

Overcoming Assumptions



A chart to help communicators anticipate when a message to practitioners may backfire

Audiences have multiple, sometimes contradictory, ways of reasoning about an issue, and some are more helpful than others. Social scientists call these ways of reasoning “cultural models.” The cues you choose as a communicator influence which cultural models people will use to make sense of your message. The chart below summarises FrameWorks’ research findings on how practitioners’ less helpful ways of reasoning about children’s mental health can cause experts’ messages to backfire and offers strategies for communicating more effectively.

Assumption: “Child Mental Health = Absence of Illness”

Common Assumptions	Implications for Communications	How to Redirect Thinking
“Absence of Illness”: Child mental health is simply the absence of disorder. If there are no visible cues of distress, then mental health must be in a positive state.	Makes it difficult to see and think about child mental health as an asset that can and should be actively promoted and supported. Leads practitioners to focus on mental health challenges.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Define child mental health as a positive state before describing challenges to it.• Focus on the collective rather than selective benefits of promoting positive child mental health. Sample usage: To ensure all of Australia’s children have a strong, positive future, we must foster environments and communities that support a positive, solid mental health. That means helping infants and children learn to regulate their emotions and respond to distress in age-appropriate ways.



Assumption: “Child Mental Health Comes from the Brain”

Common Assumptions

“Child Mental Health Comes from the Brain”:
As a result of nature and nurture, child mental health is established in brain processes.

Implications for Communications

Makes it difficult to think about broader or systemic factors that affect infant and child mental health, such as discrimination, poverty or economic inequality, and social isolation.

How to Redirect Thinking

- Use explanatory chains (cause-and-effect logic chains) to explain, step by step, how societal inequalities like discrimination and marginalisation affect child mental health.
- Use explanatory examples to facilitate more expansive thinking about child mental health.

Sample usage:

(Start of the chain): Improving children’s mental health, helping them build resilience and the necessary skills to navigate complex experiences must include providing support to their caregivers and the communities they are a part of.

(First link): Currently, one in four children have a parent living with mental illness, and one in six children are living in poverty. These realities cause stress for families. That stress can make it difficult for strong attachment relationships between children and their parents and caregivers to form.

(Second link): Without those strong bonds being made, that sense of safety and stability created, children’s emotional wellbeing and development are compromised.

(Third link): A lack of strong, healthy attachments can lead to mental health challenges, such as an inability to appropriately respond to high-level emotions and situations.

(Break the chain with solutions): Alleviating poverty is not just about the individual child or individual families, but also about the whole community. To ensure positive mental health for all, we must make sure that children, families and the communities they are a part of have access to important resources like affordable housing, workforce development programmes and quality childcare.

Assumption: “Parental Awareness”

Common Assumptions

“Parental Awareness”: Parents’ level of awareness shapes their children’s mental health outcomes in important ways. If parents do not support children’s mental health as they should, it is because they do not know that children can experience positive or negative mental health, what signs to look out for, or what actions to take to ensure their child’s mental health is as positive as possible.

Implications for Communications

Limits support for the necessary structural changes experts are advocating for when practitioners are focused on raising parental awareness.

How to Redirect Thinking

Solutions offered need to:

- Match the scope of the problem
- Include sufficient explanation
- Use even-handed tones.

Sample usage:

To better support child mental health in Australia, practitioners in child and adult services must work together to develop a comprehensive plan that accounts for the needs of the whole family. Providing families with access to quality health care, job opportunities and safe housing will give parents the capacity they need to create stable environments for children to thrive in. Those positive conditions help to foster strong, healthy attachments between parents or caregivers and the child.

Assumption: “Trauma Changes the Brain and Trauma Changes Behaviour”

Common Assumptions

“Trauma Changes the Brain and Trauma Changes Behaviour”:

Trauma, abuse and neglect can have long-term effects on infant and child mental health. These detrimental effects may include altering how the brain and nervous system respond to stress, and changing children’s understanding of what constitutes healthy relationships and coping skills.

Implications for Communications

While this can be a productive mode of thinking to tap into, language used to address trauma may also cue a sense of fatalism among members of the public. It is important to strike a balance between providing context or naming the problem without giving the impression that irreparable harm has been done. Children who have experienced trauma can still have positive mental health.

How to Redirect Thinking

Use tested reframing strategies, including metaphors and values (see [Spread the Word](#) section in this toolkit) to help explain why child mental health is an issue that requires support from members of the public as well as practitioners.

Use these metaphors in your messaging:

- **Brain Architecture**
- **Serve and Return**
- **Toxic Stress**
- **Outcomes Scale**
- And avoid the **Parent Trap**. Don’t make parents the centre, or the starting point, of the story of early development or child mental health. Instead, present parenting as a key means to the end of positive mental health.

Sample usage:

Traumatic events, which can include natural disasters or a range of human-made phenomena, from terrorism to social policies that cause extreme poverty, family separation and insecure housing, have the potential to create long-lasting effects on children’s mental health. That’s why it’s important to put programmes and services in place that support their needs and their family’s needs. To promote children’s mental health, we must provide social supports to their caregivers and communities, in order to address conditions like poverty and social inequality, which make it difficult for strong attachment relationships between children and their parents to form. Strong bonds between a caregiver and child create what scientists call “serve-and-return interactions,” and they are the building blocks of children’s positive mental health.