



Frames in Play: An Executive Summary of Descriptive Framing Research on Adolescence

Public Thinking, Media Discourse, and Field Frames¹

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In recent decades, scientists have made great strides in understanding adolescent development. New research shows that brain and biological systems interact with the social environment during this period of life to shape lifelong health and wellbeing. This research has profound implications for our society—but these implications are not reflected in policies across the range of public systems that shape the lives of young people and their families.

Why the disconnect? One reason is that the science of adolescent development is not accessible to the public or its policymakers. This isn't because people think adolescence is unimportant but rather because deep cultural assumptions about adolescence prevent people from engaging with key scientific principles. This limits the degree to which scientific knowledge influences public policy.

These assumptions do not materialize out of thin air. They are rooted in deeply held, widely shared, longstanding beliefs about adolescence that are reinforced by stories about what adolescence is, who adolescents are, how they develop, and why they do (and don't) matter. These stories come from many places, but two powerful sources are the news media and advocacy organizations working on issues related to adolescent development.

¹ The research summarized here is part of a broader project sponsored by the Funders for Adolescent Science Translation (FAST), a consortium of foundations that aims to develop communications strategies to build public understanding of adolescence. It includes The Annie E. Casey Foundation, the Bezos Family Foundation, the Chan Zuckerberg Initiative, the Ford Foundation, the Conrad N. Hilton Foundation, the Raikes Foundation, the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, and the National Public Education Support Fund.

The trio of reports summarized here describe the stories people tell themselves as well as those they are told by media and advocacy groups. The findings are based on analysis of 80 one-on-one interviews with members of the public, six focus groups, 249 influential media stories, and 150 pieces of public-facing communications materials produced by 26 leading organizations in the field of adolescence.

These reports represent the completion of the first phase of a larger project designed to increase public will to change policies and practices that affect adolescents and their development. The findings reveal both challenges and opportunities for those who wish to better support America's young people.

How does the public think about adolescence?

In interviews with members of the public, FrameWorks' researchers found a set of widely shared cultural beliefs that shape thinking about adolescents and adolescent development. Here are the key takeaways from this phase of the research:

- ▶ **People think of adolescence as a dangerous and inherently risk-filled time of life.**

The public shares an entrenched assumption that adolescence is a dangerous time in life, rife with negative influences, risky behaviors, and hormonal changes that leave young people vulnerable to bad outcomes. This perception leads people to focus on risk factors in adolescence and support measures to protect adolescents but causes them to overlook the unique, positive potential this period has for development and the contributions that young people make to society.

- ▶ **People do not see how social inequities affect adolescent development.**

The public does not understand adolescence as a time when the effects of racial/ethnic, socioeconomic, gender, and other inequities deepen and become more pronounced. Researchers note that discrimination and racism widen disparities between disadvantaged adolescents, especially adolescents of color, and their better-resourced peers, but the public does not understand how systemic inequities undermine adolescent wellbeing and development.

- ▶ People understand that adolescence is important and that environment matters.

People strongly believe that adolescence is a critical time in life—a time when adolescents’ world expands beyond the home and immediate family. This perception is important, but it won’t drive change on its own. Nevertheless, it does indicate a public appetite for efforts to support healthy development, strong relationships outside of the family, and positive outcomes.

What drives public discourse?

In analyzing stories told by the news media and the field of adolescent development, FrameWorks’ researchers found narratives that drive both productive and unproductive ways of thinking. Here are the key takeaways from this phase of the research:

- ▶ Media stories feed the public’s perceptions about the dangers of adolescence, but field communications achieve better balance.

Media stories frame adolescents as susceptible to negative influences (e.g., unhealthy relationships, gangs, technology, media, and sexual predators) and, therefore, poor developmental outcomes. Information about adolescence as a critical phase of development is largely absent from media discourse. The science of adolescent development, the broader social impacts of adolescent outcomes (good or bad), and the role that social inequities play in determining young people’s developmental outcomes receive little coverage.

The field of adolescent development, in comparison, offers a more balanced representation of adolescence—one that emphasizes risk and danger as well as opportunity and growth. The field’s communications frame risk-taking and the increased influence of social relationships as normal parts of adolescent development that can drive good outcomes. Overall, field materials devote considerable effort to describing positive influences in adolescents’ lives and the emergence of positive outcomes from this developmental period.

- ▶ The field doesn’t always tell the full story of adolescence.

The field emphasizes the positive aspects of this time of life and the importance of putting supportive systems and structures into place, but it does so inconsistently. The field’s public-facing communications materials fail to consistently answer questions including:

- Why is this an important phase of human development and how does it work?
- How does supporting healthy adolescent development contribute to our communities and society?
- How do social inequities connect to adolescent development and what can be done to address these connections?

Implications

These and other findings in these three reports show that communicators should change some of their framing strategies and use others more consistently. Dominant media and advocacy narratives leave out important elements of the full story of adolescent development. As a result, members of the public misunderstand adolescence and draw their own (often faulty) conclusions. For example:

- The media focus on risk-taking behaviors and negative influences during adolescence—and overlook the positive aspects of this phase of development. This framing focuses people’s attention on the need to protect adolescents from harm, which leaves them with little reason to back policies that maximize adolescents’ growth and learning through environments and experiences that promote healthy development.

Recommendation to the field: Tell the full story of adolescent development to generate a more balanced understanding. Emphasize that risk-taking behaviors and heightened sensitivity to external influences are normal and not inherently problematic and explain how policies that support and invest in healthy development improve adolescents’ outcomes.

- Neither media nor advocacy stories focus on equity, which keeps social disparities and their long-term consequences off the public’s radar.

Recommendation to the field: Tell stories that build understanding of how inequities affect adolescent development and how adolescents’ social conditions and contextual circumstances affect their life trajectories. Doing so will build public support for addressing disparities in adolescence through more effective social policy.

- Though the public understands that adolescence is an important period of life and a time when adolescents expand social relationships beyond their immediate families, neither

media stories nor field communications clearly explain how development works. Without this information, the public won't understand how to better support adolescents or why policies and programs that do so are necessary.

Recommendation to the field: Take advantage of the fact that people see adolescence as an important time of life. Engage people in discussions about why adolescence is important, the range of environmental factors that contribute to adolescent development, and what actions are needed to help all adolescents thrive.

Conclusion

For those communicating about adolescent development, our findings present both challenges and opportunities. The public's myopic focus on the threats adolescents face fuels a desire to protect them from harm rather than to support their independence, autonomy, and positive development. Likewise, the public's narrow understanding of how environments affect adolescent outcomes indicates that more work is needed to boost support for systemic, policy-based initiatives that promote healthy development.

There is, however, room for hope: issue salience and an awareness of the importance of relationships are strong features of public understanding of adolescence. More research is needed to identify framing strategies that can consistently channel public thinking toward a fuller, more accurate understanding of adolescent development. But advocates can begin reframing the conversation now. By explaining how adolescent development happens, its social impacts, and the effects of inequity on outcomes, communicators can start to build better support for policies and programs that promote healthy development and help adolescents realize their full potential. Read the full reports at www.frameworksinstitute.org.