

# Emerging Minds Social Determinants Toolkit

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**FRAME  
WORKS**

# Say This, Not That

A communications strategy starts with knowing what to say and what to leave unsaid. Instead of a list of words and phrases to avoid, this chart of new themes to try offers a concise overview of a refreshed framing approach. Messaging can be optimised by selecting the right terms and themes, whilst also knowing what to avoid. Incorporate these recommended terms and themes in your communications materials.

| Used to this?                     | Try this instead!  |
|-----------------------------------|--|
| 'Supporting effective parenting.' | → 'Supporting parents' mental health supports children's mental health.' |

## Here's why it works:

Messages about 'effective parenting' can backfire, as it communicates that parents' behaviour needs to be fixed, rather than the context that surrounds them. Talking about supporting parents' *mental health* opens up the discussion about social conditions like poverty and racism.

| Used to this?   | Try this instead!   |
|---|---|
| 'Addressing the intergenerational cycle of mental illness.' | → 'Building family wellbeing' and 'laying the foundation for children's and families' mental health'. |

## Here's why it works:

To counter the deterministic view that mental health disorders are inevitable, use the Building Wellbeing metaphor to underscore that societal interventions can prevent and treat these disorders, affirming the potential for change.

| Used to this?                        | Try this instead!  |
|--------------------------------------|--|
| 'Families in need should receive...' | → 'Every child and family should have what they need to do well. This means we need to...' |

**Here's why it works:**

Drawing on the idea that everyone deserves a *fair* go makes the issue of child mental health more salient. It also prevents stigma and othering of families who engage with services. And it opens up space to talk about the programs, policies, and larger social changes that need to happen to fully address child mental health.

| Used to this?  | Try this instead!   |
|--|---|
| 'Help parents identify and address their children's mental health issues.' | → 'Protective factors such as...' or 'Prevention programs and policies like ___ and ___.' |

**Here's why it works:**

People tend to focus on mental health issues as an acute problem and put the onus on parents to address them. Talking about protective factors and preventative approaches *first*, before talking about the parents' role, shifts the conversation towards the role of societal factors and solutions.

\* Note: Merely using the word *prevention* in communication materials isn't illuminating; providing concrete examples, however, can be more effective.



| Used to this?        | Try this instead!   |
|----------------------|---|
| 'Parents need to...' | → 'Parents, practitioners, policy makers, and communities need to...' |

**Here's why it works:**

People need to see that collective problems need collective action. Naming groups other than parents wherever possible expands thinking about who needs to be involved. Next, connect the actors to the collective solutions.

# Do's and Dont's

When discussing the social determinants of health, it's critical to be well-versed in the most effective framing strategies and understand why certain approaches may be counterproductive or misunderstood.

|  Try This...  |  ... Not That   |
|--|--|
| <p><b>DO</b> talk about building healthy childhood development and family wellbeing.</p>   | <p><b>DON'T</b> focus on how to make parents more effective at addressing mental health needs.</p>   |
| <p><b>DO</b> use the value of a <i>fair go</i> to emphasise why programs, policies, and larger societal solutions are so important for families and communities.</p>   | <p><b>DON'T</b> focus exclusively on permanent damage and trauma at the individual, familial, or community levels.</p>                                     |
| <p><b>DO</b> clearly explain how proximal and distal factors affect parents' and children's mental health. Use connecting words and terms like 'this happens <i>because</i>' and 'X <i>leads to</i> Y'.</p>                                  | <p><b>DON'T</b> simply list social and economic factors. You can't assume people understand the link between societal factors and individual outcomes.</p> |
| <p><b>DO</b> offer tangible solutions in every communication.</p>  | <p><b>DON'T</b> offer solutions that don't match the scale of the problem.</p>   |
| <p><b>DO</b> expand thinking beyond families by talking about how other adults (such as health practitioners, teachers and policy makers), the communities they live in, and society at large are also responsible for healthy outcomes.</p> | <p><b>DON'T</b> keep the focus exclusively on parents and families – always widen the lens.</p>  |

# Before and After

These before-and-after examples show how to reframe child mental health in the context of the social determinants of health.

Reframing communications involves tailoring the presentation of information, often subtly. These paragraphs tackle key topics in adult and child mental health – prevention, disparities, care for children and families, and multigenerational approaches to health – demonstrating how to refine examples for clearer presentations.

## Explaining Social Determinants

### Before

**The social determinants of health are defined as the conditions in which people live, learn, work, play, worship, and age that affect a wide range of health, functioning, and quality-of-life outcomes and risks.** Social determinants of health include aspects of the social environment (discrimination, income, education level, marital status), the physical environment (place of residence; crowding conditions; or the built environment such as buildings, spaces, transportation systems, and products that are created or modified by people), and health services (access to and quality of care).

In our research, framing history as important because it strengthens democracy was found to be a less effective strategy for explaining why history matters than the critical thinking frame.

### After

The places where people live, learn, work, and play shape health in many ways. For example, some neighbourhoods have plenty of places to find affordable, nutritious food, whilst others are cut off from the supply of fresh produce. Location affects diet, which affects health. Other aspects of the places where people live matter too. **The availability of affordable, quality housing close to jobs can create more stability and security for families and stronger communities, which benefits children's mental health.** On the other hand, the wrong arrangement of buildings and roads or the lack of safe housing can leave families feeling stressed and isolated. **Our housing, economic, and social policies are also mental health policies.**

Instead of simply listing factors, this message explains what social determinants are and how they work by clearly linking cause and effect.

Make sure to connect the source of the problem – social conditions to social solutions.

## Community Context

### Before

Social determinants of health, including housing, income, transportation, and socioeconomic or racial segregation profoundly influence physical and mental wellbeing. These elements are intertwined with the broader community environment and account for 60% to 80% of health outcomes (World Health Organization, 2008). Elements like access to safe recreational spaces, quality education, and mental health resources can either bridge or exacerbate mental health disparities for children.

Avoid listing high-level, generalised statements about social contexts without explanation of how they affect mental health outcomes.

### After

The environments where we live play a crucial role in our mental health. Whilst factors like housing, income, transportation, and socioeconomic or racial segregation play a role, so do community conditions like access to safe recreational spaces, quality education, and mental health resources. The mental health of both parents and children are therefore highly influenced by the communities in which they live. For example, families living in higher-crime neighbourhoods may experience a heightened sense of isolation and concerns about safety. These feelings of fear and anxiety can then negatively impact parent-child interactions and relationships, taking a further toll on their mental health. Building children's mental health and wellbeing means creating policies that foster community safety and resilience.

Use explanatory chains that link the cause (communities affect health) to mediating links (connections within communities and neighbourhood safety), to consequence (feelings of anxiety and isolation), to solution (policies that foster community safety). Making these links explicit keeps people from filling in the blanks with assumptions that may place the blame on families, and even communities themselves.

## Education Access and Quality

### Before

Poor mental health is linked with lower school grades, increased likelihood of school dropout, and lower academic achievement. This has long-term consequences for employment prospects, and incomes, and influences access to environments and resources that support mental health and wellbeing for children, youth, and families (World Health Organization, 2008). Elements like access to safe recreational spaces, quality education, and mental health resources can either bridge or exacerbate mental health disparities for children.

Steer clear of worsening the problem by using deterministic language.

### After (Example 1)

**Educational opportunities are foundational not only to a thriving society, but also to mental wellbeing across all life stages.** The quality of education, from childhood to adulthood, shapes individuals' skills, employment prospects, and incomes, influencing access to environments and resources that support mental health and wellbeing. Neighbourhoods anchored by reputable and financially accessible schools have long-term benefits, not just for children and families, but for communities, and ultimately, all of us.

Flip the script from deficit-based framing to talk about the benefits of educational opportunities for individuals and society.

### After (Example 2)

**Socioeconomic factors play a pivotal role in shaping the mental wellbeing of individuals at all stages of life.** Income levels, for instance, directly influence access to quality health care, nutritious food, and safe living environments. Families with limited financial resources may face heightened stress and anxiety, which can, in turn, affect the mental health of both parents and children. Additionally, stable and well-paying employment can provide a sense of security that reduces the risk of mental health challenges.

When you connect individual benefits to societal benefits, you create stronger buy-in and support for policies.

Communities with access to affordable housing, social support networks, and recreational opportunities tend to foster resilience and overall wellbeing. All these socioeconomic factors intersect and contribute to the mental health landscape, highlighting the need for policies and initiatives that address these disparities to ensure better mental wellbeing for all.

## Health Care Access and Quality

### Before

Access to comprehensive health and mental health care regardless of financial situation or background is crucial for children's mental health. Regular check-ups with physicians can be a form of preventative health care, giving doctors the opportunity to identify potential mental health issues early. When regular health check-ups are missed, or treatments are delayed due to financial constraints or other barriers, however, early warning signs of mental health issues may be missed.

Focusing on individual health outcomes alone keeps people thinking about what parents should be doing, instead of helping them see the bigger picture.

### After

**Access to affordable and comprehensive health care is essential for children's wellbeing and the stability and growth of families and communities.** For instance, regular check-ups with physicians can be a form of preventative health care, allowing doctors to identify family stressors and potential mental health issues early. However, the absence of such accessibility can have wide-reaching implications for the individual and families as a whole. When regular health check-ups are missed or treatments are delayed due to financial constraints or other barriers, it aggravates physical ailments and takes a toll on mental and emotional health, further straining family dynamics.

Make it clear that this isn't just about whether or not people get health care, it's about building family wellbeing overall. And don't forget about widening the lens to communities and societies to create a sense that this is about *all* of us.

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<sup>®</sup>, 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<sup>®</sup>, 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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