

# How-To Guide:

## Shifting the Narrative about Childhood Obesity

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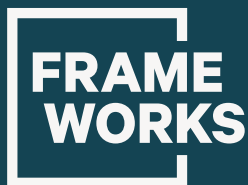
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# Introduction

Framing is the process of making intentional choices about what we say and how we say it to shape how people understand and respond to an issue. How we frame child health and obesity shapes public understanding, policies, and practices that influence children's wellbeing. Historically, conversations about children's health have overemphasized individual responsibility—particularly that of parents and children—while overlooking the systemic social, economic, and environmental factors at play. This approach not only stigmatizes children based on body size but also obscures the broader influences on health outcomes. To truly improve children's health, we must shift to a holistic narrative that embraces the complexity of wellbeing and advances support for structural changes.

This How-To Guide provides flexible strategies designed for public health practitioners, communicators, and advocates to create a new narrative around children's health and obesity. These strategies emphasize systemic drivers of poor health outcomes, encourage equity-focused solutions, and are adaptable across diverse contexts. While not prescriptive messages or behavior-change campaigns, these approaches offer a guide for shaping communication in settings such as public discussions, policy advocacy, media engagement, and written materials on health disparities.

# Reframing Strategies

## RECOMMENDATION 1:

### To talk about children’s health and obesity, use the value of *Opportunity for All, Across Places*

This value emphasizes the importance of framing communications around equitable access to resources and opportunities that support children’s health, linking the universal idea of *opportunity* to specific places.

#### What it looks like

As a theme rather than a script, it can be expressed in various ways and should be used consistently to strengthen messaging.

- *As a society, we believe that all children should have access to opportunities for good health, no matter where they live.*
- *Zip codes shouldn’t determine the opportunities kids have for good health. To prevent health issues like child obesity, we need to prioritize policies that support all kids’ health.*

## RECOMMENDATION 2:

### Use comparative community stories to highlight systemic inequities

Using stories and real-world examples is key to helping the public understand the systemic drivers of children’s health outcomes. One especially effective way to tell stories that illustrate systemic issues—and steer audiences away from blaming individuals or specific communities for the challenges they face—is through a comparative narrative arc. This approach contrasts two similar communities or neighborhoods (perhaps even in the same city), highlighting how their environments and outcomes have been shaped by past injustices and systemic inequities. When telling community stories, avoid deficit framing or blaming the people facing challenges.

#### What it looks like

- 1. Beginning:** Introduce a community with many strengths. Highlight assets like its culture, connectedness, and vibrancy.
- 2. Middle:** Reveal the impact of a systemic inequity. Explain how a past injustice or harmful policy has led to negative child health outcomes in the community today.
- 3. Contrast:** Contrast outcomes with a second community. Introduce a nearby community with similar strengths that did not experience the same policy-related harm. As a result, its children have better health outcomes.

- 4. Closing:** Point to systems, not people. Emphasize that the differences in outcomes are due to systemic inequities, not the choices of individuals.

For sample language and an example story that follows this structure, see [Shifting the Narrative about Childhood Obesity](#).

### RECOMMENDATION 3:

## Explain how food systems are designed and how corporations and the government are responsible for redesigning them

The food system plays a central role in shaping children's health and obesity, with corporations and government policies bearing primary responsibility for the system's design and resulting inequities. Framing the issue this way shifts the focus from individual blame to systemic causes, fostering public support for broad, structural solutions to improve child health.

### What it looks like

- 1. Highlight Who Has Control and Why.** Identify the main players shaping the system (for example, corporations, policymakers) and explain their motivations (for example, profit, influence, or control).
- 2. Describe How This Affects Children.** Show how this influence shapes outcomes for children.
- 3. Illustrate Disparities.** Highlight how different communities are uniquely impacted by these systemic issues. Describe any disproportionate harms for specific groups, such as communities of color or low-income neighborhoods.
- 4. Provide a Clear Solution.** Suggest actionable, system-level changes or policies that would address the root problem. Emphasize how these solutions not only benefit the group most affected by disparities but also create positive change for everyone.

### RECOMMENDATION 4:

## Lead with a future where all bodies are celebrated and respected

Start by inspiring people with a vision of the future where every body type is celebrated and respected. Vision framing helps orient people toward what the result of working together could look like for the world—be sure to make this connection for audiences so people understand that it is our shared responsibility to ensure this vision becomes reality. Keep the message positive and aspirational, but be sure to include language that introduces experiences of and barriers created by weight stigma.

## What it looks like

*Imagine a world where all bodies—no matter their shape or size—are celebrated and respected. In this world, nobody is treated differently because of their weight, and everyone has what they need to thrive in life. In this world, we focus on health, not appearance, and having a larger body doesn't make people more likely to be bullied or less likely to get hired for a job. In this world, body size doesn't affect whether people get respectful physical and mental health services. In this world, we understand that all bodies are different and that people can be healthy at any size. By working together now to ensure all bodies are celebrated and respected, we can create a better world for everyone.*

### RECOMMENDATION 5:

## Point to a stigma-free future for kids

To effectively address weight stigma and anti-fat bias toward children, advocates should lead with a clear, aspirational vision centered on children's wellbeing in a world without the stigma and bias. This approach helps people understand the harms of stigma and builds support for policies that reduce it.

## What it looks like

*Imagine a world where kids living with obesity aren't treated differently because of their weight. In this world, having a larger body doesn't make kids more likely to get bullied, which means that kids of all shapes and sizes have strong and supportive relationships. In this world, a child's body size doesn't affect the quality of health care they receive, meaning that all kids get respectful medical care to help them grow and develop well. In this world, weight-based stigma and stereotypes are no longer barriers to kids' health and wellbeing. By working together now to reduce stigma and bullying toward children with larger bodies, we can support kids' health and create a better world for our children.*

### RECOMMENDATION 6:

## Explain how stigma can lead to health and development problems for kids

While people generally understand the connection between physical and mental health, the link between mental health and experiences of obesity is less clear, so providing a detailed explanation of how weight stigma leads to stress and developmental issues can enhance public understanding of this connection.

## What it looks like

- 1. Start with the Problem.** Explain how weight stigma causes stress, mental health challenges, and physical health issues for children, creating a harmful cycle that worsens obesity and wellbeing.
- 2. Frame the Impact in Terms of Health and Development.** Highlight that weight stigma harms children's healthy development and gets in the way of their overall wellbeing.
- 3. Propose Solutions.** Advocate for solutions like restricting diet pill ads targeting kids, promoting diverse body sizes in media, and eliminating weight-based bullying in schools and health care settings.
- 4. Close with a Call to Action.** Encourage systemic changes to break the cycle of stigma and ensure all children can thrive, regardless of their weight.

# Conclusion

By consistently framing children's health in ways that emphasize systemic solutions and celebrate diverse bodies without perpetuating stigma, we can create a more just, inclusive, and effective vision of child health.

For more insights into this research and for further guidance on applying these reframing strategies, please see [Shifting the Narrative about Childhood Obesity](#).

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# 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, toolkits, online courses, and in-depth learning engagements known as FrameLabs. In 2015, FrameWorks was one of nine organizations worldwide to receive the MacArthur Award for Creative and Effective Institutions.

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