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FRAMING EARLY CHILDHOOD DEVELOPMENT:
Strategic Communications and Public Preferences

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This series of reports is designed to support the planning and implementation of the Maternal and Child Health Bureau (MCHB) State Early Childhood Comprehensive Services (SECCS) Initiative. The reports are written by a team of experts to provide guidance on state policy development within this initiative. The policy reports on cross cutting themes include strategic planning, communications strategies, financing, results-based accountability, cultural proficiency, and data analysis and use. The policy reports on programmatic topics include medical home, parenting education, family support, infant mental health, and dental health.

The National Center for Infant and Early Childhood Health Policy supports the federal Maternal and Child Health Bureau and the State Early Childhood Comprehensive Systems Initiative by synthesizing the policy relevance of important and emerging early childhood health issues, conducting policy analysis on systems-building and programmatic issues, and disseminating the latest research findings to increase the visibility of early childhood policy issues on the national agenda.

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Introduction

Maternal and child health practitioners often approach systemic change in a very practical manner: fostering a collaborative vision, engaging critical stakeholders, working with policymakers on reform, and bringing the data and experience to inform the process. Yet much of the important work that MCH does at a state and local level flies below the radar of the public and even policymakers familiar with public health. MCH/Title V programs continually work to integrate services for families and children, including those with special health care needs. Much of this work includes changing systems. Systems are often maintained at a status quo due to deep, ingrained structures, relationships, and beliefs about particular service delivery functions, as well as constituencies committed to maintaining existing service delivery structures. The MCHB State Early Childhood Comprehensive Systems (SECCS) Initiative embarks upon a process that challenges the current state of disconnected systems of services for young children and their families. The success of the SECCS Initiative will depend upon a strategic approach to planning and communicating a new vision—one that engages all potential partners in a common purpose and process of collaborative reform. The question confronting those interested in systemic reform is: How do you go about getting the public, policymakers, and other key stakeholders to think about this set of issues in such a way that they become motivated to solve them through changes in public policies, programs, and delivery systems?

The purpose of this report is to focus on the role that strategic communications approaches can play in helping state MCH programs and their collaborating partners frame their message and influence the way that key constituencies understand early child development and the need for a more functional and comprehensive early childhood service system. Often when new initiatives are being launched, communications is an afterthought and is relegated to the function of outreach or dissemination. Increasingly, those responsible for launching major initiatives requiring reformulation of existing public policies into a new and more useful framework also recognize the key role that communications strategies can play. In this report, we draw from the rich research literature on mass communications for policy change. We utilize this body of work to suggest ways in which the principles of strategic communication can be used to move specific issues forward, in this case the issue of early child development and early childhood systems building. We also draw upon our experience in research and consulting with a number of groups at the state and national levels that have targeted early child development as an issue for policy change. Because many in the MCH and child development field may not be familiar with the field of strategic communications, we begin with a brief review of how the field developed and its potential application to early childhood.

Background on Mass Communications and Social Issues

Research in the cognitive and social sciences indicates that meaningful social change involves changing the way people think about social problems and their solutions. One basic approach that has been successfully utilized to move various policy issues forward

is to predict and direct public opinion via *strategic communications (SC)*. SC is important because it has the capacity to influence the broader culture by defining the issues, directing the thoughts and actions of policymakers and influential persons, and priming people for action. As Walter Lippmann, perhaps the first person to connect communications to mass opinion, said in 1921, "The way in which the world is imagined determines at any particular moment what men will do." In other words, it is important to use SC to derive a "line of action" that is useful for advocates of systemic reform. In the case of the system reform that SECCS represents, it will be important to use SC to help all constituencies imagine what is possible, desirable, and achievable.

But what does this <u>really</u> mean for policymakers and practitioners interested in building broad public and political support for systemic reform like SECCS? In the first place, research tells us that when communications is inadequate, people default to the "pictures in their heads." For policy makers and program administrators being asked to consider a new approach for delivering services to young children and their families, communications needs to move them away from the pictures in their heads and toward a new picture. On the other hand, when communications is effective, people can see an issue from a different perspective. Why? When communications is effective, it is also interactive; that is, communications resonates with people's deeply held values and worldviews. In short, SC can contribute to social change or the lack of change. In considering the SECCS Initiative, planners must consider not only the pictures that the public, policy makers and program administrators have in their head about how services are or could be delivered, but also how we can communicate about early childhood and an early childhood system in a way the resonates with deeply held values or beliefs about young children, families and the services they have or need.

Why Framing Matters to How the Public and Policymakers Think

The basic premise is that how issues are *framed* -- in the public's mind, in the mass media, and in the minds of policymakers -- has a measurable impact on policy outcomes. Using methods from the cognitive and social sciences, we study ***frames*** to determine their impact on public policy preferences. Recognizing that there is more than one way to tell a story (a frame), we tap into decades of research on how people think and communicate, drawing from the fields of political psychology, mass communications, cultural anthropology, cognitive linguistics, sociology and political science. The result is an empirically driven SC model that makes academic research understandable, interesting, and usable in helping people to solve social problems.

Our approach begins by identifying the ***dominant frames*** that drive reasoning on public issues. In social psychological parlance, this means those frames that are most "chronically accessible" or "top of the mind" that trigger and filter public dialogue. We also call attention to those alternative frames most likely to stimulate public reconsideration and enumerate their elements (***reframing***). Our analysis offers policy makers, advocates, planners, and others a different way to:

1. Work systematically through the challenges they are likely to confront in the introduction and/or revision of social policies
2. Anticipate attitudinal barriers to support
3. Develop research-based strategies to overcome public misunderstanding

What Is A Frame?

A frame is the central organizing principle that structures meaning. It is a composition of elements -- visuals, metaphors, messengers, symbols, stereotypes, and numbers -- which together communicate a metamessage. Framing refers to the way a story is told and to the way these cues, in turn, trigger the shared and durable cultural models that people use to make sense of their world. Another way to put this is that framing is how messages are encoded with meaning so that they can be efficiently interpreted in the context of their existing belief systems. As George Lakoff notes, **"**People understand almost everything by applying conceptual frames.   The conclusion one draws depends on the frame one uses…..People reason metaphorically most of the time without being aware of it."

For frames to be effective, they must be widely shared throughout the society and be persistent over time. They must work symbolically to attach meaning and structure to life's events, experiences, and contexts. Frames tell us what communications is *about*. Framing then is a translation process between incoming information and the pictures in our heads. Frames signal what counts, what can be ignored, and allow us to "fill in" or infer missing information. In short, frames are "labels the mind uses to find what it knows."

Why Frames Are Important

Frames are important not only because they define the issues but because they also explain who is responsible for the problem and potential solutions. Communications research tells us that when it comes to framing attributions of responsibility, there are two important categories – episodic and thematic. *Episodic frames*, by far the preferred technique of the news media, focus on discrete events that happen at particular times to specific people. In other words, episodic frames lead to individual levels of attribution – if the person is the problem, fix the person, not the condition.   *Thematic frames*, on the other hand, include context and perspective in the discussion. Attention is paid to underlying systemic causes of social problems. If the system is the problem, fix the underlying conditions that lead to the systemic effect.

Another way to think about it is the difference between a landscape and a portrait. A portrait draws viewers into the intimate details of a particular person or object; landscape, on the other hand, uses foreground <u>and</u> background to forge a broader picture.

Framing can direct whether the solution to any given social problem is individual or collective, and the media's use of specific frames is an important influence on the way people perceive a communication's "call to action." Put differently, framing refers to the

construct of a communication – its language, visuals and messengers – and the way it signals to the listener or observer how to interpret and classify new information. Thus, the concept of framing is significant both to those campaigns that seek to move public opinion and to those seeking to change individual behavior. In sum, frames are the conceptual tools on which both people and the media depend on to convey, interpret, and evaluate information.

Reframing

One of the great challenges facing advocates of system reform is developing a strategy that reframes the debate by invigorating an alternative understanding of a given policy issue and thus rendering it more accessible and in-line with the analysts' policy agenda. One of our favorite quotes about the concept of *reframing* is from the noted cognitive scientists Tarrow, Snow, and Benford:

> "When a movement wishes to put forward a radically new set of ideas, it must engage in frame transformation: new values may have to be planted and nurtured, old meanings or understandings jettisoned and erroneous beliefs or 'misframings' reframed." Most movements are associated with the development of an innovative master frame.

In a more formal sense, we use the term **reframe** to mean *changing "the context of the message exchange" so that different interpretations and probable outcomes become visible to the public*. The goal of the process is to identify alternative frames that have more promise for promoting a particular policy outcome. As the literature suggests, most social movements are propelled by the introduction of an innovative master frame that resonates in broad and deep ways in the culture and society.

Two examples come to mind -- one historic, the other contemporary. There is little doubt that the *modern civil rights movement* (approx. 1950-1972) was one of the most effective social movements undertaken in American history. Perhaps less well considered is that the movement was also a masterful job of reframing the public discourse about race in America. By turning the discussion of civil rights away from racism at the individual level and towards a more penetrating and sweeping indictment of the legal and political system, civil rights advocates were able to obtain significant reforms in public **systems**. The problem was not simply about the actions of a group of racists; it was about the capacity of the system to uphold a set of principles. To paraphrase Chief Justice Warren in the Brown decision, the states had the option of either providing public education to everyone or providing it to no one.

A more contemporary example can be seen in the spate of tobacco settlements over the last several years. For example, in the early part of the Florida trial, the defense successfully framed tobacco as appealing to an addictive streak in the American general public. Cigarettes may be a harmful drug, they argued, but smoking still depended on *individual* choice. The tide turned in the case, however, when prosecutors were able to frame tobacco as a defective *product* distributed by a deviant industry. Government, therefore, was responsible for protecting the consumers. Using the best science, tobacco advocates were able to support the claim that smoking posed a severe **public** health risk

(e.g., "second-hand" smoking) and thus required sweeping reforms to the regulatory **system** (e.g., Proposition 10 in California).

How People Process Information

What has to happen in the public mind to create and sustain the conditions of social change? According to Walter Lippmann, *"We define first, and then see*." The literature on framing suggests that human beings have devised highly effective strategies for processing incoming information, using mental shortcuts to make sense of the world. The currency of a communications' efficiency is the frame, a shorthand trigger that allows people to be guided by cues in each new message that match an already extant worldview. These frames can be triggered by various elements, such as language choices and different messengers or images. These communications elements, therefore, have a profound influence on decision outcomes.

Research shows that, for the most part, people are *cognitive misers*. Incoming information provides cues that connect to the existing pictures in our heads. People then engage in a process of fast and frugal cognition where a frame ignites a cultural model that allows people to reason about an issue, make inferences, or fill in the blanks or missing information by referring to the robustness of the evoked model, not the sketchy frame.

As Deborah Tannen has observed,

> "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 storied their prior experience 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."

The consistent evocation of a particular frame of reference creates a framework of expectations or a *dominant frame*. In other words, easily remembered frames are recalled and applied; hard to remember representations are either forgotten or transformed into more easily remembered ones.

In this sense, SC is fundamentally about storytelling. Whether from the news media, advocates, partisans, or politicians, the function of the frame is to drive us toward the correct identification of an old story. Roger Schank and his colleagues have done some of the most interesting work on the role of stories in public communications. They sum up the power of stories in the following way:

> "Finding some familiar element causes us to activate the story that is labeled by that familiar element, and we understand the new story as if it were an exemplar of that old element. Understanding means finding a story you already know and saying, 'Oh yeah, that one. Once we have found (the) story, we stop processing."

For stories we know well, any part of the story will conjure all the other parts and fill them in. In this way, we learn from the stories of others, but only if what we hear relates

strongly to something we already know. In other words, we can learn from these stories to the extent that they have caused us to rethink our own stories. The cognitive cultural models that are sparked by the frame allow us to forget certain information and to fill in or invent other details because the frame is now activated. The core challenge for reform advocates is to identify and develop a compelling narrative that directs and tracks public reasoning to the preferred policy destination.

In the boxes below, we summarize the key points of the discussion on framing and suggest some limitations of current strategic communications thinking and practice.

What's wrong with framing today?

- We confuse framing with public relations, dissemination and social marketing.
- We take the advice of advertisers and communications advisors who do not understand public opinion and public policy.
- We do not take communications seriously as part of the problem we are confronting.
- We do not involve communications staff in early strategy discussions.

What We Know from Communications Research

- People use mental shortcuts to make sense of the world.
- Incoming information provides cues that connect to the pictures in our heads.
- People get most of their information about public affairs from the news media which creates a framework of expectation or dominant frame.
- Over time, we develop habits of thought and expectation, and configure incoming information to conform to this frame.

**Applying Strategic Communications to Early Childhood Development:
The Black Box and Beyond**

In this section we apply the lessons from framing to the issue of early childhood development. In particular, we ask the following questions:

- How do the public and policy makers think about young children?
- Are there dominant frames that appear almost automatic?
- How do these dominant frames affect policy choices?
- How are these dominant frames reinforced?
- How can young children's issues be reframed to invigorate less accessible frames that evoke a different way of thinking and alternative policy choices?

Over the last several years we have developed a systematic process to gauge the impact of dominant frames and test reframes with the greatest potential for encouraging public reconsideration of a given issue. The initial task is to identify and document the dominant frames of understanding – both in the media and in the public mind. We typically begin with a comprehensive review of opinion data available in the public domain. To assess media frames, we conduct content analyses of various news sources and markets, including entertainment programming when relevant. Then, to get at the "pictures in people's heads," we utilize cognitive elicitations (designed for qualitative, in-depth probing), focus groups (for texture and nuance), and public opinion surveys (mass attitudes). The next step is to identity, develop and test alternative reframes.

Our approach is different from other approaches in several important respects. First, it is committed to a multi-disciplinary, multi-method approach. Second, it is, in fact, a marriage of applied and basic research. Third, while recognizing that individuals play a pivotal role in the communications process, our model simultaneously incorporates the basic principles of systems thinking into contextual individual-level choices. Fourth, although we acknowledge the power of the media and the role of elite opinion, we also incorporate thinking and practice on the nature of mass publics.

For our work on early childhood development, we completed a series of 12 focus groups in six states with *civically active* adults. By civically active we mean people who are likely voters, participate in community organizations, and pay attention to public affairs. We also conducted, in conjunction with Children Now, a detailed content analysis of local television news coverage of children in six American cities. Finally, we performed cognitive elicitations with 40 civically active adults in four states (RI, AZ, KY, and WI) and with 10 business leaders in the Washington, D.C. area. We also performed a cognitive analysis of children's advocates' materials. In all, this research base is reflective of the first phase of our research on early childhood issues. It is designed to anticipate the way communications will interact with dominant frames about children as well as identify reframes as they have been advanced by the field.

The Research Base

Focus Groups: civically active adults in six states
- Boston women – November 28, 2001
- Boston men – November 28, 2001
- Phoenix, mixed gender, mixed race – February 12, 2002
- Phoenix, mixed gender, Hispanic – February 12, 2002
- Los Angeles, African American women – February 19, 2002
- Los Angeles, African American men – February 19, 2002
- Kansas City women – February 20, 2002
- Kansas City men – February 20, 2002
- Mt. Laurel, NJ women – February 29, 2002
- Mt. Laurel, NJ men – February 29, 2002
- Richmond women – March 25, 2002
- Richmond men – March 25, 2002

Content analysis of local news
- 11,000 stories, July 2000
- Three affiliates in six cities (Atlanta, Boston, Des Monies,
- Los Angeles, New York, and Seattle)

Cognitive Elicitations
- Cognitive elicitations with 40 civically active parents in four states
- Cognitive elicitations with 10 business leaders in D.C. area
- Cognitive analysis of advocates' materials

Dominant Frames

The pioneering work on brain research in early childhood has sparked an important national debate about the most productive (and destructive) forces on human development. There is fairly widespread acceptance that the first five years are central to an individual's development over the lifespan. There is far less consensus, however, on the appropriate courses of public policy action. This includes the roles and responsibilities of public agencies responsible for health, mental health, education and family support services. And while MCH advocates have produced some hard-earned victories, moving public will in support of children's issues remains an uphill task. A primary challenge has to do with the way the issue is framed.   As our data will show, the problem is that the public and many policy makers do not have a viable working model of early child development. Apparently, people are unable to connect particular interventions to particular outcomes because they have a causal understanding of what happens in early childhood. To many people, the developmental process is a black box. As a result, they default to other, more accessible frames. These frames, in turn, are not always in line with child advocates' intended line of action.

For program administrators and service providers from different disciplines, it appears that a similar process is at play. Whereas social workers, psychologists, and pediatricians may all have a working model of child development in their minds, it is not clear if these working models are in fact congruent and utilize the same perspectives.

There are three frames that appear to be most accessible to the study participants with whom we talked: the family, individualism, and safety. The results we report below are taken from the focus groups and cognitive elicitations.

The Family
The basic narrative of this frame is that child rearing takes place in the family. From this perspective, the development of children is considered the families' responsibility and normal development results from families raising children properly. Therefore, community is not seen as relevant. In this regard, the family environment is critical to how children turn out. This sentiment was expressed in clear ways by our focus groups discussing child development:

> "I think [families] are more like kingdoms in the fact that they have their own rules, their own laws but they interact with other countries." (Virginia man)

> "I think it is just the mother's affection, closeness, some kind of bond or relationship between mother and father and the kid. It's a bonding process…" (Los Angeles man)

> "I think one parent at least in the first five years until they get to school ought to be at home because that sets the tone for the kids." (Virginia man)

> "I think they absorb. Through three and five -- I know my son absorbs just everything that came around him. He just wanted to know everything. Everything is why, why. What is that? Why does it do that? (New Jersey woman)

To carry the sponge metaphor a little further, family-centric thinking sees the child as a "sponge" that absorbs whatever elements are in the "sink" of the family. Connection to other "sponges" or their "sinks" is not deemed important. What is also certain is that this line of thought does not mesh well with calls for systemic reform. If the problem is the family, fix the family; not the system. This is reinforced by the broadly held belief that the family is a closed and private system.

Children as "Sponges"

Another frame available to people resonates with a deep strain of American culture; namely, the belief that success is determined by the willingness of individuals to pull themselves up by their "bootstraps." In terms of early child development, this means that the goal of child rearing is to raise a successful and self-reliant child. This is best summed up by two men in our sample:

> "The parents are so protective now compared to what they were 20, 30, 40 years ago, especially the child that's born in the suburbs. I did a lot of things on my own. When we played sports, there was no parental involvement. The kids made up their own games and played. We didn't have to be ferried, driven to a place where we played. There weren't parents sitting there coaching us, urging us on. We made up our own thing. We were independent… I think this holds back the development of children." (Boston man)

> "It is kind of overprotecting; keeping them a baby. Let them make decisions. Ask them questions about what it is they want as opposed to always making decisions for them." (Los Angeles man)

The metaphor here is that young children should be like little adults – responsible for their own actions. A recurring theme among our sample was that today's children are too coddled, pampered, and sheltered to develop properly. People who rely on this frame think that what needs to be done is to get children to "grow up"; interdependence is not valued. Those utilizing this frame strive for children to be able to take care of themselves.

The "Grown-Up" Child

<u>Safety</u>
A third frame of early childhood that resides in the top of people's minds concerns questions of safety. The priorities for child rearing, according to this story, are defensive: protect children from harm and disease. This story is based on the premise that the world is a dangerous place. Children are not only endangered by each other (e.g., superpredators), they are at risk from their parents, other adults, and the broader environment. The public perception appears to be that it is a "mean world" out there and children's safety should be of primary concern. This came through loud and clear in our sample:

> "I guess you're looking for clean and safe facilities and the right number of staff per children." (Mt. Laurel man)

> "She's in this really safe little pre-school, this safe little yard with two adults there…" (Kansas City woman)

> "There's just so many kids in one area, especially when they're infants, they just get so sick. Their immune systems are so immature…" (Los Angeles man)

What the safety frame evokes is the idea that children are imperiled and must be treated as such. Parents and policymakers alike have called for stricter regulation of and control over the lives of young people. Whether it is trying juveniles in adult courts, metal detectors and drug testing in schools, or safety regulations for everything from toilets to playground equipment, American parents are looking for ways to add another layer of bubble-wrap to their children.

Children as "Precious Objects"

What Do These Frames Conceal?
What these frames all conceal is children's critical interactions. These dominant frames allow little room for a discussion of environmental factors such as the role of housing, neighborhoods, schools, museums, and libraries. It precludes questions about the relationships between children and their broader social world -- caregivers, neighbors, other children, and adults other than parents. None of the readily accessible frames have much to say about children's healthy development. For example, things like multi-track, age-appropriate stimuli or social, cognitive, emotional and moral social learning do not enter into the conversation. The bottom line is this: things commonly associated with a developmental perspective are generally unavailable to most people. Instead, people view early childhood development as the province of the family, the result of individual motivation, and a stage when children need to be protected from outside forces.

Where Do These Frames Come From?

There are three primary sources for these frames: the news media, advocates' materials, and public discourse and rhetoric. We have taken a closer look at both the news media portrayal of kids and a wide spectrum of materials culled from a national network of child advocates.

News Media

The UCLA Center for Communications and Community was commissioned by Children Now to examine the portrayal of children in local television news in six cities – New York, Los Angeles, Boston, Atlanta, Des Moines, and Seattle – during the month of July 2000. The cities were chosen to maximize both market size and geography. In total, the study captured over 750 newscasts that produced 13,000 news stories of which 10% had to do with children. The key findings from this study were:

- **Crime coverage, and to a lesser degree health coverage, dominated the local news regardless of market size or geography**

- **More than eight out of ten crime stories focused on violent crime**

- **Murder accounted for almost one-half of the violent crime stories**

- **Children, especially young children, were significantly more likely to be depicted as victims rather than perpetrators, regardless of the level of violence**

- **Racial and ethnic differences were apparent on the most frequently shown topic: crime**

- **White children were much more likely to be cast in the role of victim; African American and Hispanic children were more likely to be depicted as perpetrators**

- **Most health news coverage focused on either safety or at-risk behavior**

- **There was little coverage of broad themes like public policy**

- **Most children's stories were stand-alone stories with an episodic narrative style**

- **Only 3% of the stories looked at child development**

The findings of this report are consistent with the results generally reported in the literature. When children are seen in the news, it is in the context of at-risk behaviors and dangerous environments, with little attention paid to developmental issues or broad public policy themes. It is not surprising then that the public has a great deal of concern about the safety of children. It is also easy to understand why they think the family plays such a crucial role (e.g., bracing the child against the outside world) and why people are in such a hurry to see kids grow up.

<u>Advocates' Materials</u>
If the message from the news media is consistent, it is anything but consistent in advocates' materials. As part of our work, we canvassed a broad range of child advocates, policymakers, and foundation executives to assess what the field is communicating to the broader public. As the list below suggests, people hear from advocates both that everything matters in child development and nothing matters in child development ("wind them up and let them tick"). What is missing, of course, is a coherent narrative that explains the causal connection between programmatic interventions and positive developmental outcomes.

<table>
<tr><td colspan="2" align="center">Messages in Experts' and Advocates' Materials:
Everything Matters and Nothing Matters</td></tr>
<tr>
<td>

Kids are very complex
Children are made for learning
Infants become persons at a very early age
Everything counts
Children should be immunized
The brain is not developed at birth
Early intervention services are critical
Education is about individualized service
Zero to three is the key period
Schools need to take responsibility
Early childhood development is a national concern

</td>
<td>

Parenting is difficult
Parents are teachers
Parents are students
Trained coaches are needed for parents
All parents are good
Parents are experts
Educated parents are good decision makers
Parents are the final authority
Parenting has lasting impacts
Preschool replaces poor home environments
Parents need to create time for breastfeeding and parenting
A stable family life is critical

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</table>

In sum, the first phase of our research suggests that most people do not have access to a very well developed working model of early childhood development. Most people do appear, however, to rely on three more accessible frames based on core American values – family, individualism, and safety. The source of these frames is, in part, a combination of information from news media and advocates' materials.

What Reframes Have Been Attempted and With What Consequences?

We examined two broad scale reforms pushed for by advocates to secure public buy-in of a host of policies related to early child development: *child care* and *school readiness*. In both cases, advocates have attempted to frame the debate about child rearing to include more programs associated with a developmental policy agenda. The results, our work indicates, have been mixed at best.

<u>Child care</u>
We will begin with child care. Recent requests for better training of and compensation for providers has generally fallen on deaf ears. The same might be said of support for developmentally rich children's programs; they appear to have been trumped by a frame that treats child care centers as simple containers. As the respondents from the elicitations and focus groups suggest, child care is not viewed as affecting development:

> "It's a babysitting service is what it is. The kids are going there and that is where kids go when mom goes out and works her half a day or whatever and comes home and picks them up. They have the choice. They don't have to work." (Boston man)

> "They did pick up nasty habits. They did come home with nasty things and not just diseases but manners, behaviors, attitudes and everything else. I felt like it institutionalized them. You throw them in this room full of all these other heathens, and all I saw was absolute chaos going on." (Virginia woman)

> "I think that the people who are doing it really need to have a heart for kids and really love them…Just enjoy the children where they are at. I don't think they have to have a lot of things to do" (Elicitations)

> "Since he was so young, I wanted to make sure that he wasn't going to sit there crying forever before somebody came to see what was wrong with him, because I held him so much and I knew that he kind of wasn't used to just sitting there, I wanted to make sure that if he just wanted to be held that there was somebody available to do that." (Elicitations)

<div style="text-align:center">

Child care as a Container Frame

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• Container • Packages • Putting objects in container • Handling objects • Package handlers

• Child care center • Children • Leaving children at center • Caring for children • Child care workers

The container metaphor points to the limitations of the current understanding of child care for systemic reforms. For example, the primary goal of child care via the container model is that children can be placed in the container at the beginning of the day and retrieved "safe and dry" at the end of the day. Little consideration is given to the things associated with positive youth development. If child care is equivalent to package handling:

- Is it a highly skilled job?
- Do you need to hire highly skilled workers?
- Does it pay workers well?
- Does it need to pay well?
- Does the environment at the facility matter?
- Do the relationships between handlers affect the package?

In other words, should we equate child care providers with UPS package handlers? If so, it is not surprising that child care is perceived to be more about safety and security than about development. And perhaps more troubling, child care was seen by our focus groups as an unfortunate by-product of women in the workplace -- a necessary evil.

School Readiness Means Little to Ordinary People

Although Americans want children to succeed in school and recognize that there are factors which make them either more or less prepared to do so, the concept of "school readiness" is not an organizing principle in the minds of most lay people. While it is an organizing principle for experts, it is not a clear, available, and motivating concept that can be relied on to engage ordinary people. What we also do not know is how well school readiness works as an organizing principle for policy makers and program and agency administrators outside of the early childhood field.

> "They seem to push kids into education a little too fast sometimes and they don't allow them to be kids and play. I mean people are getting their kids into preschool at three years old… you see a lot of people that want to teach their kids like you said multiple languages before they are five and teach them to read before they get to kindergarten. A lot of these kids don't have social skills because they haven't been allowed to interact with other kids." (New Jersey man)

> "Are we trying to get them there too early? Eventually that child is going to be potty trained and …that child is going to read and write, and are we trying to push a two year old to be ready to read and write?" (Virginia woman)

> "It rubs me wrong…it's judgmental." (Phoenix woman)

> "She's judging each child when she looks at him." (Boston woman)

> "It's like labeling or stereotyping children and you really can't do that because that will lower their self-esteem…" (Boston woman)

> "They may not be able to learn but I think the natural instinct is that a child is ready to learn outside of some disabilities or whatever." (Los Angeles woman)

What these sentiments suggest is that learning means explicit knowledge is being conveyed. People are worried that the school readiness approach places too much emphasis on knowing facts and concepts, numbers, colors, reading, and not enough on how to get along with other children. The upshot is that school readiness evokes two pejorative frames for much of the general public. On the one hand, it can trigger a "hurried child" backlash. While most people want children to be self-reliant, they do not

support formal instruction as the mechanism. The other accessible frame turns on the concept of elitism. In other words, people are worried that school readiness programs will favor the children of "fancy parents" – those people affluent enough to provide their children with tutors, extra materials, and enrichment activities. In short, school readiness is equated with pressure for higher and higher academic standards. It is also perceived as unfairly judging children's future success at the age of five, in clear violation of public education as the equal opportunity leveler.

Testable Reframes

The strategic part of our work is the identification and testing of reframes that have the potential to move public perception in different directions. Two broad themes emerged from this stage of our research – nutrition and the community child. We have done some preliminary testing of these messages as you will shortly see. What needs to be said, however, is that this stage of work is preliminary. We have not yet had the luxury of taking these (and other) potential reframes into more rigorous testing environments. Nonetheless, initial results offer a provocative glimpse of potential reframes that could invigorate a more systemic understanding of child development.

<u>Nutrition</u>
We asked our sample to respond to the following text:

We all know that milk is important for children to grow strong bones but how many of us know how important it is to feed children's hearts, souls and minds right from the start? In order to develop and grow socially and intellectually children need a variety of vitamins such as a stimulating environment that feeds their curiosity, consistent personal relationships that build their sense of security and interactions with friends to learn how to get along with others.

Reactions to Nourishment Message
> "It points out the positives of what they need instead of what they don't need." (Kansas City woman)

> "You need to have some type of stimulation for the child. He needs the milk in order to nourish his bones and skin and everything, so he needs some type of intellectual stimulation and social stimulation with other kids. He has to learn how to get along with them." (Los Angeles man)

> "It is just as important to provide intellectual stimulation and a stimulating environment and feed the curiosity and personal relationships – it is just as important as food." (Los Angeles woman)

What testing of the nourishment frame seems to indicate is that the notion of nutrition resonates with individuals. The metaphor provides them with a way of seeing that, similar to the body, the mind needs to be nourished. In much the same way that certain foods are sold because they contain nutritional components that have both short and long acting roles in physical growth and health, the public may also understand that certain programs nourish the cognitive and emotional parts of a child's brain and are composed of different elements that promote overall growth and development. Again, since these findings are preliminary, additional research and testing needs to be done in order to

confirm that this frame not only resonates with different audiences but can be used to help reframe and communicate important ideas and principles about an early childhood systems-building initiative.

The Community Child
We also asked people what they thought of the following passage:

Children come in contact with many people in many different settings as they grow. While a parent may be a child's first teacher, they aren't a child's only teacher. Day care providers, teachers, doctors, neighbors, and coaches all influence children as well. Children learn a lot in the early years. They learn respect for others, right from wrong and how to get along with each other. All the people they come in contact with help influence this learning. Parents who provide security, teachers who encourage curiosity, coaches who teach them how to get along with others, and counselors who help them recognize right from wrong -- all these people touch children in ways that influence their long-term development.

Response to the Community Child

> "It makes you realize that even if it is your child, you don't own your child. A child is not a piece of property. A child, God gives it to you for awhile and you get this child ready for the world." (Kansas City woman)

> "What I see out of it is people who come in contact with children should be aware of what they are teaching children because a child can pick up bad habits," (Los Angeles woman)

> "That is how I survived, is my teachers I can tell you the name of every teacher I had and I did well in school. They encouraged me to coach. I lived with my high school coach and I got a football scholarship and went to college, so these people are important." (Phoenix man)

The community child frame also invokes the reciprocity that individuals share with their community and suggests that the importance of investing resources in every child is not only the dividends that the individual reaps -- in terms of their personal growth, development, and achievement -- but what the individual is then able to provide the community with and contribute towards the common good. Given that bridge building is one of the metaphors that may be used to develop more comprehensive and integrated delivery systems for young children, the framing of child development programs and interventions as something that communities do for all of their citizens could promote systems building. This is a frame that potentially has utility in communicating to various audiences the importance of child development and the need for additional resources and capacity building. Before we can be certain of its effect, the frame needs additional research and testing to guarantee that it has the kind of salience that this initial and very provocative research seems to indicate.

Where does this leave us?

What Do We Know About Framing Early Child Development?

- People have minimal access to a working model of child development.
- When considered at all, child development is viewed as a closed, private system.
- There are strongly entrenched frames that get in the way of development: family autonomy, safety, and individualism.
- The reframes currently in use are not yielding the desired result.
- Some reframes – community, nurturance – have the potential to move public opinion in the right direction.

In the figure below, we recommend some approaches to the framing of communication around early child development. These recommendations stem from the research we have conducted, as well as our meetings over the past few years with a number of groups across the U.S. that are working on this issue. What we call "do's" are potential strategies and approaches that might be considered as states begin developing communications materials to elicit broader support for activities around early childhood development. The communications material could target policy makers, state and local stakeholders, as well as parents and other community members. The "do's" include ways in which discussions can be initiated and messages framed, including the importance of using simple language that lay people understand and not the technical language used by professionals in the field. This guideline is also important for the SECCS Initiative since the different sectors and disciplines needed to create more effective early childhood systems often use technical language in very different ways that can be misunderstood across disciplines. We also suggest applying the model of community, and children giving back to the community in the future, to the issue of preschool and other early childhood programs. The model of community can address the importance of providing universal access to all who need these early childhood programs. The implication here is that these are necessary, not extravagant, inputs for all children if, in fact, they are going to succeed and be able to give back to their communities in the future.

Do's	Don'ts
- Prime the discussion with values like nurturance, community - Use the language of lay people: heads, hearts, minds - Use examples that are not specifically cognitive & observable - Use an exchange or future model: give to children who give back - Talk about the shared pleasures for everyone of raising children - Position preschool as an opportunity for stimulation that all should have access to regardless of income - Make community actors visible - Connect child to environment	- Begin the conversation with school readiness, brain development, or daycare - Use the language of experts: multi-track development - Focus only on observable learning - Use an extortion model: if you don't get early education, you'll have behavioral problems - Talk about parents as incompetent or super competent - Make child rearing something you must have the resources or education to do well - Reinforce the family, safety or individualism frames verbally or visually (defensive child rearing)

Similarly, the "don'ts" largely address problems in communicating these issues to various public groups. While the notions of brain development, preschool, and school readiness are clearly appreciated in the maternal child health field, and in the disciplines of child development, pediatrics, and family support, it appears a more general and understandable frame would reach a greater number of people. The other "don'ts" include specific kinds of frames that have potentially negative consequences if pushed forward.

Conclusions

The State Early Childhood Comprehensive Systems (SECCS) Initiative is an ambitious effort to move forward a very important set of national priorities focused on improving the health and development of all young children in the U.S. This initiative will face various communications challenges, as each state begins to develop a set of strategies to engage various constituencies and stakeholders in a process that will hopefully yield a common vision about not only the importance of the issue of early child health and development but also a common vision about how to invest resources, link existing services, and create a more comprehensive and integrated system to achieve a common, agreed upon set of outcomes. In this report, we attempt to provide some background from the communications, research, and practice literature about what is known about framing early child development issues. The further development of the SECCS Initiative is also a great learning opportunity so that over time we can become much better and more effective in our communication of important issues that affect children and families.

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Strategic Communications Tool Box

Framing Checklist: Basic Communications Questions

- What is the social problem we are addressing?
- What are its characteristics?
- Is there a story we know that relates?
- What do people already know about it, and how do they think about it?
- What have been the dominant frames of the issue in media coverage?
- What do we think should be done to improve/solve it?
- What do experts believe should be done to improve/solve it?
- What are our policy agenda or objectives in tackling this problem?
- What objective indicators would suggest to us that opinion/policy/behavior is moving in the right direction?
- What is the solution?

Elements of the Frame

Stories
- Narrative and words are steeped in culturally defined meaning; they should be carefully selected to elicit the desired associations and inferences.
- In stories, close-up images emphasize the personal and conceal environmental influences.
- The orchestration of pictures in stories creates a sense of causality.
- The selection of pictures in a story is highly stereotyped; the images "illustrate" an existing, dominant frame.

Pictures
- A picture is often a substitute for explanation, used as an episodic tool.
- and to conceal environmental influences
- The orchestration of a series of pictures creates a sense of causality.
- The selection of a picture is highly stereotyped; the image "illustrates" an existing, dominant frame.

Messengers
- The choice of messenger is as important as the message itself; the messenger reinforces the message.
- Knowledge and trustworthiness of the messenger are key to the public's assessment, not likeability or sameness.
- Some messengers are not credible on certain issues.
- Some messengers convey specific frames. For instance, the business professional is usually associated with the conservative, hands-off point of view.

<u>Metaphors</u>
- Metaphors provide the scaffolding with which to make sense of an issue. Different metaphors can be applied to the same topic in order to promote different points of view.
- An example of the application of a metaphor with positive resonance to a controversial topic is: "Government doesn't create jobs, but government can create the environment which is conducive for jobs to be created….Government can turn the earth and provide some nutrients, but then it's the private sector that comes along and plants the seeds and nurtures the crops." Joe Lieberman, NYT, October 21, 2000.

<u>Numbers and Statistics</u>
- Once a framework of interpretation is established or primed, the numbers and statistics will be ignored.
- Narrative normally trumps numbers and statistics.
- Most people cannot judge the size or import of numbers and statistics; they need cues.
- Numbers and statistics often fail to create "pictures in our heads" or trigger cultural models.

Tell Solutions Stories

- Rarely included in media coverage, according to FrameWorks content analysis on many issues.
- Most news is episodic; it doesn't present solutions because it doesn't present causes.
- Many advocates believe you can only get people to consider solutions if you hammer home the problem. This leads to a sense that social issues are intractable.
- In focus groups, people routinely choose "solutions stories" over problem and case study stories because they rarely see solutions.
- When solutions are presented, they are often seen as a "no brainer".

How to Tell a Solutions Story

- A story where things "just happen" isn't a story. If you're going to tell a story, make sure there is some agency, someone who is responsible.
- Address the default frame: these problems are intractable, there are no solutions, no one can fix this, and the money never gets to the kids.
- Don't put the solutions at the end; signal that solutions exist early in your message.
- Use American know-how as a core value to support problem solving.
- Remember that problem definition is integral to the solutions.

Internet Links

http://uclaccc.ucla.edu/links.php

http://www.frameworksinstitute.org/