# Framing Child & Youth Development

*A FrameWorks MessageBrief for the National Collaboration for Youth and the National Human Services Assembly*

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## Background

The National Human Services Assembly (NHSA), an association of leading national nonprofit human services organizations, is in the process of "reframing" human services. Our vision for the outcome of a strong human service system is that everyone has access to the opportunities needed to thrive and live meaningful lives. One obstacle to achieving this vision is the way the public views the role and value of human services.   Over the last few years, the NHSA has undertaken a major national initiative to address this problem. We aim to reframe how the general public and policy makers understand human services, and begin the work of building broader and deeper public support for improving lives in the diverse communities we serve. We are using an approach that is grounded in communications science and developed by the FrameWorks Institute. Our goal is to much more effectively communicate the critical role human services play in both sustaining human dignity and fostering community wellbeing.

The National Collaboration for Youth (NCY) – a coalition of fifty youth-serving (and youth-interested) organizations within the NHSA membership – has been a key collaborator in the reframing initiative and has also sought to develop common language for its affiliates to use when talking about positive child and youth development in ways that are not specific to an organization or specific forms of practice. FrameWorks Institute, another key partner in our reframing initiative, also has been engaged in research on framing early childhood development and adolescent/youth development for more than fifteen years. Consequently, the Assembly invited FrameWorks to highlight the findings and recommendations of their voluminous research on these vital topics (for more details, please see Appendix A). In response, the FrameWorks Institute produced the following synthesis of their work on framing early childhood and youth development for use by both the members of the Assembly and the National Collaboration for Youth.

## This MessageBrief

Using this MessageBrief, professionals in the field of early childhood and youth development will be able to better understand how to communicate effectively with the public and with civic leaders about what it takes to maximize positive outcomes for children and youth.

To provide a broad overview of the communications context and challenges for advocates, this document begins with a look at the frames currently in circulation when talking about issues surrounding children and youth. We then identify key concepts that emerge from FrameWorks' translation of developmental science (such as brain plasticity and resilience) which have proven productive in broadening public understanding of early childhood issues. We offer as well those explanatory metaphors that have emerged from more recent work on school-aged children.

Finally, the MessageBrief concludes by offering examples of the most immediately applicable and best-tested strategies for reframing child and youth development. The full research reports and MessageMemos from which these summaries are taken are available at www.frameworksinstitute.org.

## How Are Youth Issues Currently Being Framed?

When framing issues of child/youth development, the media most commonly focuses on issues of **parental responsibility** and **crime prevention and safety**.[1] FrameWorks' researchers explain that these frames have the effect of reinforcing individual-level solutions and obfuscating the need for systemic change. Consequently, complex social and cultural issues as they pertain to youth development are not understood as such, and instead are seen as the result of individual parents' and/or youths' ignorance, bad choices, or laziness. Further, framing the story in this way also renders the development processes invisible. Further, this way of thinking obscures the connections between solutions designed by experts and the problems they are intended to resolve. (This last point will be discussed in greater depth in the Communications Challenges section of this memo.)

In an introduction to a special issue that FrameWorks authored for *New Directions For Youth Development*, researchers explore the consequences of invoking "parental responsibility" as the primary frame when discussing youth development:

> *When the public is confronted repeatedly with such framing, considerations of the family as solely responsible for children's development become more easily triggered and relied on to evaluate policy solutions. So evaluation and judgments about a range of issues that affect children—from pre-K, to child nutrition, to after-school programs—are often thought to be assailable by parental action alone.[2]*

A major problem with this "family bubble" cultural model is that it makes it easy to blame parents and hard to see shared societal responsibility for children and youth at the community level. Thus, this framing fails to invite thinking about how community-level programs might in fact make families more effective while strengthening communities.

In framing youth development programs, "crime prevention and safety" has been for many years *the* dominant frame utilized. While this may increase public support for some programs in the short term, it does so at the cost of long-term goals, which undermines overall impact. Continued use of the crime prevention frame allows the public to fall back on the cultural stereotype of "teens as criminals," reversing the gains in understanding made by other efforts. Additionally, talk of youth safety tends to exacerbate concerns of safety rather than to allay them.[3] In more recent research, FrameWorks has found this dominant frame to be contestable using a developmental frame. Borrowing from its work on early childhood development and executive function, FrameWorks modified and tested the *Brain's Air Traffic Control System* metaphor to help people think about the ways that decision making and judgment are affected by particular systems in the brain that are developing during adolescence. When adults

were exposed to this frame, they were better able to think and talk about the need for a juvenile justice system that targets the developmental and maturational needs of children and youth, across both communities and developmental periods. Ultimately, use of the metaphor helped to bring the need for a developmentally appropriate juvenile justice system into the conversation.[4]

FrameWorks' research has underscored the media's role in distancing adults from youths—for example, overemphasizing crime and bad news, segregating portrayal of teens from interactions with people in other age groups, and tending to focus on unusual teenagers, such as those who commit atrocious crimes or heroic feats, rather than on more typical teenagers. In response, adults were observed to take a "spectator stance" toward teens, objectifying them, perhaps feeling sympathy for their plight but not empathy, while remaining skeptical about the outcomes.[5] These ways of thinking are reinforced by Americans' lack of a cultural model for mentoring young people, which makes it difficult to imagine the positive outcomes that might result from youth programs.


## Shared Communications Challenges for Child and Youth Advocates

While recent research shows a promising movement toward greater understanding of community as vital in child and youth development, lack of specific knowledge concerning the interactive effects of community resources with the developmental process persists, making it difficult for people to imagine exactly how children and youth might be supported by their communities.[6] This challenge is exacerbated by cultural models that the public employs in thinking about children, e.g., the "just add water" model of development, in which children and teenagers "just grow up." Following this line of reasoning, children develop naturally without much support or assistance, as plants do. All that they might require from caregivers is occasional watering.[7] Importantly, the commonly used metaphor of children as plants does not provide a way for people to think about how change happens, what develops when, or the role of different systems that underlie the developmental process.[8]

Further, those who are communicating about youth development have an additional communications challenge in that during the period of adolescence, youth are thought to have reached a stage where they are relatively formed and self-contained. This "container" model focuses attention on context and control as the exclusive determinants of change—the impermeable container "allows" change in, or wards it off, through individual acts of judgment. This model obscures thinking about the role of biology both as a mediating variable and as the medium of change. Since people tend to assign responsibility for controlling the container at around the age of adolescence, this model limits people's ability to see how experiences and environments, rather than acts of individual choice, shape adolescent development. For experts, awareness of the importance of experiences and environments is key.

At the core of all of these challenges is a lack of sufficient public understanding of both child and youth development. As noted recently by FrameWorks researchers in a strategic brief about self-regulation, adolescence and intervention, Americans have only a loosely organized model of early child and youth development, leaving them to view what happens inside the brain as a "black box" or invisible process. While people are comfortable using the term "develop" to describe the gradual acquisition of skills and capacities through natural growth and maturation, this comfort "masks an underlying fuzziness about how development works and what actually develops."[9] The major implication of this "black box" thinking, noted across issue areas by FrameWorks, is that when the public doesn't understand how something works, it is ill-equipped to support policy solutions or other processes designed to improve outcomes.

For developmental scientists, on the other hand, childhood and adolescence are both key times of change that are influenced by a complex interaction among environments, genetic constitution, and neurobiological systems.  This understanding explains the need for community interventions in

controlling environments and promoting positive experiences. Thus, in communicating the science, the shared concepts of brain plasticity and sensitive periods have potential for particular effectiveness. Changes that happen in the brain during earlier periods of heightened plasticity influence how the brain is shaped during subsequent periods of heightened plasticity. Thus, the developmental concept of plasticity provides a bridge for communicators in underscoring the need for promoting positive, supportive, and healthy environments in which both young children and adolescents can develop to their full potential.

Research reveals that:

*Americans have default perspectives from which they can appreciate, at a very general level, several of the points that comprise the expert account of plasticity —that people have the ongoing capacity to change, that this capacity changes over the life course, and that both early childhood and adolescence are key periods in which change occurs. The devil, however, is in the details: a major finding of this research is that, while experts recognize clear causal mechanisms and possess a process-based understanding of how and why brains change, members of the public struggle to understand these processes. From a science translation perspective, these difficulties in thinking about process are problematic and require attention."*[10]

In other words, while the public may be aware that windows of opportunity for development exist, by and large, they do not understand how they work and why this matters.

## Shared Communications Goals for Child and Youth Advocates: The Promise of Plasticity

To bring the public into these expert ways of seeing, FrameWorks develops its reframing goals only after working with experts in the field to identify which information is essential to building the public's understanding of how development works and why it matters. These goals are then used to compare and evaluate public thinking and to identify the gaps that must be addressed.

Experts identify the following findings as critical in communicating with the public about development, and in particular, about the concept of plasticity. To effectively translate the science, communicators should work to convey the following ideas in their messaging, adapted from FrameWorks' "Map the Gaps" reports on both developmental plasticity and resilience to include adolescent as well as early childhood challenges:

- Development is an active process: children are not "empty vessels" or "sponges."
- Context is key: because the brain changes in response to environments and experiences, changing/improving those contexts can alter/improve developmental outcomes.
- Early matters: the brain's ability to change and the long-term impact of these changes are particularly pronounced in early childhood. It's always easier to "get it right the first time."
- . . . But so does later: different systems remain plastic to different degrees, which means that there are significant periods of plasticity after early childhood.
- Adolescence provides particularly potent opportunities to intervene, to promote positive outcomes, and to change negative or unhealthy developmental trajectories.

- Providing the right kinds of experiences at the right times is critical.
- Policies and programs designed to support healthy development are most effective when they are aligned with an understanding of when particular brain systems are most plastic, and to what types of experiences and environments these systems are susceptible.[11]

Here is where reframing comes in. Communicators need to prioritize explaining the science of child development and how it is related to adolescent development in order to help people make sense of the different policies and interventions designed to provide developmental support at these critical moments.  FrameWorks' reframing recommendations thus focus on the underlying mechanisms common across children in helping the public see that there are concrete ways to meet these needs.

As part of the prescriptive phase of its research process, FrameWorks has developed a suite of reframing strategies for early childhood development which can also be applied to talking about adolescent and youth development because, as discussed above, periods of heightened plasticity are linked.

# How Do FrameWorks' Tools for Communicating about Early Childhood Development Help?

In close collaboration with the Center on the Developing Child at Harvard University, FrameWorks has developed a Core Story of Early Childhood Development, or the concepts that must be explained to promote a better understanding of developmental science. Below is a summary:

- The basic architecture of the brain is constructed through an ongoing process that begins before birth and continues into adulthood.

- A complex interaction of genes and experiences shapes the developing brain. Relationships are the active ingredient in this process, activated by back-and-forth interactions referred to as "Serve and Return."

- Cognitive, emotional, and social capacities are inextricably intertwined and interwoven like "Skills Ropes." Learning, behavior, and physical and mental health are inter-related over the life course.

- While there are many kinds of stress, some of which can ultimately be positive, "Toxic Stress" damages the developing brain and leads to problems in learning and behavior and to increased susceptibility to physical and mental illness over time.

- Child development provides a strong foundation for community and economic development, because capable children become the adults who drive a prosperous and sustainable society.

Many of these concepts are explained in a four-minute animation created by FrameWorks and the Alberta Family Wellness Initiative. Additionally, the Center on the Developing Child shares a wealth of excellent resources on its website.[12] These strategically framed documents use frame elements—Values, Explanatory Metaphors, etc.—to meet the challenges identified above.

## *Values*

If we think about reframing as a set of choices we make about what to say and how to say it, one of the first things that must be stated in any communication is why the issue matters. This is important in establishing that child and youth development are public, not merely private, concerns that warrant public attention and investment.

Values establish what's at stake. And while there are many available values which may be used to communicate about child development, FrameWorks recommends only values that have been empirically tested and shown to improve public engagement. Specifically, a recommended value rallies support for policies and programs that experts believe would make a positive contribution to child development. FrameWorks Academy provides a more in-depth treatment of values and how they work as a communications tool.[13]

The following values—or shared beliefs that have the power to reorient thinking—have been tested to address a major challenge for those communicating about early childhood, namely, the belief that children are their parents' responsibility, and not that of their communities. The value of *Collective Prosperity* helps the public see how supporting children might benefit the greater good.

> **Collective Prosperity**: As we look for ways to keep our country prosperous, addressing both its civic and financial health, we need to think of the connection between child development and economic development.

As further elaborated in a recent strategic brief about adolescence, "when we devote societal resources to children at the very earliest stages of life, we foster the development of our economy and our society. Supporting the skills and capacities that begin developing in early childhood becomes the basis of a prosperous and sustainable society."[14] Defining prosperity as both economic and civic is especially important in using this value frame, since this allows for a broader array of youth programs to be understood as promoting healthy outcomes from which society will benefit.

A second value addresses a different challenge. It can be easy for the public to default to feelings of helplessness when confronted with systemic problems. The value of *Ingenuity* cues optimism by introducing thinking about the effectiveness of interventions:

> **Ingenuity**: When we invent and replicate high quality programs for children and youth, we can solve problems in early childhood development and show significant long-term improvements for children. Taking advantage of opportunities that arise as we understand science better allows us to innovate.

This value helps to convey not only that interventions are desirable, but also that they are *possible*.

## Explanatory Metaphors

To help people more easily and accurately absorb the complex issues of development, the FrameWorks Institute develops Explanatory Metaphors. These frame elements fundamentally restructure the ways that people talk and think about issues by referencing a topic that is more familiar as a way to understand something less well understood. A few of the most effective metaphors for talking about early childhood development are listed below:

*What Develops?*
**Brain Architecture**: Just as a house must be built with a strong foundation, the early years of life matter because early experiences affect the architecture of the maturing brain. The quality of that architecture establishes either a sturdy or fragile foundation for all of the development and behavior that follows.

*How Does It Develop?*

**Serve and Return**: Scientists now know that the interactive influence of genes and experience shape the developing brain. The active ingredient is the "serve and return" relationships with parents and other caregivers in a child's family or community. Young children naturally reach out for interaction by verbalizing, babbling, and through facial expressions (serve), however if adults do not respond (return), the child's learning process is incomplete.

*What Disrupts Development?*

**Toxic Stress**: There are different types of stress. Short periods of low-level stress are normal and healthy —this is positive stress. But other types can affect the body's alarm systems in ways that disrupt health and development. When toxic stress is not mitigated by consistent supportive relationships, it can lead to lifelong problems in learning, behavior, and both physical and mental health.[15] The idea of *toxic* helps to communicate the seriousness of adverse experiences. Further, establishing its effects on the brain provides a mechanistic, brain-based explanation that can dislodge notions of "stress is just emotions."

By focusing on the stressors to which children are exposed and how society can do a better job of addressing and reducing them, advocates can begin to make the community a positive actor in the developmental story. Further, by showcasing communities that are making that difference and detailing how systems have been changed to buffer young children from exposures that could derail development, communicators integrate community into the larger story.[16] See FrameWorks Academy for a more in-depth treatment of explanatory metaphors and how they work as a communications tool.[17]

In moving from talking about childhood to talking about adolescence, many of the same framing recommendations may be applied and extended, for example, *Brain Architecture* and *Air Traffic Control*. In talking about adolescents, use of these explanatory metaphors should include specific information on the special nature of adolescence—such as what parts of judgment and social identity are being connected in the brain—to make the process tangible and material to the topic. The immediate applicability is the primary advantage of this conceptual metaphor.[18] Both explanatory metaphors proved powerful in FrameWorks' recent research on juvenile justice, where the developmental frame was observed to encourage more progressive views on policies and programs affecting young people.[19] Here are two executions of these frame elements that demonstrate how they can be adapted to work for both young children and youth:

> ***Air Traffic Control.*** *The mental skills and abilities that a child develops play a huge role later in life. For example, the abilities to focus, pay attention, and ignore distractions are key. These skills begin to develop in early childhood, when they require lots of practice and support, but aren't fully developed and operational until the mid-20s. These abilities are like air traffic control at a busy airport, where lots of things have to be coordinated. Some planes have to land and others must take off, but there is only so much room on the ground and in the air. The human brain also has a mechanism for controlling its mental airspace.  It's called executive function. This mechanism enables our brains to create mental priorities and manage the flow of information so we can focus on tasks and make good decisions. We need to recognize that these systems are still developing in youth and make sure that communities give young people practice and support in using these skills.*

> **Brain Architecture.** *Our brains get built like the structure of a house—what comes first lays down the foundation for all that follows. So a child's early experiences and environments are critical to the durability of the child's later functioning. But as children grow, they encounter increasingly complex tasks and demands. Like the structure of a house, the brain needs to become functional in different ways to accommodate new expectations and requirements. Again, the experiences and environments that adolescents have available to them become the building materials that allow them to adjust to new demands, to support new skills, and to become a reliable member of society.*

Using the above framing recommendations to invite the public into a deeper understanding of development, it becomes much easier to show that youth programs are neither about filling time nor dumping information into passive mental vehicles. Rather, they are about the experiences that adolescents need and actively use to develop their skills, function in society, and shape a positive adulthood. Strategic recommendations for further accomplishing this in the domain of positive youth development include the following.

# Communicating about Adolescent/Youth Development

Advocates must emphasize the role that a variety of people in the community can play in supporting positive youth development, locating responsibility within the community. By designing communications that explain important aspects of development—how youth develop, how youth programs provide developmental experiences, and the impacts of environments and community—communicators lay a solid foundation for connecting experiences and interventions to outcomes. FrameWorks offers a learning module, "Wide Angle Lens," to help advocates deploy this particular aspect of framing.

## *Values*

In its research devoted specifically to adolescent development, FrameWorks has found two values that proved highly effective in elevating support for positive youth development programs and policies:

**Reciprocity** is a value that overcomes the tendency to distance adults from adolescents. Put simply, this value states that we give support to our young people now, so that they can grow up to become good citizens and contributing community members.

**Fairness Across Places** is a value that communicates the need for equity. Our goal should be to create a country where all children—regardless of where they live— have a fair chance to reach their potential and contribute to society. Creating fairness between places means making sure that there are quality youth programs in all parts of the country. To make this happen, we need to devote more resources to those areas where the current opportunities are patchy or low quality.[20]

## *Explanatory Metaphors*

A number of explanatory metaphors result from FrameWorks' development of the Core Story of Education. These reframing strategies were tested to address perceptual problems that attach to school-

aged children, including adolescents. We offer these here, as they tackle specific problems that are likely to arise in discussing how young people learn and develop skills, what access they have to community assets, and how communities might be better structured to meet their developmental needs.

- The explanatory metaphor *Pollination Points* was created to talk about how out-of-school learning programs reinforce education. The metaphor pulls from the idea that, just as pollinating insects have to touch multiple flowers and plants to do their important work, community programs engage students in multiple spaces, times, and activities. Thus, the metaphor shows a great deal of promise in establishing and explaining how it is that communities have the potential to provide critical support and stimulation in the form of youth development programs.

- The explanatory metaphor of *Charging Stations* was developed to help explain a variety of aspects of disparities in the context of education, including:

  - Explaining disparities in outcomes as the function of certain "upstream" disadvantages related to race, place, language and income.

  - Minimizing the importance of individual traits by establishing disparities in outcomes as population-level phenomena.

  - Neutralizing the zero-sum associations that often result from the ubiquitous "achievement gap" metaphor.[21]

The goal here, as with *the Fairness Between Places* value above, is to communicate in ways that focus attention on the unequal distribution of goods, goods that are essential to the developmental trajectory of our young people.

## Key Recommendation: Adapt the Resilience Scale Explanatory Metaphor in Communicating about Youth Programs

The *Resilience Scale* explanatory metaphor is one of the most powerful reframes FrameWorks has designed to explain resilience as a positive outcome in the face of significant adversity. A resilient outcome is the product of a wide variety of genetic, environmental, and social determinants of child wellbeing interacting at sensitive periods. This way of thinking, consistent with developmental science, is greatly at odds with public understanding that tends to favor a "bootstraps" model in which "what doesn't kill you makes you stronger," and in which external factors are largely subservient to character and willpower.[22]

Here is the outline of the metaphor:

- You can think of a child's life as a scale, and the things stacked on either side shape that child's development.

- Scales have two sides onto which factors are stacked.

- The factors placed on either side determine how the scale tips, but factors don't all weigh the same.

- We want children to have scales that tip positive.

- There is a fulcrum point that determines the effect of placing weight on either side—shaping how easily the arm of the scale tips in either direction.

- Children are born with a fulcrum point in a certain place, and its early position matters a lot, but it can also shift over time.

- Resilience is having a scale that's tipped positive even when a lot of things are stacked on the negative side.

- Scales can be counterbalanced and calibrated so as to achieve different inclinations.[23]

FrameWorks has also produced a short explanatory video that makes these points.

Because the metaphor focuses on process, it is useful in reframing the fatalistic idea that once development is derailed, it cannot be put back on track. This makes it particularly adaptable to talking about the continuity between early childhood and adolescent experiences and environments. Crucially, use of this metaphor opens up thinking about how developmental outcomes can be addressed and improved through multiple intervention strategies.

Explaining youth outcomes using *Resilience Scale* gives the public a way to understand that many factors can tip a scale to yield either positive or negative outcomes. In addition, the metaphor can help people visualize why some children, with many factors stacked against them, will need more intervention and "positives" stacked in their favor to shift their development toward a positive outcome.

When people understand the "way kids work," they can more readily assign responsibility to communities and to nonparental agents, offsetting the myopic concentration of responsibility on parents to "fix" their lack of access to essential developmental assets.


## *Examples: Communicating about Adolescent and Youth Development*

As FrameWorks explains in its toolkits, "these examples can be used flexibly—as a source of themes for longer written pieces, as short responses in media interviews or public appearances, or as setups to "pre-frame" a conversation on specific policy or program proposals. Each pulls from rigorously tested messages that have been shown to shift thinking away from common but unproductive ways of thinking about development, and to build the public's support for more effective supports and programs. They need not be used word for word, but when adapting, communicators should take care to maintain the core frame elements in each." [24]

To connect specific solutions to the problems of inadequate access, note how the metaphor *Pollination Points* is adapted here from talking about out-of school-learning as it was used in the STEM Education MessageMemo to talk instead about the need for youth programs:

> *Just as pollinating insects must touch multiple flowers to do their work, community programs can engage young people in multiple spaces, times, and activities that help students cross-pollinate skills and ideas in ways that truly develop their social and cognitive abilities and ways of thinking. We need to develop more of these pollination points in our schools and communities, integrating programs in community centers, health centers, afterschool programs, and other environments to come together as a community to increase opportunities for cross-pollination and strong development.*[25]

The following paragraph, adapted from FrameWorks' *Framing Early Child Development MessageBrief* demonstrates how a conversation about early childhood development might be adapted for youth development, combining the recommendations above into a new narrative:

> If our society is to prosper in the future, we will need to make sure that all of our youth have the opportunity to develop intellectually, socially and emotionally. Like three strands of a rope, these intertwined capacities strengthen later functioning into adulthood. But recent science demonstrates that many children's futures are undermined when stress damages the developing architecture of the brain at critical periods, such as adolescence. The stress may come from family tensions over a lost job or a death in the family, but the damage that is done from these critical experiences affects the foundation on which future growth must depend for either a strong or weak structure. Serious and prolonged stress—toxic stress—such as that caused by abuse or neglect, causes brains to release a chemical that stunts cell growth. When communities make family mental health and support services available so that early interventions can take place, they put in place a preventable system that catches our youth before they fall. When communities invest in mentorship programs, they also help to ensure that the basic foundation that has been developing since early childhood will be durable into adulthood. These early investments reap dividends as child development translates into economic development later on. A young person with a solid foundation becomes part of a solid community and contributes to our society.[26]

The following paragraph presents a similar message geared for positive youth development**,** adapted from *How to Talk About Youth Development*:

> As a society, it is our job to ensure that the future is in good hands, and that means making sure young people have access to a full range of opportunities throughout their childhood, so that they can take their place in stewarding our society when their turn comes. When young people get involved in the community, they are shaped by those experiences. Scientists tell us that adolescence is another of the great building moments in the development of the brain's architecture. The parts of the brain that control judgment, foresee consequences, and see complex interactions are all in play during this phase of growth. The opportunity to lead a discussion, to work with a group of seniors on a project, to mentor or be mentored in playing a musical instrument or performing in a play help make positive connections in the brain. The experiences children have in after-school and youth development programs literally build a foundation in the brain that transforms a young person into an engaged member of our community. And our society, our quality of life, benefits from the programs that support that healthy development.[27]

These and other such examples are included in communications toolkits, available in the "Learn to Frame" section of FrameWorks' website. For the National Collaboration for Youth, toolkits of interest might include: Talking Early Childhood Development, Talking About Disparities, Telling the STEM Chapter of the Education Core Story, Education Core Story, and many more.

# Conclusions

Ultimately, framing is the process of making choices about how to communicate. Strategic Frame Analysis™ uses evidence to help communicators make these choices, emphasizing the consequences of cueing specific responses in the interests of social change. This report has identified some of the major "frame elements" that should be considered when communicating about early childhood and adolescent youth development. Each of these frame elements has been rigorously tested using FrameWorks' interdisciplinary approach to social science research, and each serves a specific purpose or performs a communications "job" in discourse.

This resource has been compiled with the goal of helping members of the National Collaboration for Youth and National Human Services Assembly to feel more confident in their choices about language, to be able to communicate with greater intentionality and fluency, and to speak in one voice about commonly shared issues. It is only by uniting our efforts around common aspects of a shared narrative that we can help the public overcome unproductive ways of thinking about child and adolescent development and begin to appreciate what it would take to support child- and youth-serving organizations in their efforts to improve our society.

## About the Institute

The FrameWorks Institute is a national, nonprofit think-tank devoted to framing public issues to bridge the divide between public and expert understandings. Its work is based on Strategic Frame Analysis™, a multi-method, multi-disciplinary approach to empirical research. FrameWorks designs, commissions, publishes, explains and applies communications research to prepare nonprofit organizations to expand their constituency base, to build public will, and to further public understanding of specific social issues —the environment, government, race, children's issues and health care, among others. Its work is unique in its breadth—from qualitative, quantitative and experimental research, to applied communications toolkits, eWorkshops, advertising campaigns, FrameChecks™ and Framing Study Circles. See www.frameworksinstitute.org.

**Appendix A**

## FrameWorks' Research on Early Childhood and Youth Development

The FrameWorks Institute has been engaged in research on framing early childhood development and adolescent/youth development for more than fifteen years. Using an interdisciplinary approach to document public thinking, FrameWorks has illustrated significant gaps between how most Americans understand development and the complex understanding of experts. To fully describe these gaps, FrameWorks conducted in-depth interviews to identify and explore the cultural models[28]—deeply shared, but implicit patterns of understanding—that shape Americans' thinking about these concepts. FrameWorks also looked to the media for how early childhood development and youth development are being framed in the public square. Based on this descriptive understanding, FrameWorks then identified and tested values and language to determine what could more effectively reframe these issues in ways that reflect the intent of experts and at the same time, move people toward greater support for productive policies. Additionally, FrameWorks' most recent research on a Core Story of Education Reform examined public knowledge of adolescent experiences in formal and informal settings, a further application of this work that extends the original findings.[29] All in all, FrameWorks' research on these topics includes roughly 60,000 informants, across time and geography, making this an extraordinarily rich, pertinent and reliable data base.

# Appendix B

A suggested list of DOs and DON'Ts adapted and updated from FrameWorks' message brief Talking Adolescent Youth Development.

## When Talking about Adolescent Youth Development: [30]

| DON'T: | DO: |
|---|---|
| <ul><li>State the goal of youth development as a negative, i.e. keeping kids off the streets, or reducing crime</li><li>Explain the end-goal of adolescence as individual academic achievement or economic success</li><li>Show youth as segregated either among themselves or within the family bubble</li><li>Use the word teenager; use young people or youth instead</li><li>Use individual life stories to exemplify the transformation caused by successful youth development programs</li></ul> | <ul><li>Talk about the community's need for solid, healthy, decent, productive, well-rounded young people who will be able to give back and sustain the community</li><li>Remind people of adolescence as a developmental stage; use brain architecture to explain it as a biological and material process that which creates critical capacities</li><li>Use explanatory metaphors to explain the underlying mechanisms of child and youth development and how these interact with experiences and environments</li><li>Help people understand the documented positive impacts of meeting the developmental needs of young people. Link programs to developmental outcomes</li><li>Explain the interaction between young people and quality programs in developmental terms as developmental experiences</li><li>Show young people in the community, interacting positively with other adults.</li><li>Get community actors in the picture early, from mentors and role models to youth program leaders</li></ul> |

[1] M. O'Neil, "The family bubble, achievement gap, and development as competition: Media frames on youth," *New Directions For Youth Development*, no. 124 (Winter 2009): 40.

[2] L. Davey, "Issue Editor's Notes," *New Directions For Youth Development*, no. 124 (Winter 2009): 1.

[3] M. Bostrom, *A Developmental Perspective: An Analysis of Qualitative Research Exploring Views of Youth Programs*, Washington, DC: FrameWorks Institute (2004): 10, 17.

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