Anticipate Public Thinking
Frequently Asked Questions (FAQs)

Advocates can engage the public and policy-makers more effectively by:

- Using research about public thinking to anticipate questions the public will likely ask about development and learning
- Considering challenges in answering those questions
- Applying tested communications strategies that build public understanding of development and learning.

The sample question-and-answer (Q&A) sequences in this section model how to use framing strategies to answer common questions about children's issues. The questions reflect patterns in public thinking about early childhood that were revealed during research in Alamance County and surrounding areas.

The false start answers are examples of ineffective answers to questions. The reframed answers apply FrameWorks' evidence-based recommendations for communicating strategically about children's issues.

Both responses come with pointers that identify what works, or not, in each response, and why. Use these model FAQs to build your capacity to communicate strategically and effectively about early childhood and learning in Alamance County.
### Q: Children’s brains aren’t any different now than they were when I was growing up. Why should we be doing anything different now?

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<td>I grew up in Alamance myself, and my parents supported me and taught me good values and morals. Many of my friends’ parents did, too. We grew up and became successful adults. I’m not saying that kids’ brains are developing differently today—just that kids are growing up in a new age with new challenges. We need to take a different approach to raising our kids to keep up.</td>
<td>We now know a lot about how brains develop in early childhood. Brain development is a lot like building a house. Kids’ earliest experiences are the foundation for their developing brains. To build a strong foundation, kids need strong building blocks like lots of learning opportunities; support from and interaction with responsive adults; access to community resources like early education programs and health care services; safe, clean play spaces and living environments; and more. We can make sure all kids in our community thrive if we all commit to getting this building process right.</td>
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### THE FALSE-START ANSWER ANALYSIS

- Phrases like “parents who supported me and taught me good values and morals” and “helped us become successful adults” trigger the Family Bubble—the assumption that parents are the only people responsible for their children’s outcomes. The Family Bubble model obscures the role that factors beyond parents—such as the quality of education in schools and resources—also play in shaping children’s outcomes.

- Because public understanding about development is not commonplace, the public may, for example, not understand the critical role that adult caregivers play in developing babies’ brains. This answer doesn’t explain how brain development happens, and as a result does not do enough to help people understand the development process. Our research finds that explaining this process helps people understand it. Without explanation, people will fill in missing information with inaccurate assumptions.

- This answer is nostalgic for the past, which can make it difficult for people to envision how to build a brighter future. It would be better if it avoided references to the past and instead focused on brain development.

### THE REFRAMED ANSWER ANALYSIS

- The reframed answer makes an affirmative case about why we need programs and policies that support children and families: because breakthroughs in neuroscience reveal the conditions that best cultivate healthy brain development.

- The values of Happiness and Social Responsibility establish why we should devote resources to programs that support healthy development. We have a moral obligation to support all children in our society, and we all benefit when all community members are healthy, happy, and thriving.

- The Brain Architecture metaphor explains the active and critical stages in the developmental process.

- Comparing positive experiences and relationships to the raw materials needed in a construction project helps people understand that (1) development is an active rather than a passive process and (2) that outcomes are shaped by environmental factors.
Q: If we want our kids to have better outcomes, shouldn’t we focus on making teachers’ salaries in Alamance competitive with other counties?

**THE FALSE-START ANSWER**

Low salaries drain our school system of its most talented teachers, making it impossible to offer our children the highest-quality education. As a result, we have a shortage of teachers—and our kids are stuck in overcrowded classrooms. But paying teachers more is only part of the solution. Many states face teacher shortages. Some are raising starting salaries, offering better overall compensation, giving teachers more authority, and reducing class sizes. If we want our children to be better off, and if we want our communities to be stronger, we’ve got to start trying these kinds of solutions in Alamance.

**THE FALSE-START ANSWER ANALYSIS**

- Low teacher pay is a serious problem, but this answer frames it as a crisis. This approach is likely to inspire fatalistic thinking. People will likely think that the problem is too big to solve, and they won’t bother trying to address it.

- Focusing on teacher salaries as the only thing that can improve learning outcomes obscures other supports that teachers need to do their jobs well. This answer fails to explain how teacher pay leads to better learning outcomes or outline other ways to support teachers and improve educational outcomes. As such, it reinforces the public’s limiting ways of thinking about the education system.

- Instead, look for opportunities to explain how learning happens and describe the various strategies that communities and schools can take to support teachers.

**THE REFRAMED ANSWER**

To move our region and our country forward, we need to make sure that all children have what they need to grow into engaged and contributing adults. Teachers play an important role in student learning and in children's development. Teachers are “brain builders.” They give children opportunities to learn and positive experiences that set the foundation for future learning. This is important work. To do it well, teachers need access to cutting-edge technology, professional development opportunities, and mentors.

Improving our education system is like a home renovation project: When builders run into a problem, they need more resources to fix it—not less. The same is true for teachers, and our education system as a whole. We need to increase investment in our education system to update and strengthen it. If we do, we will be better able to support our teachers while they work to build our children’s brains.

**THE REFRAMED ANSWER ANALYSIS**

- The reframed answer reframes supports for teachers as supports for healthy development. Explaining that teachers are actually community members who help build children’s brains reinforces the importance of the work that teachers do.

- This answer combines the **Brain Architecture** metaphor with the **Scaffolding** metaphor (the idea that teachers need support beyond higher salaries in order to do their work) to explain why investments in education assist children’s healthy brain development.

- This answer uses the **Remodeling** metaphor (the idea that the changes to our education system are like updating a valuable but outdated house and that such projects require quality resources) to explain how updates to our existing education system can support healthy development.

- The reframed answer describes learning as an active process of acquiring and practicing new skills rather than a passive process that happens without adult support.
Q: Why are we so concerned about stress? Doesn’t stress build character? And anyways, what can the community really do to fight stress? Isn't that the parents’ responsibility?

**THE FALSE-START ANSWER**

All children, at all ages, experience stress at some point. The amount of stress kids have depends on the amount of support they get from their parents. Children who are dealing with a lot of stress are likely to have difficult home lives, whereas children with less stress are more likely to be cared for by responsible family members and shielded from life’s difficulties. Responsible parents enroll kids in activities to keep them out of trouble and give them opportunities to pursue their interests. The best way to help kids manage tough emotions is to put them in safe environments and give them strong morals and values. Our community needs to be concerned about stress in kids’ lives because stress prevents children from focusing and doing well in school. If we give parents and schools more tools to deal with young people’s stress, then they’ll be happier and healthier.

**THE REFRAMED ANSWER**

Alamance is committed to giving all kids the positive experiences and environments they need to grow into healthy and engaged adults and recover from negative experiences. Some kids are experiencing abuse and neglect or are regularly exposed to violence and substance misuse. Some live in severe poverty—and don’t have access to healthy meals or do not live in safe neighborhoods. Kids’ brains react to severe, chronic stressors like these by going into “high alert.” And being on high alert can ultimately can disrupt their development.

Stressors that cause a high alert, toxic reaction are very different from positive or tolerable stress (like nerves before a public performance or experiencing a natural disaster when it is buffered by lots of different kinds of supports). In Alamance, we can reduce toxic stress and make sure all kids have the support they need they need to live healthy, productive lives.

**THE FALSE-START ANSWER ANALYSIS**

• This answer reflects the public’s lack of understanding about how children develop and how experiences shape development, reinforcing the public’s assumption that stress is merely an emotion and that children simply need to stay active to thrive.

• Instead, communicators should explain why and how stress is problematic, how it derails development, and how it affects learning and educational outcomes.

• This answer also mischaracterizes how adults influence stress. The idea that parental support solely and exclusively determines how kids experience stress taps into the Family Bubble cultural model—the idea that parents are solely responsible for ensuring children’s positive outcomes.

**THE REFRAMED ANSWER ANALYSIS**

• This answer redirects thinking away from the idea that stress is an emotion. Instead it uses the Toxic Stress metaphor to explain how stress impacts the brain and body and how to buffer the damage caused by stress. It helps people understand that different kinds of stress affect the body in different ways, that “normal” stress doesn’t affect the body and brain in the way that toxic stress does.

• This answer also helps people see that supports provided by the community—and not only by parents—can prevent or counteract the effects of toxic stress.
Q: Of course I support kids, but isn’t it better to cut spending now and reduce the strain on our budgets? Efficient governments spend less money but get better results.

**THE FALSE-START ANSWER**

You know the expression, “You only get out what you put in.” If we really want to support kids, we can’t cut programs that help kids reach their full potential. Parents depend on these programs. If we cut or eliminate funding, we won’t be able to give Alamance kids a quality education or support other community resources, like libraries and recreation centers, that help kids thrive. When our public sector has the resources it needs, we all benefit. We see this in our schools: the more funding and support they have, the better students perform.

**THE REFRAMED ANSWER**

We have a shared responsibility to plan for the future in our government budgets. We inherited our community resources, our schools and roads, our community centers and hospitals, from the community members who came before us. These resources keep us healthy and give us opportunities to succeed. When our leaders make budgets, they are making plans for the continued health and success of our community. The taxes that we pay today make it possible for the community to grow and thrive tomorrow. Investing in our education system and other resources now means we will pay less later.

**THE FALSE-START ANSWER ANALYSIS**

- The phrase “you only get out what you put in” reinforces a “vending machine” view of budgets and taxes—the idea the public immediately gets something when they pay for it.
- Words like “succeed” and “perform” tie program funding to individual learning and educational outcomes, which obscures thinking about education as a public good.
- Saying parents “depend” on public services to raise their children can activate “zero-sum” thinking—the idea that helping some groups by definition takes resources away from other groups. It can also activate unproductive models like the Family Bubble (the idea that parents are solely responsible for their children’s outcomes) or the Tangible Triad (the belief that learning is affected by three types of people: students, parents, and teachers). These obscure the important influence that community resources and contexts, including community members, have on children’s wellbeing.

**THE REFRAMED ANSWER ANALYSIS**

- This response opens with the **Social Responsibility** value to emphasize that we all share an obligation to support children by planning for the future.
- This answer shows how public goods like education require long-term planning. This moves the conversation away from unproductive thinking about government spending and about benefits of government resources as individual (not collective).
- The **Forward Exchange** metaphor describes existing community resources as the result of past budgeting and taxation. This helps people understand how taxes and budgets function and invites broader support by building understanding of what they are for, the problems they address, and the important work they do for our communities.
- This answer talks about taxes and budgets together but addresses budgets before taxes. This order is important: it reinforces the importance of fully funding long-term priorities. Messages about taxes alone cause people to see taxes as unfair, and as the symptom of a greedy, inefficient system.