Talking about Early Childhood in Kenya

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Introduction

Framing can be defined as choosing what to say, how to say it and what to leave unsaid.[1] Strategic, intentional framing is a critical part of any strategy to create social change. Frames are powerful. They advance a set of ideas about how a social problem came to be and who bears responsibility for addressing it. As such, frames shape opinions, attitudes and policy preferences. In the case of early childhood development, depending on how the issue is framed, people can become more likely to insist that early childhood outcomes are purely a matter of personal effort and character – or become more apt to see how children's capacity to learn, work, thrive and contribute to society is shaped by society itself.

This report is the culmination of a series of research activities resulting from a larger collaboration between the FrameWorks Institute, UNICEF, the Center on the Developing Child at Harvard University and the Africa Early Childhood Network, with funding from the Conrad N. Hilton Foundation, that aims to deepen knowledge about children's early development among members of the Kenyan public and those who work in the early childhood development (ECD) field. In this Message Brief, we recommend a set of communications strategies and tools that translates the neuroscience of ECD to help both the public and ECD professionals in Kenya better understand the importance of children's early learning and brain development and the kinds of inputs and practices that best support it.

The research presented in this Message Brief suggests that advocates in Kenya need to embrace a framing strategy that helps people stay focused on *early* development, and that advances an understanding of how the systems, supports and environments that surround children and families during the early years of life can and should play a critical role in supporting children's development. It establishes that society has a role and a stake in ensuring that the vital conditions for optimal development are available to all, not just some, across the various stages of development. A child development frame elaborates a broad vision of what constitutes child wellbeing, articulating the multiple aspects that contribute to children 'doing well'. When advocates can effectively advance this frame, they can help people move beyond the idea that only basic needs like nutrition or health need to be met *before* people consider children's developmental needs. They can also overcome the strong tendency for people to 'age up' in their thinking by prioritising the school-going years while de-emphasising the importance of skill development in the years preceding formal education.

Accomplishing this major shift involves adopting a set of framing guidelines. These include:

1. **Make it clear**: Before introducing specific developmental concepts, remind people to focus on *early* childhood with the phrase *Early Means Early*.

2. **Share the science**: Explain the process of early brain development using the metaphor *Brain Architecture*.

3. **Distribute responsibility**: Use the phrase *Circle of Responsibility* to widen the scope of actors responsible for children's developmental outcomes, including early childhood professionals as well as the public sector.

4. **Make it concrete**: Focus discussions on early learning with the term *Born to Learn.*

Each of these adjustments makes a difference on its own, but taken together, the whole becomes greater than the sum of the parts. Read on to learn more about the evidence behind these recommendations, what each involves and how they might be put into practice in communications.

Evidence

How Does the Public Think?

To document the deep, but implicit, cultural understandings that people draw on to make sense of development issues, FrameWorks conducted 44 in-depth cognitive interviews with members of the public and those who work in the early childhood development sector in Kenya in June and July 2017. These interviews were conducted in seven languages – Dholuo, Ekegusii, English, Kikamba, Kiswahili, Samburu and Somali – in five locations: Isiolo County, Machakos County, Siaya County, Nairobi and the Eastleigh suburb of Nairobi. These data were supplemented with a set of 60 rapid, face-to-face, on-the-street interviews conducted in Siaya, Machakos, Nairobi and Eastleigh in November and December 2017. These data were analysed to identify the implicit, shared understandings and assumptions that structure and support thinking about children's early development.

How Can We Shift Thinking?

To identify effective ways of talking about early childhood, FrameWorks' researchers developed a set of candidate frames. These frames were tested in April 2018 in Nairobi and refined using 20 on-the-street interviews to test the ability of various frames to prompt productive and robust thinking and discussions on early childhood issues.

Framing Guidelines

1. **Make It Clear: Before introducing specific developmental concepts, remind people to focus on *early* childhood with the phrase Early Means Early.**

The categorical distinction between 'childhood' and 'early childhood' is not one that most Kenyans are accustomed to making. When people think about early childhood, they 'age up' or focus on the needs, behaviours and activities of older children. The framing challenge is slightly different for early childhood decision-makers, who understand and embrace the distinction between childhood and early childhood. Decision-makers, however, do not share a strong consensus about the age parameters for early childhood.

Although slightly different, both modes of thinking represent an important communications challenge: It is difficult for people to understand messages about early childhood when they are not clear about what is meant by the phrase. Without framing cues, advocates and policymakers will struggle to build the required focus on the earliest months and years of life as a critical time span.

The communications 'fix' here is both simple and powerful. Research showed that by priming people with the phrase *Early Means Early* and following it with specific explanation of the age range, communicators can overcome the public's strong tendency to 'age up' and build consensus about the age parameters of early childhood. After hearing this phrase, research participants were able to focus on the appropriate age range (0–3 years old). Furthermore, people were able to maintain focus on this developmental period during subsequent conversations about children's development. Reminding people that *Early Means Early* ensured that conversations did not slip into later phases of childhood. Critically, when primed with this phrase, people were willing to think about both the pre- and postnatal periods in a child's development.

The phrase *Early Means Early* should become a standard part of all early childhood experts' and advocates' lexicon. Communicators should include it as liberally as possible in all communications. By adding these three words, communicators can powerfully focus attention on the appropriate age range, which is an important step in communicating more effectively on early childhood.

In addition to *Early Means Early*, communicators should use phrases such as 'children's early development', 'development in infants' or 'a baby's development' when talking about early developmental processes. They should also use consistent language to define the first 1,000 days, including emphasising the inclusion of the prenatal period in that timeframe. The phrase 'early childhood development' triggers thinking about learning and child-care facilities and institutions.

2. **Share the Science: Explain the process of early brain development using the metaphor *Brain Architecture*.**

The Kenyan public understands that early childhood is an important developmental period but struggles to articulate how development happens and how developmental outcomes can be improved. Their focus is often on the easy-to-see, physical side of development, not on the underlying cognitive and emotional skills that are also developing. When faced with explaining how development works, researchers found that Kenyans typically fall back on an understanding that, assuming nutritional needs are met, children will develop relatively automatically through natural trajectories of physical growth and maturation. The process remains both poorly understood and poorly articulated. As a result, beyond adequate nutrition, people struggle to explain what can be done to improve developmental outcomes.

In contrast, decision-makers speak specifically about brain development rather than in broad terms about mental or psychological development. However, decision-makers often rely on a default understanding of the brain as a container that simply needs to be fed with good nutrition and filled with knowledge and content. They struggle to articulate what supports need to be in place to help establish and strengthen fundamental brain capacities and skills, which makes it difficult for them to appreciate the kinds of systemic and policy-level shifts early childhood experts and advocates are working to enact in Kenya.

To deepen both the public's and decision-makers' understandings of early brain development, researchers turned to metaphor. Explanatory metaphors compare an idea that is not well understood to a familiar event, object or process to give people new ways of reasoning about or understanding that idea. Strong explanatory metaphors are memorable; this makes them effective framing tools because they pass easily from one person to another, widening the reach of a message.

FrameWorks tested the *Brain Architecture* explanatory metaphor in Kenya in 2018 to communicate the idea that brains are built over time through an active and intentional process, with early periods of development being particularly important for later outcomes. Research showed that this metaphor effectively communicates *process*, or the idea that brains are a key locus of development and are actively *built* from relationships and experience. It also imparts a strong sense of *urgency*, especially around the idea that early activity matters. Using the metaphor, people realise the importance of building a solid foundation because lots of skills are 'wired' during this period, and later skill development is built on top of earlier skills. The metaphor also effectively imparts a sense *efficacy*: people understand that supports can be put into place now to improve children's developmental outcomes.

Here is an example of how communicators can use the *Brain Architecture* explanatory metaphor in communications to deepen understanding of early childhood development: *The basic architecture of a human brain is constructed through a process that begins before birth and continues into adulthood. Early experiences shape how the brain gets built.*

3. **Distribute responsibility: Use the phrase *Circle of Responsibility* to widen the scope of actors responsible for children's developmental outcomes, including early childhood professionals as well as the public sector.**

The public's default understanding is that children's development and outcomes depend, above all else, on parents. While members of the public *do* understand that other actors outside the immediate family play an important role in children's development, they struggle to articulate how *public* institutions play a critical role in supporting and empowering parents and families in their roles as caregivers and facilitators of children's healthy development, especially for children in their earliest years. In addition, while members of the public and decision-makers can name government as a responsible actor, the scope of that responsibility – especially for children before they reach school age – is limited to the health-care sector. A major communications challenge is to bring people's attention to the broader systems, including public systems, that surround families and that either support or detract from caregiving. FrameWorks' research demonstrates that priming audiences with the phrase *Circle of Responsibility* can help communicators assign meaningful roles to a wide range of actors who are responsible for children's outcomes. By priming audiences with a broader sense of those who are responsible, communicators can leverage and expand upon the public's extant sense of collective responsibility for children's outcomes.

More specifically, the phrase *Circle of Responsibility* helps communicators focus attention on the importance of *nonparental* caregivers, including domestic workers. This phrase also helps communicators create space to name and explain how formal networks can contribute to improved developmental outcomes. More specifically, communicators can use the phrase to bring awareness to governmental

responsibility for children's outcomes that both includes and extends beyond the provisioning of health care.

Finally, the phrase can help situate mothers, parents, caregivers and families within broader systems of support that are, or should be, in place. It does this by reminding people of their sense of responsibility not only for children but also the people charged with caring for them. It opens up a productive space to make the case for cost-effective ways to provide supports to those families and thereby strengthen their children's development in the process.

The phrase *Circle of Responsibility* also accomplishes important communications tasks for the early childhood sector itself. It provides decision-makers and the early childhood sector in general with a way to frame and bring attention to the importance of their own work to ensure healthy development for all Kenyans. Not only does the phrase create space for the sector itself in communications, but the circle imagery also sets up discussions about the need for more integrated systems of care for Kenyans' children, where children's basic and developmental needs are considered and addressed in a holistic rather than siloed fashion.

4. Make it concrete: Focus discussions on early learning with the term *Born to Learn*.

The public's and decision-makers' default understanding of where and how learning happens represents a significant communications challenge. Members of the public – and, to a lesser extent, decision-makers – share the idea that 'real' learning only happens in school. When members of the public think about informal learning that occurs prior to formal schooling, they focus on a child's seemingly innate capacity to learn through observation, mimicry and osmosis, and struggle to see the need for adults and older children to be active and intentional participants in the learning process. Communicators therefore need tools to help people understand that foundational learning is happening *before* children reach school age, and that early experiences and relationships are central to that process.

Research shows that priming audiences with the phrase *Born to Learn* can help communicators address this challenge. This phrase sets up learning as an inborn and natural human trait. In this way, it 'ages down' people's thinking and brings greater salience to important informal early learning, including the importance of play. By communicating that children are *born* ready to learn, communicators can focus communication on the quality of the caregiving and environment around the child in the early months and years. Furthermore, communicators can use this phrase to situate early learning centres as an extension and continuation of the important learning that has been, or should have been, happening from day one of a child's life.

Communications Traps

Strategic framing is about knowing both what to say *and* what to not to say to help people reason productively about an issue. Some framing strategies, perhaps counterintuitively, can ensnare public thinking in unproductive evaluations and judgements. Communicators often fall into these 'traps' because they are widely accepted practices or may seem like logical ways to respond to challenges. Research, however, shows that many of our most 'tried and true' strategies can backfire. Communicators should:

- **Avoid messaging centred on 'the basics'.** While we all recognise that children's access to 'the basics' of physical health and provisioning in Kenya cannot be taken for granted, it is also critical to recognise that this concern with the basics can overwhelm and undermine people's understanding of the importance of other critical inputs for children's brain development, including stimulation and communication. Because people already know how important these basics are, communicators should focus their efforts on expanding people's model of other inputs that are essential for children's healthy development.

- **Avoid messaging that reinforces or cues the *automatic* or passive understanding of development.** Communicators can do this by avoiding any messaging that assumes positive outcomes as long as a child's physical needs are being met. Instead, communicators should look for ways to emphasise the contingent nature of healthy development and focus on those factors – in addition to nurturance, good nutrition, health-care access and other assumed 'basics' – that help create positive outcomes. This also applies to early learning, where people often reason that young children's learning is relatively natural, automatic and passive.

Moving Forward

The research described here shows the power and potential of telling a new story about early childhood development in Kenya. If stakeholders within the early childhood sector can get on message by sharing and amplifying the strategies outlined here, they can change the public discussion about early childhood, boost support for policy solutions and increase public engagement with calls to supports parents and parenting. The research shows that key phrases and metaphors can fundamentally reorientate public and decision-maker thinking and result in dramatically different ways of engaging with early childhood information and initiatives.

[1] 'Framing' refers to the subtle selection of certain aspects of an issue to cue a specific response. FrameWorks tests a set of frame elements that convey meaning and affect the way that people respond to an issue. These include values, metaphors, narrative, messengers and more.