

## Framing Early Childhood Development *Recommendations for Infant-Toddler Professionals & Advocates*

To help infant-toddler professionals and researchers successfully communicate with policymakers and the public about early childhood development, the ZERO TO THREE Policy Network is publishing a series of articles in *The Baby Monitor* focused on effective communication about the early years. All of the articles in the series can be found at [http://www.zerotothree.org/site/PageServer?pagename=ter\\_pub\\_framing](http://www.zerotothree.org/site/PageServer?pagename=ter_pub_framing).

### Introduction

Infant-toddler professionals and researchers are in a prime position to communicate with policymakers about the needs of infants, toddlers and their families. And while it might seem like second nature to talk about our work, in reality, it is quite challenging to communicate *effectively* about the complex nature of early childhood development. By learning the best ways to communicate about early childhood development, we can help ensure that the needs of babies, toddlers and their families are met through effective public policy.

This article in the series explores some specific early childhood frames, the impact of those frames on how people reason about infant-toddler development, and the consequences of these messages for public policy. The article concludes with practical tools which infant-toddler advocates can use to develop their own messages about infant-toddler policy issues.

*A key finding of the research was that the most commonly used early childhood frames do not address either the broad spectrum of a child's interactions or the complete picture of what happens during development.*

### Framing & Communications

Effective communication requires an in-depth look at *what* we are trying to communicate and *how* people make sense of the information. The FrameWorks Institute, a communications organization, conducts scholarly research on framing the public discourse about social problems and then translates that research into recommendations and tools for the non-profit sector.<sup>1</sup> FrameWorks' approach to communications is based on the precept that people rely on "frames" to make sense of the world.<sup>2</sup> Framing refers to the way a story is told, and to the way cues in that story trigger expectations about the world.<sup>3</sup> We cannot be experts on everything, and so frames allow us to quickly make sense of the information we are receiving, so we can readily process new information. In essence, frames direct the way in which people reason about the information in a message. This process can have negative consequences though, because some frames will direct people to reason about the information inappropriately or inaccurately.

## Putting Framing to Work for Infants & Toddlers

The FrameWorks Institute conducted extensive research into how to communicate effectively about early childhood development,<sup>4</sup> which resulted in an analysis and set of recommendations for experts and advocates. (See sidebar box for recommendations.) The analysis highlights some important findings that can help guide infant-toddler advocates in their communications with policymakers and the public.

A key finding of the research was that the most commonly used early childhood frames do not address either the broad spectrum of a child's interactions or the complete picture of what happens during development. When people use commonly-known metaphors to talk about children – such as children as sponges, blank slates, precious objects, young plants to be nurtured, clay to be molded, or empty vessels to be filled – “they can elevate certain types of responses and downplay others,” resulting in unintended “consequences for the ways people think about what is necessary for healthy child development.”<sup>5</sup>

FrameWorks' research indicates that the most popular messages about the early years – such as brain research, school readiness, pre-K and early childhood education – cause people to default to the frames with which they are most familiar. Those default frames tend to neglect the reality that a child's early development includes physical, cognitive *and* social and emotional growth.<sup>6</sup> This is problematic when trying to create and implement public policies that appropriately address the whole child and all aspects of development.

To address this issue, FrameWorks' researchers tested two familiar frames, *education* and *development*, and illustrated the consequences of using a particular frame to communicate about infant/toddler development.

## Key Recommendations for Framing Early Childhood Development

### DO

- Prime the discussion with values of stewardship, future prosperity for society or reciprocity (giving to children who give back to society later)
- Use a simplifying model (such as brain architecture) to give people a vivid analogy of how development works: experiences that affect the structure of the brain
- Use examples that are not specifically cognitive and observable
- Explain what derails development: stress, for example, and how it happens
- Position early childhood programs as an opportunity for foundational growth that all should have
- Make community actors visible in your communications
- Wherever possible, connect the child to the larger environment

### DO NOT

- Begin the conversation with school readiness, brain research or daycare
- Use the language of experts
- Focus only on observable learning
- String together lists of impacts or numbers to stand in for explanations
- Assume that “science says” is enough explanation
- Assume that people can understand why development saves money, improves society, etc.
- Talk about parents as incompetent or super-competent
- Make child rearing something you must have resources or education to do well
- Fall into the determinism trap (it's all over by age three)
- Reinforce the family, safety or individualism frames verbally or visually

Bales, S.N. (2005) *Talking Early Childhood Development and Exploring the Consequences of Frame Choices: A FrameWorks Message Memo*. Washington, DC: 24-25.

## Competing Frames: Education vs. Development<sup>7</sup>

**The Education Frame:** The use of messages that relate to schooling and education, including pre-school, early childhood education, and school readiness.

- About improving cognitive ability
- Associated with outcomes e.g., high grades and test scores
- Focuses on school-age children
- A high national priority
- Can result in backlash, including concerns about pushing young children too hard and too young

**The Development Frame:** The use of messages that explain how quality early experiences promote “the healthy development of brain architecture, leading to solid, decent kids who are well-equipped to succeed in all areas of life, and to contribute to the community.”<sup>8</sup>

- About the quality of relationships
- Associated with broader outcomes e.g., the child’s capacity to be a good member of the community
- Allows people to think about infants and toddlers
- Reflects the broader range of components that make up a healthy, well-developed child, including social and emotional development
- Can be viewed as a closed, private system.<sup>9</sup>
- Can be trumped by strongly entrenched frames, such as family autonomy, safety, and individualism.<sup>10</sup>

There are benefits and drawbacks to each frame. The education frame invokes a positive American cultural priority but only focuses on cognitive abilities. The development frame allows people to think about the broader aspects of development but is still viewed as a closed, private system. The frames we use shape the way our audience thinks about infants and toddlers. A timely example of the education frame in action is the growing movement among states to make pre-school available to all 3- and 4-year-old children. Communication about universal preschool can leave infants and toddlers out of the picture, because of its focus on school and thus school-age children. By framing universal pre-school in the context of all the stages of development (prenatal to age 5), infants and toddlers become part of the story and policymakers can consider the range of policies and services that support a child’s development right from the start.

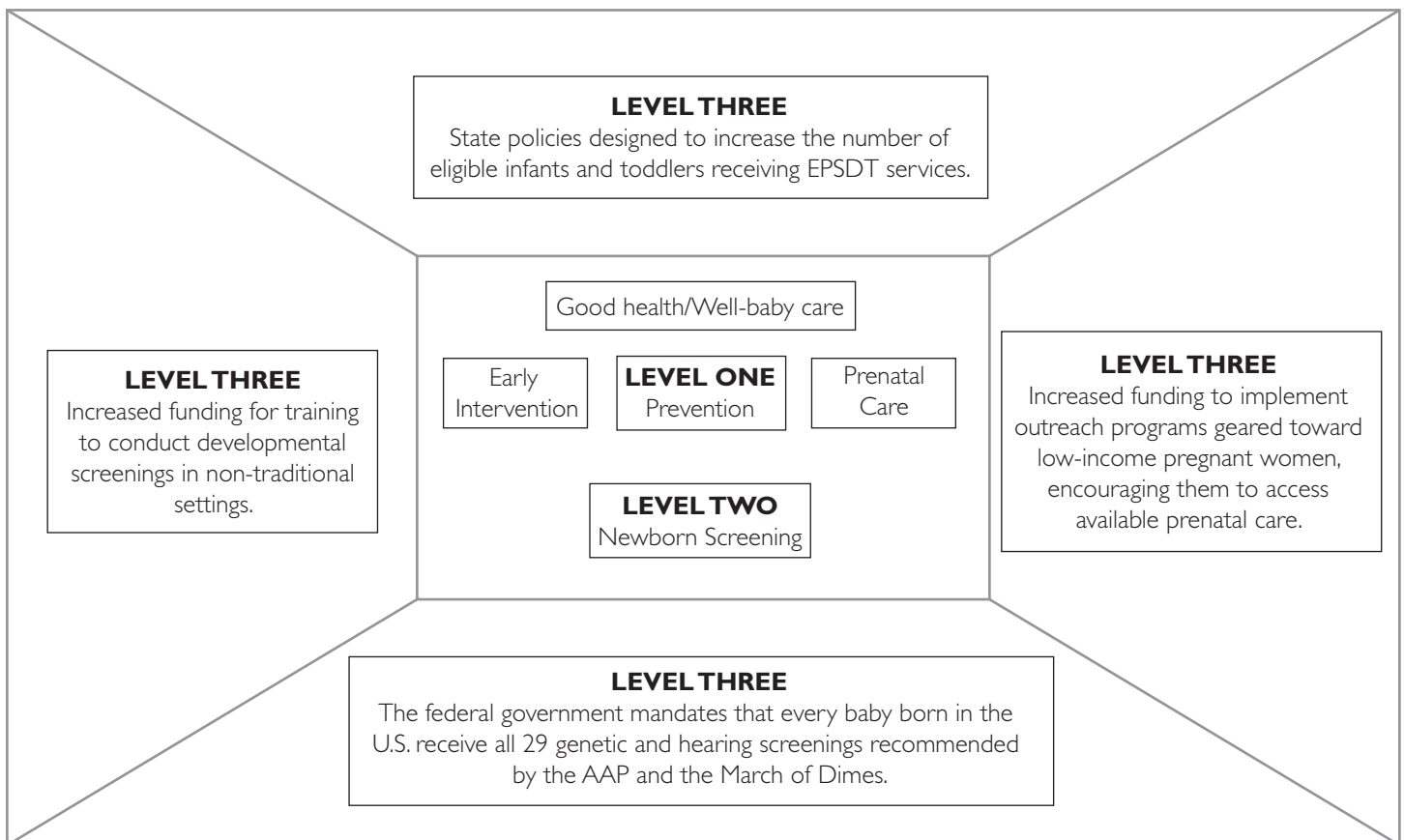
Education and development are only two of many frames that are commonly used in the public discourse about the early childhood years. As you develop messages to use with policy makers and the public, think about the many facets of that message and whether there might be any negative consequences in framing the communication in that way.

## Practice Framing Early Childhood Development Effectively

As an advocate for infant-toddler issues, you can create messages about your area of expertise and/or current legislation about babies and toddlers. A method we recommend for developing those messages is the *message box*. The last page of this article is a blank message box for your use.

Using the levels of thought as your guide (see the first article in the framing series for a discussion of levels of thought), place your Level One value in the centermost square of the message box. Then put your Level Two issue categories in the middle box. The outside sections of the message box are where you should place your Level Three policy details. This format gives you an easy format for how to communicate about infant-toddler policy. You can create a general message box that you use all of the time, or you can create a message box for each issue on which you are advocating or communicating.

Here is an example of a completed message box, so you can see how to complete your own.



*FrameWorks' approach to communications is based on the precept that people rely on "frames" to make sense of the world.*

## Conclusion

Understanding communications helps us advocate more successfully by encouraging us to consider the unintended consequences of the language we use and approach our conversations about infants and toddlers in new ways. We must work to share our stories and experiences in ways that will resonate with decision makers and the public. We hope you will use the entire series of framing articles to become expert communicators about the early years.

*Author:*

**Debbie M. Rappaport**, Project Director, ZERO TO THREE Policy Network

<sup>1</sup> The FrameWorks Institute, <http://www.frameworksinstitute.org>.

<sup>2</sup> Bales, S.N. (2002). *Framing Public Issues*. Washington, DC: 1.

<sup>3</sup> Gilliam, F.D. & Bales, S.N. (2004). *Framing Early Childhood Development: Strategic Communications and Public Preferences*. In: Halfon N., Rice T., and Inkelas M., eds. *Building State Early Childhood Comprehensive Systems Series, No. 7*. National Center for Infant and Early Childhood Health Policy. Retrieved January 17, 2006 from <http://www.healthychild.ucla.edu/NationalCenter/default.asp>: 4.

<sup>5</sup> Bales, S.N. (2005) *Talking Early Childhood Development and Exploring the Consequences of Frame Choices: A FrameWorks Message Memo*. Washington, DC: 7.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

<sup>7</sup> Aubrun, A. and Grady, J. (2004) *Framing the Birth to Three Agenda: Lessons Learned from Pre-K Campaigns*. Washington, DC: 4-8. And Gilliam and Bales (2004): 19.

<sup>8</sup> Aubrun and Grady (2004): 8.

<sup>9</sup> Gilliam and Bales (2004): 19.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

## Blank Message Box

