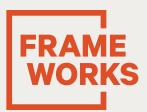# Emerging Minds Climate Change and Disasters Toolkit

FRAME WORKS

Do's and Dont's

When discussing the relationship between climate change and disasters and mental health, it's essential to rely on factual and clear communication strategies, avoiding potential pitfalls or misconceptions.

✓ **Try This...**	✗ **... Not That**
DO start with family resilience.	**DON'T** talk exclusively about family tragedies.
DO explain the cascading, ongoing effects of environmental disasters on families and communities.	**DON'T** focus solely on the immediate aftermath of the event.
DO talk about impacts on communities.	**DON'T** forget to widen the lens beyond children and families throughout communications.
DO talk about the *interdependence* of children, families, communities, and our environment.	**DON'T** forget to discuss how social bonds – and the disruption of those bonds – affect children's and parents' mental health.
DO connect the impact of environmental disasters to other important social and structural factors, such as poverty and lack of safe housing.	**DON'T** talk about families and children as passive victims.
DO talk about the collective actions that reduce the risk of environmental hazards, so they don't become disasters.	**DON'T** use the term 'natural' to describe disasters.

When You Say, They Think

Often what we say can come across very differently to what we might anticipate. The place in which children and families live affects what they are exposed to, and those exposures shape children's development and their close relationships - with potential effects on their mental health. This tool shows commonly used phrases to explain what people might be thinking in response and provides framing tips and guidance for reframing our communications around climate change and disasters.

When you say
Climate change and environmental disasters can have significant effects on parent's mental health and children's wellbeing.

They think...	What helps?
It's up to the parents to take care of their own mental health if they want to protect their children. →	Make the links between environmental disasters and their effects on mental health explicit through explanatory chains that link cause → effect → solution. Explain how environmental disasters create stress and anxiety for families as they lose their homes, belongings, and sense of security, and how this undermines the mental health and wellbeing of both parents and children. Then talk about the solutions that address these challenges, whilst taking into account the bidirectional nature of parent and child mental health.

When you say
Climate change poses serious risks to children's mental health and wellbeing as we face extreme heat and weather events.

They think...	What helps?
Climate change is too big a problem for us to address. →	Emphasise the universal impacts of climate change for children, families, communities, and the country. Talk about the ways in which we are connected to each other, as well as our environment and our planet, to build a sense of collective responsibility for addressing climate change and environmental disasters.

When you say

Rising temperatures intensify rainfall, leading to heightened flood risks. This escalation poses direct threats to children's and parents' mental health.

They think...	What helps?
It's up to people to take care of their families by finding a safe place to live. Families who live in a flood-prone area should move.	→ Talk about what determines where people live, and how constraints like the location of jobs, family connections, and availability of safe and affordable housing might put people at higher risk. Navigate around individualistic assumptions but making clear connections between opportunities – or lack thereof – to choose where we live and the risk of being affected by disaster.

When you say

Children and families from disadvantaged communities are disproportionately affected by environmental disasters, and this can lead to long-term mental health effects.

They think...	What helps?
The problems these children face are much larger than we can address.	→ Explain, don't just describe, why some communities are affected more than others. Talk about the social factors that leave some families more vulnerable, and how those social factors can be addressed before disasters hit, not just during the aftermath. Be aspirational: talk about how we as a society can make changes that ensure every family and community thrives in the future.

Before and After

These before-and-after examples show how to reframe child mental health in the context of the impact of climate change and environmental disasters.

Reframing communications involves tailoring the presentation of information, often subtly. These paragraphs tackle key topics related to adult and child mental health and climate change and environmental disasters, and demonstrate how to refine examples for clearer presentations.

Climate Change

Before

You may have seen the argument that the implications of climate change on people and communities are overstated in public discussions. However, we do know that there are long-term health impacts of climate-related environmental disasters, like drought. For instance, most of the harmful air pollutants trapped by extreme heat contribute to pregnancy complications, such as medical emergencies during pregnancy, premature births, and babies born at lower weights. These adverse birth outcomes increase the risk of long-term medical complications for the child, including behavioural and neurological challenges.

Avoid restating the information that you are refuting. Otherwise, you run the risk of reinforcing misunderstandings and unproductive ways of thinking.

After

The effects of climate change on mental health can be felt in the short, medium, and long terms. Many of these threats can combine and compound each other. For instance, most of the harmful air pollutants trapped by extreme heat contribute to pregnancy complications, such as medical emergencies during pregnancy, premature births, and babies born at lower weights. In turn, these adverse birth outcomes increase the risk of long-term medical complications for the child, including behavioural and neurological challenges. These universal impacts will hit harder in communities already facing health inequities. **It's crucial for climate change policies to address the needs of the entire community rather than concentrating solely on specific groups. When the community thrives as a whole, everyone benefits.**

Always start with the information you need to convey, rather than spending time debunking incorrect information. This can accidentally reinforce the incorrect information in your audience's minds.

To gain public support for change, we must communicate the attainability of positive outcomes. Emphasise the advantages and transformative impacts of unified community actions.

Deterministic Phrasing

Before

The environmental determinants of mental health relate to the various climate-induced factors that influence both children's and parents' psychological wellbeing. These factors include weather changes like increasing temperatures, intensified hurricanes, and rising sea levels, that may lead to trauma or displacement. Additionally, indirect impacts such as disruption in food and water supplies; depletion of resources – causing increased competition and stress; and the loss of habitats and species, contribute to anxiety and distress. Changes in the environment not only cause immediate physical threats but also pose long-term psychological challenges due to uncertainties in livelihoods, social structures, and future prospects.

If we want to engage readers, we should avoid technical language like 'determinants of mental health'. Instead, make your explanations concise, concrete, and accessible.

After

The environment in which parents and children live has a direct link to their mental health, especially with the increasing challenge of climate change. For instance, living in areas prone to frequent floods or bushfires can induce anxiety in families, wondering if their homes will be affected next. A child witnessing the gradual disappearance of a local, natural habitat can develop feelings of loss and helplessness. Similarly, parents, concerned about future resource shortages caused by changing climates might feel stressed about providing for their family. A changing climate doesn't just affect our physical world; it casts shadows on our mental wellbeing. **Our climate policies, therefore, are also mental health strategies.**

If we want the public to support change, we need to speak in ways that show change is possible. Avoid leaving the impression that demography is destiny. Instead, talk about social conditions in ways that make it clear that we, collectively, design our surroundings and can redesign them to make them better.

Children and Families

Before

Mental illness in parents is a risk for children. Children of parents with mental illnesses are more likely to develop similar conditions, especially in an inconsistent, unpredictable family social environment. Climate change–related stressors, like extreme weather events, can increase these vulnerabilities, leading to heightened anxiety and uncertainty in families.

A parent's mental illness can strain a marriage or co-parenting relationship and influence their parenting effectiveness, subsequently affecting their child's mental wellbeing. It's crucial for parents to seek treatment after disasters, not only for their personal healing, but also for the wellbeing of their children.

This communication might inadvertently suggest determination – the idea that mental illness in parents inevitably results in mental illness in children, perpetuated through generations. This could lead audiences to believe that there's minimal hope for positive change.

After

Parents' and caregivers' mental wellbeing significantly influences children's mental health and **vice versa**. The loss and dislocation due to environmental disasters, and the anxiety caused by climate change makes this especially evident. Addressing climate change and its associated stressors can provide a more stable environment for families, reducing external pressures that can affect mental health. **This is why good climate change policy is good health policy.**

This emphasises the family dynamic and the importance of bolstering the mental wellbeing of every household member.

When we call out policy change, we make it clear that the responsibility lies with the government and society, not individual parents or caregivers.

Social and Community Context

Before

Social determinants of health, encompassing aspects such as housing, income, transportation, and food insecurity, play a pivotal role in individual wellbeing, accounting for 60% to 80% of health outcomes (World Health Organization, 2008). Factors like access to fresh foods, safe recreational areas, and quality education can lead to health disparities. As a profound environmental determinant, climate change increases existing vulnerabilities and introduces new challenges in the interplay of these social determinants.

Avoid simply listing social determinants without making explicit links between social and community factors and health outcomes.

After

The mental health of parents and children doesn't exist in a vacuum, the broader community environment plays a critical role. In addition to important factors like housing, jobs, and education, interactions with family, friends, co-workers, and community members significantly influence individuals' health and wellbeing. Strong social support provides a cushion during challenging times, whereas isolation or lack of social integration can lead to deteriorating physical and mental health.

Additionally, the increasing effects of climate change, from extreme weather events to prolonged heat waves, can intensify mental health challenges for both parents and children. The uncertainty and environmental stressors associated with climate change can exacerbate feelings of anxiety, grief, and helplessness, further emphasising the importance of robust community support structures.

When we leave out community, we miss an opportunity to explain how relationships act as protective factors for both children's and parents' mental health during environmental crises.

The emphasis on community and relationships shifts away from *blame and shame* thinking about parents and caregivers and towards community responsibility. And recognising the intricate balance of socioenvironmental factors is essential for building support for mental wellbeing programs.

1. World Health Organization. (2008). *Closing the gap in a generation: health equity through action on the social determinants of health.*

About FrameWorks

The FrameWorks Institute is a nonprofit think tank that advances the mission-driven sector's capacity to frame the public discourse about social and scientific issues. The organization's signature approach, Strategic Frame Analysis®, offers empirical guidance on what to say, how to say it, and what to leave unsaid. FrameWorks designs, conducts, and publishes multi-method, multidisciplinary framing research to prepare experts and advocates to expand their constituencies, to build public will, and to further public understanding. To make sure this research drives social change, FrameWorks supports partners in reframing, through strategic consultation, campaign design, FrameChecks®, toolkits, online courses, and in-depth learning engagements known as FrameLabs. In 2015, FrameWorks was named one of nine organizations worldwide to receive the MacArthur Award for Creative and Effective Institutions.

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