

Effective Communication about the Early Years: Understanding the Basics of Framing

Babies are great communicators. They communicate from day one, through sounds (crying, cooing, squealing), facial expressions (eye contact, smiling, grimacing), as well as gestures and body movements (moving arms and legs in excitement or distress). Most babies learn to communicate to get attention or to get a need fulfilled. They continue to develop more sophisticated communication capacities and are encouraged to do so when their efforts are rewarded by appropriate and timely responses from the people around them.

As adults, we are not that different. Throughout our everyday lives, we are constantly communicating both verbally and non-verbally. Over time we learn how to communicate best with various people and in different situations. We continue to develop and expand our communication capacities when our efforts are successfully received by the people around us.

As members of the infant-toddler field, we know how to communicate effectively with one another. We commonly use jargon about self-regulation, early intervention, infant mental health and healthy child development. Yet our professional lexicon may seem like a foreign language to lay people, including policymakers who want to understand child development and articulate policies that will help promote healthy development for babies, toddlers and their families. Policymakers are not likely to be well-versed in the terminology of our field, yet they are expected to comprehend intricate details of our work in order to create policies that support infants and toddlers appropriately.

Early childhood development is a complex process and communicating it effectively can be difficult. However, we must meet this challenge, so that policymakers and the public fully understand the needs of babies and the solutions that best support families raising young children. This article is designed to provide infant-toddler professionals and researchers with a basic introduction to some concepts of effective communications; first by outlining the fundamentals of framing, and then by introducing ways to think about reframing your communications. We conclude this article with some concrete examples of how to reframe a message related to early childhood development.

Framing 101

Effective communication requires an in-depth look at *what* we are trying to communicate and *how* people make sense of the information. Fortunately, there are people who dedicate themselves to this challenge. The FrameWorks Institute, a communications organization, conducts scholarly research on framing the public discourse about social problems and then translates that research into

recommendations and tools for the non-profit sector.¹ The FrameWorks Institute has conducted extensive research into how to communicate effectively about early childhood development,² which makes its work particularly useful to the infant-toddler field.

FrameWorks' approach to communications is based on the precept that people rely on "frames" to make sense of the world.³ "Framing refers to the way a story is told and to the way these cues [or stories], in turn, trigger the shared and durable cultural models that people use to make sense of their world."⁴ In other words,

"people approach the world not as naïve blank-slate receptacles who take in stimuli...but rather as experienced and sophisticated *veterans of perception* who have stored their prior experiences as an organized mass. This prior experience then takes the form of expectations about the world, and in the vast majority of cases, the world, being a systematic place, confirms these expectations, saving the individual the trouble of figuring things out anew all the time."⁵

We cannot be experts on everything, and so frames allow us to quickly make sense of the information we are receiving, so we can readily process new information.

"Frames signal what counts, what can be ignored, and allow us to 'fill in' or infer missing information."⁶

In essence, frames direct the way in which people reason about the information in a message. This process can have negative consequences though, because some frames will direct people to reason about the information inappropriately or inaccurately. In order to improve our communications, we must identify the frames that currently govern the way in which people think about infants and toddlers, so we understand how they are reasoning about the information.

Let's examine this from the perspective of communications about early childhood development. For those outside of the infant-toddler field, information about babies is likely to be guided by their own experiences with very young children, as well as the frames that dominate the news media and public discourse. These frames may

¹ The FrameWorks Institute, <http://www.frameworksinstitute.org>.

² See <http://www.frameworksinstitute.org/products/ecdreports.shtml> for copies of the FrameWorks Institute's research reports and recommendations on early childhood development.

³ Bales, S.N. (2002). *Framing Public Issues*. Washington, DC: 1.

⁴ Gilliam, F.D. & Bales, S.N. (2004). *Framing Early Childhood Development: Strategic Communications and Public Preferences*. In: Halfon N., Rice T., and Inkelas M., eds. *Building State Early Childhood Comprehensive Systems Series, No. 7*. National Center for Infant and Early Childhood Health Policy. Retrieved January 17, 2006 from <http://www.healthychild.ucla.edu/NationalCenter/default.asp>: 4.

⁵ Tannen, D. (Ed.) (1993) *Framing in Discourse*. New York: Oxford University Press: 20-21.

⁶ Gilliam, F.D. and Bales, S.N. (2004): 4.

or may not be accurate, based on what we know from scientific study about child development in the earliest years of life. If we want our communications to help people reason about early childhood development appropriately, we should introduce new frames that lead to alternate ways of understanding the problem and the policy solutions that match.

The FrameWorks Institute's approach to communications, and thus to the study of how to talk about early childhood development, is based on the following assumptions:⁷

- People are not blank slates.
- Communication is interactive.
- Communication resonates with people's deeply held values and worldviews.
- Communication is frame-based.
- When communication is inadequate, people default to the "pictures in their heads."
- When communication is effective, people can see an issue from a different perspective.

Next Step: Reframing

Understanding how frames work is the first step in an effort to help people consider a familiar issue from a different perspective. The next step is reframing – providing a different lens or story through which people can understand new information.⁸ Reframing is hard work and takes practice, but the FrameWorks Institute offers tools to guide us in this process. One such tool is "levels of thought."

The FrameWorks Institute "adopts the position...that people reason on the basis of deeply-held moral values..."⁹ Those moral values are part of a hierarchical process for how people think about ideas and issues. As you will see below, ideas and issues can be divided into three levels of thought.

Levels of Thought¹⁰

Level One: Big ideas and values, like freedom, justice, community, success, prevention, responsibility

Level Two: Issue-types, like child care or child welfare

Level Three: Specific issues, such as earned income tax credits or family and medical leave

⁷ Bales, S.N. (2002): 7.

⁸ Bales, S.N. "A Five Minute Refresher Course in Framing." *KIDS COUNT E-Zine*. Issue No. 8. Washington, DC: FrameWorks Institute. <http://www.frameworksinstitute.org/products/issue8framing.shtml>. Retrieved February 27, 2006.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Ibid.

Reframing issues about infants and toddlers can be done effectively “by reminding [people] of the widely shared *Level One* values they already incorporate into their thinking...”¹¹ We can communicate with others by using “words and concepts like ‘responsibility,’ ‘community,’ ‘connection,’ ‘prevention,’ and ‘stewardship.’”¹² Only after we have introduced the *Level One* value, should we communicate more specific information such as the issue type and policy details. Structuring our communications in this way provides people with a context or vision through which they can understand the fine details of our message. Let’s take a look at a fictional framing and reframing to illustrate the way in which using levels of thought can improve your communications.

Original Frame

265 new babies were born in Fillmont, Indiana last year. 83% of those babies were born into homes in which both parents work and child care is a necessity. The community currently offers support services to new parents, but funds are lacking. The federal budget reconciliation bill made across-the-board cuts to domestic programs, including the Child Care Development Block Grant (CCDBG). This will have serious consequences for child care programs in our community. And with reauthorization of Early Head Start coming up this year, there is the possibility for even more cuts to the programs and services needed by the babies of Fillmont.

What was this message about? It’s specifically about child care and budget cuts to programs for babies. However, there is no clear value expressed that would help us think about the information in a particular way. As a result, we are left to make sense of the information and come to conclusions based on the “pictures that already exist in our heads.” Unfortunately, those “pictures in our heads” may not match the communicator’s intentions.

Reframe

The people of Fillmont, Indiana know how to strengthen their *community*. They know that a baby’s healthy social, emotional, physical and cognitive development helps form the brain’s architecture and leads to success in school, in life and in society. By investing in a comprehensive Early Head Start program, Fillmont, Indiana has made it a priority to provide the best start in life for all its babies and toddlers, so that their children will grow up to be *good citizens of the community*. The Early Head Start program offers an array of services to pregnant women, infants, toddlers and their families, including home visitation, parent support, early learning and access to medical, mental health and early intervention services. But this community

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Ibid.

program cannot succeed without adequate federal support for Early Head Start. Reauthorization of Early Head Start is right around the corner. It's time to remind our federal policymakers that babies in Fillmont and across the country depend on them.

What was this message about? The message was clearly about community, prevention, stewardship and responsibility. By creating a shared vision for the success of all children, we illustrate the notion that how we care for our youngest children is paramount to their future and society's as a whole. When we then introduced specific issues and policies, it was through the lens of the Level One values we had already established in our communication.

This is merely one example of reframing. You can begin to practice framing by thinking about situations in which you regularly communicate about infant-toddler development and writing down some sample messages. For instance, if you were going to meet with a state legislator about establishing a quality rating system for infant-toddler child care, how would you develop your communication? First, make a list of the two or three big ideas or *Level One* values that establish a clear vision for how you want the state legislator to think about quality rating systems. Then identify the *Level Two* category for your communication and write down the specific *Level Three* policies that you are promoting. When you put all of these together, you will have two or three possible frames for communicating about quality rating systems. Remember, frames have consequences for how people reason about the information, so be sure to test your new frames to determine whether people are reasoning about the information in the way you intended.

There is no magic bullet to effective communications. Instead our challenge is to work hard to understand the frames currently in use, as well as develop new frames that help people reason about early childhood development more appropriately. Babies are excellent examples of communication in action. Now it's our turn to implement these lessons on framing and **Be a Voice for Babies!**

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