Early Childhood Development/Children’s Mental Health Toolkit: Frequently Asked Questions for Alberta

This document is not intended to provide “the right answers” to questions you might be asked, but rather to offer illustrations of how to work with values and models that FrameWorks’ research in Alberta, Canada, has proven to be effective in improving understanding of children’s mental health. In the following Q and A, we demonstrate how an advocate might think about turning unproductive frames embedded in questions into opportunities to advance a more effective message. Communicators will find their own ways of putting these principles into practice.

Q: Aren’t most children in Alberta doing just fine?

Less Effective Response:

Most kids are doing just fine, but many are not. Close to 59,000 children live below the poverty line in our province. There are only regulated child care spaces for 9% of children under 13. Alberta has one of the highest high school drop-out rates in Canada. We need to invest in children in order to make progress. If we fail to make these new investments, we’ll have trouble caring for an aging population, and we will have failed the generations behind us. We have to do better.

Analysis:
- Relies on statistics to make the case, rather than addressing underlying cultural models.
- Doesn’t explain how these conditions actually affect children.
- Doesn’t have a “can-do” attitude about solving problems, but rather focuses on the dire consequences of not doing the right thing.

More Effective Response:

Alberta’s future depends on ensuring that all of our children grow, thrive and contribute to our collective well-being as a province. If we are to achieve this as a society, we must address the very real problems facing our children.
today. Science tells us that the architecture of children’s brains is being actively shaped by their experiences through an ongoing process that begins before birth and continues into adulthood. Early experiences literally shape how the brain gets built; as with any structure, a strong foundation in the early years increases the probability of positive outcomes. A weak foundation increases the odds of later difficulties. That’s why we want these early experiences to be optimal for all children. When this process is derailed by toxic stress, caused by situations like extreme poverty, abuse, or severe maternal depression, the developing brain is actually damaged. This particular kind of stress is concerning because it lasts longer; occurs without consistent supportive relationships; and leads to lifelong problems in learning, behavior, and both physical and mental health. As a province, we can and must develop environments for children that will both reduce exposure to toxic stress, and create buffers of support for their developing brains.

Analysis:

- Begins with a value of Interdependence, so that the reader understands that ensuring children’s healthy development is important to the future of the province.
- Uses the Brain Architecture simplifying model to establish that children’s brains are developing and the Toxic Stress simplifying model to explain the important impact of environments on children.
- Reminds the audience that we can reduce and buffer toxic stress exposure and support development.

Q: Isn’t it best for parents to take care of their own kids rather than send them to child care and to access programs if they really need them?

Less Effective Response:

We’re not asking government to replace parents. Parents are very important. We know that high-quality child care, whether provided by parents or by child care providers, helps kids learn and grow, and gets them ready for school. Regardless of how we might feel about parents being home full-time with their kids, the reality is that most families don’t have that choice. That’s why the quality of child care for those families should be as high as possible.
Analysis:
- Restates the opposition’s argument which reinforces the cultural model of the Family Bubble in people’s minds.
- Turns the discussion into a debate about working parents and parental choice.
- Limits the potential benefits of early childhood to school readiness, and ignores social and emotional development.

More Effective Response:

Innovative cities, provinces and countries have been able to design high-quality early education programs for children – programs that have solved problems and shown significant long-term improvements for children. These programs work because children grow up in an environment of relationships. Science tells us that it’s the interactive influences of genes and these environments that literally shape the developing brain. The active ingredient is the interactive nature of children’s engagement in relationships with their parents and other caregivers in their family or community, like “serve and return” in games such as tennis and volleyball. If a child is in a child care center with caretakers who are overwhelmed by too many children or by their lack of training, the “serve and return” process breaks down and the child is not given the interaction needed to foster development. When a child’s environment is organized to provide appropriate, regular responses and stimulations, the child thrives. We have to make sure that all children have access to the innovations that we know work.

Analysis
- Begins with the value of Ingenuity.
- Acknowledges a role for parents but includes community.
- Refuses to “take the bait” of a focus on working parents.
- Explains how interactive relationships and experiences shape children’s development by incorporating the “serve and return” simplifying model.

Q: Isn’t it true that data show that early childhood programs for kids that need extra help aren’t very effective in the long term? They cost a lot, but children still don’t do well in school later on.
Less Effective Response:

The early childhood years are the most productive years for new educational investment, and the long-term impacts of early education on social and emotional development may be the most important consequences of early education. Numerous studies have shown that benefits from quality early childhood education experiences carry over into the first years of school and even well into adulthood. These benefits include increased academic achievement and school success and improvements in social-emotional development, behavior, and conduct. While some research has indicated that the effects of pre-k on children’s IQ scores decrease over time, there are other studies that show a huge impact. For example, children who did not attend preschool were 70 percent more likely to be arrested for a violent crime by age 18 than their peers who had been pre-k participants, and pre-k can lower rates of teen pregnancy.

Analysis:

- Over-reliance on data to make the case without helping the audience understand development.
- By noting that some research has shown no long-term results, it repeats the negative frame of the question, and by suggesting “other studies show” different results, it turns the discussion into “dueling research studies.”
- Conjures up images of delinquent and pregnant teens.
- The programs are explained as benefiting individual children, but not society as a whole.

More Effective Response:

We can design the kinds of innovative programs that lead to long-term successful outcomes for all children, making our communities stronger and better places to live. These early childhood development programs are important because children’s brain architecture is built from the bottom up. Early experiences lay the groundwork for all of the development that follows. Trying to change behavior or build new skills on a foundation of brain circuits that were not wired properly when they were first formed requires more work and is less effective. Remedial education, clinical treatment, and other professional interventions are more costly and produce less desirable outcomes than the provision of nurturing, protective relationships and appropriate learning experiences earlier in life. And because all of the aspects of
development are intertwined – cognitive, social and emotional – you can’t just focus on one area and neglect the others. This is why we need to make significant investments in proven programs early in life.

Analysis:
- Begins with the values of Ingenuity and Interdependence to remind the audience of why this is important for everyone.
- Emphasizes the importance of addressing brain development early in life by explaining that the brain develops sequentially.
- Incorporates the Core Story elements of “Pay Now or Pay More Later” and “Can’t Do One Without the Other” to make the case for why early investment matters.

Q: Can kids really develop mental illnesses?

Less Effective Response:

Yes, kids can develop mental illnesses. Some kinds of mental illnesses are more common in kids, while other kinds, such as schizophrenia, are more common in adults. But there is no absolute dividing line. Mental illnesses do not discriminate.

Analysis:
- Triggers the dominant cultural model of “children are small adults” – children can have mental illness but it is not as complicated as adult mental illness.
- Leaves the audience thinking that mental illness is genetic because no alternate model is provided.

More Effective Response:

Children’s brain architecture is being built from infancy on, in a process similar to building a house. Just like in building a house, that process can run into difficulties along the way, perhaps from a shaky foundation or from unexpected or undue stress to the structure that affects its functioning. Just like a table needs to be level in order to function well, requiring a level floor and four stable legs, children’s mental health also depends on a solid environment and the ability to function well. So, yes, children do sometimes experience psychological problems, including mental illness. That’s why it is so important...
that we provide access to the professionals who can screen and assess for problems early on, when effective interventions are available to prevent more serious problems from developing later.

Analysis:
- Uses the Brain Architecture simplifying model to explain that children’s brains are built from the bottom up and to establish that children are different from adults.
- Uses the Levelness simplifying model to explain that children’s mental health means that they are well-functioning and that mental health is impacted by children’s environments.
- Avoids extreme or distracting examples of specific conditions.
- Includes a solution to overcome the sense that mental illness is inherited and, therefore, unchangeable.

Q: What causes mental disorders in children?

Less Effective Response:

Mental health disorders in children and adolescents are caused mostly by biology and environment. Examples of biological causes are genetics, chemical imbalances in the body, or damage to the central nervous system, such as a head injury. Many environmental factors also put young people at risk for developing mental health disorders, such as exposure to lead, violence, sexual abuse, or loss of important people through death or divorce.

Analysis:
- Interaction of genes and environment will not be understood.
- Biology/genetics will trigger dominant models of mental illness (i.e., that illness is caused by genes and cannot be prevented) and environments will trigger dominant models of mental health (i.e., that stress makes you stronger, can’t be avoided, and the solution is to learn how to overcome the impact of negative events).
- Doesn’t address belief that “stress is good for you.”

More Effective Response:

Some children are exposed to chronic, extreme stressful conditions, which lead to what scientists term toxic stress reactions in the child’s brain, which disrupts
developing brain architecture. This can lead to lifelong difficulties in cognitive, social and emotional functioning. Just as a table requires a level floor in order function well, children also need stable, supportive environments to promote good functioning. It is important to distinguish among three kinds of stress. We do not need to worry about positive stress (which is short-lived stress, like getting immunized), or stress that is made tolerable by the presence of supportive relationships, like a strong family when a loved one dies. But toxic stress lasts longer; occurs without consistent supportive relationships; and leads to lifelong problems in learning, behavior, and both physical and mental health. As a society, we can and must develop environments for children that will create “level” environments, by both reducing exposure to toxic stress and creating buffers of support to make stress more tolerable.

Analysis:
- Uses the Toxic Stress simplifying model to explain how certain types of chronic and extreme experience cause stress reactions that can damage the developing brain.
- Uses the Levelness simplifying model to explain the effect of environments on functioning.
- Effectively neutralizes “stress is good for you” and begins to shape an understanding that external events can materially impact the brain and children’s functioning.

Q: What can be done to help children with mental health problems?

Less Effective Response:

If parents or other caregivers notice repeated symptoms of mental health problems in their child or teen, they should make a list of the behaviors that concern them, speak to the child about their concerns and let the child know they will help them work out their problems. It is important to talk with the child’s health care provider, and look for a mental health professional trained in working with children and adolescents. People who are not satisfied with the mental health care they receive should discuss their concerns with the provider, ask for information, and/or seek help from other sources.
Analysis:

- Reminds the audience of the “family bubble.”
- Encourages the idea that mental health problems are controllable by the individual and consist of “working out” problems.

More Effective Response:

There is a lot we can do, because we understand what the problem is and what the solutions are. Children’s mental health is like the levelness of a piece of furniture — and that levelness can depend on the furniture itself, the floor it’s on, or both. Many places have instituted effective programs that provide these children the attention they need from experts who understand levelness and stability. These programs have solved a range of problems in early childhood and showed significant long-term improvements for children. Our task is to bring such innovations to scale for all children and families in need.

Analysis:

- Begins by saying solutions are possible.
- Uses the simplifying model of Levelness to illustrate the causes of children’s mental illness and show that interventions can address that “levelness.”
- Ends with the value of Ingenuity; we can fix these problems in early childhood.

Q: What caused the [recent violent incident involving children in the news] and how could we prevent this from happening again?

Less Effective Response:

Certainly, what happened was horrible. I think it really exemplifies what happens when you have a child in pain who has been isolated and alone and has a lot of rage. I think our society is moving faster and faster; kids are bombarded with more pressures from all sides to look perfect and to be perfect, and so many kids are simply overscheduled today. What I’m trying to get at is there are a lot of kids who, despite all the activity of their lives, feel very isolated, and as much as there has been an emphasis on kids getting into college and being more competitive in the world, we haven’t taught the basic
skills of emotional health, which is learning how to identify and solve problems, and how to soothe yourself in a healthy way.

Analysis:
- By not asserting a counter narrative, it effectively blames parents for the mental health problems children experience.
- Focuses on external behaviors and mental health as “feelings.”
- Doesn’t present solutions; offers a fatalistic explanation.

More Effective Response:

Tragedies like these are an opportunity for us to put our heads together and figure out how we, as a society, can invent and replicate those policies and programs that will support children’s mental health. It is important to remember that as children’s brains develop, they are developing in different environments; some develop with support from families in communities with easy access to resources. Much like a table needs a level floor to function well, children need this kind of level environment. But some children develop in an unbalanced and uneven environment, where their development is not well supported, and as a consequence they experience mental health problems. Toxic stressors in their environments literally undermine their stability. What we need are the kinds of interventions that can “level the table” and “smooth the floors” for these kids.

Analysis:
- Redirects the conversation from what’s wrong, to what’s possible to solve by using the value of Ingenuity.
- Uses the simplifying model of Levelness to explain 1) how mental health problems can develop and 2) that positive mental health can be achieved by interventions that address these causes.
- Uses the Toxic Stress simplifying model to reinforce how outside environments negatively impact children.