

ADDING PLAY TO THE CORE STORY OF EARLY DEVELOPMENT

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Recommendations

This brief works alongside *Moving Early Childhood Up the Agenda*, which lays out a Core Story of Early Childhood Development in Australia.

Making early childhood a priority policy issue means bringing all aspects of early childhood into the Core Story. This brief explains how to talk about **play** as a part of the overall story.

RECOMMENDATION #1. LEAD WITH A BRIEF VERSION OF THE CORE STORY OF HEALTH AND FAIRNESS.

What to do

Begin your communications with the Core Story of *Health and Fairness* – the common frame that all parts of the early childhood sector can use to shift the conversation around early childhood in Australia. You can tell this Core Story quickly before pivoting to play by doing the following:

- Show how supporting early childhood development and learning supports children’s health and wellbeing now and in the future.
- Define the problem – some children don’t have what they need to develop well – and appeal to the value of fairness.

Leading with the Core Story helps shift the broader public conversation around early childhood while making it possible to position play as vital to development.

Here’s an example of a brief statement of the Core Story that could be used to start off communications about play:

“When children have what they need to develop well in the early years, they can thrive and be healthy now and throughout their lives. But not every family has what they need for positive development. To create a healthier, fairer Australia for all children, we need to support every child, family and community according to their needs.”

RECOMMENDATION #2. PIVOT TO PLAY: MAKE IT CLEAR THAT SUPPORTING PLAY SUPPORTS EARLY DEVELOPMENT.

What to do

Show that play supports children's early development, instead of presenting it as an end in itself (see box on **page 03**). This helps people see why play matters and makes them more likely to value and prioritise play.

Show how play *works* by focusing on the skills play builds and explaining why these skills matter for healthy development.

BEFORE

“Play is really important for young children – especially active play. As we’ve all got busier, we’ve forgotten the basics of play. We need the highest levels of government to recognise the need to restore play-based learning. Play really does matter.”

AFTER

“Play is one of the vital ingredients for young children’s development. When babies, toddlers and pre-schoolers play, they develop skills, like the ability to manage emotions and social situations. To drive healthy development now and in the future, we need to provide opportunities to play everywhere in Australia.”

Why it works

When we explain how play supports healthy development, we give the issue gravitas. We position play as part of the Core Story and prevent people from assuming that play is natural and nice – something that children will ‘just do’ whatever the circumstances. It makes it clear that play is a crucial part of development.

This increases support for collective policies and actions, and helps people see why play matters. It makes people willing to bear higher costs to support play.

By focusing on the skills that are being developed through play, we deepen understanding of how play supports development.

Why talking about play as an end in itself backfires

People see play as a way to build skills and learn in the early years. But they also believe that play is natural and that we should just let it happen. They think that parents are solely responsible for children's opportunities to play and that the main threats to play are technology and overprotective parenting. Messages that only focus on the intrinsic value of play rely on all of these existing ideas about play. They don't do anything to keep unhelpful ideas in the background or to make people's productive knowledge about play more salient in their minds. On the contrary, these messages can end up reinforcing unproductive understandings of play.

This is what happens when we talk about **play as a human right**, for instance. Because people think that human rights are primarily a political issue, this message puts government action front and centre in their minds. It explicitly violates people's existing understandings of play as something natural for children to engage in.¹ As a result, they push back and reason that government should simply not attempt to legislate and control such a natural activity. When confronted with a rights argument, people say the real problem is how much time children spend in front of screens instead of playing outside and that there isn't much government can do about that. They reason that the only people responsible for providing children with opportunities to play are their parents and that throwing government money at the problem will not help. They then conclude that there are more pressing needs in Australia for government action and funding.

RECOMMENDATION #3. EXPLAIN THAT SOME CHILDREN DON'T HAVE ACCESS TO THE PLAY OPPORTUNITIES THEY NEED TO THRIVE.

What to do

Explain that one of the key reasons why some children currently don't have what they need to develop well is unequal access to play opportunities in the early years. This helps people connect inequalities in play opportunities to broader inequalities in children's development. It also helps them see that intentional support is required to address this problem.

BEFORE

“Play is a vital part of every childhood. It is part of what it means to be a kid. But many children aren’t receiving the stimulation from play that is required for learning and development. We need to ensure that all young children have chances to play every day.”

AFTER

“Having regular chances to play helps kids thrive now and sets them up to develop positively into the future. But not all kids get opportunities to play. And when they don’t, their health and wellbeing suffer. We need to make sure that all children in Australia have the chance to play in order to fuel healthy development.”

Why it works

When we show that unequal access to play leads to unequal development, we encourage thinking about play as an important issue of fairness and resources. We:

- Help people see that the resources available to families and communities shape children’s opportunities to play.
- Increase understanding of the collective solutions needed to better support play (e.g. play centres, child care centres, preschools).

RECOMMENDATION #4. SHOW HOW CONCRETE SOLUTIONS SOLVE THE PROBLEM OF LACK OF FAIR ACCESS TO PLAY.

What to do

Connect the dots between the problem, concrete solutions and improved outcomes for children. Show how programs to support play provide the opportunities that all children need and lead to more positive development and health.

This can be done through brief examples that explain how this works for a child or group of children. Examples should follow these steps:

1. The problem: insufficient play opportunities affect development
2. A specific solution: a new program or support
3. The result: improvement in children’s development.

BEFORE

“All children have the right to play and we need to make sure this right is realised across Australia. We must improve play-based learning schemes, train practitioners and introduce new centres and facilities across Australia. Children benefit from different forms of play and we need more investment in facilitating opportunities for all children.”

AFTER

“Play builds children’s brains and bodies. In towns like XXX, not enough kids had the opportunity to play and this was affecting their development. XXX created five play centres and trained local teams to build kids’ confidence, skills and wellbeing through play. This scheme has had a major impact on XXX’s kids’ ability to learn and grow.”

Why it works

Even when people see that play is important, they struggle to imagine what could be done to support it. By connecting the problem of unequal access to play with concrete solutions, we help people understand what can be done. We build support for better play programs and policies. We redirect public thinking away from the idea that parents are solely responsible for ensuring that their children can play (or for taking them away from screens and tablets), or that we should just let children be children and get out of the way.

RECOMMENDATION #5. WHEN TALKING ABOUT DIFFERENT TYPES OF PLAY, USE CONCRETE, EVERYDAY LANGUAGE.

What to do

Be as concrete as possible in describing different types of play and emphasise exploration and experimentation. Avoid relying on abstract, technical taxonomies. This makes play more tangible and prevents misinterpretations of what play is and how it works.

BEFORE

Terms like: “Structured or guided play”, “free or unstructured play”, “imaginative play”

AFTER

“Phrases like ‘re-enacting experiences with dolls or stuffed animals,’ ‘role-playing with other children,’ ‘exploring new words in stories and with toys,’ ‘experimenting with puzzles or shape-sorting toys,’ ‘chasing each other around the playground,’ ‘playing catch with friends and grown-ups,’ ‘drawing or painting.’”

Why it works

People see that play is important for learning and development.² But it remains a broad and abstract concept that can be hard to understand, especially when it is talked about using expert language.

People interpret terms like “free play,” “imaginative play,” and “structured play” based on their top-of-mind understandings of play and childhood. They think that “free play” happens naturally and does not meaningfully influence development; that “imaginative play” is just child-led fun; and that “structured play” is academic learning and not fun at all.

By being specific about what play looks like in early childhood, we help people better understand why it matters and how it works. By emphasizing the role of exploration and experimentation, we activate the public’s most helpful views of play.

RECOMMENDATION #6. SHOW THAT ADULTS CAN BE ACTIVE PARTICIPANTS IN PLAY.

What to do

Use examples, stories and pictures that show what it looks like for adults such as caregivers and nursery staff to have an active role in play. Make it clear that adult involvement does not mean forcing children to become passive learners. Help people understand that “child-led” play does not mean “no adults allowed”.

Show that children develop and learn better when adults in their lives:

- Set the scene for play with specific goals in mind.
- Gently guide play and exploration (for example, by asking questions, weaving in definitions and ideas, and connecting play with prior experiences).

BEFORE

“When we let them, children naturally gravitate to opportunities to explore and learn through play. When they have plenty of child-led playtime, they soak up and learn from everything they experience. Letting children play with other kids or leaving them to become engrossed in their own worlds helps them to learn important new skills.”

AFTER

“Children thrive when they have opportunities to play in lots of different ways – and they need grown-ups to help with this. We help children learn and grow when we set the scene for great play by suggesting ideas or helping kids to act on their own plans. We boost kids’ confidence and learning when we ask questions and play a role in their imaginative games.”

Why it works

People know that adults can take part in play, but their role is seen as peripheral – limited to providing the child with opportunities to play. People assume that after that, adults should get out of the way and simply make sure that children are safe from harm.

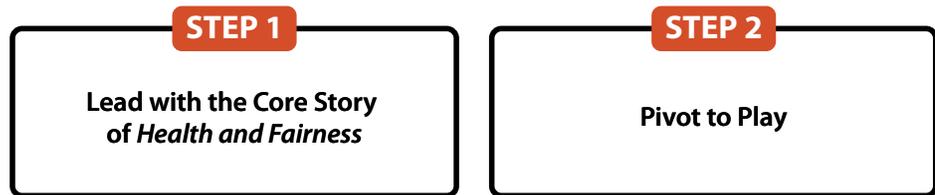
By showing how adults actively support play without taking away the fun, we unlock the public’s imagination and inspire support for play for all children in Australia.

Putting It All Together

This brief provides recommendations on how advocates can effectively communicate about play in the early years. This begins with raising the salience of early childhood as a whole – and that means starting with the Core Story of *Health and Fairness*. It is critical that, along with other parts of the early childhood sector, those focused on play turn up the volume on the Core Story and make sure that it gets stuck on repeat.

For this reason, we recommend that communicators always start with the Core Story and then turn to the specific strategies outlined above for messaging about play.

Figure 1: How to communicate about play within the Core Story of *Health and Fairness*



Here is one example of how to pivot from the Core Story of *Health and Fairness* to play:

“When children have what they need to develop well in the early years, they can thrive and be healthy now and throughout their lives. But right now, some children don’t get the support they need, and it affects how healthy they can be now and in the future.

“Play is one of those vital ingredients that fuels young children’s development. When babies, toddlers and pre-schoolers play, they develop skills, like the ability to manage emotions and social situations. But some children don’t have what they need to develop well and don’t get these opportunities to play that can help ensure positive development. To treat children fairly and fuel healthy development, we need all children in Australia to have the chance to play.”

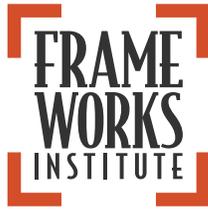
Endnotes

1. For a similar recommendation on how to communicate about early childhood development in Australia more broadly, 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.
2. See L'Hôte, E., Hendricks, R., Volmert, A., & Kendall-Taylor, N. (2019). *Cultivating Nature: Mapping the Gaps Between Expert and Public Understandings of Early Development in Australia*. 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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