Making the Public Case for Child Abuse and Neglect Prevention: A FrameWorks Message Memo

This report was commissioned by Prevent Child Abuse America, with funding from the Doris Duke Charitable Foundation.

April 2004

This Memo reports on the findings from the FrameWorks Institute's recent research on how Americans view child abuse, neglect and maltreatment in general, as well their reactions to specific reforms and arguments that child policy advocates have advanced in an effort to move beyond public acceptance of tertiary efforts to public prioritization of primary prevention policies. This work was conducted in response to a Request for Proposal solicited by Prevent Child Abuse America (PCA America) and supported by the Doris Duke Charitable Foundation. In addition to original research conducted for this project, this Memo is also informed by several years of investigation by the FrameWorks Institute on early child development and children's issues funded by the A. L. Mailman Foundation, the David and Lucile Packard Foundation and the National Scientific Council on the Developing Child at Brandeis University.

The goal of this work is to evaluate the existing body of research available to Prevent Child Abuse America against the findings that emerge from new research, and to identify promising ways to reframe these issues in ways that engage people in prevention, motivate them to prioritize proven policies and programs, and overcome existing mental roadblocks. To that end, this Memo attempts to describe the translation process necessary to engage the public in solutions by identifying specific practices that research suggests would advance public understanding as well as those that are likely to impede it.

The findings reported here result from an integrated series of research projects commissioned on behalf of Prevent Child Abuse America by the FrameWorks Institute, based on the perspective of strategic frame analysis. Additionally, this Memo extends this descriptive research by providing another level of more speculative analysis to inform the work of policy advocates. Finally, this Memo synthesizes these findings and makes specific recommendations for incorporating these findings into Prevent Child Abuse America's ongoing communications campaigns.

This Memo is not intended to take the place of the research reports that inform it; indeed, FrameWorks strongly recommends that child abuse prevention advocates avail themselves of these reports and challenge their own creativity to applying this learning.

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Within each report are specific research findings and recommendations offered by the researchers. This Memo differs in that it attempts to look across the full body of research and against the backdrop of past research on children's issues, and to interpret these findings from the perspective of a communications practitioner.

FrameWorks wishes to thank Meg Bostrom of Public Knowledge and Axel Aubrun and Joseph Grady of Cultural Logic for the rich body of work that informs this Memo. While this Memo draws extensively from the work of other researchers, the following conclusions are solely those of the FrameWorks Institute.

Executive Summary

Prevent Child Abuse America stands at a crossroads as it contemplates the future of its public education and advocacy efforts designed to prevent child abuse and neglect and secure the public understanding and support necessary to do so. Ironically, this directional dilemma is as much the product of its own past successes as it is due to any external variable. The public has learned the lessons that this organization and its extensive network of child advocates and experts have delivered over the past decade. There is broad acceptance of the reality and pervasiveness of child abuse, extending even beyond physical abuse to emotional abuse. The problem arises in how to capitalize and build upon this understanding, taking people to the next level of public engagement without bringing into play the inevitable backlash that is likely due to conflicts over public values and the policies the organization wishes to promote.

The research results presented here confirm those of past researchers: continuing along the same path pursued in previous communications campaigns is unlikely to gain any new ground and, in fact, risks alienating the public that has been won over. Currently, child abuse and neglect issues are portrayed as stories about criminal atrocities, bad parents, government failures and sexual predators. By further invigorating the dominant news frames used to tell the story of child abuse and neglect, advocates will reinforce many of the mistaken beliefs that the public currently brings to the issue, from misunderstandings about development and discipline to exaggerated appraisals of government inefficacy and stranger dangers. Most importantly, the ways that advocates or the media currently frame the issue are not leading people to an understanding of societal solutions nor are they prompting a re-examination of their personal behaviors with respect to their own children or families in their own communities. The message of prevention is being lost.

While there are advantages to be gained from all of the four attempted reframes, it is clear that conveying the realities of community impacts and child development remain the key conceptual challenges which any future child abuse prevention movement must address. The continuing obstacles faced by the dominance of the Family Bubble as the appropriate private arena for child-rearing and the sketchy role accorded community must be addressed in future messaging. At the same time, Americans' misunderstandings of fundamental child development principles leave them in defensive posture, asserting

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practices like spanking that they recognize to be ineffective because they reassert the parent's authority and traditional values.

There are numerous ways to improve the messaging of child abuse prevention that emerge from the research findings. Most importantly, however, the FrameWorks research suggests both long-term and short-term approaches. Among long-term recommendations are strategic partnerships among groups that promote community and child development in order to advance the policies that Prevent Child Abuse America has chosen. Among short-term recommendations are topical-based campaigns that take advantage of those issue areas where Americans are already asking questions about appropriate behavior and the role of community norms, such as coaching. In either case, Prevent Child Abuse America will need to come to terms with the limitations of the current messaging strategy and substitute strategies that promise to advance the next phase of public learning necessary to support proven practices and policies.

Background and Goals

FrameWorks was greatly aided in this investigation by the organization's own thoughtful appraisal of its communications practice. Indeed, both the volume of research conducted prior to the current investigation and the degree to which this had been analyzed by Prevent Child Abuse America communicators advanced the research design in important ways. In its RFP of September 19, 2003, Prevent Child Abuse America raised important questions about the effects of its past campaign approaches:

It is almost certainly true that the strategies employed so successfully by the child abuse and neglect prevention field to generate media coverage and public awareness in the mid-1970s have resulted in a vicious cycle in which new communications on the issue tends to conform to, and reinforce, the existing frame of reference…. While the establishment of a certain degree of public horror relative to the issue of child abuse and neglect was probably necessary in the early years to create public awareness of the issue, the resulting conceptual model adopted by the public has almost certainly become one of the largest barriers to advancing the issue further in terms of individual behavior change, societal solutions and policy priorities.

In addition to testing these assertions, the organization provided FrameWorks with a series of 15 working hypotheses which it wished to see tested and elaborated in order to deepen its understanding of the best ways to address them.

And, finally, Prevent Child Abuse America was tasked with providing a series of policy benchmarks against which the existing frames and speculative reframes could be tested.

The original documents are available from Prevent Child Abuse America. They are also addressed in the FrameWorks research reports, as translated into the various research methods.

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The Approach

To answer these hypotheses and questions, the FrameWorks Institute brought a group of communications scholars and practitioners with a unique perspective on communicating social issues. That perspective – strategic frame analysis – is based on a decade of research in the social and cognitive sciences that demonstrates that people use mental shortcuts to make sense of the world. These mental shortcuts rely on "frames," or a small set of internalized concepts and values that allow us to accord meaning to unfolding events and new information. These frames can be triggered by language choices, different messengers or images, and these communications elements, therefore, have a profound influence on decision outcomes.

Traditionally, news media is the main source of Americans' information about public affairs. The way the news is "framed" on many issues sets up habits of thought and expectation that, over time, are so powerful that they serve to configure new information to conform to this dominant frame. When community leaders, service organizations and advocacy groups communicate to their members and potential adherents, they have options to repeat or break these dominant frames of discourse. Understanding which frames serve to advance which policy options with which groups becomes central to any movement's strategy. The literature of social movements suggests that the prudent choice of frames, and the ability to effectively contest the opposition's frames, lie at the heart of successful policy advocacy. A more extensive description of strategic frame analysis is available at www.frameworksinstitute.org.

While strategic frame analysis brings new methods to bear on social issues, this perspective only confirms something that advocates have known for years: communications is among our most powerful strategic tools. Through communications we inspire people to join our efforts, convince policymakers, foundations and other leaders to prioritize our issues, and urge the media to accord them public attention. Every choice of word, metaphor, visual, or statistic conveys meaning, affecting the way these critical audiences will think about our issues, what images will come to mind and what solutions will be judged appropriate to the problem. Communications defines the problem, sets the parameters of the debate, and determines who will be heard, and who will be marginalized. Choices in the way we frame problems associated with child abuse and neglect and the solutions that would address these problems must be made carefully and consistently in order to create the powerful communications necessary to ensure that the public will engage in these issues.

When communications is effective, research demonstrates that people can look beyond the dominant frame to consider different perspectives on an issue. When communications is ineffective, the dominant frame prevails. When no dominant frame is available, people tend to rely on "default" frames – less vivid and powerful frames that are, nevertheless, deemed relevant to the discussion and allow people to assign meaning to new information. Understanding this process makes it all the more important that policy experts and advocates understand the likely "default" frames that ordinary people will use in processing new information about child abuse, and that these same advocates are

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prepared to tell their story using frames that automatically link problems to solutions and to policies.

Working from this perspective, the FrameWorks research was designed to explore the following questions:

- How does the public think about child abuse and neglect? What is the source of the problem? What, if anything, can be done to prevent the problem?
- Are there dominant frames that appear almost automatic?
- Are there default frames that are routinely relied upon to make sense of unfamiliar situations or policies?
- How do these frames affect policy preferences?
- What is the public discourse on the issue? And how is this discourse influenced by the way media frames the issue?
- How can child abuse and neglect prevention be reframed to evoke a different way of thinking, one that illuminates a broader range of alternative behaviors and policy choices, and makes these both salient and sensible?
- What messages, messengers and marketing/communications strategies and vehicles will be most effective in communicating these new frames and motivating changes in societal behavior?

Research Methods

To answer these questions, the FrameWorks research team completed a series of three related studies:

- a meta-analysis of existing public opinion on parents and parenting, children, development, discipline, child abuse, child sexual abuse and the political context for these issues, based on an exhaustive review of more than 100 surveys and focus group reports conducted within the past six years, as well as long-term trends. The goal of this research was to root the subsequent stages of original research in the context of recent opinion research. The results are published as *Discipline and Development: A Meta-Analysis of Public Perceptions of Parents, Parenting, Child Development and Child Abuse*, Public Knowledge for FrameWorks Institute, May 2003.

- cognitive elicitations, consisting of recorded one-on-one interviews conducted in summer 2003 by professional linguists and anthropologists with a diverse group of 22 average citizens around Seattle and Philadelphia, one half of whom were parents, of which one half had children living at home. The goal of this research was to explore the shape of public reasoning about child abuse and neglect, resulting in a systematic mapping of the frames ordinary Americans rely upon to make sense of information associated with child abuse, parenting, discipline, development and related issues. The results are published as *Two Cognitive Obstacles to Preventing Child Abuse: The 'Other Mind' Mistake and the 'Family*

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Bubble', Cultural Logic for FrameWorks Institute, August 2003.

- a series of six focus groups with engaged citizens in Manchester, NH, Atlanta, GA, and Chicago, IL in July 2003. Groups were recruited to meet an opinion leader profile: votes, news attentive, engaged in community through volunteer work, etc. Groups were divided by gender and mixed on all other demographic criteria. The goal of this research was to validate and extend the frames identified in the earlier work, to explore their expression in common parlance and in group dynamics, and to identify which frames and messengers advance appropriate policy alternatives. The findings are summarized in *Developing Community Connections: Qualitative Research Regarding Framing Policies*, Public Knowledge for FrameWorks Institute, August 2003.

- a literature review of frames currently in use by Prevent Child Abuse America and in news media. These reviews, undertaken by Cultural Logic, were based upon voluminous materials supplied by PCA America. Comments on chapter and organizational frames are included in the elicitations report, where they are used to demonstrate how ordinary people react to common messages, both positively and negatively. The news analysis was based on 120 news articles provided by PCA America and supplemented by a search conducted by the Center for Communications and Community at UCLA, drawing on their existing database of more than 10,000 news stories, both national and local. We asked the Center to provide typical coverage coded for child abuse, neglect and related stories, resulting in 25 TV news stories which were also analyzed, resulting in the report, *How the News Frames Child Maltreatment: Unintended Consequences*, Cultural Logic for FrameWorks Institute, September 2003.

In addition, FrameWorks' observations and recommendations are influenced by work conducted contemporaneously with the above research, but sponsored by the A.L. Mailman Foundation and the National Scientific Panel on the Developing Child. This work, conducted by Cultural Logic, was oriented to identifying and testing simplifying models that could help translate the causal story of early child development into metaphorical frames that the public can easily grasp, internalize and repeat. This research culminated in the following publication which has greatly influenced the recommendations reprised in this memo: *Moving the Public Beyond Familiar Understandings of ECD: Findings from the TalkBack Testing of Simplifying Models*, Cultural Logic for FrameWorks Institute, November 2003.

It is on the basis of this body of work that FrameWorks researchers have developed the following analysis and related recommendations for improving the efficacy of communications designed to advance public engagement in child abuse prevention and related policies. While we review key findings from the reports described above, we strongly encourage readers to review the full body of research that informs this Memo, available from Prevent Child Abuse America, and to refer to the FrameWorks website (www.frameworksinstitute.org) for further background on framing theory and practice.

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Situation Analysis

In many respects, the situation facing child abuse prevention experts and advocates in 2003 is similar to the dilemma faced recently by environmental advocates pressing for policies to address global warming. The analogy may prove useful in helping Prevent Child Abuse America and its coalition partners recognize that the situation in which they find themselves is not unique to their issue, but rather a common stage along the advocacy continuum. Consider the similarities:

Years of effective advocacy and public communications had resulted in general acceptance by the public that global warming was real, and that it was happening now. No longer was global warming questioned by the public as scientific exaggeration or speculation, but it had emerged in the public mind as fact.

This accomplishment had the potential to provide the important foundation for further learning.

Yet, without a strong sense of solutions, public acceptance could not move to engagement and policy support.

Since the public did not understand how global warming worked, they were easily distracted or disillusioned into a kind of adaptive futility.

Importantly, if environmental advocates continued to press the same message they had in the past – proving global warming and enumerating its detrimental effects – they were likely to lose ground, as the public became focused on the reality question and not the solutions.

This situation, so common in the literature of social movements, represents a turning point for advocacy strategy and tactics. As scholars Tarrow, Snow and Benford have argued, "When a movement wishes to put forward a radically new set of ideas, it must engage in framing transformation: new values may have to be planted and nurtured, old meanings or understandings jettisoned, and erroneous beliefs or 'misframings' reframed." The ability of social movements to make these important strategic shifts is critical to their ultimate success. Indeed, scholars Snow and Benford have argued that "the failure of mass mobilization when structural conditions seem otherwise ripe may be accounted for by the absence of a resonant master frame." Put another way, a movement's ability to translate its essence into large, resonant ideas and organizing principles that connect to well developed American values is as important to its success in galvanizing public support as is the timeliness of its issue or the cash behind it. Message matters.

To its credit, Prevent Child Abuse America began this investigation with an assertion that the child abuse prevention movement may have exhausted the mobilizing force of its current framing strategy – a strategy constructed largely around using the drama and emotion associated with media coverage of the issue to engage Americans in prioritizing identification and treatment. All research conducted for FrameWorks confirms this position. We might characterize the past phase of the movement's work as an agenda

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setting exercise: riding the tide of media coverage and manipulating familiar frames and habits of journalism to get child abuse recognized as a problem by the public.

Significant achievements have been made using this approach. Among the triumphs in which advocates should take pride are the following:

- The public is deeply concerned about child abuse and neglect.
- Its concern and its definition of the issue extends beyond physical abuse to emotional abuse.
- People can readily describe both types of abuse.
- They believe abuse has lasting effects.
- They believe abuse is a common problem.

This is an important achievement and one that should affirm the impact of advocates' past efforts on public understanding.

However, there are important deficiencies in public understanding that cannot be overlooked if experts and advocates are to realize their goal of public engagement, not merely passive acceptance. These include the fact that:

- They have an exaggerated sense of its pervasiveness.
- They explain its prevalence with recourse to their stereotype of the "bad parent,"
- which is then confirmed by child abuse communications.
- Neglect is misunderstood as "under involvement."
- The problem is perceived as internal to "bad people" or selfish people.
- Current understanding does little to challenge the autonomy of the family or what FrameWorks researchers refer to as the "Family Bubble" – that private space in which child rearing takes place.
- It does little to establish a developmental perspective, as Americans see the lasting effects of abuse as something to overcome through effort, and not as physical and psychic "damage" to the developing child.
- It does little to advance a role for the broader society.
- Current solutions or calls to action make people feel incompetent, what our researchers refer to as "failed villagers," using the Hillary Clinton metaphor that "it takes a village."
- When pushed too far – defining numerous common behaviors as abusive, for example – it results in rejection.
- The introduction of government furthers the rejection of outside forces and undermines any notion of efficacy in problem-solving.
- Reasoning from within the current understanding, moral relativism – who are we to judge? – combined with respect for family privacy tend to trump the village arguments for more societal involvement in children's lives.
- The prevention message is being lost because it is eclipsed by the numerous strongly held and familiar stories people have learned over time about child abuse; importantly, the literal use of prevention as a frame does not advance prevention as a policy.

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The issue is poised at a crossroads. Child abuse prevention experts and advocates must identify and focus upon the next frontier of advocacy or risk losing momentum and reinforcing negative aspects of the current frame effects. FrameWorks researchers are unanimous in this assessment:

"Making further headway in engaging the pubic on the issue will have to involve more than raising the volume on awareness campaigns…Advocates have relied on the power of tragic stories and statistics to move public opinion. These tactics have been effective, but may now have reached the limits of their ability, in themselves, to change people's thinking. If they are reinforced by explanations that help people understand the problem and its solutions more clearly, communications stand a change of having a much greater impact." Cultural Logic, Two Cognitive Obstacles: p1 and 25).

As we will see in reviewing the research results, the options available to Prevent Child Abuse America are not simple. The organization's policy menu and ambitions are appropriately expansive. And the problems are intricately interrelated – both in reality and in perception. No one message strategy can accomplish all that needs to be done to move this agenda forward. Therefore, Prevent Child Abuse America is left to decide whether it wishes to choose among the viable strategies suggested by the FrameWorks research and forcefully embrace a unified strategy (all eggs in one basket) or to create menus of symbolic projects that intentionally and strategically move the full agenda forward. These options are laid out at the end of this Message Memo in the section entitled Strategic Options.

Research Findings

Dominant Frames in Public Discourse

- News media is attracted to child abuse for its sensationalism, for its personal (episodic) story elements, and because it fits within a well-established news beat (crime) – the best covered news topic in America. It is, therefore, an easy story to tell with well-established conventions.
- The dominant news frame for child abuse is that of a "horrible, criminal atrocity some monstrous parent has committed, and the horrible suffering of the child(ren) in question." (How the News Frames:3)
- The qualitative research suggests that the effects of the dominant news frames have been to reinforce the notion of widespread parental deficits, to reify conclusion that the problem lies internal to the person (not in external circumstances) and to weaken the village by reinforcing the assessment that the only solution is to heighten distrust of others and to put in place safety measures to protect against stranger dangers.
- A second common news frame applied to issues of child abuse invokes the failure of child protective services. Again, the impact of this frame is not entirely positive in advancing calls for prevention and remediation. While it does attract attention to systemic failures, it fails to provide viable alternatives or solutions.

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Rather than heightening interest in fixing the system, these stories connect to the strongly held belief among many Americans that government is incompetent. Instead of outrage, these stories confirm a well-known story that Americans already know: government cannot protect us. Reasoning from this frame, there is little engagement in fixing the system because the only visible solution is ineffective. The likely take-away is that this is another regrettable social problem for which no solution is available, so the best one can do is to support treatment services for the inevitable victims through one's charitable dollars.

- A third common news trope is that of the prevalence of unseen sexual predators in our midst. This story frames child abuse as the result of "stranger danger," in which the story becomes more about personal safety and the personal behaviors one can incorporate into one's family life than it is about understanding who abuses and why and how patterns of abuse can be predicted and prevented. This too is a familiar journalistic story, as it takes on the script of a consumer safety narrative. Most importantly, this frame erodes trust in community or the Village as a solution to child abuse and parental isolation. It also reinforces the belief that "bad people" commit child abuse crimes, with little attention to circumstances that lead to abuse.

- There are another set of commonly told stories that warrant note in that they have a common characteristic. Focused on children's rights or judging the behavior of other parents, these stories inadvertently "cross a line," that the public has established between government and the Family Bubble. The public reaction is predictably negative. These stories are viewed as "meddling in other people's business," and violating the strongly held belief in family autonomy. In sum, the stories that need to be told about child abuse and neglect do not fit the formula as simple, sensational or episodic. The stories we need told – in order to connect the problem to policies and solutions – are complex, contextualized and systemic. When advocates and experts fall into the trap of "framing for access," or determining how to get the most news by fitting their story into the dominant news frame, they inadvertently reinforce problematic habits of thinking. At the same time, the full complexity of the child abuse story requires translation into narratives and frames that are as familiar and credible to ordinary people as those they see each night on the evening news. In order to identify these potential reframes, we must step inside the reasoning process that people bring to these issues and identify their patterns of expectation. Only in this way, can we focus on the main conceptual problems that are ignited by the dominant frames of public discourse and identify alternative ways to tell the story that connect to people's deeply held values.

Deconstructing Patterns of Expectation

The FrameWorks research for Prevent Child Abuse America confirmed patterns of reasoning observed in our earlier work for the David and Lucile Packard Foundation and

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reported in our Message Memo entitled "Talking School Readiness and Early Child Development" (see www.frameworksinstitute.org). This is significant as it helps establish the validity of these earlier findings and raises confidence in their endurance across time, geographies and samples.

While the latest research findings are available from Prevent Child Abuse America, we quote briefly below from the relevant portions of the earlier findings:

Child Development is a Black Box and default explanations predominate.

While many Americans recognize and are articulate about the various stages of child development, few can relate these impressions to a coherent theory or organizing principle about the way children grow. What happens inside the child is largely invisible to them: a black box. When asked to think and talk about what matters in the early years and why, most Americans "default" to three explanations:

1. *Family: Child rearing takes place in the family, making those things that occur outside the family largely irrelevant to the discussion. Parents are responsible, making those programs and policies that support and extend good parenting very accessible to the public. Public opinion about these policies is often mixed. On the one hand, as Cultural Logic found in the elicitations, people say parents should be supported in whatever way possible. On the other hand, as Public Knowledge found in the focus groups, people can be easily persuaded that parenting is a diminishing art due to such declining values among parents as selfishness, materialism, and elitism. According to this latter view, the only way to improve outcomes for children is to "fix" their parents*

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- *"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." (LA 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)*

2. *The Self-Made Child: The goal of this family-centered child rearing is to raise a successful and self-reliant child, who can "stand on his own two feet in the world," placing the emphasis on autonomy over interdependence. While Cultural Logic reports some important public concern for the socialization of children, for the most part social, emotional and regulatory development are less top-of-the mind than self-reliance. Furthermore, this developmental view raises concerns for "spoiling" children and equates this with too much attention, too much guidance and "overprotection." This perspective, so prevalent in the focus groups, often leads our informants to a positive interpretation of age inappropriate parenting, seeing this as*

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"letting the child make his own decisions.
"

- *"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)*
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3. Safety First: The priorities for child-rearing are defensive: protect from harm and disease, directing parental and community energies to the child's physical well-being and not to what happens inside the black box. This tendency is no doubt fuelled by the media's overwhelming emphasis upon crime and safety in news coverage of children's issues, from child abductions to the dangers of daycare. Moreover, as Cultural Logic points out, when people cannot fathom the internal dynamics of child development, they tend to focus on observable phenomena, making physical development more available to them than emotional growth, for example.

- *"I guess you're looking for clean and safe facilities, and the right number of staff per children, and you're looking for activities that help the children grow intellectually rather than make sure they stand in line and be quiet."*
- *"She's in this really safe little pre-school, this safe little yard with two adults there…"*
- *"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…"*

Americans struggle for working models to explain child development. Most popular default frames and current models downplay the full range of a child's critical interactions, concentrating attention solely on the domain of the family and on observable, largely cognitive, development.

The common sense metaphors and models that people rely upon to convey a child's development are mostly at odds with expert understanding, and lead people to make inaccurate assessments of what very young children need. As Cultural Logic comments, "It's almost as though people think about how to 'fill' kids' heads with the right knowledge, but do not think of how we are actually shaping or even creating the 'tools' they will have for the rest of their lives (intellectual, emotional, social, etc.)."

- *[I]f we don't instill a sense of discipline and values and that kind of thing in our children, our society eventually is going to be a place where things just don't have much structure.*
- *I think it's evident in our culture with drugs, gangs, violence, all that kind of*

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thing, that the time we don't spend with our kids keeping them on track and making sure they understand our values and our way of life and what we want for them, and in the end means that it's easier for them to get sidetracked.

- *Q: What's happening inside a kid's head when he or she is just sitting on Mom or Dad's lap with a book?*
  A: Um, I think without knowing it, they are absorbing a lot of things.
- *"We've all seen how children are like sponges in the early years…"*

These three default understandings – that child rearing takes place in the Family Bubble where issues of family autonomy are paramount, that children are "little adults" with similar capacities and motivations, and that the (primarily physical) safety of children should be the primary concern for parents – recur in the FrameWorks research for Prevent Child Abuse America. However, they have slightly different implications, viewed against a set of policies and programs oriented toward family support and abuse prevention, as opposed to school readiness.

First, the prevalence of the Family Bubble as the appropriately autonomous and isolated arena in which child-rearing takes place helps us understand the initial rejection of interventions like home visitation or even judging other parents' approaches to discipline as inappropriate. As long as child-rearing stands uncontested within the Family Bubble, Americans are likely to be nervous about "crossing the line" in terms of interference with family practices. They view this morally as disrespectful and, given that the predominant actor is likely to be associated with government, the situation reminds them further of government intrusion into private life. Even those campaign ads that feature children abused with irons or in closets accept the Family Bubble by calling our attention to cases in which the family was so dysfunctional that someone had to step in. But they do little to contest its primacy nor to provide us with a different lens that shows ongoing positive interaction between the family and the community for the good of children. Intervention as a positive force is a largely undeveloped idea; few Americans can imagine what to do or whom to do it with.

Second, the emphasis on personal safety viewed within the context of child abuse further diminishes the idea of a positive community role in family life. Views from this frame, the community is what you protect your child from, not a helping influence in preventing families from enduring the stressful situations that contribute to abusive behaviors. Since the emphasis on personal safety reinforces the Family Bubble as the protective sphere and demonizes outsiders, it reinforces distrust. The idea of the Village presupposes that most people are basically OK. The media negates this through its translation of child abuse issues into the highly sensational crime and personal safety frames, leaving people's attention focused on identifying the harmful outsiders and keeping them far removed from the protective Family Bubble. Earlier FrameWorks research focused on the "Child as Precious Object" reasoning which emphasizes the physical fragility of the child and the need to protect children from physical harm to the exclusion of all other considerations, such as lack of stimulation, neglect, stress or deprivation.

It is, however, in the area of the "self-made child" that FrameWorks' recent research

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proves most informative in helping us understand the pernicious influence of dominant frames on public understanding of child abuse issues. Because Americans have so little understanding of child development, Cultural Logic argues, they make an important conceptual "mistake" that is supported by the "self-made child" frame. When reasoning about children from this frame, Americans:

"… misperceive a child as a little mind which develops through abstract processes like learning, memory and choice; or which does not 'develop' at all, and exists from the beginning as something like an adult mind which needs to be 'filled' or 'guided'." (CL2:12)

This developmental mistake – labeled the "other minds" model by our researchers – inappropriately and erroneously attributes adult intentionality and will to the developing child, pitting child against adult in a struggle for dominance. Reasoning in this frame, as Cultural Logic points out, it is a "natural conclusion" that "even one year-old children can benefit from punishment for breaking moral rules." The naïve but willful child must be "taught" who is the more experienced boss, who makes the decisions and sets the rules. Spanking, and the oft-repeated "spare the rod and spoil the child" become entirely comprehensible within the logic of this frame. Indeed, from this perspective, "spoiling" a child becomes a more compelling concern than over-disciplining a child.

There are four subsidiary patterns of reasoning identified by the FrameWorks research for Prevent Child Abuse America which are worth noting:

> *Get over it vs. Damage*: Closely related to the idea of children as little adults is the notion that they can triumph over adversity through their own willpower. This "Baby Bootstrap" model undercuts the idea that abuse leads to lasting damage to the child's developing brain or to deficiencies that are beyond their power to address.
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> *Every Child is Unique:* Americans' strong belief in individualism can result in a denial of scientific observation and prediction. The idea that a child could be scarred for life is repugnant to people. While they are capable of understanding that there are "stages all people go through," the strongly held idea of uniqueness remains the dominant paradigm.
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> *Old Ways are the Best Ways:* Because child-rearing happens within the Family Bubble, the "experts" looked to in most cases are other family members. This is problematic because few people – especially grandparents – have recourse to a deeper understanding of development. The trusted messengers then tend to reinforce the old homilies of "spare the rod and spoil the child," all the while reinforcing the notion that parenting comes naturally and that only defective parents and families need help from those beyond the Bubble.
>
> *Money Doesn't Matter:* Because neglect is translated to underinvolvement, affluent, dual-career parents are the most likely to be "abusers." Bad parents are

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perceived as those who have bad priorities and make bad choices, not those who have constrained choices because of socio-economic status, changes in the economy, etc. This mistake leads people to see affluent families as those most "at risk" for child neglect, because they lack the values necessary to prioritize children. This does little to direct public resources toward families who need help.

Critical Issues of Responsibility and Solutions

When debating issues of responsibility from within the tight frame of the Family Bubble, one might be tempted to quip that "it's the family, stupid." Indeed, this public assessment is inadvertently reinforced by the ineffectiveness of the other actors. When government is involved, it proves ineffectual. When "outside" individuals are involved, they too prove ineffectual. Confusion over the role of the "villagers" further contributes to this assessment, as ordinary people are advised to "befriend" other families but be ready to "turn them in" as they prove deficient in their child rearing capacities.

"The result is a dilemma in which the bystander to child abuse is constantly informed by the media about the ineffectiveness of government institutions, and at the same time, realizes (and is often reminded) of his own powerlessness as a 'responsible villager.'" (CL2:19)

Many child abuse prevention messages attempt to enlist ordinary people in "taking a stand" against child abuse or, positively stated, providing support to families. These calls to action, viewed within the current understanding of child abuse, set a very high bar for ordinary people. They are called upon to help unknown parents who are viewed as highly suspect of abusive behavior, without any understanding of how to get ahead of the problem, nor any tools to diagnose who may be at risk or what might constitute effective preventive behavior. Since child abuse is criminal behavior and child rearing occurs in a private realm, people are literally walking on eggshells in entering the Family Bubble and attempting to play the role that government has proven ineffective in resolving.

In sum, there are few solutions advanced by advocates that can penetrate the frame dynamics of the Family Bubble, Government Ineffectiveness, and Personal Safety. Reasoning within these frames, solutions beyond the personal (remove the child, fix the parents) become invisible. To the extent that the problem of child abuse has been defined as internal to the parents (bad people), the solution becomes incarceration of criminals. Problematically, the idea of prevention (versus punishment as a deterrent) is invisible. Importantly, while child abuse prevention advocates talk about prevention repeatedly, the frame of prevention fails to set up support for prevention policies (see further discussion below). Until the problem in redefined in such a way that prevention policies "make sense" within the operative frame, they are likely to continue to be perceived as a non sequitur.

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Effects of Speculative Reframes

In light of these perceptual realities, FrameWorks chose four speculative reframes to take into the focus group testing. Representative news articles were created that fully developed four frame-based arguments: (1) a strong Child Abuse Frame, typical of the best of these news stories being advanced by advocates, that connects horrific cases to the prevention programs and policies that might have prevented it; (2) a Parenting Frame that advances the idea that all Americans have a stake in good parenting and that good parenting is the result of both information and education and environmental conditions that can be addressed through policies that relieve stress on the family; (3) a Community Frame that attempts to broaden responsibility for child rearing beyond the family to coaches, teachers, doctors and neighbors and to emphasize the community's ability to prevent abuse through family supports; and (4) a Child Development Frame that explains the science of the developing brain and the implications for families, caregivers and communities.

Importantly, no one reframe can lift the full range of policies and programs that Prevent Child Abuse America wishes to promote. Each lifts a certain set of policies, and disadvantages others. For example, "People can use (all four frames) to justify physical discipline, though some frames are more robust than others," Public Knowledge concludes. Yet, of the four, the Child Abuse Frame does the least to move forward a comprehensive prevention agenda. And the Parenting Frame has serious default associations which tend to reassign responsibility to the Family Bubble and individual actors.

While there is no "silver bullet" that contests the strongly held beliefs associated with child abuse and neglect, there are some significant advantages to each of the frames tested over current practice. This is especially true of the Child Development and Community Frames. Perhaps, more than anything else, the effects associated with all four frames demonstrate the possibility that, consistently deployed over time, reframes can result in significant reconsiderations and reconceptualizations of these issues. The effects of each of these frames is summarized below.

(1) Child Abuse: Effects of The Current Reframing Strategy

As Public Knowledge concludes:

"The Child Abuse Frame…is effective in causing readers to question whether or not government has the right priorities when it comes to children and families. However, it also undermines support for government solutions and does not address the perceptions that prohibit people from acting on child maltreatment. Importantly, it does not advance a prevention agenda, providing little impetus for better family support services, early intervention and referral or even parenting education. The article's prevention message and its call for positive parenting go largely unnoticed due to the vividness of the Child Abuse and Failed Government frames." (PK:3)

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Further, this frame:

- Highlights government's bad priorities.
- Reminds people of government's incompetence.
- Connects with other issues on which government is incompetent (security, jobs, health care), which then tends to deprioritize child abuse as a top issue.
- Results in frustration and helplessness, not active engagement.
- While there is strong support for treatment, it is seen as belonging to the domain of charity, which is associated with sympathy for victims, and not with politics, prevention, or social change.
- Lodges the problem in the people.
- Inhibits further learning – no "causal story" is promoted, linking the outcome of child abuse to causes, conditions and the unavailability of proven solutions.
- Consigns the prevention message to inevitability (prevention is impossible).
- Loses the message that positive parenting, and the programs necessary to support it, are important to the vividness of the child abuse frame in which the problem is the result of "bad people"; while this is retrievable (see below), it works better when decoupled from the child abuse prime.

It is important to note that, every time the organization's name is used, it introduces the Child Abuse Frame. This constrains the discussion and brings with it associations related to the frame such as crime, bad parents, etc. Moreover, it "limits interest in the organization's communications" as Public Knowledge concludes (PK:24) By contrast, "Healthy Families America" was universally well-received and was understood as improving families. The organization may want to consider a name change at this point that allows it to move from a negative to a positive.

(2) Effects of the Better Parenting Frames

When reasoning in this frame, problematically, parenting is "an individual choice and individual responsibility, external conditions do not matter to the success of the family, and outsiders (unless they are an extension of the Family Bubble) have no role." (PK:8)

Further, this frame:

- Cues up the Family Bubble and therefore defines community actors as "outsiders" whose presence is necessary because of the failure of parents.
- Defines the roles for outsiders narrowly as either the rare exception to the "stranger danger" frame or those who pick up the pieces for failed parenting.
- Sets up fragile equation in which, if the Family Bubble is violated, the roles for the Village and Government are automatically defined as intrusion and judgmental, resulting in backlash.
- Effectively counters the unexamined belief that parenting is natural; this frame connects parenting to ordinary people's experience and empathy (not sympathy); it is, therefore, an important base for shifting the discussion to what everyone

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needs to know to parent well.
- Makes it more likely that people will look for solutions within the family.
- Fails to contest mistaken understanding of development and to displace notion that the environment doesn't matter.
- Associates the notion that parenting is a "tough job" with the assertion that "tough love" is an appropriate response (other minds mistake).
- Allows people to default to trusted in-family messengers which further exacerbates developmental mistakes, e.g. money doesn't matter, all you need is love and child as precious object.
- Promotes a "that's life" view of the world in which parents acknowledge that everyone learns on the job, so preparing for parenting is not possible and the only solution is to "give parents a break" which is defined as providing an hour of babysitting for a neighborhood parent.
- Can lead to an understanding that child abuse is inadvertent and occurs in stressful situations – BUT this understanding is dependent upon the kind of reasonable, contextualized discussion afforded by focus groups and would need to be extended over time; nevertheless, this is a promising finding.

(3) Effects of the Child Development Frame:

Because the dynamics of child development are so little understood by ordinary Americans, "people's thinking about child development tends to default to parent-child interactions and disciplinary issues." (PK:11)

Further, this frame:

- Provides the most "new information," and therefore causes people to reconsider and re-examine their existing frames.
- Connects to Americans' insatiable desire for more and better information.
- Like the Parenting Frame, this frame tends to remind people that parenting requires learning and skill.
- Conflicts with people's deeply held belief that all children are unique and cannot be put into categories.
- Causes people to reject determinism in the early years; because Americans believe in equal opportunity, they tend to reject any constraints that hinder this from childhood; they can only understand socio-economic constraints or "bad seed" genetic inheritance, but continue to believe in the triumph of "boot strap" willpower over circumstance; this does little to advance an understanding of developmental damage.
- Reinforces the idea that neglect is about refusing to spend time with kids, an outcome associated with parents who have the wrong priorities, and made the
- wrong choices.
- Tends to promote existing practices, e.g. discussions of discipline, not growth and development and to do little to advance an appreciation for interaction as opposed to safety; these responses are a direct consequence of the lack of understanding of what works.

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(4) Effects of the Community Frameworks

While the obvious solution to many of the previous frames would appear to be a story in which the role of community is explicit, "people find it difficult to connect children and families to a broader community… For the community frame to be effective in leading to policy support, it is important to establish *existing* connections to community, not a nostalgic view of a 1950s community that reminds them that they are not connected to others in the way they were in the past. Furthermore, it is important to create the connections to conditions and to institutional relationships (schools, libraries, recreation centers, etc.) that will benefit children, rather than emphasize an individual's responsibility to create connections with other individuals, or to simply see relationships as needed to relieve adult stress."(PK:14, 16)
Further, this frame:

- Forces people to "fill in" the blanks in their definition of positive community, and they tend to do so with a definition that is merely the positive side of the "bad parent" frame: two parents, women don't work, people sacrifice to provide for kids, etc. This reduces community to the aggregation of individual choices and does little to define a role for community in expanding choices for parents.

- Leads to nostalgia, which reminds people of the deteriorating quality of life and propels them to prioritize stranger danger and safety issues and to promote traditional discipline as an antidote to the deterioration of values.

- When clarified or deployed as contemporary community, with robust examples of libraries, community centers, schools as the vital link between families, this frame crosses class, reducing the stigma of outside help as associated with failed families. It also makes significant headway toward penetrating the Family Bubble with considerations of environment and non-family relationships.

Strategic Reframing Recommendations

Looking across the body of this research, there are a number of important findings that can be incorporated into the organization's message strategy immediately. In making these strategic changes, the order of the communication elements will be very important, given the highly developed patterns of expectation associated with these issues.

- Without attention to order, the public is likely to easily grasp the story of child abuse it knows well from media and public discourse and to stop processing any further information. *When Child Abuse is addressed directly*, these frame elements must appear high in the messaging, in order to prevent the powerful default patterns of thinking that erode its effectiveness in promoting policies and programs: *Do not begin the communication with child abuse,* but rather prime it with a strongly held value like children are our future, children deserve

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opportunities from the beginning, etc. By substituting a common value for the dramatic and highly charged issue of child abuse, you are more likely to benefit from some of the societal role accorded to realizing that value for all children and to avoid the quick default to the stereotypes associated with child abuse and child abusers.

"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."
Roger Schank, Tell Me A Story: Narrative and Intelligence. Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1995

- *Solutions must be spelled out at the top of the communication*, to advance the prevention message and overcome the public's sense of inevitability (bad parents or bad people pierced the Family Bubble) and to counter the futility of any action (protect your own kids inside the Family Bubble, treat those who are victims).

- *A clear definition of the problem is required,* and this should be careful not to focus on people in the abusive situation but rather on the predictable situations in which abusive behavior happens: poverty, divorce, addiction, drug abuse, stress, limited education, job loss, isolation, etc.

- *Wherever possible, tell stories of efficacy* – demonstrate how programs and policies have worked for the benefit of children by predicting and addressing abusive situations before they happened. This can take the form of touting the effects of Healthy Families America and its home visitation program, or the impact of anti-bullying programs on aggression, or the value of mentoring programs in keeping children in difficult situations on track for achievement. In this way, a subtle point can be made about the interwoven relationship of abuse to internalized anger and social isolation. In effect, it increases the idea of situations, not people, as the appropriate focus for child abuse interventions.

- *Avoid vivid, dramatic details* and the focus on the worst cases, as well as on sexual abuse as the dominant form of abuse, as these frames only serve to reinforce the crime script and related conclusions about bad people, bad parents and the inevitability of abuse.

- *Forget the numbers,* in trying to clarify the exact prevalence of abuse; people believe it is a big problem, they tend to overstate it numerically (as they do many social problems they deem important) and correcting their error is only likely to result in diminished concern for the problem.

- *Stop fighting the fight you've won,* by continuing to convince people of the prevalence and seriousness of child abuse. It is time to shift to deepening citizens' understanding of the problem, not attention-getting or agenda-setting.

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- *Elevate the prevalence and definition of neglect,* as the most common form of child abuse; this will require a different term (as neglect is too tightly associated with bad, often affluent parents who ignore their children) like maltreatment. Neglect has the added advantage of being inherently situational and affords a strong messaging opportunity that, once invigorated, can map on to abuse as well.

- *Tell a developmental story,* by using effective metaphors and models (see below) to help people understand the developing brain as a system that can be damaged and needs nurturing from its environment in order to grow.

- *Avoid reinforcing the cognitive mistakes that people make,* by examining your communication to make sure it does not portray the child as willful or intentional, or define abuse as an internal flaw within bad people.

- *Try to get multiple actors into the frame,* and avoid tightly framed communications that reinforce the Family Bubble. Use community elders to explain child development, bring in front-line program directors who have worked with kids and families. Try to broaden the discussion to the Village. Try to promote trust, as opposed to safety measures required to prevent stranger danger.

- *Talk about parenting as a learned skill for everyone*, not a natural or inborn ability that only some (deficient, defective) parents need to work to acquire. Try not to discuss parenting as a private act, but rather one in which society has a stake and other community actors – from pediatricians to home visitors – have important information to offer.

- *Don't issue calls to action that are doomed to failure,* like expecting outsiders to both befriend and turn in troubled families. Indeed, Prevent Child Abuse America should give some considerable thought to defining the contours of the Successful Village and the role that individual citizens can be expected to play in it. As it stands, this aspect of current messaging is creating confusion and a deeper sense of personal inefficacy.

Tightly focusing the frame on parents and parenting only reinforces strongly held beliefs about the inviolability of the Family Bubble and the prevalence of the Bad Parent. This is not to suggest that discussions of family education, parenting preparation and home visitation be dropped altogether, but rather that they are more likely to benefit by being primed by the Community Frame or the Development Frame than by the Parent Frame.

Many of the same recommendations cited above apply to this issue as well; therefore we will highlight only those most critically connected to this frame. *When discussing parenting policies or issues,* these frame elements must appear prominently in the messaging:

- *Do not begin the communication with an overt discussion of parenting styles*, as

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this tends to reinforce Americans' sense that "what you do in your own family is your business;" rather, prime the discussion with values like children are our future, we all have a stake in the next generation, etc. that open the door to the Community and Child Development Frames.

- *Use visuals that broaden the perspective* beyond the Family Bubble – no tight shots of children with parents – but, rather, show coaches, mentors and librarians interacting with families.

- *Use recent research in child development and the new brain research as the "new information" necessary* to prompt a reconsideration of parenting skills.

- *Establish that good parents are made, not born* and demonstrate the kind of knowledge and supports that parents should be able to count upon in the community; make explicit what can be learned and avoided through effective programs.

- *Focus on situations* in which many parents find themselves – divorced, out of work, stressed – and connect parent education and family supports to these situations; avoid demonizing certain categories of parents or making parental deficiency the necessary prerequisite to outside help.

- *Use the parenting frame to establish empathy,* and the universality of the predicament in which people find themselves; this frame is especially powerful in promoting workplace reforms that recognize the realities of working parents' lives.

- *Champion programs that work,* and describe how these programs resulted in healthier situations for children and families.

- *Take care in the definition of abuse,* that neglect is not left open to default misinterpretation as lack of involvement.

- *Avoid using parents as messengers,* as this further validates the Family Bubble and the existing tendency to look to other family members or non-experts for advice.

- *Don't cross the line,* by boldly asserting a prominent role for government or reinforcing the widely held fear that someone will come and take your children away for arbitrary reasons; bring community in, don't shut parents out.

- *When addressing issues with strongly developed associations, prime first and use reasonable tone.* For example, don't tackle spanking or hitting straight on, but first prime with something like, "Universally, parents want their children to learn right from wrong. Most parents admit spanking doesn't work, but they have few alternatives…now new research from child development experts says there are

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better ways to get children to internalize discipline, and that hitting may in fact make children weaker and less able to judge right from wrong …."

- *Do not confuse people with calls to action* that ask people to spy on their neighbors, be ready to turn them in and at the same time provide support; establish and foster trust.

- *When defining a role for community,* with resource to the Community Frame, the following framing recommendations are important:

- *Begin with a strong vision or description of community* – use analogies that define community as the environment in which children, like plants, grow, as well as others that demonstrate all the actors in a community that shape a child over time.

- *Avoid nostalgia,* which only reinforces Americans' deep concern over the loss of traditional values and may, ironically, send them back to more traditional forms of discipline like spanking; note how closely related are notions of the "Good Old Days" to physical punishment by a wide array of community actors! Talk about, and use visuals that promote contemporary communities.

- *Avoid creating the idea of community as the safety net for failed parenting.* Examine your messages over time to see if community is portrayed as a factor in many parents' lives, both successful and troubled, and is seen as a force for positive development, not merely prevention of the negative.

- *Don't cross the line,* by overtly displacing the Family Bubble. Keep parents in the picture, but add other actors to the scenario.

- *Stress community connections* – libraries, recreational organizations, schools, community centers – that affect and benefit children and their families; but don't fall into the trap of putting the responsibility on the parents to make these connections, or imply that these programs are abundant (leading to the conclusion that only ineffective parents fail to find them).

- *Stress interactivity and mutuality of benefits* – we give to children now so that they can give back to the community and the society in the future.

- *Show other community actors interacting with children and enjoying it* – stress that it is a pleasure to be involved in the lives of children and families; help define the Village as an attractive place, not a place where children are dumped so their parents can pursue work or bad priorities.

In addition to many of the above recommendations*, when discussing child development*, the following recommendations are important to consider in developing communications:

- *Use new research on child development to get people into the conversation* and to

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reconsider what they know. Take care in establishing an informative and reasonable tone; don't explicitly challenge "old ways are the best ways."

- *Use simple but highly descriptive models* to help people understand how the brain develops (see section below). Do not leave scientific jargon untranslated.

- *Describe the process as affecting the whole child.* As Cultural Logic writes, "messages that incorporate information about the brain must be carefully framed in order to affirm that they are about emotion, character and values, and not just about a child's intellect." (2:14)

- *Avoid taking on directly those highly charged issues like spoiling and spanking.* This is likely to send people scurrying to defend the importance of discipline, even if the techniques are not perfect. *Instead counter them through indirection.* For example, describe developmentally appropriate behavior as increasing the odds a child will thrive and succeed, or spanking as a technique that doesn't work well, that makes children weaker in developing self-discipline.

- • *Demonstrate alternatives.* Don't tell people what not to do without telling them why and what to do instead and why the latter is preferable. Educate, don't lecture.

• *Back up experts with front-line messengers.* When you rely on scientists and new reports, back this up with people who can attest to the validity with their own eyes – people who run programs for kids, pediatricians, teachers, etc.

The Use of Simplifying Models and Other Metaphors

FrameWorks has stressed the importance of "priming" people to see child abuse issues through the lens of strongly held values like Community, the Future, and Opportunity. As Cultural Logic has pointed out in other publications, "An essentially different (but complementary) approach is to provide people with a *new* model rather than reminding them of a familiar one. In order to be helpful (i.e., both informative and "catchy"), such a model must be fairly simple and concrete – such as a vivid metaphor – while also capturing the essence of an expert perspective." For example, the depiction of the ozone problem as a "hole in the roof of the sky" made it significantly easier for people to understand and engage with the issue. This is a matter of providing a mental model where none existed before. FrameWorks has been instrumental in providing a similar model for global warming, with research that demonstrates the model's efficacy in engaging people in solutions. (For a fuller discussion of the principles and rationales of the simplifying models approach see FrameWorks' KidsCount Ezine number 19: "Opening Up the Black Box: A Case Study in Simplifying Models" – by Axel Aubrun and Joe Grady with Susan Bales, FrameWorks, 2002.

In 2003, with funding from the A. L. Mailman Foundation to FrameWorks, Cultural

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Logic undertook research to identify a new simplifying model to help explain the complex process of early child development, with special emphasis on ensuring that concepts like child abuse and neglect, as well as family well-being, mental health, and prevention were advanced by the model. The research involved just over 400 subjects, and took place between July and September, 2003. Participants were asked to respond to terms and to interpret explanatory paragraphs, to respond to policy-related questionnaires, and, finally, to explain child development in successive iterations of participants. This method, developed by Cultural Logic, is referred to as "Talk Back Testing." For a complete report on the process and its findings, see "Moving the Public Beyond Familiar Understandings of ECD: Findings from the Talk Back Testing of Simplifying Models," Cultural Logic for FrameWorks Institute, November 2003

There are particular aspects of this research which are germane to the work of child abuse and neglect prevention advocates. We summarize these below.

Among the key recommendations was the importance of moving from a "mentalist" communications perspective to a "materialist" perspective. The former focuses on subjective, abstract mental experiences (thoughts, feelings, emotionality, willfulness) while the latter emphasizes the physical changes that take place in a child's brain (pruning, circuits, hormones, chemicals). As Cultural Logic explains:

"The mentalist perspective does not include the important notion of a "damaged system" (i.e. the idea that a person might behave a certain way because of a damaged internal system rather than a moral failure); it excludes certain kinds of causality, such as the lasting effects of chronic stress; and it tends to imply a kind of "all or nothing" perspective, in which personhood emerges full-blown even in very young children, rather than developing through the growth of individual parts and systems."

TalkBack testing demonstrated that, when people understood brain development in terms of lasting damage to the system, they took it far more seriously than the more abstract ideas of bad behavior or bad character:

"I think what really gets me …is that it could actually have a chemical or biological or some sort of impact on the child's brain…Behavior is one thing, and attitude and personality is one thing, but if it can really negatively impact…the chemistry and make-up of the brain – you can damage that that early – that's really serious. That's more than just having a bad personality, that's really screwing up a kid."
TalkBack informant

The recommendations that emerge from this aspect of the research include three integrated aspects of the model:

Brain Architecture:

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The idea of Brain Architecture makes it possible for lay people to attend to and think about new ideas concerning early childhood development more quickly and in a more sustained way than any other models tested. Brain Architecture is both a memorable term and an effective organizing principle, by means of which lay people can think about explanations of brain development – including, for example, the ways in which a child's *brain architecture* is *built* and *strengthened*, or information about things that can *weaken* brain architecture or hinder the development of the brain's *structure*. Thinking about childhood development in this way can help people see, for example, that it would make sense for pediatricians to take an interest in children's mental and emotional development.

Interaction:

A challenging part of the expert model on ECD relates to the types of interaction children need in order to develop properly. This round of TalkBack revealed that certain terms do have the capacity to engage and inform the public. For example, information about "Mirroring" – the instinctive interaction style in which adults *get in sync with* babies and *mimic* their coos, gestures and facial expressions – makes it easy for people to begin to see the importance of interaction. Thinking about development in this way can help people see, for example, that child care must involve one-on-one interaction with attentive providers.

Stress-related Chemicals in the Brain:

When lay people are told that *stress releases chemicals in the brain*, and that these chemicals *weaken brain architecture*, or *hinder its development*, they find this explanation important and memorable. When they understand the situations that can cause a baby to feel stress – including lack of interaction, or interaction with an adult under stress – they are able to extrapolate to the kinds of situations which are detrimental to the development of a baby's brain architecture, including the effects of poverty on families.

Putting these three inter-related components together yields a message platform like the following:

We now know that if a baby doesn't have the right kinds of interactions in the first few years of life, the baby's brain architecture doesn't build itself properly. And if the brain architecture doesn't build itself properly, kids can be at a disadvantage in long term ways. We know a lot about what helps and hurts the growth of brain architecture. What helps build and solidify brain architecture is interaction like mirroring where adults take time to mimic the baby's facial expressions, coos and gestures, for example. This practice strengthens the architecture. What weakens and damages brain architecture is frequent stress – from fear, hunger or interacting with a parent under stress, for example. Stress releases toxic chemicals in the baby's brain. These chemicals weaken brain

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architecture, by stopping brain cells from growing and forming connections to each other.

While these findings are applicable to many issues advocates within the child advocacy community, they have special relevance for those who work on child abuse and neglect. The TalkBack testing revealed some significant progress in the model's ability to:

- Elevate consideration of the effects of poverty on the developing child.
- Define neglect as related to poverty and stress.
- Overcome the belief that the triumphant individual can overcome early deprivation and that this might, in fact, be good for character-building.
- Make clear the lasting effects of abuse and neglect without being entirely deterministic – the brain's plasticity can work around the damage but it is harder, takes longer and costs more in the long run.
- Emphasize the cost-benefits of early intervention and prevention.

Consider the differences in the following frame effects, the first from an informant presented with the school readiness model and the second from an informant in response to an earlier variant of brain architecture – emotional brain – that was later discarded in favor of the more powerful model:

Q: How does growing up in poverty affect a child's school readiness?
A: I would say in a lot of cases, I wouldn't say in all cases, growing up in poverty would hinder them, but I guess in some cases it would hinder them, sort of being ready to get to school as knowing, I guess maybe kids who are not in poverty growing up do have an advantage, as far as they probably know a little more when they do start school than children who are raised in poverty.
Q: How does growing up in poverty affect the emotional brain?
A: I believe because you're stressed a lot …because you have a lot of stress, usually parents that do not make a lot of money are usually under a lot of stress, so that makes the child be under stress as well, also that would affect I guess the growth of the brain.

In sum, there are powerful advantages to be gained by child abuse and neglect prevention advocates in their thoughtful deployment of the simplifying model identified and articulated by Cultural Logic. While the model is not a substitute for the values primes discussed above, it helps root them in a mechanism that can overcome one of the major hurdles facing advocates on these issues, e.g. the fact that child abuse and neglect cause lasting damage to a child that is far more serious than "emotionality," and that derives from a range of experiences to which the child is subjected. Moreover, it offers hope and optimism to counter the determinism that we observed in the focus groups; that is, the very fact that childhood damage can be repaired if a child's experiences are changed for the better. The simplifying model helps explain both prevention and treatment in ways that seem organic to the now discernible idea of how children develop. It should be noted that FrameWorks and Cultural Logic will be refining the model in future testing; those interested should refer to the FrameWorks website.

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About the Institute

The FrameWorks Institute is a nonprofit organization whose purpose is to advance the nonprofit sector's communications capacity by identifying, translating and modeling relevant scholarly research for framing the public discourse about social problems. FrameWorks designs, commissions, manages and publishes communications research to prepare nonprofit organizations to expand their constituency base, to build public will, and to further public understanding of specific social issues. In addition to working closely with social policy experts familiar with the specific issue, its work is informed by a team of communications scholars and practitioners who are convened to discuss the research problem, and to work together in outlining potential communications strategies for advancing remedial policies. Its work is based on an approach called "strategic frame analysis," which has been developed in collaboration with such research partners as UCLA's Center for Communications and Community, Cultural Logic and Public Knowledge. FrameWorks also critiques, designs, conducts and evaluate communications campaigns on social issues from this perspective. Recent projects focus on such diverse issues as gender equity and school reform, leadership development, neighborhood transformation, global interdependence, early child and youth development, children's oral health, the environment, global warming, oceans, rural issues and children's issues. For more information, see www.frameworksinstitute.org.

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