Taking Responsibility for Solutions:

Using Values to Reframe Child Maltreatment in the United Kingdom

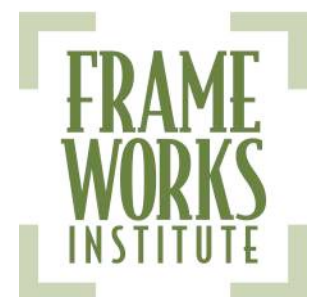**OCTOBER 2014**
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Introduction

There has been substantial progress in convincing the British public that child abuse and neglect is a problem, with widespread agreement that abuse is both prevalent and reprehensible. However, as FrameWorks has documented, members of the public remain uncertain about whether anything can be done to address this issue and about what steps should be taken to reduce rates of child maltreatment.[1] Those advocating for the well-being of children need strategies to help the public recognise that effective action is possible and to raise support for evidence-based solutions.

The research presented in this report, which was conducted on behalf of the National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children (NSPCC), tests the role of values in reframing child maltreatment. We present findings of a survey experiment that tested the effect of different values on people's thinking about child abuse and neglect. Values are broad perspectives that help people think about what an issue is about and why it matters. Values help people evaluate social issues and reach decisions.[2]

In addition to values, the experiment also tested the effects of including facts and solutions along with values. Findings offer evidence-based recommendations that communicators can use to generate greater public support for the solutions that are necessary to address this pressing social issue.

The way an issue is 'framed' strongly influences the chance that the public will embrace new ideas and solutions. Frames shape the way people attribute responsibility, understand how an issue works and support specific solutions. Knowing how to frame issues of abuse and neglect, therefore, is a vital component in creating real and sustained change in the lives of children and in improving the welfare of society.

Appealing to shared values is a key part of issue framing. Not only does an effective value motivate engagement, it also serves as an organising principle that shapes people's understandings and subsequent decisions. Without a value to anchor a message, people struggle to see the point of engaging with the issue. In addition, providing facts about the nature and extent of a social problem can increase the effects of values.[3] Similarly, descriptions of solutions can improve the effects of values by giving people a grasp of the concrete steps that can be taken to address an issue. Presenting facts and solutions together with values has the potential of motivating even greater issue engagement and policy support by providing both a sense of urgency *and* a clear sense that the issue can be solved.

About This Study

To understand the potential of values to shift attitudes about child maltreatment and increase support for relevant solutions, FrameWorks, in collaboration with the NSPCC, conducted an experimental survey of 6,560 Britons, recruited to match demographic baselines provided by the UK's Office for National Statistics.[4]

Ten possible values were tested in the experiment. They were derived from messages currently in use to communicate about child abuse and neglect, suggestions from the NSPCC, and recommendations that have emerged from prior FrameWorks research in the UK on child maltreatment.[5] The following four values emerged from pilot work as the best candidates and were tested in the survey experiment (see the Appendix for exact message wording):[6]

- *Social Responsibility* – Suggests that the British people have a collective obligation to address child abuse and neglect and to help children develop and succeed.

- *Individual Responsibility* – Suggests that "each of us" has an obligation to address child abuse and neglect.

- *Prevention* – Focuses on "taking steps now" to avoid future harm and to address problems of child maltreatment "before they get worse and become harder to fix."

- *Protection* – Emphasises the need to shield children from harm, stressing that children are vulnerable and must be protected from danger.

In addition to testing the effects of using values on their own, the experiment examined the effect of appending two additional pieces of information to the value: 1) a set of facts detailing the prevalence of abuse and neglect and the long-term consequences of maltreatment; and 2) the same set of facts combined with a concrete solution — in this case, a description of how helplines help address issues of maltreatment (see Appendix for exact wording of these additions).

Each of the four values was thus tested in three forms: 1) the value message on its own; 2) the value message followed by the fact statement; and 3) the value message followed by the fact statement plus the solution description. The experiment also included a control group that received no message to serve as a baseline against which to measure the effects of the other messages.

After being randomly assigned to one of these messages, respondents were asked a common set of questions designed to identify the best communication strategies. These question were developed through an analysis of expert interviews, a review of relevant literature and materials from the field, and consultations with the NSPCC. The questions were presented in random order to all respondents. For the purpose of analysis, the questions were organised into the following six groups, or "scales":

- *Solutions* – Measured attitudes toward and support for programs and policies that experts identified as important in reducing child abuse and neglect.

- *Problem Scope* – Measured respondents' ability to see child abuse and neglect as a societal rather than individual-level issue.

- *Efficacy* – Measured respondents' level of confidence that the issue of child maltreatment can be addressed and improved.

- *Remedial Responsibility* – Measured respondents' support for collective — as opposed to individual — solutions to child maltreatment issues.

- *Behavioural Intentions* – Measured respondents' own intentions to take actions supporting the NSPCC and its work.

- *Issue Definition* – Measured the accuracy of respondents' understanding of basic definitions of child abuse and neglect.

In addition to these closed-ended questions, respondents were asked three open-ended questions that prompted them to: 1) list what they think should be done to reduce child abuse and neglect; 2) judge if they think these steps would be effective; and 3) identify who they think is responsible for taking these actions.

Findings

Question 1: *What values are most effective in shifting opinion on child abuse and neglect and increasing support for effective solutions?*

Figure 1: *Effect of Values on Child Abuse and Neglect Opinion*
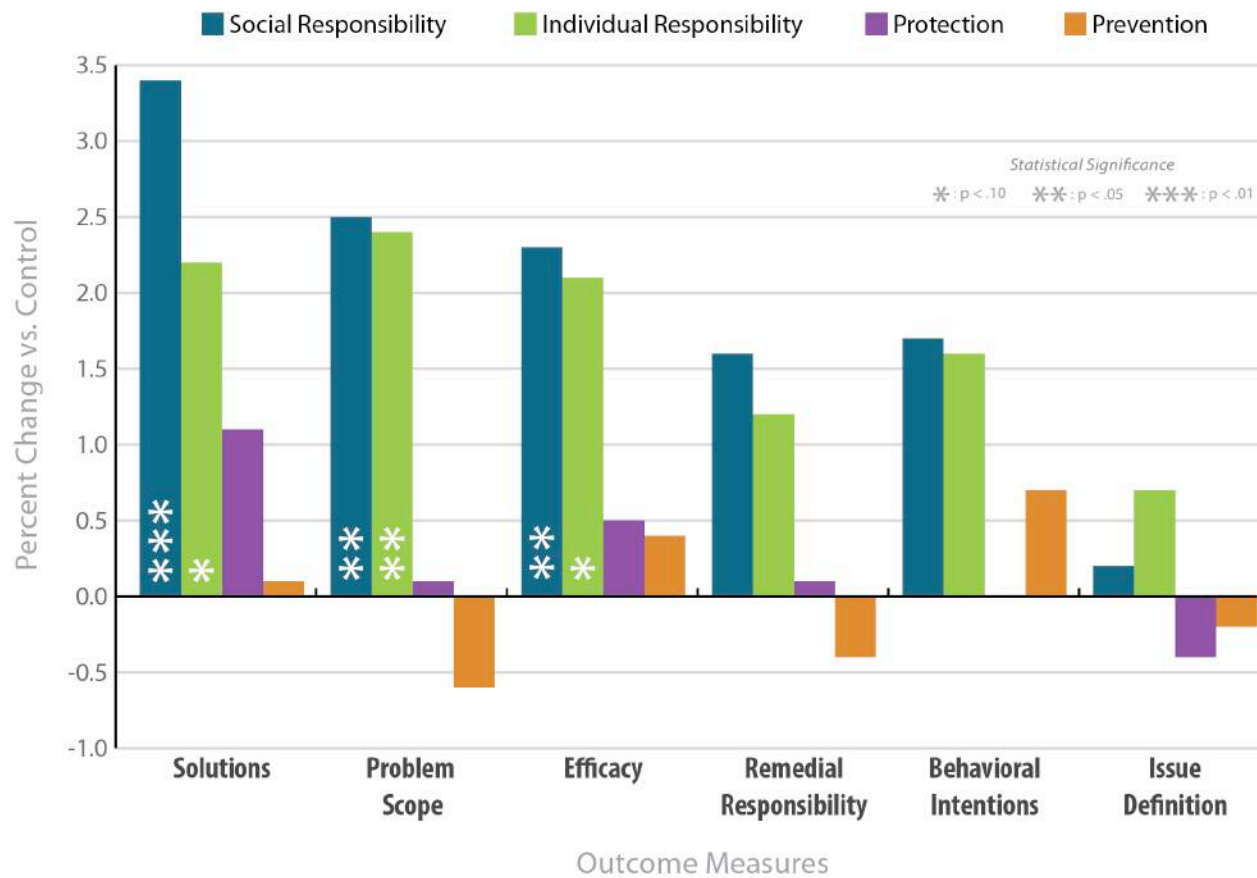
Finding #1: Responsibility is an effective underlying value. *Social Responsibility* and *Individual Responsibility*, which are grounded in the common underlying value of responsibility, generated significant increases in the outcomes tested and performed substantially better than the other values.

- *Social Responsibility* and *Individual Responsibility* produced statistically significant impacts on three important outcome measures: *Solutions*, *Problem Scope* and *Efficacy*. This means that these responsibility frames caused respondents to support relevant policies more strongly, to recognise the societal impacts of this issue more

clearly and to feel more confident that effective steps can be taken to confront the problem.

- *Social Responsibility* and *Individual Responsibility* outperform the other two values across all the outcome measures.[7]

Prior FrameWorks research suggests an explanation for the effectiveness of these responsibility values.[8] Qualitative research has found that Britons share a dominant cultural model of <u>Collective</u> *Responsibility* when it comes to child maltreatment. According to this cultural model, people assume that society shares an obligation to deal with the problem of child abuse and neglect. While this cultural model is a productive one, its capacity to motivate support for collective action and solutions is weakened by several countervailing assumptions — most strongly by a powerful sense of fatalism that depresses senses that addressing issues of child maltreatment is possible.

By priming people with the Value of *Responsibility,* messages activate and pull forward the underlying assumption of *collective* responsibility, and simultaneously background senses of fatalism. In short, priming messages with the idea of responsibility cues people's default sense of responsibility — which for the British public is a collective sense of responsibility. This sense of collective responsibility results in greater motivation and more productive thinking about the potential of addressing the issue of child maltreatment through social-level actions.[9]

Finding #2: Of the two responsibility messages, *Social Responsibility* outperforms *Individual Responsibility*. *Social Responsibility* produced greater effects than *Individual Responsibility* on five of the six scales.

Social Responsibility is more effective in cuing the collective responsibility cultural model and in leveraging its productive potential. By most explicitly reinforcing a collective understanding of child abuse and neglect and framing the problem as a societal concern, the *Social Responsibility* message facilitates thinking about the need for collective measures to prevent and respond to child maltreatment.

Finding #3: As values, *Protection* and *Protection* are ineffective. The impacts of these values are not statistically distinguishable from the control condition (those respondents who received no message) on any of the six scales. Moreover, these effects were often negative — particularly for the value of *Prevention.* This indicates that these ideas may in fact be counterproductive when used as lead values in messaging about child

maltreatment. Of course, prevention and protection are essential components of programs that address child maltreatment and this needs to be communicated. As such, these ideas should be communicated; however this experiment shows that they should not be used as the leading reason for action.

The poor performance of *Prevention* seems to stem from a lack of understanding of the causes of child abuse and neglect. FrameWorks' research has established that the British public attributes child abuse and neglect to deep and immutable causes (human nature, for example), which lead to pessimism about the possibility of preventing maltreatment. While prevention must be part of the message, the ground for talk about prevention must be prepared through the use of communication tools that enable the public to understand the social causes of maltreatment. A better understanding of these social causes will help people productively consider the idea of prevention. Without priming thinking with more productive values, *Prevention* discussions seem to trigger the fatalistic idea that nothing can be done, which does little to generate support for solutions.

Respondents' inability to understand how child abuse and neglect might be prevented is confirmed by their responses to the open-ended questions. Regardless of which message they received, discussions of preventive measures or actions were infrequent. When preventative actions were discussed, they were done so, most frequently, in the context of calls for harsher punishments for abusers, suggesting that more severe actions would make people "think twice" before maltreating a child.

Finding #4: Values do not improve people's understanding of basic definitions of abuse and neglect. None of the values produced statistically significant increases in respondent's ability to identify basic definitional aspects of the issue. This lack of improvement was expected, as values typically fulfil their framing function of increasing motivation and support for solutions without altering underlying knowledge. FrameWorks recommends the development and use of Explanatory Metaphors to illuminate key aspects of how the issue of child maltreatment works in the UK.

Question 2: *Can the effects of the responsibility value frame be amplified by providing facts about child abuse and neglect and by describing possible solutions to the problem?*

Figure 2: *The Effect of Adding Facts and a Solution to Effective Values*
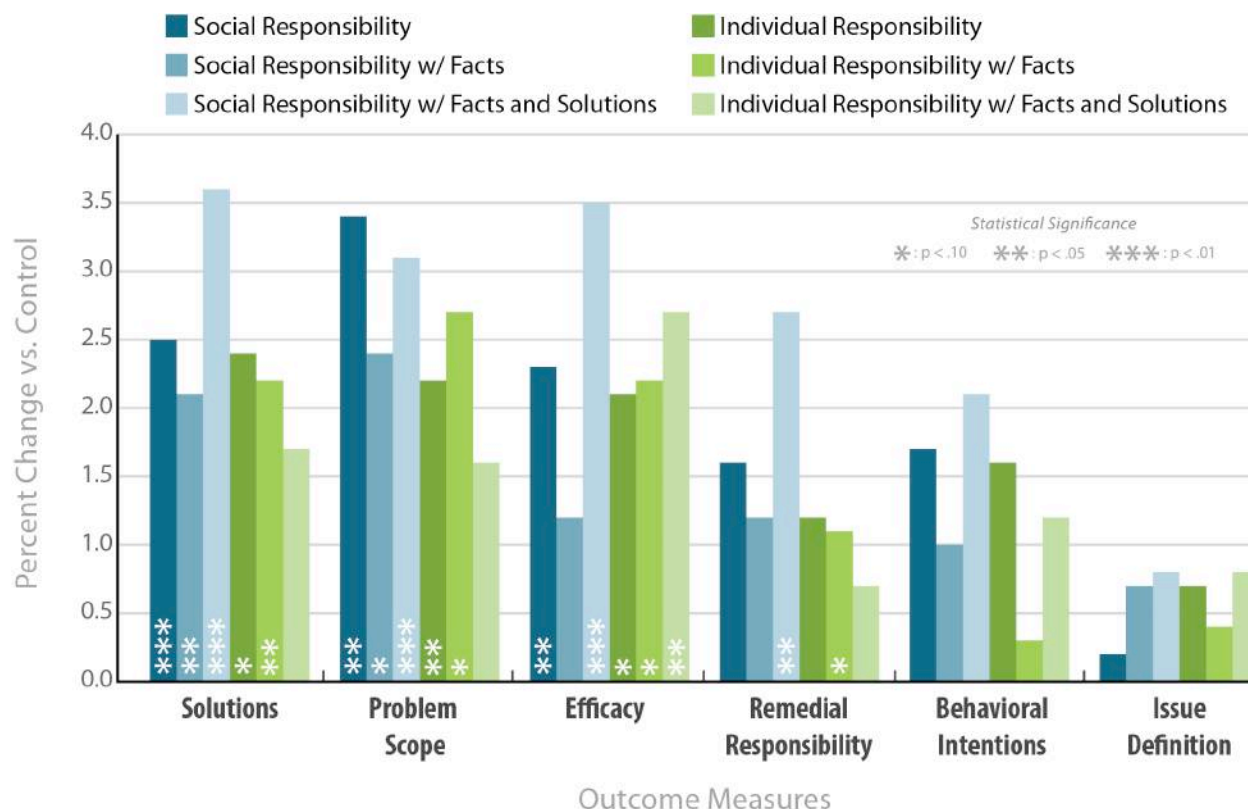
Finding #5: Adding a fact statement alone did not enhance the effectiveness of responsibility messages.

 – Including the fact statement without the solution description actually *reduces* the effectiveness of *Social Responsibility* on five of the six outcome scales.

 – Adding the fact statement on its own has little effect on *Individual Responsibility*, producing negligible changes in the value's impact.

We suspect that the neutral and sometimes negative effects of adding a fact statement to the value is because adding additional information about the severity of the problem supplies a degree of urgency that, without a sense that there is something that can be done, actually depresses people's willingness to engage in solutions. The fact that the largest

retrograde movement of adding a fact statement is on the *Efficacy* measure supports this interpretation.

Finding #6: Adding a solution description to the fact statement amplifies the effectiveness of *Social Responsibility*.

- Adding fact and solution components to the *Social Responsibility* value frame boosted effects in comparison with the value's performance on its own. This increase was a roughly 50% jump in effect size. This boost is particularly noticeable in the key outcome areas of *Problem Scope* and *Efficacy*.

- The version of *Social Responsibility* that included the fact/solution combination produced statistically significant positive effects on five of the six outcome measures. Adding the fact/solution combination sufficiently intensified the effects of the value on the *Remedial Responsibility* and *Behavioural Intentions* scales to push these results into statistical significance. Put another way, adding the fact/solution combination broadened the effect of the *Social Responsibility* value.

- There is a notable difference between the *Social Responsibility*/fact combination and the *Social Responsibility*/fact/solution combination. This gap is especially wide on the *Efficacy* scale, which displays a statistically significant 2.3 percentage-point difference (p < .05). This is consistent with the idea that solutions supply a vital sense that the problem of maltreatment *can* be addressed and that supplying this sense is integral to effective communications on this issue.

Finding #7: The *Social Responsibility* message with the fact statement and solution description is the most effective message tested. This message combination is a highly effective communication strategy.

Why does adding a description of a solution enhance the effectiveness of *Social Responsibility*? By articulating concrete steps that can be taken to address the problem of child maltreatment, the message helps to combat the dominant sense of fatalism that attaches to this issue. Adding facts about child abuse and neglect may reinforce the sense that the problem is urgent, but without a concrete sense of how the problem can be effectively addressed, there will be limits to public support for taking action. Providing a clearer picture of *how* the problem can be tackled leverages the sense of urgency provided by the *Social Responsibility* value and facts and results in a strong sense that the problem can and should be tackled.

Recommendations

On the basis of these findings, we recommend that communicators:

1. **Use the value of responsibility to frame messages about child abuse and neglect.** Communicators should prime their messages by emphasising the obligation or duty to promote children's welfare and to take steps to address the problem of child maltreatment.

   'Meeting our obligation to Britain's children needs to be a priority. The welfare of our society depends on us taking this responsibility seriously and meeting our obligations.'

2. **Articulate responsibility in collective terms — as <u>*Social Responsibility*</u>.** Explicitly appealing to the *collective* responsibility of the British people leverages the productive assumptions about responsibility that people already hold and increases their receptivity to the solutions that the NSPCC and other issues experts suggest are effective ways of addressing this issue.

   'By taking responsibility as a society, we can help children develop positively and promote their future success. We need to do more to support children, families and communities and make sure that we are living up to our responsibilities as members of society.'

3. **Avoid using the values of *Protection* and *Prevention* at the top of messages**. While these ideas play a role in communications on child abuse and neglect, using these values as the lead item in messaging is not productive. Our evidence indicates that these concepts are not helpful in orienting people's thinking or motivating support for solutions.

4. **Focus on and explain effective solutions**. Information about the prevalence and consequences of maltreatment must be accompanied by examples that illustrate how this problem can be effectively handled. Absent such illustrations, people's support for solutions may be undermined by a sense of fatalism. Talking about solutions in concrete terms and using examples of specific solutions and how they work to address the issue amplifies the effects of the value of *Social Responsibility* by fostering a greater sense of efficacy.

'There are concrete steps that we can take to prevent and address child maltreatment. Understanding the causes and effects of maltreatment is vital in developing solutions that improve the lives of children. For example, helplines that children or adults can call at any time of the day or night are effective ways of addressing the problem of abuse and neglect. Most calls — over 50% — result in contacting the police or children's services so that they can help children when needed. When appropriate, helplines can also offer counselling and other services to assist children directly. In the last year alone, helplines have improved the lives of almost 400,000 children in the UK.'

The findings presented above indicate that values play an integral role in effectively communicating about child maltreatment in the UK. In addition, this research points to the need to develop tools capable of improving public understanding of child maltreatment as values do not seem well-suited to increasing understanding and knowledge.

Appendix

Values

Social Responsibility

Lately there has been a lot of talk about the social responsibilities of British people. One area that we are responsible for addressing as a society is child abuse and neglect. Meeting our obligation to Britain's children should be our top priority. By taking responsibility as a society, we can help children develop positively and promote their future success. The welfare of our society depends on us taking this responsibility seriously and meeting our obligations. When we fail to take responsibility, the problems that our society faces get worse. We need to do more to support children, families and communities and make sure that we are living up to our responsibilities as members of society.

Individual Responsibility

Lately there has been a lot of talk in Britain about the need for individuals to take responsibility for their actions. One area where each of us needs to take more responsibility is child abuse and neglect. Each one of us needs to make sure that no harm comes to children and make them our top priority. Being responsible means each of us should make decisions that help children develop positively and promote their future success. Children's welfare depends on every individual meeting his or her obligations. When adults do not take proper responsibility for their actions, this issue gets worse. Every person is responsible for doing the right thing and making good decisions when it comes to children.

Prevention

Lately there has been a lot of talk about preventing problems that threaten Britain and its people. One problem that we can prevent is child abuse and neglect. Preventing child abuse and neglect from happening in the first place should be our top priority. By stepping in and acting now, we can help children develop positively and avoid obstacles to their future success. The welfare of our society depends on taking action now to avoid problems later on, and not waiting to deal with them after they happen. When we avoid addressing problems, they get worse and become harder to fix. We need to do more to support children, families and communities today, so that we can prevent problems in the future.

Protection

Lately there has been a lot of talk about protecting Britain and its people from harm. One area where protection is necessary is child abuse and neglect. Protecting children should be our top priority. By shielding them from harm, we can help children develop positively and help ensure their future success. The welfare of our society depends on keeping our children safe and away from harm. When we don't protect our children, they are vulnerable to danger. We need to do more to support children, families and communities and protect them from harm.

Fact Statement

Child maltreatment is highly prevalent in the UK. Some research has suggested that almost 1 in 5 children in the UK are abused or neglected during their childhood. These experiences of abuse and neglect can have major long-term consequences for the health and well-being of the child, such as physical changes in the developing brain, mental health and substance abuse issues, trouble forming and maintaining relationships, difficulties in school, and behavioural problems. They are also six times more likely to have suicidal thoughts. Finally, children who are abused are more likely to be unemployed and to be homeless.

Solution Description

Helplines that children or adults can call at any time of the day or night are effective ways of addressing the problem of abuse and neglect. Most calls – over 50% – result in contacting the police or children's services so that they can investigate and take action to help children when needed. When appropriate, helplines can also offer counselling and other services to assist children directly. In the last year alone, helplines have improved the lives of almost 400,000 children in the UK.

Outcome Measures

Solutions

- We should substantially increase the public funding available to provide treatment and support for victims of child abuse.
- The Government should take concrete steps to reduce poverty and inequality in order to decrease the amount of child abuse and neglect.
- The best way to address child abuse and neglect is for individuals to make better decisions.

- We need to make sure the Government devotes enough resources to programmes that support parents with mental health and substance abuse issues.
- All families should have access to high quality, culturally appropriate counselling services.
- We are not doing enough to make sure parents have the support they need in order for babies to thrive in their first year of life.
- We should spend whatever money is necessary to make sure that child protection services are fully funded and able to do their job.
- Children should not be physically punished.
- Sex and relationship education should be compulsory in all schools.

Problem Scope

- The consequences of child abuse and neglect eventually affect the whole of society.
- Many of the problems to do with crime, substance abuse and mental health that Britain faces are the result of child abuse and neglect.
- When one child has problems and fails to succeed, everyone suffers.
- Taking steps to alleviate the problems caused by child abuse and neglect will help us all.
- Abuse and neglect are problems that keep us from moving forward as a country.

Efficacy

- There are things we can do reverse the consequences of child abuse and neglect.
- Making sure that everyone has access to good education, housing and health care will reduce rates of child abuse and neglect.
- There are things I can do to help reduce child abuse and neglect.
- Rates of abuse and neglect in the country can be reduced, if we all take action.

Responsibility for Remediation

- We should spend a greater share of public money supporting families that are having difficulties.
- We should ensure that people who have experienced violence or neglect as children receive publicly funded treatment.
- Parents in difficult circumstances need support from public services to avoid behaving in ways that will harm their children.
- Technology companies are responsible for making the Internet safe for children.

- Neighbours should do more to look out for one another, especially when it comes to the welfare of children.

Behavioural Intentions

- Everyone should take action if they see a child being abused or neglected, like calling the NSPCC's Helpline.
- Everyone should donate to the NSPCC to help it reduce rates of child abuse and neglect.
- I would encourage my friends to support to the NSPCC.
- I would consider volunteering my time to help the NSPCC with its work.

Definition of Neglect and Abuse

- Along with adults, other children can abuse children.
- Child abuse and neglect is probably happening close to my area right now.
- Child abuse and neglect happens in well off families as well as poorer families.
- Disabled children and children from certain minority ethnic groups are more vulnerable to abuse and neglect than others.

Endnotes

[1] See: Lindland, Eric and Nathaniel Kendall-Taylor (2013) 'No Idea How That Works or What You Would Do About It' Mapping the Gaps Between Expert and Public Understandings of Child Maltreatment in the UK: A Frameworks Institute Research Report. In addition, assertions that abuse and neglect are not major problems in the UK were rare in the open-ended question responses collected as part of the survey experiment detailed in this report. Less than 5% of respondents contested the idea that child abuse and neglect is a real problem.

[2] Simon, A. (2012). *The pull of values.* Washington, DC: FrameWorks Institute.

[3] Gilliam, F.D., & Simon, A.F. (2013). *Framing and facts: Necessary synergies in communicating about public safety and criminal justice.* Washington, DC: FrameWorks Institute.

[4] Specifically, the respondents fell into these categories: Age - 18-39: 26.7%; 40-64: 48.5%; 65+: 24.8%. Gender - Male: 45.6%; Female: 54.4%. Partisanship - Conservative: 34.4%; Labor: 37.8%; Liberal Dem: 11.5%. Ethnicity - White: 94.2%; Asian: 3%; Black/African: 1.7%. Nationality - England: 83.9%; Scotland: 8.9%; Wales: 5.4%. Income - Less than £20,000: 41.8%; At least £20,000 but less than £50,000: 52.3%; More than £50,000: 5.9%.

[5] Lindland, Eric and Nathaniel Kendall-Taylor (2013) 'No Idea How That Works or What You Would Do About It' Mapping the Gaps Between Expert and Public Understandings of Child Maltreatment in the UK: A Frameworks Institute Research Report.

[6] All of the value messages tested were roughly the same length, employed the same syntactic structures, and contained similar semantic elements, such as "making this issue a top priority" and "helping children develop positively," to tie the value's substantive content together. This parallelism (coupled with random assignment and experimental control) allows us to attribute effects on the outcome measures to the value content, rather than the variable wording of the messages.

[7] The difference in performance between *Social Responsibility* and *Prevention* is statistically significant for the *Solutions*, *Problem Scope* and *Efficacy* scales; the difference between *Social Responsibility* and *Protection* is significant for these three scales and also for the *Intentions* scale. The difference in performance between *Individual Responsibility* and *Prevention* is statistically significant for the *Solutions*, *Problem Scope* and *Efficacy* measures; the difference between *Individual Responsibility* and *Protection* is significant for the *Problem Scope*, *Efficacy* and *Intentions* scales.

[8] Lindland, Eric and Nathaniel Kendall-Taylor (2013) 'No Idea How That Works or What You Would Do About It' Mapping the Gaps Between Expert and Public Understandings of Child Maltreatment in the UK: A Frameworks Institute Research Report.

[9] This finding confirms the difference between American and British assumptions about responsibility for children's welfare. FrameWorks' extensive research on children's issues in the United States has consistently found that individualistic messages lead people to personalize these issues and sap support for collective solutions. The fact that *Individual Responsibility* does not trigger individualistic thinking among the British public indicates the strength of the assumption of collective responsibility. When Americans hear "individual responsibility," they focus on the "individual" part of the message. At least on this issue, when Britons hear "individual responsibility," they focus on the "responsibility" part of the message.