FRAMING FAMILY, SCHOOL, AND COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT IN EARLY CHILDHOOD

A FrameWorks Brief

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Introduction

FrameWorks research has shown that building public understanding and support for effective family, school, and community engagement (hereafter engagement) is a very challenging framing task.[1] The task becomes even more complex when advocates focus on engagement in early childhood, and when they want to highlight the importance of engagement along the entire continuum of childhood, from birth to high school graduation. This report, generously supported by the Heising-Simons Foundation, offers framing guidance on communicating about family and school engagement in early childhood in ways that better position audiences to recognize its importance. This "preframing" of early childhood development is a requirement for advocates to set up a productive conversation about engagement from birth to age five.

When communicators answer key questions about children's early development—*when, how, where, who*, and *what*—they consistently focus on answers that impede public appreciation of the importance of engagement in early childhood. If the multifold character of early childhood development is understood, it generates a profoundly different orientation toward engagement during this period. and more specifically communicates how engagement can be fostered through *systems*, rather than just individual actions. Preframing is needed to promote the following series of shifts in how the public thinks about and understands early childhood development so that they can better appreciate the role of family, school, and engagement in that process:

- *When*: From the tendency to "age up" and focus on school-age children, to sustaining attention on the earliest years.
- *How*: From assuming development is a natural and automatic process, to understanding that positive early child development occurs through intentional planning, building and interaction.
- *Where*: From assuming that the only context of importance for children's early development is the home, to recognizing the many different kinds of places where development happens and adults who are active participants in the developmental process.
- *Who*: From parents alone, to a collective effort among various actors in families, schools, and communities.
- *What*: From very narrow thinking about the skills that develop in the earliest years, to a robust and nuanced understanding of the learning and skills development during this period.

When communicators provide new answers to these fundamental questions about early childhood development, they lay the cognitive foundation needed for people to recognize the importance of family, school, and engagement prior to K–12. The framing strategies and recommendations for implementing them outlined in this brief offer guidance for how to talk about early childhood development and learning in such a way as to prime audiences for more in-depth discussions about engagement. An additional benefit of these tested frames is their communicative power, both singularly and together. Advocates for engagement in early childhood can and should be strategic about which frames best suit their specific communications.

The framing strategies presented here should therefore be used together with strategies for talking about family, school, and engagement. These supplement two in-depth research reports by the FrameWorks Institute: one that explores in depth how experts, practitioners, policymakers, and members of the public think about engagement (*Beyond Caring: Mapping the Gaps between Expert, Public, Practitioner, and Policymaker Understandings of Family, School, and Community Engagement*, at **http://frameworksinstitute.org/assets/files/PDF/beyond-caring-nafsce-map-the-gaps-2018.pdf**); and a second that provides new communications recommendations for overcoming the challenges that advocates for engagement face every day (*From Caring to Conditions* at **www.frameworksinstitute.org**).

The section below hones in on the *when, how, where, who*, and *what* questions about early childhood engagement; discusses the challenges to communications about engagement in this period; and offers specific recommendations for how to address these questions using frames that FrameWorks previously created and are now widespread in the field of early childhood development. When developing their communication strategies, communicators should first assess which of the questions—and answers—below best match their communications needs.

When is early childhood?

Focus attention on the early years at the beginning of discussions about family, school and engagement.

What needs to be communicated:

Experts explain that interaction between families, communities, and learning settings should start very early and include infants, toddlers, and preschoolers. Family, school, and engagement in the earliest stages of life is just as important as in K–12 because it can lead to more positive developmental and learning outcomes. Furthermore, when engagement happens early, it is more likely to continue during K–12.

Why it's hard to communicate:

Communicating about engagement in early childhood is difficult because the categorical distinction between "childhood" and "early childhood" is not one many people are accustomed to making. When people think about early childhood, they tend to "age up" or focus on the needs, behaviors and activities of older children. This tendency represents an important communications challenge: it is difficult for people to understand messages about engagement in early childhood when they are not clear about what is meant by early childhood itself. Without framing cues, advocates will struggle to build the required focus on the earliest months and years of life as a critical time span when engagement can and should happen.

What reframing needs to accomplish:

Effectively framing family, school, and engagement in early childhood requires that communicators consistently and frequently remind people of the appropriate age range and developmental period.

What helps:

The framing fix here is simple but very powerful. Communicators should provide multiple cues and reminders of what they mean when they refer to the early childhood period. This can include naming the

age range, focusing on behaviors or activities that people recognize as pertaining to this developmental period, and including images that show what engagement looks like with very young children. Because people's tendency to age up, communicators should strive to signal and define early childhood throughout their messages.

Below are some phrases that communicators can use to train the public's attention on the appropriate age range:

> Early means 0–5! Family, school, and engagement can start very early in life.
>
> Infants, toddlers, and preschoolers benefit from family, school, and community engagement.
>
> Engagement between families, schools, and communities can start from birth!

How does development happen?

Use the *Brain Architecture* and *Serve and Return* explanatory metaphors to foster understanding of how engagement can facilitate that process.

What needs to be communicated:

Experts emphasize that engagement needs to be intentionally planned and implemented, including in the early years. This means that families and early learning programs should participate together in decision-making and goal-setting, sharing knowledge and information to foster healthy development and further children's education. Continuous and ongoing engagement ensures that caregivers and families have strong partnerships that bridge learning at home and in early learning environments.

Why it's hard to communicate:

This aspect of engagement—that it should be intentional and with all actors equally participating in the goal-setting process—is particularly difficult to communicate to non-experts. FrameWorks has found across a wide body of research[2] that people often say that children develop "automatically," following "natural" trajectories of physical growth and maturation. The process and mechanisms by which development happens are largely misunderstood and poorly articulated; they are, in the parlance of FrameWorks, "black-boxed."[3] As a result, people don't consider the importance of positive environments and experiences and stable, supportive, and responsive relationships. Instead, people assume that "normal" and "good" development happens on its own.[4] When people draw on this model, concepts like goal setting, intentional decision-making, and strong cross-setting partnerships that are the hallmarks of effective engagement, are very difficult to think about. If kids develop on their own, what is the point of planning?

What framing needs to accomplish:

Effectively framing family, school, and engagement requires that communicators deepen people's understanding about what occurs in this critical developmental period. When experts and advocates explain early childhood development in an accessible way, people will be better situated to understand what engagement in early childhood actually entails. More specifically, they will be able to more easily grasp the idea that engagement needs to be planned and strategically implemented.

What helps:

As part of its core story of early childhood development, FrameWorks has developed several strategies to translate the science of many aspects of that process. In particular, the metaphors *Brain Architecture* and *Serve and Return* explain that early brain development is intentional and interactional, both of which lend themselves to preframing engagement in early childhood.

Use *Brain Architecture* to explain brain development.

FrameWorks developed the *Brain Architecture* metaphor to communicate: (1) that brains are built over time; and (2) that there are critical periods of intense construction, particularly in the early years.[5] Construction metaphors are powerful because they communicate both process (how brains are built) and agency (construction is an active and ongoing process that allows for change and improvement). *Brain Architecture* conveys that experiences in early childhood affect the brain, establishing sturdy or fragile foundations for subsequent health, learning, growth, and behavior. These facets of the metaphor open space for people to understand how engagement might facilitate and deepen development. An example of this metaphor follows.

> The brain is built through a process that begins before birth and continues into adulthood. Just like constructing a building, building a brain takes a strong team of builders to lay the foundation, frame the rooms, and wire the electrical system. Opportunities very early in life for family, school, and engagement is one way we can make sure that young children have a work crew for their development.

Use *Serve and Return* to explain how brains are built.

While the *Brain Architecture* metaphor establishes that brains are built over time, the metaphor of *Serve and Return* helps people understand that relationships with supportive caregivers are a critical part of the brain-building process.

By describing how reciprocal interactions build the brain circuitry on which future learning and development are based, the metaphor helps to inoculate against default assumptions that children's development "simply happens." An example of this metaphor is below.

> Scientists now know that the interactive influences of genes and experience shape the developing brain. The active ingredient is the "serve and return" interactions between infants and very young children and their caregivers. Like the process of serve-and-return in games such as tennis and volleyball, young children naturally reach out for interaction through babbling and facial expressions. When parents, daycare providers, and preschool teachers engage, they can coordinate to make sure "serve and return" interactions occur early and often, and across all the settings children encounter.

Where does development happen?

Use *Charging Stations* to bring attention to other places where engagement can foster positive development and show how those places are not accessible to all.

What needs to be communicated:

Experts argue that there are *multiple* places where family, school, and engagement can and should happen in early childhood. Preschools and daycare centers are important sites where families and early learning environments can begin to engage. But experts also point to community sites—libraries, museums, community centers, among others—where engagement can be intentionally fostered and sustained.

Why this is difficult to communicate:

Communicating about the various places that engagement can and should happen in early childhood is difficult because people assume that the home is the only context of importance. This assumption obscures the environmental conditions, supports, and relationships outside the family that affect children's outcomes. When this mode of thinking becomes active, it undermines support for engagement because people have difficulty assigning responsibility for developmental outcomes to any adults outside of the family. This mode of thinking is particularly pernicious when people think about disparities in developmental outcomes, because it leads them to blame parents rather than consider structural inequities.

What framing needs to accomplish:

People need a broader understanding of the places where development happens in order for them to appreciate the importance of engagement in these spaces. A central goal of well-framed communications will be to expand people's understanding of the places beyond the home environment where early

childhood development takes place. Furthermore, advocates need to explain why those places are not accessible to all children or equitably distributed across communities.

What helps:

Another framing device, the *Charging Stations* metaphor, was originally designed as part of FrameWorks' "Core Story of Education" project. The metaphor allows communicators to point to both the informal and formal settings that foster development and early learning. Communicators can use the metaphor to highlight all of the places where family, school, and community engagement occur.

> Opportunities for family, school and engagement are like charging stations that power up infants, toddlers, and preschoolers' development and learning. We want to make sure that people in our community are a part of high wattage, densely networked charging systems that support early childhood development. That's why we need to build a network of connected charging stations that includes daycares, pre-kindergarten (pre-K), libraries, museums, science centers, and afterschool programs so that young children have lots of opportunities to charge up their development.

Charging stations not only bring attention to the places where early engagement can happen, this metaphor also explains how systemic exclusion from the sites of engagement can lead to disparities in learning and outcomes.[6]

> Our current charging station system for engagement for very young children is patchy—it's built in a way that provides fewer charging opportunities for some of our communities' children than for others. For example, some neighborhoods have many charging stations, such as libraries, community centers, and athletic fields, while other communities have few public spaces due to underfunding. We can rewire our charging system across our community so that all families, no matter who they are or where they are, will have high-quality opportunities to engage.

The *Charging Stations* metaphor enables people to connect differences in access to engagement to differences in developmental and learning outcomes. The metaphor trains attention on the idea that disparities are a problem of inequity—differences in access, opportunity, and resources.

The metaphor also helps people to see that collective solutions can address inequities in access to engagement opportunities. The idea of *patchy* charging stations suggests a system that is not functioning well, but also not beyond repair. This helps people see that policy changes are needed and possible. Strengthening or repairing charging stations frames the issue as a collective one because it becomes a matter of addressing a common infrastructure.

Who is a part of the developmental process?

Use the *Scaffolding* metaphor to emphasize the supports that teachers, caregivers, and program staff need to effectively engage with families.

What needs to be communicated:

Experts note that successful engagement in early childhood requires that daycare centers, preschools, and other kinds of early learning environments implement a comprehensive program-level system of family engagement. This entails institutionalizing family engagement policies and practices to ensure that teachers, administrators, and other staff receive the support they need to fully engage with families.

Why this is difficult to communicate:

Early learning environments are viewed by the public as having social and entertainment value but little *educational* value, which derails discussions about the full value of engagement. If social skills develop naturally—regardless of whether children attend preschool—then people won't understand the value of preschool and will be less likely to invest in policies and programs that support engagement between families, pre-schools, and communities. People *do* understand that kids start school at different developmental levels, but they believe that kids' "starting points" are determined either by their innate ability or by their home environment, which they see as shaped and constructed exclusively by parents.

What framing needs to accomplish:

Effective framing will position the early childhood workforce as professionals who are critical actors in the developmental process. It will make clear the types of supports that early childhood professionals need to have in order to engage effectively.

What helps:

The *Scaffolding* metaphor was designed to focus attention on the kinds of supports that teachers, both in learning environments and in K–12, need to do their jobs well. In this context, and in combination with the *Brain Architecture* metaphor, it opens space for communicators to clearly explain the kinds of institutional supports that the early childhood workforce needs to effectively engage with families.

> We can think about early engagement opportunities as a building block of brain development and our early childhood workforce is a critical component of this construction process. As brain builders, early educators need scaffolding in order to effectively and consistently engage with families, such as quality opportunities for professional development, and fair compensation. When we support our early childhood workforce, they can provide the types of experiences with children and families that are needed to build trust and promote learning.

What develops?

Explain what skills develop in early childhood using the *Weaving Skill Ropes* metaphor to increase appreciation for what effective engagement can accomplish.

What needs to be communicated:

Experts explains that engagement ultimately improves developmental and learning outcomes for young children. It does this by coordinating learning activities at home and in the community to enhance each child's early learning, and encourage and support families' efforts to create a learning environment beyond the program. Experts explain that effective engagement programs take a whole child approach and are focused on the development of social, emotional, as well as cognitive development.

Why this is difficult to communicate:

People have a limited understanding of what skills are developing during this developmental period. Along with very basic literacy and numeracy skills (ABCs and 123s), people assume that a key part of development is learning "right from wrong" and aligning behavior with this understanding. This model involves the thinking that "doing well" in childhood is related to compliance with adult expectations, indicated by a young child's ability to listen to adults, follow their directions, and avoid actions that adults would consider misbehavior. Similar to the lack of understanding of the process of development, people's limited understanding of the skills that develop during this period impede understanding of this key component of engagement. People are likely to dismiss the idea that teaching young children "basic" skills requires planning and goal setting, robust interaction between families, and both formal and informal learning environments.

In addition, members of the public tend to view learning as highly compartmentalized. Families, according to this logic, are responsible for teaching children manners, morals and responsibility; schools are in charge of academic learning; and communities are where children develop social skills. This separation of skills acquisition into distinct locations obstructs thinking about the ways in which families, schools, and communities can coordinate to promote learning and healthy development.

What reframing needs to accomplish:

Effective framing will not only emphasize that skills are rapidly developing in early childhood, but also show how interaction and experiences affect that development. In order for non-experts to appreciate how engagement shapes the developmental process through intentional interaction, people need a deeper appreciation of what develops in early childhood and how development happens.

What helps:

The *Weaving Skills Ropes* metaphor explains how kids develop skills and the mutual importance of cognitive, social, and emotional skills.[7] It defines skills acquisition as an active process that occurs in a developmental context in which positive interactions and experiences with others are key, which counters the public's belief that skills acquisition is a passive process. This brings the importance of coordination between families, schools, and communities into view, and helps move thinking past compartmentalized learning. An example of the metaphor follows.

> Learning skills is like weaving a rope: No single strand does all the work. To develop a strong rope, each strand must be strong and woven tightly with others. The development of social, emotional, and cognitive skills begins in early childhood and is a similar process. Our brains weave these skills together into 'ropes,' which are then used to develop and strengthen other skills, like solving problems, collaborating, forming and expressing ideas, and learning from mistakes. Children need a lot of opportunities to weave strong skills ropes through interactions and experiences with the people around them. When families, schools, and communities partner together they can reinforce these interactions and experiences to support skill-building in early childhood.

Conclusion

Communicators dedicated to raising support for family, school, and engagement in early childhood face a steeper slope than advocates for engagement in K–12. However, this challenge can be addressed by a taking the extra step of "preframing" early childhood development and learning before implementing the Conditions for Engagement master frame. This brief outlines the necessary shifts in public thinking about early childhood development that need to take place so that people can better understand, appreciate, and support programs and policies that promote engagement during this period. Early childhood needs a kind of "prequel" framing.

Although this brief offers a number of framing strategies for early childhood development, communicators should be strategic about which individual frames are the most appropriate for specific messages. They should first assess where the cognitive holes about early childhood development are most problematic, and then employ the "preframe" best suited to filling in that gap in understanding. For example, if the public's focus on the home as the only site for early learning is impeding effective communication, *Charging Stations* can open up thinking about engagement.

It is important that everyone in this field who focuses on engagement in early childhood be "on the same page" when they pivot to talk about engagement in later childhood and adolescence. It offers many more opportunities to change public discourse about engagement. And while this prequel increases the effectiveness of the wider communications strategy around engagement, it also reinforces public understanding of early childhood development and learning more generally. This will bring together two interrelated but sometimes disconnected fields around a shared—and effective— messaging strategy.

Endnotes

1. Volmert, Andrew, O'Neil, Moira, Gerstein Pineau, Marisa, and Levay, Kevin (2019). *Strategies to effectively frame family, school and community engagement.* Washington, DC: FrameWorks Institute.
2. See: www.frameworksinstitute.org/public-safetycriminal-justice.html
3. See Aubrun, A., and Grady, J. (2003). *Simplifying early childhood development: Findings from cognitive analysis and phone interviews.* Washington, DC: FrameWorks Institute.
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