

IMPACT SPOTLIGHT

FRAMING CHILD

WELLBEING

Whether it's the metaphors we use, the examples we reference, or how we explain the science of development, discourse around early childhood is changing.

Earlier this year, the Center on the Developing Child at Harvard University released [Place Matters: The Environment We Create Shapes the Foundations of Healthy Development](#). The paper, from the National Scientific Council on the Developing Child, explains how environmental factors shape early child development and represents an important step forward for the field. This kind of progress reflects decades of effective and sustained collaboration between the scientific community, early childhood advocates, and framing experts—a collaboration that continues to advance what people know and say about what children need to thrive.

For the past 25 years, we've been working alongside developmental scientists and advocates to help tell the story of early child development in a way that drives change. As social scientists, we've created and tested framing strategies that shift thinking. As social change strategists, we've equipped and advised experts and advocates to navigate persistent framing dilemmas and tell new stories.

Picture: CEO Nat Kendall-Taylor discussing advances in discourse about early childhood development at the launch of the Stanford Center on Early Childhood. [Watch the full speech here.](#)



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How Toxic Stress Affects Your Long-Term Health

Published on December 06, 2023

Jennifer Siebel Newsom, California surgeon general help launch fight against 'toxic stress' in children under 5 years old

"We're adding Stronger Starts campaign to California's growing list of youth mental health services," First Partner of California Jennifer Siebel Newsom said.

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BODY + BRAIN

How the stress of racism can harm your health—and what that has to do with Covid-19

'Allostatic load' explains how chronic stress can cause wear and tear on the body, increasing your risk of hypertension, depression, diabetes, and more.

BY ALISA GREENBERG TUESDAY, JULY 14, 2020 NOVA NEXT

For example, the impact of significant early adversity in a child’s life is now central to conversations about child development—but that wasn’t always the case. For decades, the common assumption that “what doesn’t kill you makes you stronger” made it hard to translate people’s concern for children into support for policies that prevent or mitigate harm. Other assumptions, like the idea that babies cry in an effort to “manipulate” adults, are now recognized as genuine bids for attention to meet a need. These shifts in public understanding have led to significant policy and practice changes that promote childhood wellbeing, such as more research, funding, and programs to promote infant attachment.

Framing research has also played a role in shaping other major changes in the field. Twenty years ago, we were first asked to co-construct and test framing strategies that emphasized the prevention of maltreatment—not just responding after the fact. As a way to talk about prevention, we recommended moving toward a developmental story grounded in science, not sympathy.

Throughout our research, we’ve been part of developing several evidence-based metaphors that are now deeply embedded in scientific and public discourse about early childhood development. For example, the idea that adverse childhood experiences can “get under the skin,” or physically affect children, helps communicators convey a sense of urgency around preventing abuse and neglect. Other metaphors, like “buffering” children from adverse experiences, have also permeated discourse about early childhood development. Perhaps one of the most popular metaphors is the notion of “toxic stress,” or the idea that certain forms of severe, chronic, and unbuffered adversity can create physiological responses that derail development.

The scientific community, advocates, and framing experts have also been working together to expand understanding of what adversity looks like. Now, another frame change is in progress—one that is expanding the way people think about what “counts” as adversity.

For example, while families and communities play a massive role in children’s development, an outsized focus or even a placing of blame on parents has dominated the discourse for decades. Framing helps us understand what happens when we zoom out from the “family bubble” to consider how structural adversity like systemic racism affects children’s wellbeing. In the child welfare space, we’ve worked with advocates and experts to move efforts away from over-investigating and policing families of color, instead focusing attention on upstream approaches to address the sources of social, cultural, systemic, and interpersonal racism.

As the field expands understanding of adverse environments, it’s vital to ensure that we’re collectively equipped to talk about the distinct role that racism plays in children’s development. In partnership with Prevent Child Abuse America, we recently released framing guidance for communicating about racism in child and family advocacy, which includes recommendations such as adopting more expansive understandings of racism and explaining how it shapes children’s environments. Moving forward, as manufactured controversies about “critical race theory” and parents’ rights have moved issues of race and children even more into the spotlight, it will be important to learn from progress made in the realms of early childhood development and child welfare to ensure that young people have the support they need.

This year, we've seen meaningful changes in practice and policy. For example, more and more states are using funds from the Family First Act to address racial inequities and build a more robust continuum of prevention services and supports for families. This move reflects a shifting understanding of the child welfare system—an understanding that is now focused more on child wellbeing—made possible in part because of more widespread recognition of the differences between poverty and neglect, in addition to an increased appreciation of systemic racism as a driving force of our institutions.

Although much work remains to be done, together we've made strides in helping build more comprehensive understandings of early childhood development. Framing is only one part of the equation, but together with our partners we're helping shape the narrative and pave the way for more effective, systemic, and supportive solutions.



Listen to the conversation [here](#)