

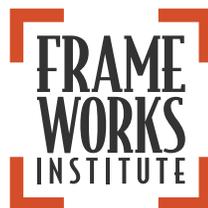
MOVING EARLY CHILDHOOD UP THE AGENDA

**A Core Story of Early Childhood
Development in Australia**

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Introduction

By Nathaniel Kendall-Taylor, PhD, CEO

Over the past 10 years, the early childhood sector in Australia has made major advances in explaining the science of development. Australians have come to associate early childhood with the brain and recognise the early years as a critical time of learning. By using effective frames to explain the science of development, the sector has succeeded in building understanding of how development works.

Despite these advances, Australians still don't see the full importance of early childhood or how the country can do a better job of supporting it. People continue to believe that child development is a 'natural' process that should not be distorted by science, medicine and modernity. And Australians still see a limited role for society and government in providing children with the supportive experiences that we know promote positive development. Australians may nod their heads at the idea that "it takes a village", but when pressed, most don't see what needs to be done to more fully support children. Most fall back on the idea that Australia is already doing so much for its children and families that there isn't much more that can – or should – be done.

As a result of these ways of thinking, early childhood advocates remain short of their goals. The bottom line is that supporting children is not seen as a priority social issue. And there is not widespread support for the policies and investments necessary to assure that all children in Australia have the opportunity to meet their potential and thrive.

So, what can we do?

It's time for a new framing strategy capable of moving the issue up the agenda. It is time to create will for policy change and greater public investment. And because of the sector's good work in explaining how development works, the moment is ripe for this frame shift.

The sector must continue their work of explaining the science, but they must take the next step to make early childhood matter to people and drum up demand for change. The strategy discussed here is a way for the field to take this next step.

We wrote this Strategic Brief for everyone communicating about early development in Australia. The strategies we lay out here can be used to build deep and sustained support for policies that will improve the wellbeing of all of Australia's children.

In this brief, we outline a new Core Story of Early Childhood Development built around the concepts of "Health and Fairness." It is based on an in-depth exploration of a series of frames highlighting different aspects of these concepts.

The central argument is that supporting early development builds health and creates fairness for Australia's children now and in the future. The greater the number of people who use this new communications approach, the better our chances will be to move early childhood up the agenda.

We recognise that people in the field also need ways of communicating about specific issues – from child mental health to play. To meet this need, we have developed strategies that can be added to the Core Story to create issue-specific messages. At the end of the brief, we link to guides that summarise tailored strategies for communicating about play, child mental health, prenatal development, and parenting. These guides can help communicators tell these additional parts of the story effectively.

How to Frame Early Childhood Development: A New Core Story with Issue-Specific Chapters

FROM SCIENCE EXPLANATION TO HEALTH AND FAIRNESS

Over the past decade, the sector has coalesced around a *Science Explanation* narrative. It has been highly effective in building public understanding of how development works. The sector's work in scientific explanation has created the conditions in which it is possible to move the issue up the social and policy agenda.

But to take the next step and move early childhood up the agenda, a new narrative is needed. The sector must now tell a broader story and make a new case that centres on making early childhood a policy priority. This new, broader strategy centres on the ideas of *Health and Fairness*.

Making this shift in framing doesn't mean we should stop explaining the science of development. But it does mean that this explanation needs to sit inside a broader story that people across the children's sector share and tell. In the new strategy, explaining the science of development becomes a part of the story rather than the whole.

The *Health and Fairness* strategy makes a straightforward case for why early childhood must be a policy priority:

We need to make sure that all children have a fair chance for a healthy life, no matter where they live. To do this, we need to support every child's development and every community according to what they need to thrive.

Framing early childhood as a health issue boosts the perception of its importance, for children’s present and future. Appealing to fairness taps into a shared Australian value that enables people to hold in mind simultaneously the universal importance of childhood and the reality that children in some places lack the opportunity to be healthy, and that those places need specific support.

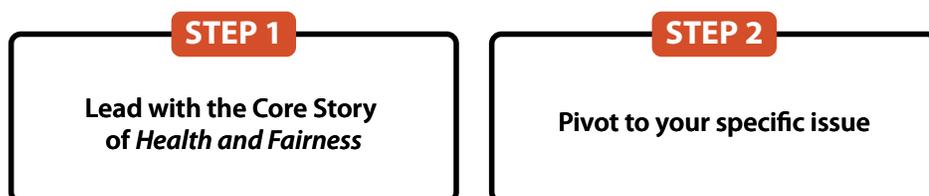
In the next section, we offer a set of specific recommendations for communicators that highlight the key dimensions of the *Health and Fairness* narrative. These recommendations, taken together, offer a roadmap for effectively telling this new Core Story.

The *Health and Fairness* approach is the central case that all early childhood advocates should be making, regardless of the specific issues they focus on. Building public support for prioritising early childhood as a policy issue requires the whole sector to pivot to this new story. Repetition is critical. Shifting public thinking requires that people hear this same story repeatedly over time and from many sources.

ADDING CHAPTERS TO THE STORY

When advocates want to communicate about a specific issue, they can add it to the story. The additional briefs we’ve created for **child mental health**, **play**, and **prenatal development** provide recommendations on how advocates can get more specific about their particular issues. But communicators should always start with the new Core Story *before* turning to these more specific messaging strategies.

Figure 1: How to communicate about specific issues within early childhood development



To shift the public conversation on early childhood, the whole sector needs to turn up the volume on the new Core Story and make sure that it gets stuck on repeat.

At the end of the brief, we link to guides that outline tailored framing strategies that can help advocates effectively communicate about:

- Prenatal development
- Play
- Child mental health
- Parenting

The Core Story of Early Childhood Development in Australia: Health and Fairness

Each of the following recommendations includes one or two illustrative examples of how it can be used. The toolkit¹ that complements this Strategic Brief and its secondary chapters on **child mental health, play, and prenatal development** will provide a more comprehensive look at how to use and apply the recommendations for specific audiences and contexts.

RECOMMENDATION #1. MAKE EARLY DEVELOPMENT AND LEARNING ABOUT IMPROVING CHILDREN'S HEALTH AND WELLBEING.

What to do

By connecting early childhood development and learning to children's health, we expand people's thinking about the issue. Making early childhood development a health issue moves it up people's list of priorities and inspires more and deeper support for solutions.

How to do it

BEFORE

"Early childhood is a crucial time for learning. What happens early on in a child's life shapes the developing brain and influences how well children do throughout their lives."

AFTER

“To support children’s health and wellbeing, we need to start in the first months and years of life. Supporting babies and toddlers as they develop and learn paves the way for good health and wellbeing throughout life.”

FOCUS ON

- The **potential to improve children’s health**. Talk about how supporting development early creates positive effects on health and wellbeing. The focus on building positive health (rather than just preventing ill health) is important.
- **Explain** that learning and skills building are actually health issues. Emotional control, social skills and language abilities are critical to academic learning and success, but they are also cornerstones of lifelong health. These are the skills that we use to build relationships, manage adversity and lead a healthy life. Supporting the development of these skills makes chronic diseases like diabetes or depression less likely later in life.
- When setting the health frame, talk about **both physical and mental health**, to reinforce the sense that health is holistic.

AVOID

- Focusing exclusively on preventing poor health. This leads people to think about health in purely medical terms and restricts the power of the health frame to elevate early childhood development.
- Using language that is too scientific or medical. Avoid triggering thinking about how science and the medical profession are ruining childhood and thus should be kept out of the conversation, or questions about how legitimate “experts” really are.

Why it works

People recognise that early childhood is an important period in a child’s life. But they don’t see childhood as a social issue or think that more can be done beyond educating parents to take their responsibilities more seriously.

From a scientific perspective, the relationship between health and learning is mutually beneficial: health supports learning and development as much as learning and development support health. But from a framing perspective,

we have found that leading with one side of this relationship and showing how learning and development support good health and wellbeing is the most effective strategy. When we talk about early development and learning as ways to support and improve children’s health, we help people see early development in a new light and at a new level. Thanks to the sector’s work, it has become easier for people to connect the dots between early development, learning and the brain. We can expand this thinking by making it clear that early childhood development is an issue not only of learning but also of health and wellbeing.

People recognise health as an important issue that needs to be at the top of the country’s political and social agenda. Connecting development and learning to health increases people’s sense of the importance of early childhood and allows them to see it as a social issue. Because health is perceived as a broader goal than learning, it expands the number and types of solutions that people value and support. It helps Australians see that more can and must be done to ensure that all children thrive in Australia.

RECOMMENDATION #2. TALK ABOUT EFFECTS ON HEALTH AND WELLBEING IN THE PRESENT AND THE FUTURE.

What to do

Stress that supporting early childhood development leads to good health and wellbeing *now and in the future*. This connects the immediacy and concreteness of short-term effects with the gravity of the long term. This is a winning combination that boosts support for policy change and the sense that the Australian government can and should act on the issue.

How to do it

BEFORE

“Early childhood development has major long-term social impacts. Experiences in the early years have knock-on effects for years to come and can determine lifelong learning, health, relationships and wellbeing. What happens early in life is important because it influences what happens later.”

AFTER

“Our children’s health and wellbeing matters – both now and into the future. When we support children’s early development and learning, we help build their brains and bodies, creating health and wellbeing now and setting them up for positive health in the future.”

FOCUS ON

- Always framing early development in terms of **both immediate and long-term** health and wellbeing. Make it clear that supporting early development is a “now and later” issue.

AVOID

- Turning this into a future finances argument by focusing on long-term savings in health care costs.

Why it works

Human beings tend to prefer smaller, immediate rewards to more significant future ones.² This affects how we make decisions and the policies we are likely to support. Highlighting the immediate benefits of supporting early development gets around our tendency to undervalue future benefits.

By keeping the future in our messages, we maintain the ability to highlight the true social benefits of supporting early development and the repercussions of not supporting children and families.

We keep children at the centre of our messages when we emphasise that supporting early development leads to good health now and in the future. And we avoid giving the impression that children are a means to abstract ends that people don't connect them with, like population health or economic growth.

By leading with immediate benefits, we also leverage people's generosity and willingness to act for children – sentiments that people don't typically apply to adults in the same way.

RECOMMENDATION #3. DEFINE THE PROBLEM: LACK OF SUPPORT IS LEADING TO POOR HEALTH FOR SOME CHILDREN.

What to do

Highlight that some children do not have what they need to develop well and that this is leading to disparities in children's health. This dimension of the framing strategy raises the profile of early childhood development as an issue that warrants public attention and drives support for policy change.

How to do it

BEFORE

“The early years are one of the most important times of life for all of us. When a child experiences adversity, it disrupts their development and can have negative effects for years to come. This is why we need to do more to support early development and learning for all children in Australia.”

AFTER

“Good health and wellbeing are built from positive early development. But not all of Australia’s children and families are getting the support they need to ensure positive development. This is why, when we look across the country, we see such major differences in the health of Australians.”

FOCUS ON

- **Connecting the dots between health, early development and learning, and disparities.** Lead with the idea that “positive health and wellbeing depend on healthy early development and learning”. Then say that some children do not have what they need to develop well and explain that this has effects on their health and wellbeing.

AVOID

- Just talking about “all children”. This robs the message of its urgency and reinforces people’s assumption that “Australia’s already doing enough.”

Why it works

By stating that some children in the country don’t have good health and connecting these differences to uneven support, we help people recognise that there *is* a problem that needs to be solved. This:

- Overrides people’s assumption that Australia is already doing enough to support children and families and that there isn’t much else that can or should be done.
- Overcomes the idea that positive early development just naturally happens and makes it clear that positive development requires support.

Highlighting disparities in the support children receive and, in turn, their health, activates Australians' strong sense of fairness and justice when it comes to children. Appealing to health disparities and connecting them to differences in how we support children activates a moral response and motivates people to support solutions.

RECOMMENDATION #4. FRAME THE CALL TO ACTION WITH AN EXPLICIT APPEAL TO FAIRNESS: WE NEED TO ENSURE THAT CHILDREN CAN THRIVE, NO MATTER WHERE THEY LIVE.

What to do

Appeal to the public's strong sense that society should be fair and equal – especially when it comes to children. In making a case for action, the appeal to fairness should be explicit. This establishes why the issue of early childhood development matters, and why people should care about it and engage to help. It moves people to action and boosts support for change.

How to do it

BEFORE

“Disparities in early development and children's outcomes are not simply the result of children's – or parents' – efforts. There are significant differences in opportunities between groups of Australians. These differences play a critical role in the country's current inequality.”

AFTER

“To treat all of Australia's children fairly, we need to make sure that every neighbourhood in the country has what kids need to thrive and be healthy, like high-quality child care, chances for children to develop relationships with supportive adults, and safe places to play and learn.”

FOCUS ON

- The **characteristics of places, not people or groups**. If the focus stays on individuals or groups, people will focus on what they believe parents or individuals are doing wrong or will rely on stereotypes of groups and their behaviours. This is particularly likely to be the case with messaging about Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, because of strong and persistent negative stereotypes about these groups. Instead of focusing on individuals and groups, emphasise the opportunities that all children need, but which children in particular areas don't have, like safe playgrounds, affordable child care, trained educators and medical staff.
- **Explaining how proposed solutions help create fairness across places** in the country. If solutions appear to be "smaller" than the problem, or not clearly connected to it (e.g. offering an app to connect to existing child health services versus training medical staff to provide trauma-informed care), people will likely dismiss them as inadequate and see the issue of inequality as too big to solve.

Why it works

By appealing to fairness, we tap into a widely shared Australian value. People know that things like quality child care are unaffordable for families on low incomes. They agree that this is not fair or right. They can see that children's opportunities to thrive are unequally distributed across the country and that this shouldn't be the case.

A focus on fairness across places gets people thinking about differences in contexts and circumstances – and how these differences affect children. It does this without triggering blame, negative stereotypes, or "us vs. them" thinking.

The value of fairness is a powerful antidote to people thinking that this is "not my problem" or that the problem exists "over there" in some group that I am not part of. The idea that children in all parts of Australia should have what they need to develop positively and be healthy resonates strongly and increases willingness to act and support solutions, even if this means accepting costs like higher taxes.

RECOMMENDATION #5. TALK ABOUT SUPPORTING EVERY CHILD AND COMMUNITY ACCORDING TO THEIR NEEDS.

What to do

Emphasise the need to help everyone according to their needs and the needs of their communities. This builds support for targeted solutions without stigmatising communities.

How to do it

BEFORE

“We have a lot to do to tackle entrenched disadvantage in Australia. We need to start in the early years and create opportunities for the most vulnerable children by working in the most disadvantaged and at-risk communities.”

AFTER

“Children can thrive and be healthy when they have what they need to develop well. But not every family has these resources. This is why we need to support every child, family and community according to their needs. This will create a healthier, fairer Australia for all children.”

FOCUS ON

- Talking about the needs of children and their families, and the **needs of their communities**. This helps people think about resources and responsibilities beyond the family unit.
- **Defining what is meant by “needs”** (e.g. access to behavioural health services, housing supports, family counselling). This helps people see what kinds of supports are needed and why they are important. Without these specific examples, the idea of needs stays fuzzy and vague and people’s support languishes.
- **Using “we” language and talk about “our communities”** to emphasise that supporting children’s healthy development is important for all of us, not just for “those” people.
- If you are arguing for targeted solutions, **don’t stop at the need to help specific communities**. Explain that solutions targeting particular areas and families make *society* fairer. This prevents people from thinking that targeted solutions divert resources from, and are unfair to, middle-class communities and families.

AVOID

- Making your message *only* about “helping everyone”. The public is likely to perceive universal calls as too vague or too overwhelming to be realistic. Balance the call to help everyone with the idea that people have specific needs and challenges.

- Using terms like “disadvantaged” or “vulnerable” to talk about communities targeted by specific policies. These terms are powerful cues for “otherising”, which saps support for issues and policy solutions by making them seem like “their” issues rather than “our” issues. These terms are also dangerous because of their power in cueing and reinforcing negative stereotypes of certain groups. Instead, talk about how we all have common needs but that communities differ in the resources they have to meet these needs. This helps keep “us vs. them” thinking at bay.

Why it works

By arguing for support for *every* child and community *according to their needs*, we avoid “othering” communities that are “not like me”.

- Talking about the need to help “every” child, family and community wards off debates over who deserves what and the reaction that more for “them” means less for “me” – a response that surfaces when messages focus *only* on helping specific communities.
- The universal dimension of the message (“help *every* child, family and community”) also avoids activating the assumption that differences in outcomes are the result of “those” people’s or communities’ supposed lack of morals or poor decisions and habits.
- Talking about the need to help children, families and communities “*according to their needs*” prevents people from being fatalistic about the possibility of effecting change. Relying on a purely universal message can be perceived as too unrealistic (how can we do everything for everyone) and even unfair (people who need less get as much as people who need more).
- Talking about the needs of communities in addition to the needs of children and families gets people to think beyond the level of individuals. It places the spotlight on how resources and structures (e.g. playgrounds, libraries, daycare centres and schools) can support positive development and health. It helps people see that community needs can be “mapped” and addressed at a systemic level.

How to connect the early years with Australia's future prosperity

What to do

Connecting the early years with "future prosperity" can help people understand why early childhood development matters and why we should take action to support it.³ The "future prosperity" frame might also be needed by advocates pitching to government officials, for instance. But this strategy needs to be about "prosperity" in a broad sense, rather than focus only on economic success and cost-efficiency.

How to do it

BEFORE

"Investing in the early years brings a significant return on investment. Every dollar spent on the first years of life returns two dollars in higher achievement, better skills and more employability. Money spent on early childhood services has one of the highest returns on investment of any social service program."

AFTER

"When we support children's development in the early years, we increase their health and wellbeing, and the success of their communities both now and in the future. If we want healthy, vibrant and prosperous communities, we need to focus on the earliest years of life and support our young children now."

FOCUS ON

- Helping people think about **"prosperity" in a broad sense** by mentioning ideas like social wellbeing, creativity and healthy and vibrant communities.
- Emphasising that prosperity is something collective, not individual. The goal is a prosperous society rather than financially successful individuals.

AVOID

- Strong economic language. Avoid terms like "return on investment", "cost-efficient" or "economic prosperity".

Why do this?

Making early childhood development and learning only about the economy and money violates people's views about children and childhood. People see childhood as a time that is inherently important and wondrous. Purely economic arguments are often perceived as too utilitarian and too remote from the ideas of love and care that people associate with children and parenting. Economic arguments frequently result in pushback in the form of the popular wisdom that we should just "let children be children".

Plus, framing early development in terms of future economic benefits doesn't leave room to talk about the immediate benefits that we have found to be a powerful part of an effective strategy to communicate about this issue.

Putting It All Together

Here is one example of what the full Core Story of *Health and Fairness* can look like in practice:

“Positive development and learning in the early years pave the way for children’s good health and wellbeing, now and throughout their lives. But not all families have what they need to support children’s development and learning in this way. This is why we see such major differences in the health of Australians across the country.

“To treat all of Australia’s children fairly, we need to make sure that every family and community in the country has what kids need to thrive and be healthy, like high-quality child care, chances for children to develop relationships with supportive adults, and safe places to play and learn. Supporting everyone according to their needs will create a healthier, fairer Australia for all children.”

In the secondary chapters focused on **play**, **child mental health**, and **prenatal development** we provide shorter, more pointed versions of the Core Story that can be used before pivoting to these specific issues

Adding Your Chapter to the Core Story

The early childhood sector in Australia is broad and brings together many more specific sub-issues – from child protection to child care and early literacy to infant mental health. But for the new Core Story to move culture, the sector must work together to mobilise and use these recommendations to advocate for the importance of early childhood.

The good news is that there are narrative strategies that allow all children’s advocates to advance the common story while also making the case for their particular issue. When communicators want to focus on a particular issue, we recommend that they **start with a distilled version of the *Health and Fairness* Core Story narrative and then pivot to their particular area of focus.** The key is for all advocates to frame their specific issue as a means to advance early development and good health and wellbeing, which will create a fairer Australia for kids to grow up in.

Framing specific issues in this way increases the sense of their importance and their people’s willingness to support policies and programs in these specific areas. This approach also provides a seamless way for communicators to get *from* the Core Story *to* their more specific issue.

We have developed framing guides that offer specific, evidence-based sets of recommendations on four specific issues.

- **Play recommendations**
- **Child Mental Health recommendations**
- **Prenatal Development recommendations**
- **Parenting recommendations**

For more information on our research methods and the evidence behind our recommendations, visit [FrameWorks’ website](#).

It’s important to conclude by stressing again that the primary recommendation that emerges from our research is the need for as many members of the sector as possible to make the Core Story of *Health and Fairness* a central part of their communications and to influence those outside of the sector to also take up this strategy. That’s the only way to shift the public conversation around early childhood development and move it up the agenda.

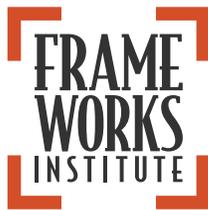
Endnotes

1. Expected release date: June 2020.
2. On what behavioural science calls “hyperbolic discounting”, see for instance www.behaviorlab.org/Papers/Hyperbolic.pdf
3. See Bales, S.N. & Kendall-Taylor, N. (2014). *Finding the Southern Cross: A FrameWorks MessageMemo for the Centre for Community Child Health*. Washington, DC: FrameWorks Institute.

ABOUT FRAMEWORKS

The FrameWorks Institute is a nonprofit think tank that advances the mission-driven sector's capacity to frame the public discourse about social and scientific issues. The organisation's signature approach, Strategic Frame Analysis[®], offers empirical guidance on what to say, how to say it, and what to leave unsaid. FrameWorks designs, conducts and publishes multi-method, multi-disciplinary framing research to prepare experts and advocates to expand their constituencies, to build public will and to further public understanding. To make sure this research drives social change, FrameWorks supports partners in reframing, through strategic consultation, campaign design, FrameChecks[®], toolkits, online courses, and in-depth learning engagements known as FrameLabs. In 2015, FrameWorks was named one of nine organisations worldwide to receive the MacArthur Award for Creative and Effective Institutions.

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