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**Framing the Birth to Three Agenda:
Lessons Learned from Pre-K Campaigns**

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INTRODUCTION

Advocates in the early childhood arena recognize that creating motivation in support of policies to help young children requires more than appeals to “help kids.” There are innumerable variables in the thinking of a given individual which can lead to different degrees of support for a given program – a person’s factual understanding of the policies in question; their grasp of various aspects of development; their attitudes about the relationship between families and society; their general level of civic engagement; their level of concern about children; their other priorities; their feelings about schools, about the government, about scientists; and so forth. Likewise, there are a wide variety of strategies for communicating about kids – focusing on different aspects of problems and solutions relating to children. Each of these communicative strategies represents a different way of “framing” children and children’s issues – and each leads to different conclusions and outcomes.

Purpose of the Review

In this brief report, we examine the implications of the current framings of an issue that is on the policy agenda in states across the country: universal pre-kindergarten. Since the issue is currently being discussed and promoted, many people are being exposed to these frames in newspapers, brochures, websites, and speeches. The general question addressed in this report is: What effects does the way pre-kindergarten is being framed have for the future communications context of the early childhood field as a whole? More specifically, what consequences do current frames have for advocates focused on children from zero to three years of age? And finally, what effects are these framing choices likely to have on understandings of early childhood social-emotional-regulatory (SER) development—a critical but under-appreciated aspect of development?

Basis for the Review

The analysis presented here is based on years of experience with communicating early childhood issues, including a variety of research projects conducted by the FrameWorks Institute, Cultural Logic, and Public Knowledge on topics related to early childhood development. These projects have included:

- Focus groups with engaged citizens in several states
- National surveys
- Meta-analyses of survey literature
- Dozens of one-on-one interviews with average Americans, and businesspeople
- Development and testing of “simplifying models”¹ of early childhood development

¹ I.e. explanatory models intended to help lay people grasp some critical aspect of ECD, and to shift to a perspective closer to that of experts.

Materials Reviewed

The materials reviewed in this report were collected by Zero to Three, mainly through Web searches for texts mentioning prekindergarten. The materials consist of dozens of news articles and op-eds, brochures, and other communications materials produced by experts and advocates; and several videos produced by advocacy groups on topics related to early childhood.

Analytical Perspective

Researchers who study cognition and culture have established that people understand all concepts in terms of related networks of ideas, also known as *frames*. For example, the concept of a “father” is not understood in isolation, but in connection with understandings of mothers, children, families, biology, responsibility, and so forth. Frames themselves are usually expressed indirectly, whether in informal speech or in communications materials. They are embedded in the language (including the metaphors) that is used in connection with a concept, as well as in patterns of reasoning and association. Any discussion of early education evokes a particular set of frames, whether deliberately or not, and the frames present in a given piece guide a reader’s thinking about the issue far more powerfully than the particular facts and figures being presented.

ANALYTICAL FINDINGS: EDUCATION VS. DEVELOPMENT

The central pattern in the materials is that they seek to extend the Education frame—that is, our detailed and wide-ranging understanding of schooling and education—so that it applies to children of a younger age than ever before.

“Filed in the State House a year ago, ‘An Act Establishing Early Education for All’ sketches a compelling vision...Basic reading and number skills would be a cornerstone. Classes would be free...” [Boston.com news 1/15/2004]

This Education framing is accomplished through the consistent use of terms and ideas related to education in the materials:

- Pre-kindergarten
- Education budgets/departments
- Learning years
- Academic needs

Each of these terms tends—sometimes unconsciously—to evoke the Education frame in the reader’s mind. That is, each term triggers clusters of related understandings and implications about the issue that are all based on the central idea of education.

Assets of the Education Frame

Of course, the strategy of extending the Education frame to early childhood programs is not unconsidered. There are a variety of advantages of using the Education frame to talk about the programs. These include:

- Well-known, well-understood: This frame is highly elaborated and deeply entrenched in the public’s thinking. It is not an exaggeration to say that it has a central place in American culture. The term “Early education” itself has penetrated the language of advocates and media widely.² This term has currency among elites, and paves the way naturally for the idea of Pre-K.

² This frame/term was recommended in earlier work (Bales, Grady, Lakoff). It was well justified in that it overcomes certain obstacles (Child as precious object, Lack of social responsibility). But in the light of more exposure to expert perspectives, we can do even better. Importantly, the Early Education frame does not promote a cognitive shift all the way to the Developmental Perspective, nor does it support the range of policies associated with healthy ECD.

- Practical and important: Education is widely perceived to be very important, both for individuals and for society. This is not simply a matter of “charity”—it is about our success as a society, as well as the moral imperative.
- Polls very well: As numerous surveys (and Public Knowledge’s meta-analyses of surveys) have shown, “education” is reliably at or near the top of issues that voters and opinion leaders are most concerned about.
- Supported by existing infrastructures: It is not just the *ideas* related to education that are well established. We have infrastructures in place, too: funding, regulation, hiring, administering, schools, professional media and discourse, etc. These reinforce the conceptual frame, and create natural ways for the field to move forward.
- Connotes an active process: Importantly (as we will see), Education is thought of as something that we *do*, that we need to think about and plan. This aspect of the frame leads naturally to the implication that it is something that we need to be actively *responsible* about.

In short, it should be both natural and advantageous, *in principle*, to extend the Education frame one year (or “grade”) earlier—and after that another and another?

Two Major Problems with the Education Frame: Backlash and Absence of Development Frame

We identify two major kinds of problems with the Education frame approach, however. The first is that there are a variety of *backlash* hazards to using this frame when referring to very young children. The second, just as important, is that the Education frame does not set up a Developmental Perspective in the minds of those who are exposed to it.

Backlash

The following types of backlash (which all overlap to some degree) are not merely hypothetical, but have been observed in our research, including both focus groups conducted by Public Knowledge and elicitations conducted by Cultural Logic.

- What very young children (<5) need is *love*, rather than *academics*. It is uncomfortable for many people to think of 3 year olds being “educated” and having “academic needs,” and the implied image of babies behind desks is incongruous and grotesque to much of the public.
- Hurried child: People consistently object to the trend of pushing kids too hard, too fast.
- Yuppie super-achievers: Many people are put off by the “fancy parents” who want their children to learn Swahili and differential equations and hear only the finest music. The idea of Early Education can easily suggest this image if not handled right.

While it is tempting to dismiss these types of reactions as misguided because they are inaccurate from the point of view of experts on child development, they should not be underestimated. These reactions are rooted in deeply held and widely shared notions of “common sense” which can be extremely difficult to displace, and which have the power to turn the conversation against the policy goals of advocates—in effect to push the pendulum strongly in exactly the wrong direction.

The Developmental Paradigm: What the Education Frame Leaves Out

The second fundamental problem is that even if people *accept* the idea of young children being placed in more demanding and rigorous academic settings, this image obscures and blocks out another way of thinking that is in a number of ways more productive than the Education frame.

The Development frame provides a way of thinking about kids and what they need that is much closer to the expert perspective of developmental psychologists, and one that earlier research by Cultural Logic has shown is capable of being understood by the broader public. The Development frame can be summarized as follows:

Quality early experience (including nurturing, stimulating, attentive, and responsive interaction) promotes healthy development of brain architecture, leading to solid, decent kids who are well-equipped to succeed in all areas of life, and to contribute to the community.

Importantly, communications materials can make reference to children’s “development,” without actually reinforcing the Developmental paradigm:

[The creation of a Department of Early Education and Care will] “promote school readiness when children’s emotional and intellectual development makes them most ready to learn.” [*Boston Globe* editorial by Rep. Marie St. Fleur, 6/20/2004]

In this example, “children’s emotional and intellectual development” is treated as something that happens naturally and automatically—and which early education will take advantage of—*rather than as a key goal of the intervention*. This mistaken conceptual implication follows easily from the Education frame.

There are a number of fundamental differences between the Development frame and the Education frame, each of which has significant implications for how people reason more broadly about policy choices:

- Building brain architecture vs. Filling a container

Education per se is often understood as giving kids knowledge/facts/skills—filling a metaphorical container. The Development frame, by contrast, emphasizes the idea of building the container itself, the architecture that a child will need throughout life.³

Implication for reasoning about policy: The Development frame is resistant to the backlash against the idea of “babies behind desks”—it does not directly challenge a deeply held commonsensical idea, that education per se can only occur once a child has the tools that make learning possible. At the same time, it draws attention to the fact that development is not automatic, but is instead contingent on circumstances.

- Cognitive, SER, Physical vs. Cognitive

Education per se is primarily understood in terms of improving a child’s cognitive ability, both in terms of the learning of information and, in the best case, in terms of the development of cognitive skills and capacities (even if many people believe that education is not supposed to raise IQ). Development, on the other hand, is about a much broader range of capacities including the ability to interact with other people, to govern one’s emotions and impulses, to make wise choices, etc.

Early education leads to development of “academic skills” and “long-term educational benefits” [Mass live.com]

By providing early education opportunities throughout the state, students will be instilled with fundamental skills and a love of learning that will allow them to succeed in challenging careers in math and science. [Early Education for All, press release 9/9/2003]

Implication for reasoning about policy: The Development frame makes it easier for people to think about a number of different aspects of development, each of which can be helped or hindered by a child’s circumstances. This in turn makes it easier for people to think about the relevance, for example, of infant mental health, and health more generally. The Development frame also has clear implications for the public’s thinking about discipline.

³ Cultural Logic's "TalkBack" research with over 400 subjects established that discussions of the effects of early experience on the development of a child's "brain architecture" were likely to capture lay people's attention, and to alert them that there are new and important ways of understanding development. See Cultural Logic's 2003 report, "Moving the Public Beyond Familiar Understandings of Early Childhood Development," at www.frameworksinstitute.org/products/ecdreports.shtml.

- Quality of environment vs. Visible learning

As opposed to the teaching of information and skills, the Development frame is about the overall quality of a child's environment and interactions (the child's "environment of relationships"). This means that the Development frame takes much more of the child's *context* into account.

Implication for reasoning about policy: The Development frame makes it easier for people to see the relevance of larger issues, such as the role of poverty, that have their causes *outside of the "family bubble."* Once this cognitive shift has occurred, policies such as Temporary Assistance to Needy Families; other family support including parent education, home-visiting; paid family leave, and child welfare; all make more sense.

- Solid kids, Decent citizens vs. Grades, Test scores, Salary

Education is associated with very specific kinds of goals/outcomes—high grades, high test scores, good jobs, college attendance, high salaries. Development is about a much broader set of outcomes for a child, including his/her capacity to be a good member of the community, a "solid kid."

Implication for reasoning about policy: As a policy goal, creating "good citizens" has advantages over the goal of creating society's "winners." First, there is good evidence that people prefer good citizens to winners. Second, it is actually easier to demonstrate the positive impact of programs such as Head Start on outcomes that are more closely related to personal responsibility than, for example, to higher achievement in math and science.

- Starts at ~5 vs. Starts before birth

Education is associated with "school-age" kids. Development, of course, starts much, much earlier.

Implication for reasoning about policy: One basic problem with the Education frame is that even if the public can be persuaded to extend the notion of education one or two years before kindergarten, it becomes increasingly difficult to make the case for earlier children. The Development frame has no such built-in limitation, and is thus much more compatible with policies that promote early, even pre-natal, interventions and support.

ANALYSIS OF SPECIFIC ARGUMENTS/FRAMES USED IN THE MATERIALS

In this section we examine the particular arguments used to justify pre-kindergarten in the materials, and the implications of these arguments.

General Observations

A number of observations apply to the arguments taken as a group. We consider these before turning to the more specific ways in which pre-K is framed and justified.

Mix of Arguments

There are many different arguments offered in the materials: pre-K is a smart investment; it's about justice and fairness; it's about improving the experience of young children; etc. (The most prominent of these rationales are discussed later in this section.) In many cases multiple arguments are offered within a single piece, often without the sense that the lines of reasoning are related or mutually reinforcing.

This multiplicity of arguments represents an important missed opportunity for advocates on behalf of young children to present communications with a coherent message that resonates with policymakers and the public.

Note also that a good number of the pieces really offer no rationale at all, and seem to take for granted that “if it's about education, people will support it.”

Exclusive Focus on Benefits to the Child

By and large the materials focus on the various sorts of benefits that come to kids who participate in pre-K, including:

- A better experience in school
- Better grades
- Higher college attendance
- Higher grades
- Higher earnings

Importantly, many of the materials make no reference to how “the rest of us” will benefit if pre-K is enacted or expanded and developmental outcomes are improved. While the average American is certainly interested in helping kids, the pieces typically miss an opportunity to offer additional reasons why we should all care about these programs—there are benefits that accrue to a community and to a society when kids do better, such as stronger communities, better citizens around us, and a more prosperous society.

This omission not only means that fewer people will *understand* the place of the programs in the broader social picture, it means that an important type of *motivation* that leads to support for the desired policies is left untapped.

Lack of Causal Explanations

Many of the pieces make claims about the tremendous benefits of pre-K, but without explaining *how* these benefits are going to be created.

“Early education can enhance the state’s future work force, making it easier for companies to grow here.” [Boston.com news 1/15/2004]

“Supporting young children through their educational and social development is a crucial component to creating an innovative and internationally competitive workforce.” [Early Education for All, press release 9/9/2003]

It is through early education and care programs that we have the greatest chance to break the cycles of poverty, unemployment and child abuse. [Massachusetts live.com]

“The Department of Early Education and Care represents a real cure for the problems that plague our public schools, especially in poor communities and communities of color.” [*Boston Globe* editorial by Rep. Marie St. Fleur, 6/20/2004]

In some cases, these claims stretch credulity, and in general they are harder to grasp than they should be because they don't provide a concrete story that the reader can easily follow and accept. They would be much more effective if they offered more in the way of a causal mechanism which could help readers understand (and believe) how the programs will create such desirable effects. Naturally, these causal explanations would be based on a developmental perspective, and on such ideas as the “environment of relationships” and its critical impact on the growth of a child’s brain architecture.

Several major arguments are used regularly, and merit individual analysis:

Argument #1: Improving academic achievement

The most common argument offered on behalf of pre-K in the materials is the general claim that it will lead to better performance in school:

“Every child should be required to attend kindergarten and should be offered free pre-kindergarten, the nation’s largest teachers union says... The union backs full-day kindergarten, which has been shown to produce greater student

achievement ... The statement comes after a year of study among union leaders about how to improve education for young children.” [LA Times 7/6/03]

Not Qualitatively Different

This rationale is certainly at least somewhat motivating, since everyone does want kids to do well in school. On the other hand, it does not suggest anything qualitatively different from our current approaches to education, and often sounds like just a bit more of the same: a bit more education, a bit more preparation, starting a bit earlier, etc. Given that there are always many, many proposals in play about how to improve schools and academic performance, there is no reason to expect this argument to generate strong, new motivation.

No Benefits for the Rest of Us

This argument focuses solely on the benefits that individual children receive, without making it clear that early childhood programs can create stronger communities, better citizens, and so forth.

Risking Backlash

If our efforts are all about trying to improve kids’ grades and school achievement, we may risk triggering backlash against the idea of the “Yuppie Superachiever”.

No Developmental Perspective

Most importantly, advocates who lean heavily on this argument are missing an opportunity to establish an entirely new rationale, based on a developmental perspective, and the *special significance of experience in the early years*.

Argument #2: Giving kids a head start

Many of the materials focus on the simple idea of giving kids an advantage as they enter school.

“The programs are designed to give students a head start on kindergarten. For ages 2-3 they focus on the basics.” [Montgomery (AL) Advertiser, 4/23/03]

While the idea of a head start is certainly positive, this argument easily falls into the Superachiever trap, since it is not clear why kids should learn the same things earlier, or why there has been anything wrong with our current way of doing things in the early

years. Is it just so that kids can pack in more education at an earlier age? As focus group findings have often shown, a typical reaction from ordinary Americans is roughly, “we didn’t get early ed and we turned out OK.”

Note that from a Developmental perspective, it is very clear that early experience (before the beginning of school) is extremely important.

Argument #3: The increasing demands of early grades

A number of articles and op-eds make the point that kindergarten and the early grades are not as easy or simple as they used to be.

“They want us to teach so much in kindergarten that hopefully I can give them the pre-skills before they get there...” [*Arkansas Democrat-Gazette*, 11/11/02]

This argument is certain to trigger backlash against the Hurried Child syndrome. It is hard to understand the situation in any way other than that kids are being pushed “too hard too fast.” (What’s next? Kaplan prep courses for kindergarten?) Instead of this pointless “arms race,” which is turning kindergarten into a stressful ordeal, why shouldn't we simply make the curriculum there more reasonable?

Argument #4: Making up for changing home life

A tempting and oft-cited justification for pre-K is that schools must now provide some of what children used to get at home.

“Many mothers are working two jobs. Many children don’t have the guidance and encouragement of two parents. A pre-K program helps to bridge this sociological gap.” [*Baton Rouge Advocate* editorial, 2/4/03]

This argument makes sense because it is based on real (if not fully understood) changes in family life. It also creates openings, in principle, to discuss SER aspects of children's developmental needs. Nonetheless, there are two important drawbacks to this argument.

It Evokes the Deficient Parent Frame

One of the most consistent findings in research about kids and families is that there is a widespread perception that “other parents” are not doing a good job with their kids. This Deficient Parent image is very easy to trigger, and is sure to be evoked by arguments based on what kids should be getting at home but aren't. While people sometimes want to

help the children of these Deficient Parents, there is also a degree of resentment and resistance to being put in this position.

Interestingly, the Deficient Parent frame can easily be triggered, even by a sympathetic speaker:

“I have children who arrive in my kindergarten class never having been read to, who don’t know their colors, who can’t write their names or recognize the alphabet...There has to be a way to reach them before they start school.” [Ruth Cohn, kindergarten teacher, epigram for Margaret Blood’s report “Our Youngest Children: Mass Voters and Opinion leaders speak out on their care and education”]

The picture of children who have never been read to (and who have not been taught some basic skills before reaching school) leads to the clear implication that their parents have failed them.

The Deficient Parent frame can be triggered even more indirectly, for example by a simple term such as “Cherish Every Child” (CHECH), a citywide initiative in Springfield, MA. The act of “cherishing” is clearly associated with what a parent does, rather than with government. The implication is of course that if government has to cherish the children, then parents are not taking on their responsibility.

It Asks the Public to Accept the Collapse of Families

Even if people can accept that family life has changed for reasons that often have nothing to do with individual parents—that the changes are due to broader changes in economic and social structure—they are still likely to resist the idea that the family has deteriorated and assumed a permanent lesser role.

Argument #5: School readiness

The school readiness frame appears in many of the materials as an argument for pre-K.

“Almost half of children entering kindergarten in the United States are unprepared for the journey they are about to begin.” [*Philadelphia Inquirer* op-ed, 6/16/03, written by Pew Foundation staff]

“Three years after the [No Child Left Behind] deadline, the nation still falls abysmally short of providing the resources to make children ‘school-ready.’” [(Syracuse, NY) *Post-Standard/Herald-Journal*, 12/22/03]

This frame has gained a great deal of currency with advocates, and also with elites—it is cited by politicians as well as educators. Ideally, this would mean that the frame is ready to be tapped into as a source of motivation and momentum.

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Unfortunately, research conducted for the FrameWorks Institute by Cultural Logic and Public Knowledge shows that the public doesn't understand the frame well, and even objects to it. The public prefers to believe that all kids are ready if you give them a chance. Average Americans often feel that only elitists believe that a child needs preschool in order to be ready. For many people, "ready for school" means that children have had breakfast and done their homework.⁴

In short, even though advocates have been optimistic that the school readiness theme would be a vehicle that could carry many programs forward, the public has not understood the message in the same way.

Argument #6: Equity, leveling the playing field

In quite a few of the materials reviewed, proponents make the argument that pre-K is needed in order to equalize opportunity for all children.

"The program focuses on the 'haves' and 'have nots' of UPK." [description of Winning Beginnings NY, from the Trust for Early Education]

"... [T]he program is most beneficial for poor families and those with children who have learning disabilities. ... 'I think it is probably a move in the right direction,' [U of AK faculty member] Bain said. 'The advantage is it evens it out.'" [(Ft. Smith, AK) *Times-Record*, 11/25/02]

This position is both moral and reasonable —there certainly are wide disparities in the conditions from which children come to school, and it is certainly important for communities (including states and the nation as a whole) to work towards equity.

Furthermore, as a way of arguing in favor of universal programs for young children, this frame enjoys a contextual advantage: Everyone already accepts our universal education system—unlike proposed systems for universal health care, for example, which is seen as "socialized medicine" by many people.

On the other hand, experience and research suggest that like all appeals to altruism, this one will be limited in its effectiveness. Put simply, it is possible to generate a certain amount of good will and sacrifice on behalf of unfortunate "Others," but no more. It is distressingly easy even for very well-intentioned people to put other priorities ahead of helping people who are, by definition, not like themselves.

Furthermore, frames that focus on needy populations tend to "essentialize" these groups of people—i.e. to imply that it is their poverty or need which defines them, inherently and innately. This is an effect of talking about "the poor," for example, or "the unemployed," rather than referring to *situations*—the people we're helping become less like "us."

⁴ See various reports on school readiness at www.frameworksinstitute.org/products/ecdreports.shtml.

Another important downside of this argument is that it can easily trigger the Deficient Parent model discussed earlier. Consider the following passage:

“Children from some homes show up at their first day of kindergarten without knowing that print reads from left to right. Some, in extreme cases, have not seen books in their home.” [(Ft. Smith, AK) *Times-Record*, 11/25/02]

References like these can easily provoke readers to blame the children's parents: “Why don't they provide a better atmosphere at home?” Because of the destructive consequences of this frame, and because it so widespread in American culture, it is critical to avoid it whenever possible.

Argument #7: Investment

One of the strongest themes in the materials reviewed for this report is that pre-K represents an investment.

“Arizona's Children – A Wise Investment for Now and Later” [from “The Economics of Early Care and Education In Arizona,” by the W.P. Carey Center for Business Research at Arizona State University]

“No other public expenditure can reasonably claim to produce higher economic returns.” [Steven Barnett, director of the National Institute for Early Education Research, quoted in a 2/19/04 press release from the office of Gov. Brad Henry of Oklahoma]

“One investment that always yields dividends” [New Jersey preschool brochure]

A first point to note about the Investment frame is that it is independent of the choice of either Education or Development as a basic perspective on children. We can, in principle, invest either in education or in creating the right conditions for development—these may or may not be the same thing.

Do's and Don'ts

This frame has a quality that many frames related to kids do not: It is fundamentally practical rather than “merely” moral. That is, it treats early childhood programs as expenditures that make sense for practical, objective, bottom-line reasons, rather than simply because we would like to do the right thing. While moral arguments on behalf of children are appropriate and sometimes effective, advocates miss an important opportunity if they do not complement such appeals with more practical rationales.

That said, there are better and worse ways of presenting the Investment frame. The frame probably works best when it focuses on *Smart, Efficient use of resources*. We are already

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investing tremendous resources in kids, and investment in early childhood programs is the best use of those resources.

“‘When you have a problem, you fix it up front,’ said Kolb [President of Washington-based Committee for Economic Development]. ‘Not in fourth grade or eighth grade.’” [(Syracuse, NY) *Post-Standard/Herald-Journal*, 12/22/03]

By contrast, some of the materials can be read as promoting investment in kids because it means that they will turn into very valuable commodities. This purely economic (“get rich quick”) version of the Investment frame is likely to be less appealing. Parents, especially, have a hard time thinking of children primarily as economic assets and future workers.

The Investment argument also works best when the pieces cite very concrete ways in which early childhood programs save money down the road.

“[U]niversal pre-K won’t be cheap: It will require at least a doubling of the current \$25 billion investment [in pre-K]. But that investment can lower costs for remedial education, boost graduation rates, improve worker productivity and reduce crime.” [(Syracuse, NY) *Post-Standard/Herald-Journal*, 12/22/03]

Conversely, leaving out the concrete ways in which the investment will provide a return can leave the communications sounding like empty rhetoric:

The price tag for early education is high... But the return on this investment would be inestimable.

The frame is also more motivating when it includes benefits beyond financial savings. These include lower dropout rates and teen pregnancy – in short, more “solid” kids.

Notes on Business People as Messengers

Businesspeople are perceived as practical and responsible, which makes them well-suited messengers for the Investment frame. Furthermore, they are *unexpected* messengers on behalf of early childhood programs, giving them an extra measure of credibility—no one expects them to have a position on issues in this area.

“Pop quiz: Who just made an impassioned case that, even in these deficit-haunted, recessionary times, the federal government should start cranking up a

\$30 billion program to ensure every American child a crack at a good preschool? (a) Hilary Rodham Clinton, (b) The Children's Defense Fund, (c) *The Nation* magazine, or (d) the Committee for Economic Development.

“This is one of those multiple-choice questions where the weird answer is right. It's the Committee for Economic Development, a Washington-based group that includes 250 business leaders and educators.” [Philly.com, 2/20/02]

Importantly, businesspeople are in a position to “get” many of the central points that advocates would like to make about early childhood programs, but which come less naturally to other lay people:

- Business managers can naturally think in terms of long-term investment, including ones that may yield their most significant rewards after fifteen years or more.
“Thirty years out the long-term non-cognitive effects were dramatic.”
- The business perspective minimizes the effects of the “Family Bubble,” which makes it hard for lay people to see connections between young children and the broader community. (From the Family Bubble perspective, young children's lives take place almost entirely within the self-contained universe of the family.) The business perspective focuses on *outcomes*, and how to achieve them—and is not concerned with such questions as whether the community should have any influence on how a child is raised.
- Business people are naturally concerned with more than just “academic achievement”—from the workforce development perspective they are interested in “solid citizens,” good team players, and so forth. (They may also want a more stable community/society overall, since stability is another prerequisite of profitable business.)

For all these reasons, advocates will find businesspeople to be not only valuable allies, thanks to their resources and their influence with policymakers, but valuable spokespeople for the public as well.

CONCLUSION

The good news implied throughout this report is that there are communications strategies available to the early childhood field which would not require them to make difficult choices between promoting the welfare of preschool-age children and promoting what's needed by younger children, from zero to three. Communications based on the Developmental frame allow for coherent messages across the entire span of development, from prenatal development through school age (and even beyond, to adolescence).

Furthermore, this frame would allow advocates to address the broad range of developmental needs faced by young children, many of which are unrelated to “education” per se. Programs which provide appropriate, interactive, supportive and stimulating environments for young children make sense from the Developmental perspective—and can also be related to the wide variety of other programs (such as family visits and mental health screenings) which would benefit these same children. The Education frame currently favored by pre-K advocates supports a much narrower set of policies, and will ultimately demand that lay people apply their understandings of “school” to kids at younger and younger ages. While the Developmental approach entails a number of challenges, it is a strategic direction that the field would do well to explore.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The following guidelines will give advocates the best chance of framing early childhood programs in ways that will “lift all boats.” These framing recommendations will make communications about the programs more effective in themselves, and will also help lay the groundwork for more engaging discussions of the broad array of policies that experts know are needed on behalf of young children.*

Find Unifying Messages

To the extent possible, advocates should find common language and arguments that echo and resonate across materials, regions, issues, and media. The more these central arguments are reinforced, the greater the chances they will come to inform public debate on the issues.

Establish a Developmental Perspective

Recommendations for early childhood programs must be framed in terms of a Developmental paradigm: Development is taking place from the time a child is born (and before); it depends on quality of environment and interactions, rather than just tangible incidents of teaching and learning; it involves the development of the internal tools (not just the knowledge and skills) that a child needs in order to thrive; it determines the kind of person a child will become, not just the kind of student and wage-earner; etc.

Despite its various advantages, the Education frame currently used to promote “pre-K” *obscures this critical perspective on kids and what they need.*

Emphasize Social-Emotional-Regulatory (SER) Development

It is very important that communicators on early childhood issues emphasize the central role of SER development in determining kids' outcomes—and that they help lay people understand the conditions that help and hinder this development. Pre-K (by whatever name) is largely about creating conditions in which SER development is likely to proceed in a healthy way.

Discussions of SER development should also take advantage people's existing interest (established in polls and surveys) in the development of language and social skills, reduction in crime, and other outcomes related to healthy SER development.

* These recommendations are based on an analysis of materials gathered by ZERO TO THREE – dozens of articles and op-eds from sources all over the country on the topic of pre-K, plus materials produced by advocates in support of pre-K programs. The materials were reviewed from the communications perspective of Strategic Frame Analysis. See <http://frameworksinstitute.org> for information about this approach, and Cultural Logic's report, "Framing the Birth to Three Agenda: Lessons Learned from Pre-K Campaigns," for a discussion of the materials and their impact.

Use “Brain Architecture” as an Explanatory Model

Empirical testing has demonstrated that advocates will have a better chance of engaging lay people in new perspectives on development if they refer to the developing “architecture” of a child's brain, and the ways in which experience, interactions, and relationships help shape this architecture and make it stronger or weaker. This type of concrete image helps lay people recognize that there is something objective and undeniable at stake. Furthermore, this model fits well with people's interest in authoritative new science regarding children and their development.

Emphasize the Benefits to “the Rest of Us”

Advocates should highlight the ways in which early childhood programs create benefits that go beyond the individual child. The Development frame provides a natural fit with this sort of thinking. The Development frame is compatible with current psychological models of development, which focus on the child’s social, emotional, and regulatory capacities (SER). As it turns out, these capacities are closely connected to the making of “good citizens,” or “solid kids”—children (and ultimately adults) who are responsible, polite, and generous; have good impulse control; etc. Not surprisingly, this is the sort of outcome—rather than making “smarter” and more “successful” kids—that makes the most sense to the general public, that people can support most wholeheartedly.

Tell Causal Stories

People understand and remember better—and are more engaged —when they can understand simple causes and effects. Telling people that investing in pre-K leads to “inestimable” results is less effective than explaining that supportive and engaged interactions with trusted caretakers help build and strengthen a young child’s developing brain architecture. Note too that this is one of the real advantages of the Developmental Perspective: It gives advocates a way of *explaining* how early childhood programs can yield such remarkable results, for children and for communities.

A Central Challenge

The main challenge associated with these recommendations, and one that will require the field to invest significant energy and resources, is that the Development frame is not well articulated in the public's language or understanding, particularly in comparison with the well articulated Education frame, where such terms as Educator, Teacher, School, Class, and Grade are well established, and rich with concrete meaning and associations.

When it comes to framing the Developmental message, the field has a great deal of catching up to do. To put it another way, the field finds itself at a moment ripe with exciting opportunities for a profound change in public understanding.

THE AUTHORS

Cultural Logic, founded by anthropologist Axel Aubrun and linguist Joseph Grady, is an applied cognitive and social science research group that helps organizations frame their messages for maximum impact. Working with a network of experts and partner organizations including the FrameWorks Institute and the Rockridge Institute, we focus primarily on research relating to public interest issues.

Cultural Logic investigates the shared understandings – *cultural models* – that underlie opinion and behavior, applying the latest findings from the cognitive and social sciences to generate analyses of how people think and talk about specific cultural domains – such as teenagers, global warming or health insurance. Research techniques include cognitive interviews, rapid ethnographic assessments, “TalkBack” testing of language and framing, and analysis of media and other public discourse.

Cultural Logic’s research has been presented at the Aspen Institute’s Wye River Conference Center, the White House Conference on Teenagers, the Rockefeller Brothers Fund’s Pocantico Conference Center, the Benton Foundation, the Ford Foundation, and the W. T. Grant Foundation, among other forums.

Axel Aubrun, Ph.D., cofounder of Cultural Logic, is a psychological anthropologist whose research and publications take an interdisciplinary approach to problems of communication and motivation. Aubrun has been a lecturer in cultural anthropology at the University of California, and manager of public relations for an advertising firm in San Diego.

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