Strategic Framing for Effective Communication

A Workshop for Social Policy Advocates

Centre for Community Child Health at the Royal Children’s Hospital and the Murdoch Childrens Research Institute

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Julie Sweetland, Ph.D., Director of Learning
Nat Kendall-Taylor, Ph.D., Vice President for Research
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The FrameWorks Mission

To advance the nonprofit sector's communications capacity by conducting, translating and modeling relevant scholarly research for framing the public discourse about social problems.
**Examples of Our Work**

- **Harvard University Center on the Developing Child** – how to translate science of early childhood brain and biological development to inform sound policy

- **Alberta Family Wellness Initiative** - how a cross-sector coalition (government, academia, nonprofit) can speak the same language in order to move early childhood policy forward

- **A Better Start Initiative** - how multiple sites across the UK can transform their systems to align with the implications of the science of early brain and biological development

- **KIDS COUNT Network** - how to make the most powerful case for children’s issues at the state level

- **National Human Services Assembly** - how to build support for a range of social services and reframe the conversation about supporting healthy development across the lifespan

- **Jacksonville Partnership for Child Health** - cross-sector, inter-agency network working to build support for child mental health as a key to reducing disparities in child outcomes
A Multidisciplinary Approach to Communications Research

- Advocacy
- Digital Media/Production
- Administration
- Political Science
- Language & Linguistics
- Sociology
- Psychology/Antropology
Today’s Agenda

Storytelling for Policy Thinking
  *Widening the Lens*

  Anticipating Public Thinking
    *Navigating the Swamp*

  That’s An Empirical Question
    *Research on Frame Elements*

  Translating the Science of Early Childhood
    *A Case Study in Reframing an Issue*

  Putting It All Together
    *Practice/Wrap Up*
Storytelling for Policy Change
Framing a social policy on youth: Exhibit A
How did this communication address these questions?

*Why does this matter?*
Teenagers are dying (killing people?) on the roads.

*What’s this about? How does this work?*
Doesn’t say - must be, teenagers are behaving badly, as usual.

*What’s the goal? How can we tell if it’s been met?*
Keep them off the roads — is that practical?

*If it’s not working, why not?*
Bad parents.

*Who’s going to fix it? How?*
I’m supposed to spread the word about teen accidents?
Framing a social policy on youth: Exhibit B
## How did this communication address these questions?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Why does this matter?</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Our licensing system is out of date.</td>
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<table>
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<tr>
<th>What’s this about? How does this work?</th>
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<tr>
<td>Road conditions have changed.</td>
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<table>
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<tr>
<th>What’s the goal? How can we tell if it’s been met?</th>
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<tr>
<td>Give new drivers more practice, under the safest conditions.</td>
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<tr>
<th>If it’s not working, why not?</th>
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<tr>
<td>Vulnerabilities in system — conditions such as dark roads or distractions.</td>
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<tr>
<th>Who’s going to fix it? How?</th>
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<tr>
<td>New proposal to modernize our system.</td>
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A broader frame attracted a broader base of policy support
The number of accidents involving teenage Kansas drivers has dropped sharply over the past few years, and safety experts say the graduated driver’s license law that took effect Jan 1, 2010, has played a major role in the trend.

“I think that’s exactly the outcome we expected,” said Suzanne Wikle, director of policy and research for Kansas Action for Children, a nonprofit group that pushed for the law. She said other states have seen similar results after enacting similar laws.
Public Discourse

Frames

News

Cultural Models

Self-Made Child

Family Bubble

Solutions?

Back to Basics

Will Power

$$$

Will
Teens are dying on the roads

Opinions:
Why aren’t parents instilling responsibility?
Our road conditions have changed
Our road conditions have changed

Changed Public Discourse

Opinions:
What can we do to update our system?
Reframing ‘troubles’ as ‘issues’

“Troubles occur within the character of the individual and within the range of his or her immediate relations with others; they have to do with one’s self and with those limited areas of social life of which one is directly and personally aware.”

“Issues have to do with matters that transcend these local environments of the individual and the range of her inner life… An issue is a public matter; some value cherished by publics is felt to be threatened.”

C. Wright Mills
Influential Sociologist
Different kinds of stories set up different solutions

**EPISODIC**
- Individuals
- Events
- Psychological
- Private
- Appeal to consumer
- Better information
- Fix the person

**THEMATIC**
- Issues
- Trends
- Political/Environmental
- Public
- Appeals to citizens
- Better policies
- Fix the condition

Different kinds of stories set up different solutions
Frame Elements That Can Help Advocates Tell More Powerful Stories

**CONTEXT** establishes the nature of the problem as either a public “issue” that concerns us all, or a private “trouble” affecting only those individuals experiencing the problem.

**TONES** supports broad consideration of a communication by establishing it as explanatory and reasonable and for ‘everyone,’ not just those who already agree with the point of view being expressed.

**VALUES**, or goals, to remind people of what’s at stake or a principle they hold that is connected to the issue.

**METAPHORS**, to place issues in people’s everyday action scenario, enhance their understanding of processes and mechanisms and increase agency.

**NARRATIVE**, to override people’s default patterns of expectation about a complex, abstract issue by substituting the expectations of a well known narrative structure.
Framing Practice

Troubles talk or issues evolution?

Expert and advocate communications can play a large role in whether the public approaches a social problem as a “private trouble” or “public issue.”

Stand up, form groups of three, and stay on your feet.

After you introduce yourself to your partners, take turns responding to this prompt:

*In what ways does your specific field frame your issue as a little-picture, private trouble? In what ways does your field communicate the bigger picture, inviting the public to see the common good, shared fate, and structural issues at play?*

You’ll have 6 minutes for the three of you to share your thoughts.
Anticipating Public Thinking
“We need to improve the quality of childcare in Australia.”

EXPERT/ADVOCATE

PUBLIC

“Well...I don’t know about that. The problem is that too many kids are in childcare these days and not at home with their mums.”

You have a problem when...
“Science can tell us a lot about ways to improve outcomes for children—about the programs and policies that we should be investing in.”

“Hold on there! These days all the scientists want to do is put kids on pills and diagnose everything as some new ‘disorder.’ We need to let kids be kids. Scientists and their science are part of the problem, not the solution.”
“People approach the world not as naïve, blank-slate receptacles who take in stimuli …in some independent and objective way, but rather as experienced and sophisticated veterans of perception who have stored their prior experiences as an organized mass. This prior experience then takes the form of expectations about the world, and in the vast majority of cases, the world, being a systematic place, confirms these expectations, saving the individual the trouble of figuring things out anew all the time.”

What is Effective Communication?

It’s NOT about Louder or More
It’s NOT about Louder or More

Numerical Data → Charts, Graphs, Tables, More Data → More Evidence → Epiphany
“base rate information, despite its validity, does not affect recipients’ perceptions or judgements about a problem”
It’s NOT about Correcting Mistakes

People misremembered the myths as true.

Got worse over time.

Attributed false information to the CDC.
It’s NOT (Just) About Resonance

Beliefs that vaccines have serious side effects

Intent to vaccinate

It *is* About the Swamp

Knowing what’s in the swamp that’s eating your messages

Using proven strategies to get your messages out alive
Threat
- Crisis/Threat of Modernity
- Medicalisation of Childhood
- Bubble Wrap
- Information is Everything

Context
- Environments Shape Outcomes
- Place Matters

Early Child Development

Development
- Family Bubble
- Separate Influences
- Fill it Up
- Stretch but not Break
- Success = Happiness

Groups and Populations
- Clusters of Difference
- Ageing-Up
What cultural models might ‘eat’ this message?
What cultural models might ‘eat’ this message?

“Government figures reveal that 2,853 WA children under the age of 12 were on drugs to treat attention deficit hyperactivity disorder last year- including 223 aged two to six - compared with 2003 children in 2008. Perth psychiatrist Roger Paterson, who is on the professional advisory committee of WA’s Learning and Attentional Disorders Society, said it was encouraging that stimulant medication was used more because there had been concerns about under-treatment.

‘Stimulant medications such as dexamphetamine and methylphenidate are an important part of a multi-modal treatment package for ADHD,’ Dr Paterson said.”
Babies don’t come with a set of instructions, but other parents - and medical professionals, marketing people and even well-meaning strangers - most certainly do.

When I was pregnant with my first child 10 years ago, people were full of advice about how to maximise my newborn’s potential. Value adding to your child begins in utero, with a plethora of supplements available to improve your unborn child’s capacity to learn.

Once the child is out, the message gets even louder. “A baby’s brain is like a sponge,” was the common cry. “They absorb everything. It’s never too early to start boosting their brain development.”

Indeed, mothers are encouraged to breastfeed as soon as the child is born to foster bonding but also to promote braininess. And a recent study from the US found that seven-year-olds breastfed for the first year of life had a higher verbal IQ than children who were bottle-fed.

This isn’t to say that children who aren’t breastfed are-condemned to a life at the bottom of the class. Besides, there are so many other things a parent can do to stimulate the synapses of their newborn.

Far from being squirming bundles who just wants to eat, sleep and do unspeakable things in their nappies, babies are apparently potential geniuses, and it’s up to parents to unlock their amazing abilities.

Parenting publications are full of ads for activities and products which promise to foster learning. There are exercise classes for babies which give nature a helping hand by stimulating their intellectual abilities. There are DVDs to teach your little one all about shapes, colours and even parts of the orchestra.
It Is About the Swamp

Knowing what’s in the swamp that’s eating your messages

Using proven strategies to get your messages out alive
That’s An Empirical Question
There's a story there - whether or not you're telling it
“So a good process for making your ideas stickier is:
(1) Identify the central message -- find the core;
(2) Figure out what is counter-intuitive about the message -- why isn’t it happening naturally?
(3) Communicate your message in a way that breaks your audience’s guessing machines
(4) Once their guessing machines have failed, help them refine their machines.”

When we burn fossil fuels like coal and gas, we release carbon dioxide into the air. When excess CO2 from the air gets absorbed into the oceans it causes ocean acidification. Ocean acidification makes it hard for shellfish to build their shells. The loss of these organisms affects the whole ecosystem.
Framing Fundamental #1: Explain More, Summarize Less

- CO₂ Drives Climate System
- Increase in correct answers vs. control

Knowledge Scale

- Ocean Acidification - Description
- Ocean Acidification - Explanation
Framing Fundamental #2: Fill Out Your Frame

Selected results from recent FrameWorks research on public health

- **Human Potential**
- **Human Potential + Social Determinants Explanation**

* Statistically Significant
Need for Flexible System

Legalization = Most Effective Reform

Legalization --> Econ Growth

Immigrants Contribute to Society

Lack of Legal Status Weakens Communities

Framing Fundamental #3: Metaphor Makes a Difference
Why Is Testing Metaphors So Important?
People will run with metaphors. Will they run in the right direction?

vs.

[Image of a plant being held with hands] vs. [Image of a detailed building diagram]
Consistent Effects that are Positive in Relation to Communications Goals
The Power of Metaphor

**Stress**
not talking about stress/
focusing on physically
abusive parents

**Process**
parental love as primary
(sole) determinant of
outcomes

**What Develops**
happiness

No anti-science mentions (highly significant relative to control)
Framing Fundamental #4: Build Meaning Around Data

Selected results from recent FrameWorks research on criminal justice

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Outcome Measures</th>
<th>Pragmatism</th>
<th>Racial Facts</th>
<th>Prag+ Racial Facts</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Disparity Reduction</td>
<td>1.1</td>
<td>-0.3</td>
<td>3.4**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Causal Attribution</td>
<td>2.2</td>
<td>4.2**</td>
<td>5.6**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Solutions Attribution</td>
<td>2.3*</td>
<td>3.9**</td>
<td></td>
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* P<.05
** P<.01
Framing Fundamental #5: Always Include Solutions

**Social Responsibility**
**Soc. Resp. w/ Facts**
**Soc. Resp. w/ Facts + Solutions**

% Change Vs. Control

- **Solutions Support**
- **Problem Scope**
- **Efficacy**
- **Resp. for Solutions**
- **Behavioral Intentions**

**=P<.01  
*=P<.05
The Power of ‘How’

“I think you should be more explicit here in step two.”
The Power of ‘How’

- Explanation is an important communications goal

- Communications real estate is valuable—we need higher standards for what we use to fill it

- If we focus on explaining how things work, we help people become advocates for better change

“**I think you should be more explicit here in step two.**”
Case Study: Early Childhood in Australia
Mapping the Gaps

Childcare

Similarities and Differences

Process of Development

Relationship of Causal Factors

Stress

Science

Information

Temporal Focus

Site of Development

Common Processes

Active and Dynamic

Interactive

Development Derailer

Solution

Better and Part

Forward

Safe Place to Put Child while Parents Work

Group Differences

Passive and Uni-Directional

Discrete

Almost Non-Existential

Part of Problem

More

Backward
Frame Elements That Can Help Advocates Tell More Powerful Stories

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Values:
enduring beliefs, which **orient** individuals’ attitudes and behavior (perceptual lenses)

- Shared Fate/ Common Good
- Pragmatism
- Prevention
Which Values Lead to Productive Thinking and Policy Support?
A Framing Experiment

- Effects of **values** on people’s attitudes and policy support

- Values from:
  - media discourse,
  - expert discourse,
  - public discourse,
  - past FrameWorks research on similar content areas across cultures

- 2,800 respondents selected to statistically match a representative Australian national sample
A Framing Experiment

Sample N=2800

Random assignment to messages

Independent Variable

Candidate Values
- Opportunity for All
- Innovation/Problem-Solving
- Future Functioning of Society
- Community Cohesion
- Future Prosperity
- Workforce Equity

Control - (No Message)
Value: Future Prosperity

Australia needs to invest in children’s development for the benefit of our future. This is important because our nation’s prosperity depends on the collective investment we put in our children’s development, and we all benefit from that investment. This means devoting resources to improve programs and services that help all children be healthy, get a good education, and contribute to our collective prosperity as Australians. Doing so will help ensure that we are investing now for the future prosperity of our country.
A Framing Experiment

Sample N=2800
Random assignment to conditions

Frames (IV)
Candidate Values
- Opportunity for All
- Innovation/Problem-Solving
- Future Functioning of Society
- Community Cohesion
- Future Prosperity
- Workforce Equity

Control - (No Message)

Attitudes and Policy Support (DV)
- Child Care
- Poverty
- Importance of Community
- Context/Quality
- Child Mental Health
- ECEC System
- Efficacy
Examples of Outcome Measures

Child Care
• We need to make sure that all children have access to high quality childcare and early education programs no matter their income level or where they live.

Community Context
• We should focus more resources at the community level, by working with communities to develop, implement and evaluate programs that support parents and children.

Child Mental Health
• Mental health services should be available, accessible and affordable for all parents, caregivers and children who need them.

Efficacy
• With the right programs, distributed in the right ways, more of our children can experience positive development.
A Framing Experiment

Sample N=2800
Random assignment to conditions

Frames (IV)
Candidate Values
- Opportunity for All
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- Future Prosperity
- Workforce Equity

Control - (No Message)

Attitudes and Policy Support (DV)
- Child Care
- Poverty
- Importance of Community Context/Quality
- Child Mental Health
- ECEC System
- Efficacy

Analysis
Compare effects between treatment groups and control
Results

Policy Support

- Community Resources
- Poverty
- ECEC
- CMH
- Child Care
- Efficacy

Opp. For All
Innovation/Prob. Solving
Future Functioning
Community Strength
Future Prosperity
Workforce Equity
Collective Prosperity

Using our national resources to support our children’s positive development is a responsible way of assuring a stable, functional, and prosperous future for our country. If we invest in now in the health and development of our children, our whole country benefits.

Inoculating and refocusing attention:

- Backward --> Forward
- Crisis --> Solution
- Science as Problem --> Science as Part of Solution

Key ideas to include:

- All Children
- Future perspective (importance of acting now for the future)
- Collective prosperity / All Australians
A new ANU study, finding that the poor quality of childcare in Australia in 2007 meant children in care for more than 21 hours a week had poorer school results, supports the ongoing national reforms to improve quality . . .

The report makes a compelling case for the need to increase the quality of child care and early learning in Australia . . . through the National Quality Framework.

The NQF is vital to raising quality and needs to be supported. Our children need access to quality early learning if they are to have the best start in life. There is plenty of evidence that high quality early learning and care can deliver long and lasting benefits for children in later schooling and life.

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The future of Australia depends on making the decision to invest in all of our children. If we support our children’s development now they can reach their full potential and become the foundation for the future prosperity of our country.

A new ANU study shows that, compared to their peers, children exposed to poor quality child care show long-lasting disparities in school results. This impacts all of our well-being by standing in the way of our country’s ability to meet future challenges. The National Quality Framework is working to solve this problem by improving the quality of child care and early learning and investing in our country’s future.

High quality early learning and care for all children is a vital ingredient in a strong, sustainable society. Our investment in young children now can guarantee a sound future for us all.
Frame Elements That Can Help Advocates Tell More Powerful Stories

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The Explanatory Metaphor:

A Translation Device

Makes something that is hard to understand easier to understand, by comparing it to something concrete and familiar.
The Explanatory Metaphor:
A Translation Device

Brain Architecture

Brain Development ≈ Building/Architecture
All Metaphor Is Not Good Metaphor: Know Before You Go
All Metaphor Is Not Good Metaphor: Know Before You Go

He was as tall as a 6’3” tree.

Her eyes were like two brown circles with big black dots in the center.

John and Mary had never met. They were like two hummingbirds who had never met.

The lamp just sat there, like an inanimate object.

He was as lame as a duck. Not the metaphorical lame duck, either, but a real duck that was actually lame.

Here vocabulary was as bad as, like, whatever.
What the Metaphors were Designed to “Do”

1. See childcare as an **important site of development** (not just places to put your kids or it’s never as good as mum)

2. Realize that childcare **quality matters** rather than “as long as it’s safe…”

3. Think about some of the **features of high-quality** childcare:
   - Stable: low staff turnover
   - Professional: teachers are trained and supported
   - Relational and Responsive: childcare centers incorporated/embedded in culture, community and relationships that dynamically support skills and development

4. Reason about what high quality childcare **does**: develops skills and abilities, improves outcomes, functions as a source of intervention
Amplifying Development

A metaphor for the role of childcare in child and community development

Quality childcare centers have the power to amplify children's development. Like an amplifier takes an incoming sound and makes it stronger and clearer, a good childcare center can amplify children’s learning and skill development so that they can reach their full potential.

Inoculates against:
Family Bubble
Bubble Wrap /Safety is it
Medicalization of Childhood
Information is Everything

Productive effects:
Position role for childcare in relation to family
Illustrate how childcare affects development
Very sticky and easily used
Very generative (boost, enhance, multiply, turn up...)
Magnitude and breadth
Thinking and Talking with Amplifier
Think of a high-quality ECEC program or policy that you know fairly well.

How could you explain how it works using *Brain Architecture* and *Developmental Amplifier*? Write a few sentences sketching out what you might say to a curious member of the public who doesn’t know much about early development.

Use your Reframe Cards and the Talking Points in your folder to build greater familiarity with these recommendations.

Work alone for 5 minutes. Then, we’ll share out and get feedback.
Putting It All Together
Which Card Would You Play?

Explanatory Metaphors translate a specific concept for the public, making it “sticky.” For these topics, which metaphor would help to explain the issue for non-experts? See if you and your partner can select a reframe to use before the prompt dissolves. Use the remaining time to discuss your reasoning.

- Why it’s important to talk to children before they learn to speak
- New initiative for addressing needs of children who have experienced trauma
- Expanded access and flexibility for child care in early years
- Mental health referral system integrated into primary care
- Why staff in early development centres should be highly trained
Basic Message Template

Start with a **value** (Level 1)

Describe the **issue** (Level 2)

Introduce the **solution** (Level 3)

What’s at stake?

What’s this about?

How would policy help?
Think of a data point that is commonly mentioned in your field.

How might you frame it so that the public understands it productively?

Consider the lessons we just explored - and try to apply them.

Find a partner and chat about it.

Then we’ll share out.
Please complete the evaluation form. We value your insights.

PS. We will make this presentation available as a pdf.
Discussion
“The advocates’ message tends to be complicated rather than simple, longer rather than shorter, and contrary to rather than consistent with popular understanding. . . . For the most part, this means that we have to explain, our opponents just have to state; we need to change people’s minds, they just need to reinforce what people already think; we need to emphasize shared responsibility, they just need to highlight personal choice.”
