The following are talking points to use as a reminder during media interviews or when writing, and are based on FrameWorks’ research conducted in Alberta, Canada. Specific policy proposals can be introduced after the value and appropriate model.

We need to ensure the healthy development of all of our children because what affects one community in Alberta affects us all. We need policies and programs that encourage development, protect children’s brains, and prevent the conditions that put children at risk for physical and mental health problems. [Value of Interdependence]

Early experiences literally shape how the brain gets built. We now know that the basic architecture of the human brain is constructed through an ongoing process that begins before birth and continues into adulthood. Just like building a house, it’s step-by-step, beginning with a strong foundation. A strong foundation in children’s early years increases the probability of positive outcomes. A weak foundation increases the odds of later difficulties. [Brain Architecture Simplifying Model]

We know how to create stronger foundations for children’s development. One active ingredient is the “serve and return” relationships that children have with their parents and other caregivers in their family or community. Like the process of serve and return in games such as tennis and volleyball, young children naturally reach out for interaction. When adults respond by mirroring back those interactions in a consistent way, the child’s learning process is complete. We also know that all parts of a child need attention - cognitive, emotional and social capacities affect each other in the developing brain. Early childhood programs must reflect this understanding. [Serve and Return Simplifying Model]

Toxic stress in early childhood is caused by experiences such as extreme poverty, abuse, and chronic or severe maternal depression, all of which
can disrupt the developing brain, particularly when children lack supports
to protect against these harmful experiences. This can lead to lifelong
difficulties in learning, memory and self-regulation. Exposure to chronic and
serious early stressors creates an exaggerated stress response in the brain
and body that, over time, weakens its defense system against diseases, from
heart disease to diabetes and depression. These children also are at
greater risk to experience mental health problems, as toxic stress erodes the
solid foundation on which their mental health is developing, leaving them
without the stability they need to be able to adjust to situations and function
effectively. So just like we need to limit the toxic substances in our
environments to avoid damage and disease, we need to eliminate or buffer
the stressors in children’s environments to avoid the toxic stress response
that can derail and damage development. [Toxic Stress Simplifying
Model]

One way to think about mental health for children is that it’s like the
levelness of a piece of furniture, such as a table. And that levelness can
depend on the table, the floor it’s on, or both. Just as levelness allows a
table to function properly, the mental health of a child enables them to
function in many different areas. When children’s brain architecture
develops in an environment of toxic stress, it’s like a table on an uneven
floor. And tables can’t make themselves level; they need attention from
experts who understand levelness and stability and who can work on the
table, the floor, or even both. [Levelness Simplifying Model]

When we don’t attend to these important aspects of development now,
there are serious consequences later. 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. This
means we need to invest in the kinds of programs that affect child well-
being early on, because remedial education, clinical treatment, and other
professional interventions are more costly – both to the child and to the
society – and produce less desirable outcomes than the provision of
nurturing, protective relationships and appropriate learning experiences
earlier in life. [Pay Now or Pay More Later]

We can combine what we know from science about children’s brain
development with what we know from measuring “effectiveness factors” to
learn which programs work and which don’t support children’s healthy
development. In addition, we can evaluate the efficiency of programs for
young children by comparing the benefit of the investment to the cost. This allows a reliable comparison between programs that don’t improve child development and those that show real results. When we apply a system of continuous quality improvement to our children’s developmental experiences and environments, we show that we take seriously their role in our future. [Effectiveness Factors]

As a society, our job is to develop environments for children that shore up the brain’s architecture, create environments that encourage serve and return relationships, reduce exposure to toxic stress, create buffers of support to make stress more tolerable, and work toward the levelness necessary for our children to be healthy mentally. Innovative cities, provinces and countries have been able to design high-quality programs to support these environments. These programs have solved problems in early childhood development and shown significant long-term improvements for children. Alberta can be one of these thought leaders by putting science into action. [Value of Ingenuity]