

How the News Frames Child Maltreatment: Unintended Consequences

A Supplement to Cultural Logic's report,
"Two Cognitive Obstacles to Preventing Child Abuse:
The 'Other-Mind' Mistake and the 'Family Bubble'"

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INTRODUCTION

While advocates are usually gratified to see attention paid to their issue in the news, the coverage can often be a mixed blessing, as research by the FrameWorks Institute and others has shown. It is the *way* that stories are told in the news that affects public thinking, and many of these stories do not guide thinking in constructive directions. A story that seems to convey important information may also have *unintended, damaging consequences* for public understanding and engagement.

This document summarizes some of the major patterns in news coverage of child maltreatment – the key narratives, frames and causal stories that are conveyed to the public on the issue. The material for the analysis includes a collection of roughly 120 news articles collected by Prevent Child Abuse America and Cultural Logic. Additionally, the review included a collection of several dozen TV news stories assembled by the Center for Communications and Community at UCLA.

The premise behind this study is that once advocates have a better idea about the way their issue is portrayed in the media, they can be strategic about choosing which narratives to reinforce, which to challenge, and which to downplay. A close examination of news coverage also gives advocates a window into what they are up against as they try to increase public engagement.

This discussion follows up on Cultural Logic's findings from cognitive elicitations, and readers are referred to that report for more in-depth discussion of some of the patterns of reasoning described here (see *Two Cognitive Obstacles to Preventing Child Abuse: The 'Other-Mind' Mistake and the 'Family Bubble'* prepared for the FrameWorks Institute).

The analysis presented here complements quantitative studies of news coverage (e.g., “The Local Television News Media’s Picture of Children,” Children Now, 2001; “Coverage in Context: How Thoroughly the News Media report Five Key Children’s Issues,” Kunkel,

Smith, Suding, Biely for Casey Journalism Center on Children and Families, U. of MD., February 2002) by taking a cognitive perspective on the material, and exploring the frames and assumptions in news stories. Two of the key questions we ask are: “Why do certain kinds of stories (framed in a particular way) count as news?” and, “What patterns of reasoning are reinforced by the way the stories are presented in the news?” There are various patterns of thought which people can default to *even when they know better*^{*}, and news stories can trigger or reinforce those patterns.

General patterns in news coverage

Some of the important aspects of child maltreatment coverage are related to tendencies in media coverage that apply to almost any issue:

- Sensationalism

The emphasis on sensational events and images pervades the news media and has obvious consequences for coverage of child maltreatment. It means that the shocking *results* of maltreatment receive a tremendous amount of attention, while the "mundane" risk factors, and the "not-very-sexy" solutions, are often ignored. It follows that the more complex and larger *context* of the problem is not explained, leaving the public to rely on (and reinforce) its own default patterns of reasoning to understand the awful events.

- Simple Causal Stories

When journalists offer explanations, they typically present issues in terms of simple and vivid causal stories. On some issues, this preference can actually help the audience better understand the big picture. For example, when reporters offer vivid examples of how recently-developed industrial fishing technologies are able to "scrape" the sea floor and "flatten" ecosystems, this can help readers understand the ecological threats the oceans currently face.

On child-related issues, on the other hand, many simple causal stories are provided that are not helpful, because they don't tend to teach anything new, but rather to reinforce unproductive associations with the topic – e.g. a parent gets violent with his child because the parent is a sick, drunken monster.

- Episodic Vs. Thematic Information

Political communications expert Shanto Iyengar has pointed out that news stories tend to be *episodic*, as opposed to *thematic* (*Is Anyone Responsible?: How Television Frames Political Issues*, 1991, U. of Chicago Press). That is, they tend to present stories as individual episodes happening in a particular time and place, rather than showing how

^{*} For example, Cultural Logic's interviews with members of the public have established that people tend in many situations to treat even very young children as though they had adult-like intentionality – despite the fact that they consciously know better.

they connect to broader causal contexts. "Human interest" stories, for example, are episodic by definition, since they focus on individuals rather than presenting a bigger picture.

On the child maltreatment issue, this bias plays out in ways that demonize individuals and prevent learning about causes and solutions.

THE MAJOR FRAMES AND THEIR IMPACTS

Criminal Atrocity

Child maltreatment is most commonly portrayed in the media in terms of a horrible, criminal atrocity some monstrous parent has committed, and the horrible suffering of the child(ren) in question. Stories like this are easy to tell (and to gather information for), and they fit the mold of simple, sensational and episodic: they are about a terrible thing that one person does to another. They are especially sensational because of shared taboos against harming children, and shared cultural models of "monsters" whose actions can't be chalked up to any rational causes.

While of course the suffering is real and important, and the evil of certain acts is undeniable, this dominant frame does not take the public towards constructive thinking or rethinking of the larger policy issues, even if on some level advocates appreciate the stories because they draw attention to the seriousness of the problem.

Impacts

Parental Deficit: One negative consequence of the Atrocity frame is that it exacerbates the blinkering effects of the very common "Parental Deficit" model, according to which bad, irresponsible parents are to blame for everything from crime to poverty to a breakdown in civility. (Notice that this view is nearly the exact opposite of the stereotypical liberal view that "society is to blame" for an individual's actions. This clash between the Personal Responsibility view and the Societal Context view is one of the chief tensions in American society.) When people are in Parental Deficit mode, there is very little interest in educating parents or helping them do a better job. Atrocity-based news stories evoke this mode, by framing perpetrators as fundamentally bad individuals, whose motivations and weaknesses have nothing to do with the rest of us.

Weakening "the Village": Another negative consequence of the Atrocity frame is that it makes people less likely to trust the people around them. Advocates on the child maltreatment issue know that increasing social connections is one effective way of reducing the risk of child maltreatment, but stories about the other "monstrous" adults in our community work against that goal, by strengthening the walls that Americans put up between their families and the dangerous outside world.

Variants

Other Adults: The Atrocity story can also take the form of abuse committed by an adult outside the nuclear family – an uncle, neighbor, teacher, etc. This is in some ways less shocking – since it doesn't involve the especially powerful taboo against harming ones *own* children. But it has a perhaps even more destructive effect on our trust in the Village.

Trial: Another important variant is the Trial story, which follows the ups and downs of a court proceeding against an accused party. This type of story holds inherent interest because of the “win-lose” and “search-for-the-truth” elements. It does nothing positive for the child maltreatment issue, however, since it focuses on whether a given *individual* has committed the acts in question, and obscures the relevance of risk and protective factors. Local TV news is littered with stories about sensational crimes, and the trials of accused abusers. These stories can often last for weeks as additional testimony and arguments are offered.

Examples

- A *Dateline NBC* episode called "Saving Richard" (April, 2000) is a typical, if unusually detailed example. The show reports that "doctors made a chilling diagnosis. [Doctor:] 'Much of what happened to him I would classify as systematic torture,'" and Richard's "mean mommy" is the focus of much of the discussion.
- The following story starts with a quick summary of an appalling event. The "rationale" offered two-thirds of the way through the story feels like an afterthought, and the sketchy contextual information in the story's last paragraph can hardly compete with the impact of the crime narrative.

Pa. Woman Who Abandoned Baby Gets Prison, Associated Press, 8/5/03

PHILADELPHIA - A woman who gave birth in a factory bathroom, then put the baby in a trash bin and went back to her job packaging chocolate, was sentenced Tuesday to 6 to 12 years in prison.

...

During the trial, defense attorney Charles O'Connell said Liem was confused and suffering from blood loss after giving birth. He said she may have discarded the baby because she thought she had a miscarriage.

...

A state law allowing mothers to abandon their newborns at hospitals without fear of prosecution took effect in February.

- This example adds the twist that the abuser seemed harmless, or even much better than harmless. How much more dangerous are the adults around us if we can't even recognize the threat they pose!

Shaken Baby Deaths Defy Easy Answers, *Chicago Tribune*, 3/5/01

...

Friends and neighbors of the Keintz family reacted with astonishment upon learning that Keintz was charged in the baby's death. He had been watching the girl and her 11-month-old sister when the infant was injured. One friend remembered seeing Keintz around her baby, and recalled a gentle man who took to children easily. "A lot of us thought, 'Boy, his wife is really getting a great guy.'"

Failure of Child Protective Services

Almost as common as the Atrocity frame is the story about the failure of the systems set up to protect children. While always offering sensational descriptions of the atrocities that should have been prevented, these stories also play on widespread suspicion of bureaucracies and a universal fascination with public failure. The stories often present images of particular workers who have failed to follow up on a case (playing on the cultural model of the Incompetent Worker), and invite us to shake our heads in disgust at the lack of competence and accountability in the world. Again, while the tragedy of these failures is undeniable, and the need for improvement is very real, these stories also have very negative consequences for the public's thinking about the issue.

Impacts

Condemning the System: These stories exacerbate the common tendency to condemn complex systems rather than thinking about how to reform them. When we do not understand how a system works (because it is complex or simply because we lack experience with it), it is easy to assume that it *doesn't* work – consider widespread attitudes among the American public towards the Federal Government. Stories about agencies that have failed to protect children bring up chronic suspicions about the money that is spent on bureaucracies, and about the motives and competence of people who are part of them.

Weakening the Village: These stories not only inflame anger at the systems that currently exist, they also threaten to reduce overall trust that communities *can* set up collective solutions to problems. Instead, they reinforce the powerful model that each family should protect itself, even from people who appear to be harmless and/or helpful.

Variants

Stories about the failure of CPS can either focus on individual cases, or on trends and an agency's overall bad record. While the second kind of case sounds promising in that it at least paints a bigger picture, that picture is more likely to discourage than to encourage engagement. They tend to reduce the story to one about Incompetent Workers, or about the suffering of the injured parties, rather than presenting contextual causes and potential solutions.

Examples

- The *Dateline NBC* special "Saving Richard," referred to earlier, asks the question, "When it comes to child abuse, does the punishment fit the crime?" and focuses much of its attention on failures of the Montgomery County, Maryland system for child protection. The story questions how so many children can fall through the cracks, and asks, "Why were numerous cries for help ignored"?
- A typical article describes a parent who has been brutal in the past, but who nonetheless likely to retain custody of her children.

Mom who beat son, but seeks to regain 6 kids, violates parole, Houston Chronicle, 7/30/03

A mother, who was on the verge of regaining custody of her six children after being convicted of severely beating one, has been ordered incarcerated for parole violations.

...

Children's Protective Services, which has repeatedly argued for terminating Kegg's parental rights, noted the severity of the injury to Kegg's oldest child, 14-year-old Tyler.

A 911 audio tape recorded sounds of whacks and screams as Tyler was hit 60 times with a board on Dec. 10, 2001. He is living with other relatives.

...

- Some articles, like this one, focus on problems with the broader system for children's welfare, including adoption bureaucracies. The article focuses on the suffering caused by a budget crisis – but rather than emphasizing the need for allocating greater funds to the system, it frames the story as a bizarre failure on the part of the bureaucrats involved.

State budget crisis puts kids' adoptions in limbo, Houston Chronicle Austin Bureau, 7/27/03

...

Parents like the Sanfords, who have yet to be matched with a prospective child to adopt, were put on hold six weeks ago when the state agency ordered new adoption placements to halt until the new budget year begins Sept. 1, Wool said.

"It's very dramatic. Now they're being forced to wait and held in limbo. It's a tremendous waste. It's horribly counterintuitive," said Todd Landry, president and chief executive officer of the nonprofit adoption agency Spaulding for Children in Houston.

After weeks of intensive training for prospective parents to understand a child who has suffered abuse, after required screening for tuberculosis, after undergoing a home study, making loving preparations and winning official approval, it's hard not to vent, Sanford said.

"To know I am potentially the right family for a child who's being denied the right to a family simply because the state won't fund an adoption, then you get mad and then you get angry," she said.

Meanwhile, as child protection workers tried to figure out what to do about 433 contracted adoptions already under way, confusion over renegotiated contracts and whether adoptions could be done free of charge created a series of delays, adoption officials and families say.

For some, bureaucratic misunderstandings turned personal, confusing children and upsetting adoptive parents.

- Articles like this one add official condemnation to the journalist's implicit condemnation.

Child agency rebuked by judge: Sex by underage teens brings contempt order
Free Press, 7/24/03

A Monroe County judge has held the state's child welfare agency in contempt of court for failing to stop two teens from having sex in a foster home.

In issuing the contempt order, Family Court Judge Pamela Moskwa also cited problems within the Family Independence Agency that have the potential to put other children in danger.

...

In her five-page order, Moskwa cited a series of problems within the FIA, including:

- The agency was not advocating for children.
- Caseworkers, supervisors and top managers at the agency are not communicating with each other.
- The agency has a lack of training, and morale is low among caseworkers.

...

- This article talks about a decline in the number of charges against parents in Washington, DC. The implicit question is whether the decline has happened because the agency is doing a poor job of keeping up with cases, or because they are being less aggressive in removing kids from families.

Abuse Cases Rise in D.C., But Fewer Go to Court

Henri E. Cauvin

Washington Post, Sunday, July 27, 2003

...

Children's Rights sued the District in 1989 on behalf of children in the child welfare system, and in 1995, a federal judge placed the system under the control of a court-appointed administrator. As part of the agreement that ended the receivership in 2001,

the Child and Family Services Agency must make a host of improvements and provide regular reports to the monitor appointed by the federal court.

...

- Additional examples

Kids in N.J.'s Care Missing: 110 in Abuse Case Unaccounted For as Files Are Checked, *Washington Post*, 1/11/03

TRENTON, NJ – New Jersey's child welfare officials have lost track of 110 children in cases of suspected abuse, with caseworkers checking their files in the wake of the brutal child abuse death of 7-year old Faheem Williams, whose decomposed body was found in a plastic garbage bin.

Deaths Rise Despite State's Intervention: Agency is Plagued by Inadequate Training, Excessive Caseloads, *Indianapolis Star*, 12/8/02

It's their mandate: Save the children from abuse and neglect. But even after Child Protection Services responds to reports of child mistreatment, Indiana children are dying – at a rate that has nearly doubled in the past five years.

When Parents Fail. *Chicago Tribune*, 11/16/97: "Almost every child who is placed in foster care is on some sort of psychotropic medication, usually Ritalin and Prozac," says Pia Menon, formerly of the Office of the Public Guardian in Cook County... "They were on drugs because it is systematically convenient. The children were easier to manage, and generally drugs were given as a substitute for nurturing."

Sexual predators

This kind of story is appalling and compelling because it involves the violation of a powerful taboo. While the stories might be thought of as raising awareness in a healthy way, various studies have shown that awareness is already high, and the perceptions of risk may even be exaggerated (if distorted in certain ways – see below).

One of the more positive aspects of these stories is that they tend to emphasize the lifelong impacts of sexual abuse. This fact can help readers adopt a Developmental perspective – i.e. one in which maltreatment is understood in terms of developmental *damage* that is hard to overcome, rather than merely a mental challenge to put behind us.

Impacts

The "Family Bubble": Like stories of monstrous physical abuse, stories of sexual abuse and sexual predators reduce our trust in those around us and strengthen the "Family Bubble," the unconscious understanding of the family as a separate and distinct realm with few and limited connections to the broader community. The stories may serve to raise awareness of a

legitimate danger, but as they are typically presented – without reference to community-strengthening approaches to safety – they also reinforce the belief that our own children are only safe when our locks (both real and metaphorical) are strong enough to protect them.

In addition, this sort of story reinforces the idea that there is an absolute divide between “normal” parents and people on the one hand, and “monsters.” This makes it difficult to think in terms of “risk factors” and to consider the possibility that even regular folks may in some situations become abusive.

Examples

- The Internet presents many opportunities for sexual predators. This story goes on to name all the individuals involved, and is certain to frighten parents, without offering them any reassurance about overall risk levels, or any information about how children can be protected (other than by locking up offenders).

Online sexual predator task force nets nine arrests, *USA Today* 12/20/02

LOUISVILLE (AP) – Agents posing as a 14-year-old girl have arrested nine men on charges of surfing the Internet to find and lure minors for sex over the last 18 months.

Some of the men arrested by agents and officers with the Louisville Innocent Images Task Force also were charged with crossing state lines for sex with a minor.

To find sexual predators, task force members surf the Web's chat rooms, often posing as a 14-year-old girl, and exchanging messages with older men.

...

- Churches and orphanages are institutions where violations of children seem especially shocking. This story also makes a strong case that the harms from sexual abuse are lasting (though it does not offer much help in conveying expert understandings of the nature of the damage).

Parents of man who committed suicide sue church for alleged abuse

Associated Press

LOS ANGELES -The parents of a man who committed suicide last year filed suit against the Archdiocese of Los Angeles, alleging their son took his life because he was emotionally scarred from childhood sexual abuse by a Roman Catholic brother.

The wrongful-death suit filed Friday in Los Angeles County Superior Court claims that a despondent 36-year-old Richard Lukasiewicz Jr. hung himself 12 hours after being admitted to a psychiatric hospital in April 2002. The lawsuit states that Lukasiewicz was still traumatized by the sexual abuse he suffered while a young student at John Bosco Technical Institute in Rosemead.

Richard and Blanca Lukasiewicz said in their suit that: "The horror and betrayal associated with years of sexual abuse drove Richard Jr. into severe depression." They added, "The sexual abuse stole Richard Jr.'s youth, it took his self-esteem and drained his ability to cope."

...

Attorney Raymond Boucher said Lukasiewicz tried to overcome the mental distress he suffered as a result of the molestation, which allegedly began during a 1979 camping trip when he was about 11 and lasted four years. ... Lukasiewicz tried to deal with the trauma through yoga classes and by confiding in friends and family.

4th Lawsuit Claims Abuse at Boys Town, Associated Press, 7/8/03

OMAHA, Nebraska - A fourth man who lived at Boys Town, the home for wayward youths that was made famous in a 1938 Spencer Tracy film, has filed a lawsuit claiming he was sexually abused by a staffer.

...

- While stories like those below are legitimate, they also create a media environment where it is easy to internalize the message that many, many of us are deprived.

Many Sexually Abused, Study Says, Boston Globe, 3/30/03: [The article reports that in Massachusetts one in five women say they were sexually abused as children.]

Boy Scouts step up screening of leaders; Little League also planning checks, Chicago Tribune, 4/1/03

As spring arrives, so do baseball games, soccer matches, scout campouts for kids – and criminal background checks for many parents.

The confusing divide between discipline and abuse

Quite a few stories address the trickiness of the divide between discipline and abuse – either directly, by referring to the difficulty of defining the boundary, or indirectly by presenting stories where it is unclear whether an adult has "crossed the line."

Impacts

Weakening the "Village": These stories not only reflect people's confusion about the definition of child abuse, but may reinforce this confusion. The stories typically do not include any information about the consensus that does exist among developmental experts, for instance. In this way, they exacerbate the loss of shared values, which are one of the most important kinds of "glue" holding the traditional Village together.

Weakening the Developmental Perspective: If these stories strengthen the “Family Bubble” by implying that discipline is a moral area where every family must make its own subjective choices, they also directly work against the developmental perspective that children have *universal* developmental needs, and that the impacts of certain kinds of treatment can be judged scientifically and objectively rather than morally or ideologically.

Discrediting Advocates: A third downside is that such a story can frame advocates as ideological, PC extremists who are bent on taking away a legitimate and traditional tool of child rearing.

Variants

A closely related type of story is the one in which a person has hesitated to intervene between an adult and child because of uncertainty about whether it would be appropriate to get involved. This uncertainty is a result of both confusion about the line between discipline and abuse, and because the “Family Bubble” mode of thinking frames almost any kind of intervention as inexcusable *meddling*.

Examples

- In the first story below, the difficulty of drawing the line between abuse and discipline is explicitly addressed. In the second, there is no explicit discussion of this difficulty, but two competing perspectives are presented.

Second parent arrested in spanking incident, Slidell Sentry News, 4/3/98

SLIDELL – For the second time this week, a parent has been charged with cruelty to a juvenile for spanking a child.

Gregory Magee, 28, of 2021 Covington Hwy allegedly whipped a 9-year-old boy in his care with a belt, inflicting deep bruises on the boy's legs, said Tim Reichenbach, spokesman for St. Tammany Parish Sheriff's Office.

Magee told investigators that he had spanked the child, which is not illegal. But investigators believed the spanking was "carried too far." Magee allegedly whipped the boy because he was acting out in school and getting bad grades, said Reichenbach.

...

A local woman was also charged this week with cruelty to a juvenile after a spanking incident. She allegedly spanked her 10-year-old son three times after he was suspended from elementary school for five days.

In that case, police and juvenile authorities in Slidell made the determination that Humber had gone beyond corporal punishment and into the realm of cruelty to a juvenile.

...

The question of parents' rights versus children's' rights becomes complicated when corporal punishment is at issue. "It is a bit of a grey area," said Alan Black, an attorney in Slidell whose practice includes both criminal and family law. "These are tough cases. ...

...

Parents have the right to discipline their children, said Black, but there are limitations as to what is acceptable.

"There was a time when (corporal punishment) was generally accepted. Then it was viewed as disastrously negative for children. Now we are back to using more physical punishment and believing it is OK," said Peter Clark, a child psychologist in Slidell.

There is a trend toward more rigid discipline these days born out of a worry that society has become too liberal and out of control, said Clark.

He never advises people that corporal punishment is a necessary parenting tool, "but how they discipline their children is up to them," he said. "Some people believe one thing and others believe another."

Port Charlotte school director arrested for paddling student, Daytona Beach News-Journal wire services, 7/4/01

PORT CHARLOTTE – The director of a parochial school was arrested after paddling an 8-year-old student as punishment for lying, officials said.

Paul King, director of Charlotte Regional Christian Academy, was arrested Monday and charged with aggravated child abuse for spanking the girl twice with a board, officials said.

"I'm shocked charges were filed," said King, a pastor at Harborview Christian Church. "I look forward to being vindicated."

...

Students at the academy are disciplined with paddling as a last resort after other punishments fail, King said. Parents must sign a note agreeing with the policy before their children enroll, he said.

...

- The next example is an excerpt from a newspaper column recounting the columnist's experience of witnessing a mother verbally abusing her child:

Witness to Child Abuse: An Episode of Indecision and Shame, Tyler Currie, *Washington Post*, 4/3/03

... Now what to do with this curbside, open-air child abuser? There's no guidance counselor out here on the street. No protocol. No institution to guide my action. If I say something to this woman, is there a reasonable expectation she'll change her

behavior? ... Her slurs on the little girl become increasingly unprintable. This woman is forcing the moment to its crisis. Do I dare? No, I don't. I walk on past like a guilty thing, leaving the mother to her business. Just around the corner on Irving Street there's a man waiting for the Metrobus. He's also been watching and listening to the mother. He and I make eye contact for a quick moment. Surely it's a look of disgust that he and I exchange. Disgust for whom? The mother? Ourselves? The frayed fabric of our community? A combination of all these, perhaps.

The sanctity of the family

Quite a few stories about child maltreatment raise questions about whether it is appropriate to interfere with *families*. There is a perceived tension between protecting children and granting families an appropriate degree of autonomy.

Impacts

Strengthening the Family Bubble and Weakening the Developmental Perspective: While questions about whether children are best off with their families are complex, these stories often obscure such questions by emphasizing the issue of family autonomy. In this context, the issue of children's developmental needs is often downplayed or ignored.

Examples

- **When Parents Fail.** Gail Vida Hamburg, *Chicago Tribune*, 11/16/97:
"This issue of family preservation versus child protection has been with us since Colonial times," says Cathy Barbelle of the Child Welfare League of America. "Teddy Roosevelt gave us a policy, but the problem of how we address and deal with child abuse remains unresolved." The tension between the two groups has prevented child welfare from accomplishing the important goals first set in 1909. The opposing views also have created a contradiction between policy and practice. "The policy has been one of family support, but the practice has been one of child protection through family disruption," says Golden.
- **Price of Abuse Prevention Debated: Parents' Privacy Pitted Against Child's Well-being,** *Chicago Tribune*, 2/17/00:
The McHenry County Board may reconsider whether to accept a \$102,800 state child-abuse prevention grant, barely one month after rejecting the grant because of concerns over privacy rights and government intrusions into family life.

Children accidentally harmed by parents

There is a large category of news-you-can-use stories about the risks children face everywhere they go. Often these stories focus on children who have been injured because their parents were unaware of a particular type of hazard. Stories like these often imply that parents' ignorance or negligence amounts to something very close to child maltreatment.

Impacts

Of course these stories perform a service by reminding people of risks. They can also have the positive effect of framing harm to children as something that even “normal” people can cause, but that can be prevented through education. The more the stories do condemn individual parents, though, the less effective they are at promoting the Educational Frame, and the more they evoke Parental Deficit thinking.

Example

Texas Baby Dies After Being Left in Car, Associated Press, 7/31/03:

HARLINGEN, Texas – A 2-month-old girl died after being left inside a sweltering parked car while her mother was in a Target store applying for a job, police said.

After consulting prosecutors, police charged 24-year-old July Vreeland with abandoning-endangering a child Wednesday. Vreeland was in jail Wednesday night.

...

CONCLUSION: Important stories that don't get enough attention

Experts on child maltreatment know many things about the issue that they wish the public knew – about risk factors, protective factors, and trends, for example. Unfortunately, this kind of information is not, in itself, the stuff of "good" news stories. First because by definition such contextual information is not simple, sensational or episodic. But also because it may not even count as "news" – it is background information about the world, rather than a surprising incident.

In order to have the best chance of moving public opinion forward, advocates must avoid reinforcing the patterns of reasoning discussed above, and must also find ways of helping journalists write stories that evoke the right frames, including the value of social connection and a developmental perspective. Stories that promote these frames, and include information about causes and solutions, can be news when they include new findings, for example, or when they discuss the beginning of a new program – see the examples below.

Child Abuse Prevention Effort Starts, *Chicago Tribune*, 6/13/00

Parents Care and Share of Illinois is starting a chapter this week in Elgin for parents and caregivers of children who need to let off a little steam. "When your kids are

misbehaving and you think you're the only one who's having that problem, you feel pretty awful about it," said Susie Kline, regional director of the child abuse prevention program...The Parents Care program...aims to support caregivers of children of all ages who fear stress is affecting their caregiving.

Troubled Parents Learn to Create Healthy Families, Marc Fisher, *Washington Post*, 4/19/01

... [P]arents who have never lifted a finger against their children – but who fit the profile of those who might – are getting loving, intensive care and friendship that could stop abuse before it happens.

Each of these stories moves people away from the Family Bubble and Parental Deficit modes of thinking, by reinforcing the important ways in which social connection help reduce the risks of child maltreatment.

For advocates on the child maltreatment issue, the struggle to create news that promotes productive ways of thinking is certainly a challenge, but as on other social issues where public perception started from a basis of individual demonization, it is likely that persistent efforts can lead to real shifts in understanding.