Amplifying Positive Frames

The Shape of Organizational Discourse on Adolescent Development

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Introduction

This report maps the frames and narratives that organizations use to communicate about adolescents and adolescent development. Specifically, it identifies the framing strategies used by influential organizations in the field, analyzes their effects on public thinking, and makes recommendations as to how to improve communications to drive social change.

The research presented here is part of a multimethod framing project to design and test strategies to build public understanding of what adolescence is, how adolescents develop, and the programmatic and policy actions designed to improve adolescent wellbeing. In the first stage of this project, researchers identified differences in understanding between experts in adolescent development and members of the public. In the second stage, researchers identified the frames and storytelling approaches embedded in media coverage about adolescents. In this stage, researchers examine the effects of organizational discourse on public thinking and recommend how to communicate more effectively about issues related to adolescents and adolescence.

This project is sponsored by the Funders for Adolescent Science Translation (FAST), a consortium that aims to build public understanding of the science of adolescent development and drive policy and structural change across issues that affect adolescents. The consortium 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 first set of findings focuses on the missed framing opportunities that allow unproductive patterns in public thinking about adolescents to go unchecked. Most notable among them: organizations do not frame adolescent development as a public issue that warrants collective, systems-level action. This absence reinforces the individualized ways in which the public thinks about adolescent issues. In addition, organizational materials rarely mention adolescent development, which means that the field is missing an important opportunity to build public understanding of the key processes that occur during this time. Going forward, organizations should fill these absences in by explaining adolescent development and explicitly naming the collective impact of policies and programs that support it.

This analysis also identifies the productive framing strategies that organizations *are* using to build understanding. One notable example: organizations are spotlighting key protective factors that support healthy adolescent development. This contrasts with the media's sharp focus on

negative influences of adolescent issues and the public's strong association of adolescence with risk and danger.[1] Organizations also present adolescents in a range of social settings and avoid a myopic focus on the home and family. This wider lens strengthens the public's existing but latent sense that adolescent outcomes are shaped by multiple community- and societal-level influences. Finally, organizations *are* telling systems stories about adolescence that highlight structural causes of racial disparities and other inequities, although they do so relatively infrequently.

These important framing practices, however, are not applied consistently or broadly across the field. Indeed, the literature of social movements shows that when organizations across a field unite around and adopt a shared framing strategy, they begin to drive change. This report concludes with a set of recommendations that communicators across the field can use to fill gaps in organizational discourse and amplify positive frames. Future research will provide additional tools that advocates can use to build public understanding of this important developmental period and encourage support for policies that will improve outcomes for all adolescents.

Methods and Data

Three questions guide this research:

1. How does the field frame adolescents and adolescent development?
2. How do these frames shape public thinking?
3. How can the field reframe adolescents and adolescent development to expand public understanding and build support for policy and practice reform?

Data

Researchers answered these questions via a multistage process. In collaboration with FAST, researchers created a list of advocacy and research organizations, direct service providers, and key funders working on and communicating about adolescent issues. This list included organizations with a significant youth leadership component. These organizations were then entered into IssueCrawler, a web-based application that "crawls" an identified set of organizational websites and compiles their shared links. IssueCrawler uses a method called link analysis to determine the network of influential organizations for a given issue.

This procedure identified 21 organizations, some of which were on the initial "seed list." (See the Appendix for the full list.) Researchers then sampled public-facing communications materials from each organization. These materials, including press releases, reports, "About Us" webpages, and other communications collateral, were selected because they described the organization's work and orientation toward adolescence and adolescents. The final sample consisted of 150 materials[2] across 21 organizations.

Analysis

Researchers coded each document to identify the presence or absence of each narrative component in Table 1 (see next page).

Table 1: Codebook

Narrative Component	Brief Description	Codes
Demographics	What demographic groups are mentioned?	– Low-income adolescents – Middle/high-income adolescents – Middle school, high-school, post-high school – Adolescents of color – Adolescent boys or girls – LGBTQ adolescents
Setting	What setting and/or context does the document focus on?	– Home – School – Community – At-risk settings (e.g., crime scene, court room) – Health care setting (e.g., hospitals, clinics) – Online
Development	What type of developmental process is described?	– Neurobiological – Pubertal – Socio-emotional – Moral – Cognitive
Issue	What is the main focus of the document?	– Risk behaviors – Criminal behavior – Traumatic experience – Parental conflict – Leadership/extra-curricular activity – Racial inequity/discrimination – Health – Stress and mental health
Influences	What factors influence adolescents or adolescent development?	– Parents – Peers – Schools – Communities – Society/culture
Consequences	What are the implications of healthy adolescent development?	– Individual-level (e.g., positive and negative effects on mental and physical health, education, employment, relationships, criminality) – Societal-level (e.g., criminal justice system, economy, health care, social welfare)
Messengers	Who are the people and/or organizations quoted?	– Politicians, government officials – Parents – Organizational spokespeople

| Responsibility	Who is responsible for improving adolescents' outcomes?	– Government – Educators – Justice system – Health care system – Individual adolescents/youth – Family – Society/communities
Values	Why is adolescent development important? Why is it necessary to address adolescent issues?	– Equity and justice – Interdependence – Economic prosperity – Human potential

After coding the data, the analysis proceeded accordingly:

- **Frequency analysis.** Researchers first examined the frequency of each code in the materials, calculating the percentage of materials in the sample that contained each code.

- **Latent class analysis.** Next, researchers used a statistical method called latent class analysis (LCA) to identify unique subgroups (or "classes") in the sample. LCA is used to discover whether a sample of materials (in this case, organizational documents) can be divided into distinct groups based on categorical data (in this case, the presence or absence of our codes).[3] In keeping with the scholarly literature on narrative and framing, FrameWorks defines a complete narrative as one that describes a problem or issue, states why it is a matter of concern, explains who or what causes it, provides a clear vision of a change in outcomes, and delineates actions that can create change. Narratives influence how people make sense of, remember, and transmit information about a given topic.

- **Cognitive analysis.** Finally, researchers interpreted the implications of findings against the backdrop of the first phase of research, which identified the public's deep assumptions and implicit understandings about adolescence. This phase included the "untranslated" expert story of adolescence: the core principles that experts and advocates want to communicate to the public (see Appendix). This analysis allows researchers to identify how frames in organizational materials affect public understanding.

Findings

This section draws on evidence from the frequency and LCA to distill key findings about organizational communications. Taken together, these findings paint a picture of how the field frames adolescence and adolescent issues and the narratives they tell the public. Three narratives emerged from the research: a *Youth Leadership* narrative, an *Incomplete Story* narrative, and a *Race and Equity* narrative. These narratives were mutually exclusive, in that materials were categorized into only one narrative type.

Figure 1: Narrative Classes in Advocacy Materials

31% Race and Equity

25% Youth Leadership

44% Incomplete Story
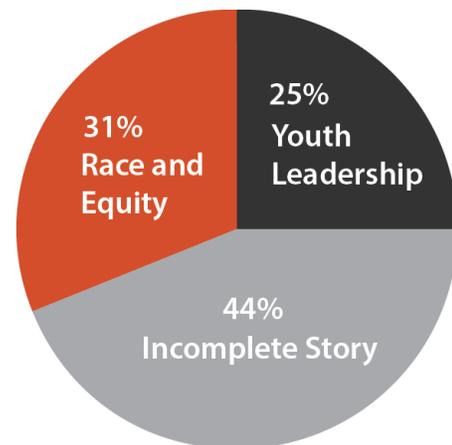
*Percentage of articles within class

What to Avoid

We first discuss unproductive frames and narratives that undermine efforts to build public support for policy, practice, and systemic change. The unproductive patterns we describe below are not so much about what organizations *are* doing but what they are *not* doing. The analysis revealed the following absences:

FINDING:
Organizational materials rarely discussed adolescent development.

Almost 60 percent of sample materials failed to describe the transition between childhood and adulthood or changes during this time. Those that *did* focused narrowly on the acquisition of socio-emotional and cognitive capacities, such as perspective-taking, emotion regulation, and resisting peer influence.

These pieces often listed the domains of development but did not discuss *how* adolescents develop. Consider the following excerpt:

> Social and emotional learning (SEL) programs, which previously have shown immediate improvements in mental health, social skills, and academic achievement, continue to benefit students for months and even years to come, according to a 2017 meta-analysis from CASEL, the University of Illinois at Chicago, Loyola University, and the University of British Columbia.[4]

While this passage asserts the importance of healthy socio-emotional development, it leaves key questions unanswered: What *is* socio-emotional development? How does it happen? Why is it important? What can be done to support it? While organizational materials did mention socio-emotional and cognitive development, they rarely discussed other domains of development, such as pubertal, moral, and neurobiological development (see Table 2).

Table 2: Mentions of Development in Organizational Materials

Developmental Domain	Percent of Materials
Neurobiological	4%
Pubertal	5%
Socio-emotional	35%
Moral	5%
Cognitive	21%
None mentioned	56%

Implications

The lack of explanation is a missed opportunity to build public understanding of adolescence. Earlier research found that members of the public don't understand how development works, what develops during adolescence, and what can and should be done to support it.[5] For members of the public, the process and mechanisms of development are largely misunderstood. The public doesn't understand that adolescent brains are built over time through a process of neurobiological construction, and, as a result, they don't see the value of supportive environments and experiences. This lack of understanding depresses support for interventions to support healthy development in adolescence, such as the inclusion of socio-emotional learning curricula in middle and high school. The media, for their part, rarely discuss adolescent development, which leaves the public with virtually no access to information about this important period.[6]

Organizations leave out social impacts.

Experts emphasize that the adolescent wellbeing has far-reaching social, economic, and public health implications [link]. This point, however, is not made in organizational communications. While organizations are clear about how changes in policies, programs, and practices will improve outcomes for individuals, they don't discuss the *societal* impacts of these interventions. This pattern is reflected in three, more specific findings:

1. **Adolescent development is not treated as an issue of collective importance.**
   Substantial portions of organizational materials lack information about the collective impacts of adolescent development. More than two-thirds of organizational materials fail to refer to societal-level impacts of adolescent development, either positive or negative (see Table 3).

Table 3: Mentions of Societal Consequences in Organizational Materials

Social Effect	Positive Effect	Negative Effect
Justice system	11%	7%
Health care	3%	2%
Social welfare	3%	2%
Economy	11%	2%

The following excerpt illustrates the lack of attention to collective outcomes. It provides detailed information about how adolescent development can be supported but little about how doing so will affect communities or society as a whole.

> A key way to promote adolescent health and development and to prepare young people for adulthood is to actively engage them at school, at home, and in the community. School clubs, sports, music, the arts, out-of-school time programs, jobs, and places of worship all offer opportunities to involve teens in meaningful ways. Adolescents benefit when they provide input into the design of programs and activities, which not only improves the programs but also provides valuable leadership experiences. Engaging teens in learning, leading, and as team members is one of the Five Essentials for Healthy Adolescents identified in the HHS Office of Adolescent Health's national call to action, called Adolescent Health: Think, Act, Grow, or TAG.[7]

This excerpt clearly articulates how individual adolescents benefit from active engagement in the design of programs and activities, and it names several places in the community where this kind of engagement can take place. These are highly effective framing practices, which are discussed in detail below. However, the inclusion of multiple settings makes the absence of a discussion of the *societal* impact of positive adolescent development even more conspicuous.

2. **Organizational materials emphasize the importance of youth leadership—but only as an end in itself.** The analysis identified a narrative cluster that centered on *Youth Leadership*. Twenty five percent of articles in the sample communicated this narrative. These articles used youth as messengers, promoted programs and policies designed to empower adolescents, and focused on the positive impacts of healthy adolescent development (such as higher educational attainment and professional success).

Materials in this cluster frame adults, educators, and community program workers as *partners* in adolescent development and leadership, which emphasizes the need for young people's involvement in designing and leading the programs and policies that affect them. Organizations often highlighted youth empowerment with examples of youth sitting on boards of organizations, serving as policy advocates, or planning events and activities. The following excerpt typifies this narrative cluster:

> Giving young people voice, choice and decision-making opportunities is critical to support their healthy development and life success. They need to make decisions, act on their intentions and work collaboratively whether it is in school, after-school programs, communities or in their families. Providing these opportunities before they become full adults is critical if we want them to have the best chance at success in their personal, educational, civic and work lives. Moreover, we all benefit by building a civil society whose youth are civically engaged and prepared to be active participants in a democratic society.[8]

Many of the materials in this cluster focused on the development of socio-emotional skills. However, these benefits were often framed at the individual level (e.g., an adolescent's employability and job skills) rather than accruing to or affecting communities and society more generally. This is evident in the following passage:

> A key way to promote adolescent health and development and to prepare young people for adulthood is to actively engage them at school, at home, and in the community. School clubs, sports, music, the arts, out-of-school time programs, jobs, and places of worship all offer opportunities to involve teens in meaningful ways. Adolescents benefit when they provide

input into the design of programs and activities, which not only improves the programs but also provides valuable leadership experiences.[9]

3. **Messengers are limited to adolescents and nonprofit professionals.** A critical but often overlooked frame element, messengers help people answer questions such as: Who says this is a problem and why should we pay attention to it? Like other frame elements, messengers shape how members of the public interpret messages. For example, when people consider messengers knowledgeable and trustworthy, they are more open to considering information from them. When messengers are seen as biased or self-interested, people are less likely to engage with or accept their message.

    As shown in Table 4, the most common messengers across the sample were adolescents and professionals in the nonprofit sector (21 percent and 23 percent, respectively). Other messengers, such as parents, governmental workers or agencies, researchers, educators, and those in the health care system, were much less common. Adolescents typically spoke to their own experience, and nonprofit messengers often served as representatives of their organizations. In other words, organizations are not using messengers who are positioned to speak to the wider impacts of adolescent development, such as those named above.

Table 4: Mentions of Messenger in Organizational Materials

Developmental Domain	Percent of Organizational Materials
Adolescents	21%
Parents and family members	0%
Government	6%
Nonprofit organizations	23%
Researchers	4%
Educators	3%
Health care staff	1%

Implications

The field is putting young people front and center in its public-facing communications. This is critically important, as youth are often denied agency in the development of programs and interventions that are designed to address their needs. However, their messages focus on the importance of ensuring healthy and positive development for adolescents themselves. This narrow focus is compounded by the absence of other types of messengers who can speak to the *societal* impacts of programs, policies, and services for adolescents.

Organizations must find a way to balance youth voices and experiences with explicit messages about the collective benefits of ensuring healthy adolescent development. This is important because the public doesn't think about the social causes and collective impacts of disparate outcomes or appreciate why positive adolescent development is a matter of societal concern. And, if the public only thinks about individuals, they won't support efforts to ensure positive developmental outcomes for *all* adolescents, especially those from socially disadvantaged groups and communities.

FINDING:

Organizational materials often tell incomplete stories.

Forty-four percent of the organizational materials in the sample were categorized as incomplete narratives because they lacked the narrative components that research shows improve public understanding. Materials in this class failed to answer questions about how development happens, what influences it, and/or why it matters. They tended to be short, informational pieces about youth programs that didn't explain how the program works or why it matters. Consider the following paragraph:

> Elev8 Baltimore believes that it is important to reinforce the learning that goes on in classrooms with opportunities to learn during after- and summer-school programs. In addition, many young people need social services and other community resources. We integrate all those services into one dynamic program inside the school building, where many young people spend a considerable amount of time. By coordinating the delivery of learning, health, and family engagement services students and families receive, we are more likely to foster lasting change in the lives of young people, and the systems that support them, than if we provided any one service in isolation.[10]

This excerpt provides a high-level overview of the program but fails to explain the problem it is addressing or the aspects of adolescent development it targets. Later, it mentions "[increasing] the impact we have on families and the community," but this statement does not specify what the

impact is or how it will be achieved. In short, pieces in this class communicate in high-level and non-specific ways; they don't build understanding of adolescent development or why adolescent issues are relevant to society at large.

Implications

As noted above, people's understanding of adolescent development is sketchy at best and non-existent at worst. In the absence of a complete narrative about adolescence, people will "fill in" the details with their existing and often unproductive understandings. More specifically, the public will likely focus on individual-level rather than social causes of adolescent outcomes. This research found that people *can* think about environmental or social influences. Nevertheless, they understand environments as inherently negative and dangerous, which makes it difficult to see that some environments are protective.

Incomplete communications won't build support for public structures (e.g., the education, juvenile justice, and mental health systems) that better support adolescents unique developmental needs. They also make it difficult for people to fully consider, value, and understand the protective effects of addressing various determinants of adolescent development, such as access to safe housing, comprehensive education, nutritious food, employment opportunities, psychological treatment, public transit, and other services and supports.

What to Amplify

Organizations in the field also practice framing strategies that are likely having positive and productive impacts on public thinking, but they do not apply these strategies consistently. A primary challenge, then, relates less to framing than to dissemination and discipline. Advocates should employ these strategies more often in their own communications, sustain their use, and encourage others in and outside of the field to do the same.

FINDING:

Organizations describe adolescents in a variety of contexts.

In interviews with experts in the field, adolescence was described as a period when the scope of relevant social contexts and influences expands.[11] In our analysis, organizational materials *do*

discuss adolescents in a range of contexts, including school, community, and at-risk settings (see Table 5).

Table 5: Mentions of Setting in Organizational Materials

Developmental Domain	Percent of Organizational Materials
Home	13%
School	41%
Community	52%
Afterschool	31%
At-risk	9%
Health care	8%
Online	5%
None mentioned	7%

Implications

Showing adolescents in a range of different contexts has positive implications for public thinking. It allows people to identify a range of contexts outside of the home that influence adolescent development, including schools, after-school programs, communities, and public systems. This relatively wide recognition of influences allows communicators to message about the importance of a broad set of factors and can be cued to expand the public's ecological understanding of adolescent development.

FINDING:

Organizations focus on positive influences on and outcomes of adolescent development.

Experts understand adolescence as a time of heightened risk-taking and sensitivity to social status and rewards, but they see these features of development as adaptive and normative, not inherently problematic. In a supportive context, risk-taking and social attunement drive learning and self-actualization. Our analysis found that organizations in the field of adolescent development are devoting a good amount of their communications real estate to positive influences in adolescents' lives and the emergence of positive outcomes from this developmental

period. Almost 60 percent of pieces in the sample described the ways in which parental, peer, educational, community, or societal influences contribute to positive developmental outcomes for youth. In contrast, only 24 percent described the negative influence of these factors.

Implications

Earlier phases of research found that members of the public understand adolescence as a time of risk and danger—not as a period of positive development where positive outcomes can be created or where communities and environments can be structured to improve outcomes. This negative conception of adolescence, and of the environments in which adolescents develop, was mirrored in media discourse, where coverage of adolescent issues was dominated by risks, danger, and negative outcomes, rather than potential opportunities.[12]

Research with members of the public showed that people draw on what FrameWorks calls the *Family Bubble* when thinking about who bears responsibility for adolescent outcomes. In this line of thinking, people understand the immediate family as the primary context of importance. When thinking about adolescence, however, the public also tends to "perforate" the *Family Bubble*. In other words, they recognize the importance of influences outside the family, including schools and teachers, entertainment media, and, especially, adolescents' friends and peers. When it comes to adolescents, these factors are assumed to be equally, and sometimes more, influential than the family in shaping adolescent behavior and outcomes.

Our analysis found that organizations that advocate for or work with adolescents consistently tell a counternarrative that *does* address some unproductive patterns of public thinking. For example, depicting adolescents in a variety of settings (as some materials did) leverages the productive aspects of the *Perforated Family Bubble* by emphasizing the responsibility that individuals outside of the immediate family have for adolescent outcomes. Organizations that focus on the positive influences on adolescent development can neutralize the overwhelmingly negative associations that people make when thinking about this period. These are productive and important framing strategies that communicators should amplify.

Organizational materials tell stories about systems, quality, and access inconsistently.

Our analysis revealed a promising narrative cluster that closely aligns with key messages that experts are attempting to communicate, such as the fact that adolescence is a time when social and economic inequities are widened, affecting education and economic attainment and social relationships in and beyond adolescence. The *Race and Equity* narrative, found in 31 percent of materials in the sample, communicates this message by focusing on the racial and socioeconomic factors that shape adolescent development.

This narrative explains how societal conditions and structural forces shape adolescent outcomes and how societal-level interventions improve them. These stories also discuss the impact of interventions beyond individual adolescents. The following passages exemplify the *Race and Equity* narrative in their focus on access to and availability of services and the way in which they tell a "systems story" rather than an individual one.

> After Kiara got in her school fight last year, the systems around her prevented her from falling through the cracks. Students in Connecticut who act up get access to counseling, summer jobs, after-school activities, mentors and medication. Communities have defunded programs that contribute to the school-to-prison pipeline. For example, officials in Bridgeport, Connecticut's most populous city, have limited the number of police officers inside schools and have discouraged them from arresting students. Even after the deadly elementary-school shooting in nearby Newtown, the district resisted the urge to become more punitive. Research shows that police presence is connected to higher arrest rates for a range of infractions, including disorderly conduct and vandalism.[13]
>
> The Annie E. Casey Foundation's 2017 Race for Results report shows that persistent challenges in opportunities for success and wellbeing after the recession hinder children of color and kids living in immigrant families, especially African American, Latino and American Indian kids. Race for Results, released today, underscores the formidable risks to healthy child development, such as poverty, limited educational opportunities and family separation, in immigrant families and for children of color, exacerbated by policies that limit resources and restrict access. The report comes at a time when the nation's lawmakers consider policy changes that will affect the 800,000 young people who have been granted a reprieve from fear of deportation through the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) program.[14]

The documents in this cluster highlight the structural barriers that create disparate outcomes for different groups of adolescents, especially those in low-income areas and communities of color.

Implications

By depicting racial and socioeconomic disparities as an issue of access, and attributing lack of access to systems and policies, materials in this cluster expand the public discourse about adolescent development in significant ways. This is particularly important because equity, as it pertains to adolescence, is off the public's radar. This productive, systems-level story is, however, relatively uncommon (and present in less than one-third of organizational materials). Therefore, more organizations must tell this story more consistently, and they must focus on axes of inequity beyond racial and socioeconomic disparities, such as gender, ability, and sexuality.

Recommendations and Conclusion

This report comes to a promising conclusion: In some critical ways, the field is communicating about adolescents and adolescent issues in ways that align with expert perspectives. Organizations are representing young people in a range of settings outside of home and school; presenting young people as leaders who play important roles in their communities; and focusing on the structural causes of, and solutions to, disparities in adolescent outcomes. If amplified and sustained, these framing strategies will change the public discourse, shift culture, and ultimately increase public engagement with effective policies and practices.

There are, however, important ways in which the field is reflecting and even reinforcing misunderstandings in public thinking. Despite its best intentions, the field is not telling a full and complete story about adolescent issues. Experts and advocates can deepen and broaden existing narratives by following the recommendations below. Subsequent research will build upon these recommendations and explore the most effective ways of executing them.

1. **Explain the process of adolescent development.**
   Organizations rarely tell a developmental story in their communications. To begin to tell this story, start with a communications audit that explores whether existing materials answer these fundamental questions: What is adolescent development? How does it happen? Why is it important? What can be done to support it? Later phases of FrameWorks research will develop strategies and explanatory tools to help communicators effectively tell this story.

2. **Deepen public understanding of how developmental capacities are built.**
   The field needs to describe how quality programs support adolescents' growth and autonomy. Communicators should use examples of effective programs to explain how these developmental competencies can be built. However, communicators must go beyond briefly mentioning programs or listing activities. Effective examples provide a clear causal pathway that (1) lays out a particular challenge, (2) describes how a program or policy addresses that challenge, and (3) details the positive (and collective) outcomes that result.

3. **Emphasize the broader societal impact of adolescent development.**
   The field needs to frame the importance of healthy adolescent development beyond individual factors like academic or personal success. Instead, it must consistently explain why adolescent development is of *collective* concern. In future research, FrameWorks will explore the role of shared values that activate our sense of collective responsibility for supporting

young people. In the meantime, the field can start by simply naming the collective impact that adolescents have on our future workforce, the vibrancy of our communities, and the strength of our democracy. Even small changes to communications can signal these collective impacts, such as using first-person voice (e.g., we) instead of third-person voice (e.g., them).

4. **Balance discussions between risk and opportunity.**

   The good news is that organizations are speaking widely about positive influences on adolescent development. This stands in contrast with popular discourse on adolescence, which is attuned to threats and corrupting influences in young people's lives. Communicators must help the public understand adolescence as a period of heightened sensitivity to *both* positive *and* negative influences. If communicators accomplish this critical framing task, they will be better positioned to create widespread support and demand for policies that both reduce harm reduction and support positive development.

   One place to start is the *Resilience Scale*—a metaphor that explains the risk and protective factors that shape adolescent outcomes and the social determinants of adolescent development. This metaphor compares development to a scale and explains how positive and negative factors shape outcomes., as in this passage:

   > As adolescents develop, positive and negative factors in their experiences, relationships, and skill-building opportunities stack up like weights on a scale, tipping development toward good or bad outcomes. Supportive relationships, safe and healthy environments and communities, and opportunities to develop strong cognitive, social, and emotional skills tip the scale positively; negative factors like violence, chronic trauma, neglect, or malnutrition do the opposite. We need to recognize adolescents' developmental needs and address their circumstances and behaviors in ways that do not stack the odds against them.

5. **Amplify productive communications patterns.**

   Organizations are constructing a new image of adolescence, but these frames are not coming out of the field with sufficient force or frequency to change the larger public discourse. Organizations don't control the media, of course, but they can take steps to shape the landscape.

   ▸ *Get in the media.* In a separate analysis of media content, we found that that experts and spokespeople for nonprofit organizations comprise only 14 percent of messengers in media pieces [link]. Organizations need to unify around productive frames and disseminate them into the mainstream media as widely as possible.

▸ *Make sure all frame elements are in alignment.* Productive communications patterns are amplified when they are supported by other frame elements in the message. For example, when focusing on the positive influences on adolescent development, organizations should make sure that visuals support this message by depicting adolescents engaging in prosocial behaviors and activities. When talking about the structural causes of disparities in adolescent outcomes, organizations should make sure that images show social contexts.

▸ *Coalesce around a common framing strategy.* FrameWorks' research, as well as a rich body of scholarship on social movements, shows that when movements coalesce around a unified framing strategy, they are better able to mobilize the public to take action.[15] In addition to using and amplifying the productive framing strategies in this report, organizations should encourage others in the field to engage in similar framing practices.

Appendix A: Organizational Sample

Our sample included materials from the following organizations:

- 4-H
- Afterschool Alliance
- The Annie E. Casey Foundation
- The Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL)
- Forum for Youth Investment
- The Gay, Lesbian, Straight Education Network (GLSEN)
- Human Impact
- Mott Foundation
- National Collaboration for Youth
- National League of Cities
- The Neutral Zone
- National Network for Youth
- Plan International USA
- Robert Wood Johnson Foundation
- Sex, Etc.
- Society for the Prevention of Teen Suicide
- Spark Action
- Students Against Destructive Decisions (SADD)
- Youth-Centered Health Design
- Youth Leadership Institute
- Young Minds Advocacy

Appendix B: The "Untranslated" Story of Adolescent Development

To distill key messages from the science of adolescent development, FrameWorks conducted 18 one-on-one, one-hour interviews with experts in the field and six focus groups with researchers studying this period of development. The list of participants was compiled in collaboration with the Center for the Developing Adolescent and FAST and was designed to reflect a diversity of perspectives and areas of expertise within the field. Interviews were conducted in late 2016 and early 2017 and, with participants' permission, were recorded and transcribed for analysis.

This section distills the key themes that emerged from analysis of interviews, focus groups, and feedback sessions with those studying adolescent development from a variety of perspectives. These themes constitute the "untranslated" expert story of adolescence: the core set of understandings that researchers want to be able to communicate.

This untranslated story is organized around four broad questions:

1. What is adolescence and why is it important?
2. What changes occur during adolescence?
3. What are the key factors that influence adolescent development?
4. How can policy and practice better support adolescent development?

What is adolescence and why is it important?

- Adolescence is a period of multiple phases and transitions that begins with the onset of puberty and ends when individuals assume the roles, rights, and responsibilities of adulthood. Experts noted that when adolescence begins and ends can vary substantially across individuals and cultures. They also noted that, globally, the period of adolescence is elongating due to an earlier onset of puberty and a delay in assuming adult rights, roles, and responsibilities.

- Adolescence is a time of significant and, at times, rapid change in physical, neurobiological, and psychosocial development. These changes may occur at different times for different people. Many of the changes that take place during this period of life, such as increases in risk-taking behavior or heightened sensitivity to social status and rewards, are adaptive parts of the developmental process; they are vital for the learning

and change that takes place during this time of life. These features of adolescence are not and should not be viewed as inherently problematic.

- Adolescence is a time for individuals to become purposeful, self-reliant, and socially engaged. One strategy to support adolescence is facilitating exploration and cultivating adolescents' physical, emotional, social, and intellectual needs. Promoting these domains helps facilitate a successful transition to adulthood.

- Adolescent development lays the foundations for lifelong wellbeing. Experts noted that adolescence has far-reaching implications for physical and mental health throughout life, involvement with the justice system, educational attainment, and economic productivity. Both positive (such as good study habits, love of a sport) and negative (such as substance misuse, physical inactivity) behaviors that begin in adolescence can become habitual and persist throughout the lifespan. While these core life skills can be built throughout the lifespan, it becomes harder and more expensive as we age.

- Adolescent development has social, economic, and public health implications for society. Experts emphasized that the process of adolescent development has effects and implications that extend beyond the individual. When adolescent development goes well, the effects are felt by communities, states, and the nation in the form of increased contributions to the labor market and to civic and community life. The opposite is also true: when adolescents do not have the support they need for positive and healthy development, negative effects are experienced by the whole of society.

What changes occur during adolescence?

Experts focused on the following changes that occur during adolescence:

- Adolescence is a period when the social factors that influence individuals and the influence that they have on their social environment expand. The social environment includes adolescents' friends and peers, teachers and schools, communities and wider cultural influences (including the media). While adolescents increasingly seek out and are influenced by their social environments, families remain a critical influence during this time of life.

- Autonomy and social integration are central components of adolescent development. Experts described a complicated balancing act between the need to assert independence from parents and family, the need for parental support, and the need to fit into various

groups. Parents play an important role in scaffolding adolescents' exploration of the world in ways that are autonomous, but safe, structured, and age appropriate.

- Identity formation is an important component of adolescence. Adolescents' identities are forged through interactions with others, especially peers. Adolescents become increasingly capable of formulating and articulating their values, goals, and interests, which inform their understanding of their own position within society.

- Social and economic inequities can be widened during adolescence, affecting education, economic attainment, and social relationships. For example, adolescence is a time when different rates of health problems, particularly mental health issues, emerge between young men and women. This is likely caused by the interaction of biological (e.g., differences in average onset of puberty) and socio-cultural factors (e.g., harmful gender norms).

- Puberty contributes to important biological, social, and behavioral changes. During puberty, the body releases hormones that result in rapid physical growth (including the emergence of sex-specific physical characteristics), sexual maturity, increased metabolism, and changes in sleep and circadian rhythms. This rise in hormones affects neural structure and function and may influence adolescents' behaviors in response to changes in their environment and social context.

- Adolescence is an important period when cognitive, social, and affective skills are integrated. This includes the integration of skills related to the ability to monitor, inhibit, and modify behavior in the service of long-term goals, and encompasses emotion regulation, goal-setting and self-monitoring with a growing proficiency for abstract thought, sophisticated reasoning, social perspective-taking, and emotion regulation.

- Adolescence is a time of important changes to the brain. These changes underlie many of the learning and behavior changes that take place during this period of life.

    - Adolescence is a period of high neuroplasticity when the brain's development is particularly sensitive to environmental influences. Experiences during this time of life are particularly formative and can have significant and lasting effects.

    - During adolescence, the brain refines and stabilizes its neural connections for later efficiency. New connections form to integrate disparate brain regions. This refinement and stabilization process allows adolescent learning in various areas to integrate and consolidate. New information and experiences occurring at this

time may therefore play a particularly powerful role in sculpting the adult brain. An increase in exploration, experimentation, and risk-taking may occur during adolescence to enhance the information gathered for this process. In this way, exploration and risk-taking support successful development and, at the same time, increase vulnerability.

- The changes in the brain occurring during adolescence lead to changes in motivation and increased sensitivity to certain types of learning experiences. At the same time, individual experience also shapes the developing brain. This is a two-way process where brain changes affect adolescent behavior and adolescent behavior affects the ways in which the brain changes.

What are the key factors that influence adolescent development?

- Social relationships were identified as one of the primary shapers of adolescent development. Adolescents need opportunities to grow and develop identities and figure out how they fit into their social worlds. Successfully navigating this stage of life depends on quality and nurturing relationships with adults and peers, as well as opportunities for community and civic engagement. In contrast, social isolation and other forms of severe disruption to social relationships during adolescence increase risks for negative outcomes in a number of areas, from school failure to mental health problems. Positive feedback and praise from parents, educators, and other respected adults supports positive adolescent development, especially when it emphasizes effort and perseverance.

- A reciprocal relationship exists between the social environment and adolescent development. Social and cultural contexts influence how adolescents develop; in turn, their development changes the social and cultural context they experience. Social and cultural factors including beliefs, values, and practices; socioeconomic resources; and social and structural factors can support or compromise adolescent development. Adolescents' agency in the co-creation of their social and cultural contexts plays an increasingly important role in their development, but it cannot override the powerful impact of many larger factors (e.g., neighborhood resources, school quality, racism, stereotyping, and discrimination) that are beyond their control.

- Researchers voiced the need for scaffolded, safe, sequenced, and satisfying ways of engaging adolescents' need for exploration and experimentation. Parents, caregivers, schools, and communities should provide opportunities for adolescents to take "positive risks," which can include participating in unmonitored time with peers, playing team sports, meeting new people, and trying out new activities and interests. These

opportunities allow adolescents to practice making healthy, independent choices, even if they carry risk and the possibility of failure.

- In contrast, some phenomena that emerge during adolescence, such as negative risk-taking and mental health problems, can have adverse effects that last into adulthood. These phenomena include behaviors such as smoking, unprotected sex, accidents, and gang involvement, and mental health problems such as depression, eating disorders, schizophrenia, and substance misuse and addiction, all of which can lead to dramatic increases in mortality and morbidity during adolescence and later in life. Understanding the trajectories of these adverse outcomes, and the factors that predict their onset, is critical for informing early intervention and prevention efforts.

- Chronic stress undermines healthy development and can stem from a variety of factors, including excessive academic pressure, conflictual and/or unsupportive family relationships, maltreatment, peer victimization, social isolation, poverty, and community violence, among others. Repeated exposure to stress can sensitize the body's response to future stressors, interfering with adolescents' capacity to regulate their emotions and behavior.

How can practice and policy better support adolescent development?

While researchers were cautious about making programmatic and policy recommendations based on the available scientific evidence, they agreed on the need to leverage developmental science to inform our understanding of the targets (timing, social contexts, etc.) for prevention, early intervention, and policy. This requires teams of researchers and practitioners with a clear focus on implementation research that tests the application of general principles from developmental science to specific outcomes (e.g., violence, sexual and reproductive health, educational attainment, etc.). The primary goal of this work must be to maximize opportunities and minimize vulnerabilities. To exemplify this approach, experts identified the following examples:

- Researchers argued that health and child welfare systems should support families more effectively during the transition to adolescence. The quality of family relationships during early adolescence is a key predictor of many adolescent health and behavioral outcomes. However, no system-wide policies specifically support families during the period when children transition from childhood to adolescence. Yet adolescence is a time of high parental concern about children's preparedness to skillfully navigate change (thus creating readiness to access and learn from interventions). Many health and welfare systems see the transition to parenthood at birth and infancy as a key time to support

families; a similar argument can be made for the need to support families during children's transition to adolescence.

- There is a need for developmentally sensitive education systems that better fit and meet adolescents' needs. Experts agreed that schools are not currently optimized to promote adolescent wellbeing. They emphasized the need for school environments that enhance young people's intellectual autonomy and creativity and provide them with opportunities to explore and experiment. Resources reflecting the social and emotional capabilities and needs of adolescents should be incorporated into teacher training and professional development. Consideration of the mismatch between the timing of the school day and the sleep and circadian rhythms of adolescents should be considered in designing school structure and schedule.

- Researchers also called for developmentally sensitive modifications to the juvenile justice system that respond to the developmental capabilities and needs of adolescents. Several experts criticized the practice of trying adolescents as adults in the justice system, arguing that adolescents have diminished responsibility for criminal acts. They also noted that there should be a greater focus on rehabilitation than punishment, given the malleability of adolescent neurobiology and behavior. Adult prisons deprive adolescents of the inputs they need to develop into successful adults, such as positive social relationships and cognitive stimulation.

- Public systems should be designed to meet the needs of adolescents. Researchers called for public services to be developmentally informed and consistent with the ways in which adolescents prefer to access services and information. Proposed changes include:

  - Avoiding what one expert called a "transition cliff" when youth age-out of services (e.g., in the foster care, mental health, and juvenile justice systems) and find themselves without the supports they need to navigate adult systems. For example, many mental health services end when youth reach age 18, which coincides with the highest incidence rate for psychiatric disorders. Experts called for a more seamless transition in public services that is guided by developmental rather than legal or bureaucratic considerations (such as the use of a "youth" model to provide mental health services across the highest period of risk for onset, i.e., the period when individuals are between 14 and 24 years old).

  - Policies and programs should take the heterogeneity of adolescent development into account. This includes recognizing that different kinds of policies and

programs are appropriate at different times during adolescence and that these times vary across individuals.

- Legislative efforts should simultaneously increase autonomy and learning while reducing harm, reflecting the reality that experimentation and risk-taking are a normative part of adolescent development. This requires a delicate balance of policies that promote autonomy and scaffolding for adaptive, developmentally appropriate learning (e.g., driving a car; navigating romantic and sexual relationships; assuming legal culpability for minor offences) and those that deter specific behaviors that create biological vulnerability during adolescence and do not facilitate adaptive learning (e.g., tobacco use, drug use, and unhealthy food consumption).

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Busso, D., O'Neil, M., Down, L., & Gibbons, C. (2018). *Amplifying positive frames: The shape of organizational discourse on adolescent development*. Washington, DC: FrameWorks Institute.

Endnotes

[1] Busso, D., Volmert, A., Kendall-Taylor, N. (2018). *Building opportunity into adolescence: Mapping the gaps between expert and public understandings of adolescent development.* Washington, DC: FrameWorks Institute.

[2] In this report, we refer to items in the sample (including articles, blog posts, web copy, or other content included in the analysis) as *materials* and occasionally as *communications*.

[3] To improve the stability of the model, we omitted from the analysis codes with a prevalence of less than 10 percent or collapsed them with other thematically related codes.

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[15] See for example, see: Benford, R. D. & Snow, D.A. (2000). Framing processes and social movements: An overview and assessment. *Annual Review of Sociology* 26:611-639; Iyengar, S. (1991.) *Is anyone responsible?: How television frames political issues.* Chicago: University of Chicago Press; and Snow, D. A., Rochford, E.B. Jr., Worden, S.K., and Benford, R.D. (1986.) Frame alignment processes, micromobilization, and movement participation. *American Sociological Review* 51:464-481.