



Changing the Story:

**How 20 Years of
Framing Shaped
Public Thinking
about Child
Wellbeing**



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hen the FrameWorks Institute was founded in 1999, experts in the “child maltreatment” field, as it was then known, were puzzled that evocative depictions of child abuse were not generating greater public concern. Was it a question of Americans not caring enough or was something deeper contributing to the lack of public support?

It turned out that part of the reason was that Americans’ understanding of child abuse was deeply individualistic. More fundamentally, people didn’t have ways of thinking about the important development that takes place in the earliest years of life. These mindsets didn’t lead people to see the role that public policy and programs could play in preventing maltreatment before it happened, much less the role that government and communities play in promoting child wellbeing.

Today, there’s strong evidence that these patterns in public thinking have substantially shifted. While major, culture-wide mindset shifts often take generations, it’s clear that in just 25 years, public thinking about child wellbeing has changed significantly. The story of how it happened offers us all important insights into how reframing can catalyze changes in public discourse, thinking, and policy.

Like all effective efforts to reframe an issue, the story involves multiple organizations. Research from [Prevent Child Abuse America](#) (PCA America) found that children were at the forefront of public concern when it came to addressing social issues, so it commissioned FrameWorks to work together on a series of research projects to find out if public thinking about abuse and neglect might be limiting progress. [This work](#) shed light on some of the deeper assumptions shaping Americans' thinking about child development.

The findings highlighted the need for major efforts to shift understandings and attitudes. People's mental picture of child abuse was that of a rare, sensational crime, attributed to exceptionally "bad parents" or monstrous perpetrators. People also held outdated, inaccurate models of young children's emotions and behaviors. The widely shared, harmful assumption that babies and toddlers had manipulative "intentions" or "agendas" normalized punitive or neglectful responses to child behavior—even for children as young as one year.

There was little reason for people to think that these early experiences would have any lasting effect, as the general understanding was that if children didn't remember an experience, it didn't "matter"—a belief at odds with the science. People also shared a widespread idea that children's minds were like passive containers that were "filled" by adults, mostly after children began talking.

Field leaders like Prevent Child Abuse America, the [Harvard Center on the Developing Child](#), [the National Scientific Council on the Developing Child](#), the [Change in Mind Institute](#), and many others embarked on a coordinated mission to bridge the gap between expert knowledge on positive development and the societal supports needed to nourish it. Guided by framing strategies developed and tested by FrameWorks researchers, the field changed its narrative from one that relied on emotionally evocative, sensationalized, and individualistic stories about a limited range of adverse childhood experiences (ACEs) to one that leads with the role of experiences and environments in child development and wellbeing. Because of this work, “child maltreatment” became too narrow a policy focus for the field, and it instead adopted the wider lens of “child development” and “child adversity” to better address the needs of children and families.

The cross-organizational, cross-sector effort to shift mindsets on early development and adversity has moved American thinking. Take the evidence on parents’ understanding of infant emotions gleaned from [Zero to Three’s National Parent Surveys](#), which are conducted every 5-10 years. In 2010, about 70% of U.S. parents incorrectly believed that infants couldn’t experience sadness or fear until six months old. That number decreased to about half of parents in 2016. Similarly, the number of parents who correctly believed that infants can sense whether their parents are angry or sad went from 44% in 2010 to 54% in 2016. Those significant boosts show not just a change in opinion but a deepening understanding of how early brain development works over a relatively short amount of time.

Having established a stronger public understanding of the early years, the field recognized it needed to build out even more. To counterbalance the new understanding of early adversity, advocates began to focus on the central importance of promoting healthy development and fostering positive childhood experiences (PCEs).

This transformation is the result of collaborative efforts among developmental psychologists, sociologists, linguists, neuroscientists, pediatricians, and others working across disciplines to understand and communicate [the science of early childhood development](#). Evidence of this shift is all over—from government guidance to state and federal policy.

For example, the CDC’s [“Essentials for Childhood”](#) framework highlights strategies for fostering PCEs and preventing adversity and states like Maryland and California have adopted [similar initiatives](#) and [campaigns](#). Another major change is the way the CDC-funded [“Behavioral Risk Factor Surveillance System”](#) questionnaire now incorporates questions about ACEs. The past decade has also seen the development of a federal [Commission to Eliminate Child Abuse and Neglect Fatalities](#), policy wins like the [Family First Prevention Services Act](#) that allows states to use funding for prevention measures to support children and families, and the introduction of new legislation like [The Preventing Adverse Childhood Experiences \(PACE\) Act](#) to authorize the CDC to award public health grants for promoting PCEs.

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–Jennifer Jones, chief strategy officer, Prevent Child Abuse America

More than just tangible victories, this shift represents a fundamental change in how we approach support for children and families. It is now deeply intertwined with both developmental psychology and framing science. As Jennifer Jones, chief strategy officer of PCA America puts it, “It’s no longer just about child abuse and neglect prevention; it’s about changing the way society supports children and families in this country. It’s about creating the conditions for all kids and families to thrive. Transforming the narrative is vital.”

While the impact of this shift is undeniable, there’s more narrative and policy work to be done. As we look to the future, items on the reframing agenda are clear. One involves reimagining the “child welfare” system as a “child and family wellbeing system.” This shift is more than just a name change; it’s a reorientation of policies, practices, resource allocations in public agencies, and more.

Another is the role of economic wellbeing in child and family wellbeing. Advocacy coalitions are highlighting the evidence that ACEs are symptoms of a flawed economic system, rather than indicative of flawed families and individuals. In [a 2021 report](#), we offered evidence-based framing guidance to help the field frame child adversity as a public issue, a preventable problem, and a solvable problem. Framing the issue as fixable helps motivate action; widening the lens beyond individualistic and “family bubble” thinking is essential to identifying the structural factors that shape development outcomes.

Of these structural factors, systemic racism is one that is particularly pervasive. Our [recent report](#) with PCA America highlights strategies for talking about racism in child and family advocacy, and though its recommendations are only one aspect of addressing the problem, they can help foster productive conversations as we move toward more robust structural solutions.

We’ve come this far in just two decades. Together, we can go even further to ensure that children and families have what they need to thrive.