for participants to learn how and when to use framing elements in their work, and then to apply this knowledge in practice. There was significant feedback that participants began to employ framing principles in their work and encouraged others in their spheres of influence to do the same. As one participant put it, *“The idea of thematic stories rather than episodic ones is important. I do try to insert that element into materials and conversations as much as I can.”*

Finally, there is some evidence from the surveys to suggest that, after the Study Circle, many participants took steps to institutionalize framing as part of their organization’s efforts. Some wanted to incorporate the Core Story as part of their organizational mission; others worked with colleagues to weave the Core Story into their websites or promotional materials. The important observation is that participants were inspired to bring this perspective back into their home institutions, amplifying the learning of individual communicators and extending it to a field of practice.

*“The things we’ve had the most success with is our parent handout. We chose three key elements [from the Core Story]: brain architecture, serve and return, and toxic stress. We chose the most important things.”*

Study Circle Participant

## The Impact of the Spokesperson Training

As part of the effort to develop the communications capacity of influential voices in Alberta's early childhood development field, FrameWorks conducted spokesperson trainings open to Study Circle participants as well as frontline communicators from other organizations. FrameWorks' spokesperson trainings focus more narrowly on framing issues in oral discourse settings, such as media interviews, and emphasize active practice. More specifically, participants are guided through exercises to give them a chance to practice reframing a conversation "in action" by pivoting away from dominant or negative frames and toward frames that have been empirically shown to be effective for reframing the public conversation. Teaching techniques include the use of videorecording of mock interviews, in which participants view themselves and their peers and offer constructive criticism.

Participants found this training to be very challenging but overwhelmingly useful. Overall, participants saw the spokesperson training as an opportunity to get "immediate feedback" as they practiced using the Core Story. They also found the immediate video playback of themselves to be an incredibly valuable asset; in fact, it was the most cited benefit of having participated in the training.

*"We're trying to organize our new website around the Core Story so that it's consistent with what people are starting to see in the project."*

Study Circle Participant

The most interesting finding from the survey-based evaluation of the spokesperson training was that participants reported increased confidence as a result of meeting the challenge of the pressure of the mock interviews. Additionally, many noted that with the added confidence came a readiness to share their knowledge about framing with their colleagues – those both internal and external to their organizations. Often, the added confidence meant that they were able to advocate for a strategic framing approach in a much stronger way when they went back to their home institutions.

Finally, participants saw the spokesperson training as an integral part of the broader learning experience rather than a separate add-on. For participants, this very focused training added a necessary element for increased understanding and facile use of the Core Story. As one participant put it, "Each media training session I have attended [as part of FrameWorks' work] has added a fresh perspective to my approach; this

*"You can't target the communications professional [only]. You need to target the leadership as well because you need their buy-in. You need both ends. If the communications team isn't involved but leadership is, you are also frustrated. Then you can't deliver."*

Study Circle Participant

*session provided an additional building block.”*

### **The Impact of the Symposia on Study Circle Participants**

Both of the Symposia provided additional opportunities for Alberta’s advocacy community to acknowledge and deepen their shared interests in emphasizing the science of early brain and biological development, and to reinforce skills in using the Core Story to explain it to policymakers and lay audiences. As one participant of the first Symposium recounted: *“We learned many things over the course of this week, one of them being – the value, the power, and the importance of framing and framing through metaphors.”* More than simply an additional opportunity to hear about and practice strategic framing principles, the Early Brain and Biological Development (EBBD) Symposia introduced a wider cross-section of the child development field in Alberta to framing principles. As a result, the Symposia may have contributed to a more hospitable atmosphere for Study Circle participants to use and spread the techniques they learned as part of their participation. Indeed, several of the participants noted that having their colleagues *“get a chance to hear the FrameWorks messaging”* helped to legitimize the efforts to use framing in their work.

*“I definitely feel more confident because of the advice given on how to reframe questions and use bridging clauses to keep an interview on track.”*

Study Circle Participant

### **NEXT STEPS**

As part of their final Study Circle session, participants articulated their desired next steps in enhancing their communications expertise. In addition, as part of the Institute’s evaluation work, FrameWorks asked them to identify potential barriers to taking full advantage of the research they were exposed to during the Study Circle. Their responses illuminate potential opportunities to continue to build the communications capacity of Alberta’s child development experts, child advocates, practitioners, and nonprofit and philanthropic leaders.

***Continue to convene the existing community of practice.*** A new community of framers emerged from the two Study Circles – a group which was self-consciously aware of their mutually shared set of newly acquired knowledge and skills. The most frequent request for continued learning was for opportunities and mechanisms through which the participants could continue to support each other in framing, and to foster collaboration on practical projects.

To some extent, the second EBBD Symposium played this role. It gave some of the Study Circle participants a chance to reconnect with the framing work by incorporating them into the Frame Foundry sessions as peer collaborators. This joint work between the FrameWorks Institute and the Study Circle participants at the Symposium was a particularly rich and truly two-way exchange. FrameWorks had the opportunity to hear more about how Study Circle participants were using the Core Story and the framing principles in their work. At the same time, participants had the opportunity to be recognized for the expertise they had developed as a result of their investment in the Study Circle.

Additional opportunities for participants to work with each other and with FrameWorks have the potential to coalesce and realize the group's influence on public interest communications in the province.

***Expand the community of practice to new members.***

A routine challenge for Study Circle graduates is moving their newly acquired expertise into the organizations they represent. While they may be eager to share their newly acquired understanding of the power of public interest communications and the dangers of traditional communications habits, they may not, for various reasons, find supportive audiences when they return to those institutions. One of the prominent advancements made as part of the Alberta experience is that the EBBD Symposia gave Study Circle graduates an opening for widening the sphere of influence around framing because it exposed Strategic Frame Analysis™ to their colleagues, supervisors and frontline staff on their behalf.

*“Too bad that the group can’t be brought together once in awhile to keep them going. A few of us really took off and it was nice to be recognized (as a peer collaborator at Banff) and to share our experiences, but we need to bring that circle together a bit more.”*

Study Circle Participant

A wider field of practice can partially address the institutional barriers to adopting the core story. A wider field cannot be built, however, through a one-time activity. To the extent that the EBBD Symposia and other activities could marshal additional opportunities to keep strategic framing in front of those audiences, it might provide an ongoing invitation to further seed framing into critical institutional spaces in Alberta.

***Bring in more representation from First Nations groups.*** At various points throughout the initiative, FrameWorks faculty were asked about how to message specifically to, and about, First Nation groups. So, it was not a surprise when this interest showed up in each phase of evaluation. In the evaluation surveys, participants asked for a direct research focus on First Nations groups, for more representation of First Nations people (as part of the Study Circle, spokesperson trainings and Symposia), and for more direction in addressing the needs of First Nations communities in their messaging. FrameWorks contends this is a critical next step and should be taken on as part of the next phase of the Institute's work with child development experts, practitioners, policymakers and advocates in Alberta.

***Collect, disseminate and celebrate evidence of impact.*** As part of the process of working with the peer collaborators for the second Symposium, it became apparent that Study Circle graduates were regularly and fluently integrating the Core Story into their work and having some amazing success as a result. Still, few of the participants knew about the successes being attained by their Study Circle counterparts. There was not a forum for them to acknowledge, appreciate or celebrate the successes of their colleagues or even their own "wins." By extension, the broader field support for early child development seemed to be missing out, in some measure, on the opportunity to see, participate in and capitalize on the significant investments in communications training that had earned returns in capacity for the field. Some additional efforts to identify and share these types of successes could be tremendously useful in seeding bigger wins for the field.

<sup>1</sup> The FrameWorks Institute (2005). Talking Early Child Development and Exploring the Consequences of Frame Choices: A FrameWorks Message Memo. Washington, D.C.: FrameWorks Institute.

<sup>2</sup> Manuel, T. (2010). Baby Steps into the World of Frames and Metaphors: Translating the Science of Early Child Development for Policy and Practice. Washington, D.C.: FrameWorks Institute.

<sup>3</sup> Taylor, N. (2010). Experiences Get Carried Forward: How Albertans Think About Early Child Development. Washington, DC: FrameWorks Institute.

<sup>4</sup> Manuel, T. (2010). Baby Steps into the World of Frames and Metaphors.

<sup>5</sup> Taylor, N. (2010). Experiences Get Carried Forward.

<sup>6</sup> The Core Story of Development for Alberta: Child development is a foundation for community development and economic development, as capable children become the foundation of a prosperous and sustainable society (Interdependence). The basic architecture of the brain is constructed through an ongoing process that begins before birth and continues into adulthood (Brain Architecture). Brains are built from the bottom up (Skill Begets Skill). Interaction of genes and experience shapes the developing brain and relationships are the active ingredient in this Serve and Return process (Serve and Return). Toxic stress damages the developing brain and leads to problems in learning, behavior, and increased susceptibility to physical and mental illness over time (Toxic Stress). Brain plasticity and the ability to change behavior decrease over time, and getting it right early is less costly, to society and individuals, than trying to fix it later (Pay Now or Pay Later). In effect, the Brain Architecture simplifying model contends that the early years of life matter because early experiences affect the architecture of the maturing brain. As it emerges, the quality of that architecture establishes either a sturdy or a fragile foundation for all of the development and behavior that follows – and getting things right the first time is easier than trying to fix them later. When interpersonal experiences are disruptive, neglectful, abusive, unstable, or otherwise stressful, they increase the probability of poor outcomes. When a young child experiences excessive stress, chemicals are released in the brain that damage its developing architecture. Finally, the newest simplifying model, Levelness, is designed to draw attention to the specific cognitive and developmental needs of children and be able to shift people toward ecological thinking about the impact of children’s environments on development (Levelness).

<sup>7</sup> See Heath, C., & Heath, D. (2007). *Made to stick: Why some ideas survive and others die*. New York, NY: Random House. Drawing extensively on psychosocial studies on memory, emotion and motivation, the Heath brothers define the concept of “stickiness” as the art of making ideas unforgettable. Ideas that are understood and made memorable, or “sticky,” have a lasting impact powerful enough to change people’s opinions and behaviors.