

# FRAMING EARLY CHILDHOOD DEVELOPMENT:

## Strategic Communications and Public Preferences

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### Overview

This report focuses on the potential role that strategic communications can play in helping state MCH programs and their collaborating partners frame their message to enhance the public's understanding of the importance of early child development and the need for a comprehensive and integrated early childhood system.

The framing of issues affects public policy preferences. How people think about an issue affects their actions. Researchers have studied the dominant frames that trigger reasoning on public issues because this information helps anticipate challenges, attitudinal barriers, and public misunderstanding of new or revised social policies. Communications research shows that:

- 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 plays an important role in creating “dominant frames”—how we think about what we hear.
- Over time, we develop habits of thought and expectation, and configure incoming information to conform to this frame.

Recently interviews have been conducted throughout the U.S. to better understand:

- How the public and policymakers think about young children;
- Which dominant frames are triggered when early childhood issues are discussed;
- How the dominant frames affect policy choices; and
- How dominant frames are reinforced, and how young children's issues can be reframed to eventually affect policy preferences and choices.

(The authors interviewed civically active adults, defined as those who vote, participate in their community, and pay attention to public affairs.)

### How Do the Public and Policymakers View Child Development?

Research suggests that the public and many policymakers do not have a clear understanding of early child development. People are unable to relate particular interventions to child outcomes. As a result, many people default to other more accessible frames. Unfortunately, those other frames do not always support what is best for young children. From recent research, three such frames appear to be most common: the family, individualism, and safety.

**The Family:** Normal development results from families raising children properly. Support from the community is not thought to be relevant.

**Individualism:** Children are like little adults—responsible for their actions. Children are too pampered and sheltered for normal development. Interdependence is not valued.

**Safety:** Children face many dangers. Strict regulation and control is necessary to protect young children from harm. Children are “precious objects” who should be protected from each other, and adults, rather than helped to develop through social interactions.

### What Do These Frames Prevent the Public from Understanding?

Research shows that the public's current frames do not recognize the importance of environmental context, including relationships, for children's development. Things commonly associated with a developmental perspective—such as relationships with caregivers and other children, and emotional and social learning—are generally not part of the way most people think about care and supports that young children need.



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## Where Do These Frames Come From?

**News Media:** A review of news media shows that when children are seen in the news, stories portray substantial concern about the safety of children and pay less attention to developmental issues and broad public policy themes. This further explains the public's great concern about the safety of children. It also explains an eagerness for children to be increasingly independent. Depictions in the news media are consistent with the public viewpoints identified from research.

**Child Advocates' Materials:** Messages from advocates are inconsistent. Advocacy messages range from "everything" to "nothing" matters in child development. For instance, the public hears both that "schools need to take responsibility" and that "preschool replaces poor home environments". The public, policymakers, and parents need to understand causal connections between interventions and positive developmental outcomes.

## What Reframes for Early Childhood Policies Have Been Attempted and with What Consequences?

**Child care:** The public needs a better understanding of quality child care and its associations with positive child developmental outcomes. Requests for better training and compensation generally fall on deaf ears. Child care is perceived to be more about safety and security than about development. The "container" metaphor suggests that the public believes that child care is similar to package handling. Things associated with positive child development may be needed to increase their valuation of child care providers and training. Rather than thinking of child care as only a container, the public needs to understand how high quality child care affects child development and education outcomes.

**School readiness means little to ordinary people:** School readiness is an unclear concept that does not engage ordinary people. Research on this concept suggests that the public perceives school readiness as focusing on cognitive and general knowledge rather than social skills. Many people view school readiness as "hurrying normal child development" and see it using formal instruction, which they don't support. Many think it gives "greater opportunity for a chosen few" and favors the children of "fancy parents." This conflicts with the public's vision of public education as a means to create equal opportunity.

**Testable reframes:** Reframes have the potential to change public perceptions. Some information is available on recasting early childhood issues to move public perception. Additional research and testing needs to be done to confirm that these frames resonate with different populations and can be used to help reframe important policy issues for the SECCS Initiative.

**Nourishing children:** The notion of nutrition resonates. This metaphor helps the public and policy makers realize that just as nutrients have short and long-term impact, programs can nourish the child's mind—both cognitively and emotionally.

**The Community Child:** People appreciate that investing resources helps individual development and achievement and, over the long run, this benefits the community. This frame invokes a valued exchange between the child and the community. This frame may garner support for system capacity-building.

## Where Does That Leave Us? What Do We Know About Framing Early Child Development?

- People do not generally have a working model of child development.
- When reflected upon at all, child development is viewed as a closed, private system.
- There are three dominant frames that get in the way of the public's perception of child development: family autonomy, safety, and individualism.
- The reframes currently in use to focus attention on early childhood issues—child care, school readiness—are not yielding the desired result.
- Some reframes – community, nurturance – have the potential to move public opinion in the right direction.

The following recommendations are offered for framing early child development in a way that better communicates ideas to the public: prime the discussion with values like nurturance and community; use simple language, such as "heads," "hearts," "minds"; don't focus only on brain development and observable learning; don't use an extortion method, such as "without early education, children will have behavior problems"; use an exchange or future model, such as "give to children who give back"; and connect children with their environment.

## Conclusion

Strategic communications can be a valuable tool to create support within communities and build partnerships toward a system that meets the needs of each young child. SECCS grantees can reframe traditional policy concerns in ways that get better traction among partners and the public.

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