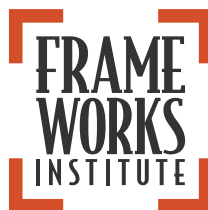# TALKING ABOUT EARLY CHILDHOOD DEVELOPMENT IN AUSTRALIA

Interim Guide for Communicators

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WHAT IS THIS GUIDE FOR?

It is easy to get lost in translation when talking about early childhood. There are a number of barriers to being heard and understood.

The public has multiple ways of thinking about children's development and the factors that shape it. This guide identifies the key challenges and opportunities for communicators. It provides guidance on navigating public beliefs and assumptions. It can help build better understanding of how children develop in the early years and why this matters to everyone.

This guide is part of the Core Story for Early Childhood Development and Learning in Australia, commissioned by CoLab, a partnership between the Telethon Kids Institute and the Minderoo Foundation. It builds on previous work on early childhood and parenting in Australia and precedes a comprehensive re-framing strategy to be published in 2020.

Key Challenges in Public Thinking and How to Address Them

CHALLENGE 1: PEOPLE ASSUME THAT DEVELOPMENT JUST HAPPENS

People tend to assume that development:

- "just happens", especially in very young children

- is as an automatic, natural process that requires little input or intervention.

From this perspective, problems with development are assumed to:

- be caused by too much meddling by anxious parents and wider society

- be the result of too much science affecting childhood and child rearing

- be a product of modern times

- require parents and wider society to "step back and get out of the way"

- only be solvable by a return to a simpler time when children could play outside unsupervised and mothers could stay at home to take care of them.

How to address this

Avoid activating the idea that development is automatic, even inadvertently. Talking about how children 'acquire new skills' or saying that 'children are able to' do particular things by certain ages can unproductively strengthen the idea that development 'just happens'.

Connect development with outside influences. **Explain** and show that the brain and body develop in response to experiences and environments. Talk about how genes interact with experiences to shape development, setting the path for future learning and health.

Broaden the meaning of 'environments', avoiding an exclusive focus on parental responsibility. Illustrate this with concrete examples like the quality of child care and community centres. Explain how things like poverty, working hours, access to transport and discrimination impact on families and children.

Highlight that development is a dynamic process. Emphasise that children take an active role in their development. Show that development is constantly being informed by the experiences that children have and the places they have them.

CHALLENGE 2: EARLY DEVELOPMENT IS SEEN AS BASIC AND INCONSEQUENTIAL

People often see early development as:

- simple and basic

- only mattering when children can speak

- limited in its impact and collective significance.

These ideas make it difficult for people to see the importance of and think about what can be done to better support early development.

How to address this

Avoid language that activates the idea that children inhabit simple, worry-free worlds (e.g. adjectives like 'basic', 'simple', 'easy' or 'silly').

Use language that emphasises the foundational nature of early development instead (e.g. adjectives like 'different', 'core', 'essential', 'first' or 'foundational').

Emphasise the active and responsive nature of early development and its potential long-term effects to ensure the public doesn't assume that 'basic' means 'unimportant' or 'doesn't need support'.

Use the brain architecture metaphor to communicate the idea that brains are built over time through an active and intentional process. Emphasise that the foundations are built in the early years.

> **Brain architecture metaphor**
>
> *Brains are built over time. Experiences shape this developing architecture. Having a sturdy foundation early improves health and wellbeing later on.*

Highlight the fact that early development involves processes that may not be visible to the naked eye.

Provide concrete examples of how experiences affect children even before they can speak.

Communicate about why and how infants and very young children can experience and be affected by specific emotions.

Balance examples of positive and negative experiences in discussions of early development to avoid cueing deterministic thinking about underserved communities in Australia.

CHALLENGE 3: ADVERSITY IN EARLY CHILDHOOD IS ASSUMED TO DO IRREVERSIBLE DAMAGE

People increasingly recognise the importance of early childhood as a critical window of development. However, they often:

- lose sight of the potential for plasticity: that the brain and body continue to change and adapt beyond early childhood

- become deterministic about the effects of adversity

- don't see the opportunities for positive change in early childhood and beyond

- assume that some communities are unable to support children's development because they don't have the right 'values', which gives rise both to fatalism and the idea that removing "those" children from their home is then the only way to protect them from adversity.

How to address this

Convey the idea that "the early years matter… but so does later".

Explain that there are periods of development where we are particularly open to influences. Early childhood is one of these times, but not the only one – adolescence is another.

Emphasise that developmental disruptions can be addressed by making changes to a child's environment of experiences and providing support.

Provide concrete examples of what "changing environments" looks like, to avoid activating family separation as the only solution.

Avoid statistics that talk about the prevalence of adversity unless they are carefully balanced by robust solutions messages and discussion of what can be done to improve outcomes.

Use the outcomes scales metaphor to explain how genetics and environmental factors interact.

> **Outcomes scales metaphor**
>
> *Positive experiences like supportive relationships can help to balance out more challenging ones, enabling children to have good health and wellbeing despite experiencing some adversity. We want outcomes for as many children as possible to tip positive.*

CHALLENGE 4: UNDERSTANDING OF EARLY CHILDHOOD DEVELOPMENT IS LIMITED TO THE BRAIN AND LEARNING

People increasingly recognise that the brain develops rapidly in the early years and that this shapes learning. But they do not connect early development with the rest of the body or with the idea of health.

How to address this

Connect brain development to the rest of the body, specifying the links between the brain and other systems in the body (e.g. the immune system or the circulatory system).

Explain that early development shapes lifelong health as well as skills.

Provide examples that illustrate the way that development shapes health.

CHALLENGE 5: TALKING ABOUT TECHNOLOGY CAN ENTRENCH NEGATIVE BELIEFS

While it is true that certain uses of technology can be detrimental to early development, the idea of "dangerous technology" can be counterproductive. This idea:

- leads people to think that modern life is *the* problem and that this is a problem *nothing* can solve
- closes people's minds to the idea of better supporting children and families
- leads to criticisms of science and intervention
- triggers stigmatisation and judgement of parents who do use technology with children
- obscures the idea that technology, when used appropriately, can support positive development.

Talking About Early Childhood Development in Australia

How to address this

Avoid leading with or focusing exclusively on the role of technology in early development.

Avoid purely negative representations of technology's role in development.

Balance technology's opportunities and risks for early development.

Explain – without judgement – that parents and caregivers build children's brains through their interactions, big and small, with children.

Provide practical, specific advice about the role of technology in early development. Include recommendations about the type and duration of screen time for each stage of a child's development and the type, duration and quality of support children need from adults and caregivers. Be clear which aspects of development can be supported by the use of technology.

CHALLENGE 6: PEOPLE DO NOT RECOGNISE OR UNDERSTAND CHILD MENTAL AND EMOTIONAL HEALTH

People assume that children's worlds are simple and worry-free. They:

- do not believe that young children are able to have mental health issues

- assume that children only start to be affected by mental states, emotions and stress when they are five or six

- define mental health as mental health *problems* and illnesses that must be addressed, not positive states of wellbeing that can be promoted

- assume that mental health issues in children are unnatural or a direct consequence of "modernity" and the overuse of technology

- associate mental health issues with a lack of control over emotions

- conclude that child mental health is something that only affects "other" communities – not an issue that concerns all Australian children and as a priority for Australian society as a whole.

How to address this

Define child mental and emotional health upfront. Show that it is as an essential component of early development and explain how it can be supported in Australia. Repeat this idea.

Highlight child mental health as a positive state before describing challenges to it. This is needed to shift people away from a purely negative conception of mental health. Use inclusive terms, emphasising what 'all children' need and avoid other language such as "those children".

Avoid the word 'control' when discussing child mental health or define it clearly where needed. The term 'control' can trigger stigmatising thinking about "those children" who are "out of control".

CHALLENGE 7: AN INDIVIDUALISTIC PERSPECTIVE DOMINATES THINKING ABOUT EARLY CHILDHOOD

People move between placing responsibility only on parents and seeing that circumstances shape lives and options. But the focus on parental responsibility normally dominates. People:

- have a partial understanding of how contexts shape early development

- believe the ultimate responsibility for healthy development remains with parents

- favour solutions focusing on the role of individuals like educating parents and raising awareness of existing support

- think of pregnant women as wholly responsible for healthy foetal development which is assumed to be determined by what pregnant women choose to consume

- believe that the government has a role but only a vague sense of what that should be.

How to address this

Use the navigating waters metaphor to show how parenting is affected by context and environments.

> **Navigating waters metaphor**
>
> *To develop healthily, children need life to be on an even keel. But for families experiencing poverty and stress, raising children can be like sailing in rough waters. Just as we provide lighthouses and safe harbours, we can help parents with support like counselling, quality child care and financial support.*

Highlight the supportive programmes that already work. **Explain** how they help children thrive by supporting parents and families.

Show how social factors and supportive programs can shape prenatal development.

CHALLENGE 8: HARMFUL SUBSTANCES DOMINATE THINKING ABOUT PRENATAL DEVELOPMENT

The public associates the prenatal period with:

- threat and vulnerability
- the potential for harmful substances to be passed through to the foetus during pregnancy and to cause irreparable damage.

How to address this

Present prenatal development as an opportunity to support *healthy* development at least as often as talking about threats and risks.

Avoid focusing exclusively on the chemicals that can harm the foetus during this time (e.g. mainly messaging about the dangers of alcohol, drugs and cigarettes).

Balance positive and negative influences on prenatal development, favour verbs that can trigger both positive *and* negative associations for people (e.g. 'influence', 'shape' and 'impact') instead of verbs that primarily denote threats and negative forms of impact (e.g. 'damage' and 'harm').

CHALLENGE 9: PROBLEMS WITH CHILD DEVELOPMENT ARE SEEN AS OTHER PEOPLE'S PROBLEMS

Adversity in early years and the derailed development that ensues are seen as:

- "us vs them" issues – a problem for specific communities that do not hold the right values, not a problem for society as a whole
- not associated with structural factors and inequalities that make a child more or less likely to experience adversity
- issues that activate entrenched stereotypes: the idea of government support for children's development focussed on disadvantaged families and communities can reinforce the notion that this is "those" people's problem, resulting from "bad values".

How to address this

Show how disadvantaged communities are part of and integral to Australian society.

Use 'we' language and talk about 'our communities' to emphasise that supporting children's healthy development is something that is important for all of us, not just for "those" people.

Use inclusive pronouns (such as 'we') as much as possible. Communicators should avoid referring to disadvantaged groups in the third person ('they') and emphasising distance and disconnection (e.g. 'that' or 'those'). This seemingly minor shift has significant potential to advancing public thinking.

Highlight, where appropriate, how culturally sensitive policies, or the provision of more intense support for communities who need it the most, complement policies and initiatives that support all families in Australia.

Emphasise the effects of discrimination, racism, and lack of access to structural supports when talking about issues that affect children in disadvantaged communities – especially Aboriginal communities.

CHALLENGE 10: FATALISM DOMINATES PUBLIC THINKING

The dominant beliefs and assumptions people hold about this issue lead to the idea that change is not possible or necessary. For instance:

- When modern life is assumed to be the problem, no policy – no matter how innovative and evidence-based – can turn back time.

- People tend to think that the support society provides is already more than adequate and generous. This leads people to believe that families and children who are not doing well must be making poor choices and failing to take advantage of the services that exist.

How to address this:

Balance urgency with solutions and the possibility of change.

Avoid stark statistics without also providing solutions, examples, and explanations.

Highlight what *can* be done:

- When talking about existing programmes and policies, explain how they work and where they need to be strengthened and expanded.

- When focusing on where existing programmes and policies are unable to meet every child's and family's needs, make it clear that there *are* concrete solutions that can be implemented to improve how the system works.

- When focusing on new policies, explain how they would work, who would be responsible for implementing them (being more precise than 'government'), and what they would achieve.

The Major Opportunity: People Value Play but Don't Understand Why it Matters and How it Works

People see play as:

- a key part of positive development

- a natural human instinct.

This makes play an effective way of framing early childhood development more generally. It can open people up and help them understand how young children develop and what they need.

How to use this opportunity

Explain *why* play is so valuable for early development. Emphasise that play is powerful *because* it's fun: children are motivated to have fun and they learn and develop skills as they do so.

Emphasise that play needs different types of support: encouragement, scaffolding, space and opportunity.

Use the serve and return metaphor to help people understand that playful relationships with supportive caregivers are critical parts of the brain-building process.

> **Serve and return metaphor**
>
> *Interacting back and forth with babies and children helps them to learn and grow. Like a game of tennis, babies and children 'serve' when they babble, gesture, or cry. When adults respond with kind words and gestures, it's like they're returning the ball. This back and forth is fun and great for children's development.*

Show the 'hidden treasures' of play: give examples of different types of play and explain how each supports positive development, highlighting elements that might not be obvious.

- Rough-and-tumble play supports the development of self-regulatory skills *as well as* motor skills and physical strength.

- Adults can facilitate and actively participate in healthy play *as adults,* they don't have to resort to being 'silly' or just staying in the background to keep kids safe. For instance, guided play supports learning in the classroom, playful 'serve and return' interactions with infants build connections in their brains.

- Imaginative play can help young children work through trauma and help adults gain a window into what they are thinking. It's not just about developing creativity.

Avoid language suggesting babies' play is 'simple', 'natural' or 'basic'.

Activate productive ideas in public thinking by emphasising the role of exploration and experimentation in learning and development.

ABOUT THE FRAMEWORKS INSTITUTE

The FrameWorks Institute is a think tank that advances the non-profit sector's communications capacity by framing the public discourse about social problems. Its work is based on Strategic Frame Analysis®, a multi-method, multidisciplinary approach to empirical research. FrameWorks designs, conducts, publishes, explains, and applies communications research to prepare non-profit organisations to expand their constituency base, build public will, and 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, ranging from qualitative, quantitative, and experimental research to applied communications toolkits, eWorkshops, advertising campaigns, FrameChecks®, and in-depth study engagements. In 2015, it was named one of nine organisations worldwide to receive the MacArthur Foundation's Award for Creative & Effective Institutions.

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