

Effective Communication about the Early Years The Elements of the Frame – Part One

Early childhood development is a complex process and communicating it effectively can be difficult. To help infant-toddler professionals successfully communicate with policymakers and the public about early childhood development, the ZERO TO THREE Policy Network is publishing a series of articles in *The Baby Monitor* focused on effective communication about the early years.

In the first article (<http://www.zerotothree.org/policy/framingissues.html>), we provided 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.

“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.”¹

We also included some concrete examples of how to reframe a message related to early childhood development.

This second article begins to break the process down even further by examining the strategic elements that comprise a frame. The elements of a frame help people understand new information by providing cues for how to interpret the communication. The concepts and research in this article are derived from the work of the FrameWorks Institute, a non-profit communications research organization in Washington, DC. According to FrameWorks, the essential elements of a frame are:

- Context
- Numbers
- Messengers
- Visuals
- Metaphors and Simplifying Models
- Tone

In this article, we examine the first three elements of the frame – **context**, **numbers and messengers** – the research which supports each element, how to use it effectively in your communications and examples that relate each element directly to communicating infant-toddler issues. The next piece in the series will focus on visuals, metaphors and simplifying models, and tone.

Context

What does it mean to provide context in our communications? Context refers to the conditions or circumstances that help illustrate a situation. “The way you identify

¹Gilliam, 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.

the problem [or issue you want to communicate] makes all the difference in how people are able to view [the solutions you propose.]”² Establishing context in your communications may seem like a rather straightforward and simple strategy. And yet, context is the element which is most often overlooked. “When people understand issues as *individual* problems, they may feel critical or compassionate, but they won’t see *policies and programs* as the solutions.”³ When you provide context, it allows people to think about your issue as one that affects the entire community, and helps them see that community solutions are needed.⁴

*RESEARCH SUGGESTS:*⁵

- Context establishes the cause of a problem and who is responsible for solving it.
- Context can further systems thinking and minimizes the reduction of social problems to individual solutions.
- Context must be built into the frame from the very beginning when the problem is introduced.

So how can we use context to positively impact our communications? The FrameWorks Institute proposes the following strategies⁶:

1. Define the problem so that community influences and opportunities are apparent.
2. Make the connection between data and long-term trends.
3. Interpret the data: Tell the public and policymakers what is at stake and what it means to neglect this problem.
4. Connect the issue to root causes, conditions and trends with which people are familiar.
5. Assign responsibility.
6. Present solutions.
7. Acknowledge how well the *state or community* is doing in addressing the problem, rather than focusing on how *individuals* are addressing it.

Let’s take a look at a *fictional* example of using context in a communication that impacts infants and toddlers.

Paid Family & Medical Leave

The Jackson Paper Company is taking its employees and executives on the road and making the case for paid family and medical leave at the State House. The company realizes that investing in the healthy growth and

² Bales, S.N. (June 2004). *Framing Public Issues*. Washington, DC: 16.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Ibid.: 18.

development of the community’s youngest children pays huge dividends for everyone, and they want the state to recognize it too. So they are asking the state to demonstrate their commitment to families with very young children by passing legislation that would make family and medical leave more accessible and affordable. Jackson Paper provides 6 weeks of paid family and medical leave and up to 6 additional weeks of unpaid family and medical leave to all of its employees – both men and women – upon the birth or adoption of a new baby or when a family member becomes ill and needs care. They recognize that to build a satisfied and loyal workforce, you have to support and value the people who work for you. Now it’s time for the state to do the same and make paid family leave a priority.

This example illustrates context by making paid family and medical leave a public issue, rather than the problem of one individual family. It presents the problem, offers solutions, and assigns responsibility.

Numbers

We see numbers everywhere – in our work, in the news, in our everyday life activities – and yet numbers alone do not tell a story. Research from the cognitive sciences tells us that numbers must be accompanied by narrative in order for them to be fully understood.

RESEARCH SUGGESTS⁷:

- Numbers alone often fail to create “pictures in our heads.”
- Most people cannot judge the size or meaning of numbers; they need cues.
- Once a frame is established, it will “trump” the numbers.

What, then, does this mean for people who use data regularly in their work? It means that we must think more strategically about how we use numbers, how we explain them and how we use them to support our frame. These strategies⁸ from FrameWorks help us use numbers more effectively:

1. Never provide numbers/data without telling what they mean.
2. Try to provide the interpretation first, then the data.

An excellent method for accomplishing this is “social math,” a way of associating numbers with comparisons of similar things that people can understand. This strategy was developed by experts at The Advocacy

⁷ Ibid.: 19.

⁸ Ibid.: 19-21 and Bales, S.N. (November 2003). .” “The Storytelling Power of Numbers.” *KIDS COUNT E-Zine*. Issue No. 25. Washington, DC: FrameWorks Institute.

<http://www.frameworksinstitute.org/products/issue8framing.shtml>. Retrieved November 21, 2005.

Institute and Berkeley Media Studies Group. Here's an example of social math from the international advocacy community:

"Two years ago in Nigeria, an AK-47 could be had in exchange for two cows. Now the price is down to one cow. And in Sudan, you can get an AK-47 for a chicken." (Marie Griesgraber, Oxfam America)⁹

3. Use numbers only when necessary. When you use dramatic numbers, you may have the inadvertent effect of making the problem seem unmanageable or scary.
4. Use numbers to demonstrate cost-effectiveness and to convey the cost of ignoring the problem.

Let's take a look at an example of using numbers effectively in a communication about infants and toddlers.

Using Social Math

"In the time it takes to watch an episode of *Law and Order SVU*, five infants are being removed from their homes for abuse or neglect or both. During the time you're getting ready to go to work, another five babies move into foster care. Everyday in the United States, 118 babies leave their homes because their parents cannot take care of them.¹⁰¹¹

As this example demonstrates, associating numbers with something people know and recognize can help describe the scope and size of the data being presented.

Messengers

The person who delivers your message – the messenger – is one of the most important elements in a frame. The messenger is the person who establishes why this is a problem about which people should care.¹² In fact, "messages can be reinforced or undermined by their attachment to a [particular messenger]."¹³ For example, FrameWorks' research on children's oral health found that when dentists were the messenger, they were perceived as speaking from a position of self-interest.¹⁴ Thus the choice of messenger interfered with the success of the frame.

⁹ Bales, S.N. (June 2004). *Framing Public Issues*. Washington, DC: 20.

¹⁰ Administration for Children & Families. (August 2005) *The AFCARS Report: Preliminary FY 2003 Estimates as of April 2005 (10) What were the ages of the children who entered care during FY 2003?*, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, http://www.acf.hhs.gov/programs/cb/stats_research/afcars/tar/report10.htm, retrieved January 23, 2006.

¹¹ Youcha, V., Hudson, L. and Rappaport, D. (April 3, 2006) "From Science to Public Policy: Court Teams for Maltreated Infants and Toddlers." *The Baby Monitor: ZERO TO THREE Policy and Advocacy News*. ZERO TO THREE Policy Center. Washington, DC.

¹² Bales (June 2004): 22.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Ibid.

You can strengthen your frame by carefully selecting messengers who will lend credibility and avoid perceived self-interest.

RESEARCH SUGGESTS¹⁵:

- The choice of messengers is as important as the message itself.
- The message is reinforced or undermined by the choice of messenger.
- Knowledge and trustworthiness are critical to public acceptance, not likeability or familiarity.
- Some messengers are not credible on certain issues because we assume they are biased toward a perspective.
- Unlikely allies can prompt public reconsideration of an issue or recommendation.
- Some messengers convey specific frames.

Infant-toddler professionals and researchers can improve their communications about early childhood development by broadening the scope of professionals they utilize as messengers. Strategies¹⁶ proposed by FrameWorks include:

1. Use messengers who can make the connection between the severity of the problem and the system that can address it. Be sure to use a messenger who can establish that the problem is public, not the problem of an individual or a particular family.
2. Test your messengers for public perceptions of their knowledge and trustworthiness.
3. Use unlikely allies.
4. Only use professional advocates and those closest to the issue in supporting roles, understanding the public's assumption that they are already vested in the issue.

Let's take a look at an example of using messengers effectively in a communication about infants and toddlers.

Judges as Messengers

Babies and toddlers are the most vulnerable to the effects of maltreatment, which can have life-long implications on all aspects of their development if not properly addressed. Yet the needs of infants and toddlers in the child welfare system are often overlooked. Social workers, early intervention specialists, court appointed special advocates and numerous other professionals are faced with the overwhelming issues that plague infants and

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Ibid.: 23.

toddlers in the child welfare system. But who can speak most effectively about these issues? ZERO TO THREE's experience with its Court Teams for Maltreated Infants and Toddlers project has found that judges are knowledgeable and trustworthy messengers for communications about infants and toddlers in the child welfare system. Judges provide a respected and authoritative voice and help define the issue as one that must be addressed within the public arena.

Conclusion

There are several strategic elements that contribute to the ways in which a communication is understood. By appreciating these elements and utilizing them in the most resourceful ways, you can improve your communications and advocacy in support of healthy early childhood development. Watch for our next framing article, which will examine visuals, metaphors and simplifying models, and tone.

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