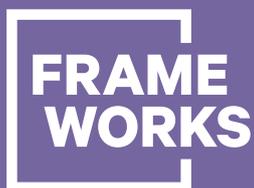


How to Tell the Core Story of Early Childhood

A Short Guide



Contents

Section A: The Core Story

- What is this guide? **3**
- Getting started **4**
- The Core Story **5**
- Approaches to framing **10**

Section B: Pregnancy and the Prenatal Period

- Top tips **11**
- What to avoid **12**

Section C: Child Mental Health

- Top tips **13**
- What to avoid **14**

Section D: Play

- Top tips **15**
- What to avoid **16**

Section E: Framing Tools

- Do's and Don'ts **17**
- Framing Thesaurus **18**

Find out more 19

What is this guide?

This guide is here to help you apply powerful insights in your communications about early childhood development and learning, so that they are even more effective. It's based on rigorous research about ways to communicate about early childhood development and learning, using an approach called framing.

Find out more about the research and discover in-depth resources for each topic on the [Core Story webpage](#)

Who is it for?

Anyone who talks about early childhood development and learning as part of their role. If you work in healthcare, education, policy or research, this guide is for you.

Why do you need it?

As people working in the field of early childhood, we know that we need to build a society where early childhood is a priority, so that every child and every community has what it needs to thrive.

To build this society, we need to show everyone that early childhood matters. We need to show that to give every child in Australia a fair chance, we need to act.

When we all use our voices to tell a powerful story, we help others see why this is important and what we need to do.

This guide provides evidence-based framing strategies to communicate in persuasive ways, to make early childhood a priority.

What is framing?

Framing is about making choices about what we say and how we say it. The words, images and ideas we use influence how people think. Using the wrong frames means we risk our message backfiring, or being ignored. Using the right frames can unlock new ways of thinking that lead to positive change.

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Getting started

The Core Story of Early Childhood Development and Learning

What is a Core Story? And what does it mean for me?

We all think and communicate in stories. They are powerful.

Research has shown that there are shared stories we all tell. They help us make sense of the issues affecting our lives.

These shared stories take many different forms. Many are easily recognisable, such as those told in books or films. Others are more subtle. They are told through the underlying themes in what we say, through the metaphors we use or the values we convey.

By taking control of the story we tell about early childhood development and learning, and by telling it again and again, we can help Australians better understand why early childhood matters, and what we need to do to help all children thrive.

Our research has identified the narrative we need to tell. We call this the 'Core Story'.

You can help by telling it in your own way, whenever you talk about early childhood development and learning.

This guide will show you how.

A

B

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D

E

The Core Story

This is the Core Story

For Australia's children to thrive we need to support their development and learning, from conception onwards. This improves their health and wellbeing, both now and throughout their lives.

Right now, some children aren't receiving the support they need. This causes their health and development to suffer.

To improve health for every child across the country, we need to demand programs that support the specific needs of each child and each community. This will create a healthier society, both now and in the future.

Why we need to tell the Core Story

Our research with members of the Australian public has shown that this story:

- Makes an effective case for making early childhood a policy priority
- Shows people why early childhood development and learning is so important
- Works by tapping into values that Australians share
- Clearly demonstrates how and why we need to act

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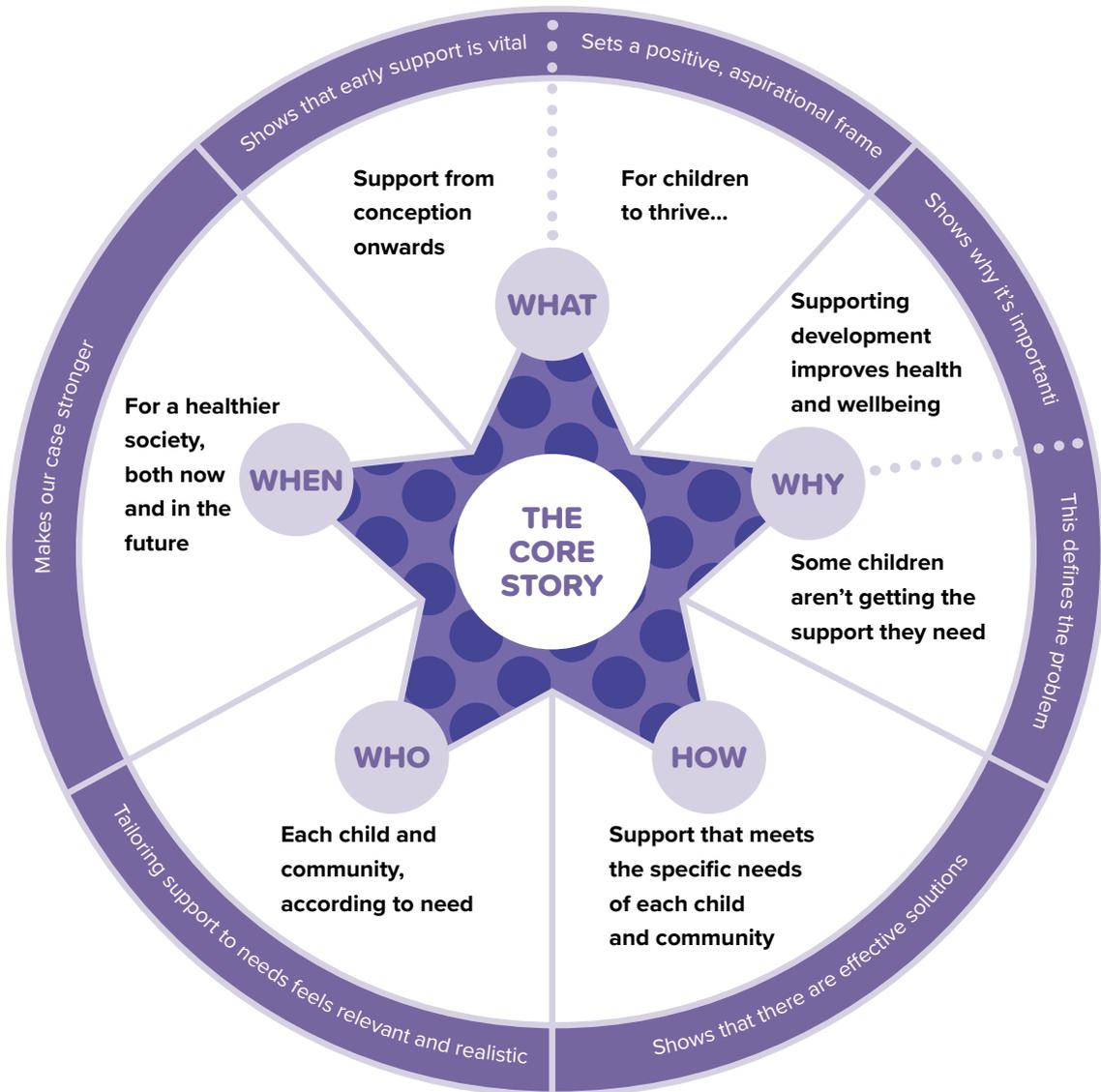
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Breaking it down

Like any good story, the Core Story answers the big questions: what, why, how, who and when. It contains key ideas that are found to help people see why early childhood development is so important, and to support what needs to be done.



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How this could look in practice

You can tell this Core Story – on its own – in your own words. Or you can weave elements of it into other communications. Here are some examples to show how it could work:

Media release



For babies, learning starts in the womb

Ground-breaking new research has used the latest neuroimaging technology to show that babies begin to learn from as early as 23 weeks old – and can remember what they've learned after birth.

Dr Fiona McResonance, who led the research, said 'These promising findings show that the early days matter. That's why it's so important that every community in Australia is provided with the necessary prenatal support for parents; as support for babies helps families both now and in the future'.

Social media post



Twitter Account @TwitterAccount

Books aren't just for fun – kids who are read to regularly are up to THREE times more likely to be healthy than those who don't. That's why we need YOU to support our campaign to fund libraries in every neighbourhood.

Funding application



Funding application

Our research has found that access to pre-school matters. Children who attend pre-school not only have better test scores throughout their education, but they also enjoy better health and wellbeing than their counterparts who don't. However, not every child is able to enjoy the benefits it brings. Up to 32% of Australian children are denied access to a high-quality pre-school, purely based on their postcode. With this funding, we would create fairness for every child by opening a new pre-school in every community that needs one...

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Telling the Core Story to different audiences

We can change the way we tell the Core Story in order to suit the audience we're telling it to. We can do this by choosing the right examples, emphasising the parts that are most relevant, and avoiding triggers that might distract from the message.

The wider public and families

✓ Dial up:

- The links between health and learning, as these will feel novel and important.
- Support for every child and family, based on their needs. The idea that each family has different needs makes sense to parents.
- Tangible descriptions of programmes and services that will make places and spaces better for families, to help them see what needs to be done.

✗ Avoid:

- Anything that might feel judgemental or finger-pointing, such as prescriptive 'dos and don'ts'. Parents reject or ignore critical-sounding messages.
- Technical or abstract language, as this lacks relevance to parents, making the message feel like it's not for them. For example, talking about 'structured play' is likely to make them switch off. Whereas, phrases such as 'games that have rules, such as 'what's the time, Mr Wolf?'" feel more relevant and engaging.

Schools, early years education and care

✓ Dial up:

- The links between learning, health and development; this is new information for many people, which helps them see the broader importance of their work.
- Describe how good services support families and communities. For example, childcare helps children thrive, as well as enabling parents to work, take care of their own needs and support older relatives.
- Show how people can support these services, whether that's by demanding policy changes, providing funding or getting involved by volunteering.

✗ Avoid:

- Jargon and technical terms. Using everyday language with practitioners will help them in turn to use everyday language with the communities they work with.

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Government



Dial up:

- Defining the problem, so that it's clear: unmet needs during the early years are leading to poor health for some of Australia's children.
- Show how government support can make a difference by supporting each community based on their needs – which in turn benefits all Australians.
- Make it clear that supporting children matters, both now and in the future. This makes the message feel both urgent and important.



Avoid:

- Data or statistics without interpretation. Help people by giving them the information they need to understand facts and statistics, showing why they matter.
- Technical or abstract language where it's not needed, such as 'texts' rather than 'books', 'linguistic skills' rather than 'speaking', 'cognition' rather than 'thinking'.

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Approaches to framing

Here are some key strategies to tell the Core Story in the most effective way.

Strategy	What it is	How to use it	Before	After
Explain, don't assert	When we explain <i>why</i> development is important, we help people understand. When we assert, people tend to switch off, or argue.	Think 'what' 'why' and 'how' – are these covered off in the message?	'X is harming children.'	'X is harming children, in ways such as Y, because Z.'
Proposing solutions	By proposing solutions, we show that change is possible, which feels empowering.	Explain what needs to be done.	'X is causing many children to fall behind.'	'These simple changes to X will help children to...'
Widening the lens	Context shows how society affects individuals. This helps open minds, building support for helpful programs and policies.	Add in details that show the broader forces affecting the issue.	'In [X community] children aren't given sufficient outdoor play time.'	'Since the playground in [X] was closed, children have had nowhere to play'
Explain the significance of facts and stats	Numbers, data and stats are easily misinterpreted.	Describe what the numbers mean and why they matter.	'300k children have been affected by cuts to X.'	'Cuts to X have affected 300k children by... This shows that we need to...'
Lead with the message we want to stick	Resist the urge to 'myth bust'; research shows this can backfire.	Focus on what you want people to remember, not what you want them to forget.	'It's a myth that children's brains just naturally develop as they grow.'	'Interaction is a vital ingredient that helps babies' brains develop.'

A

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E

Adding to the Core Story

When communicating about particular topics such as pregnancy, child mental health or play, you can use the Core Story as a starting point to set the scene, before focusing in on your specific area of interest. Here's how:

Pregnancy and the Prenatal Period

From personal choice to public policy

To frame pregnancy and the prenatal period, we can begin with a short version of the Core Story:

'Supporting early childhood development and learning supports both physical and mental health. However, some young children aren't currently getting the support they need. We can create fairness by supporting every child and community, according to their needs.' Having set the scene, we can move on to specific pregnancy and prenatal messages.

Top tips for framing Pregnancy and the Prenatal Period

- **Make it about the benefits of support in pregnancy:** Babies and children thrive when their parents are supported. This support is vital even before conception, as well as during pregnancy and in the earliest days.
- **Show that it's society's job to support pregnant women and their families:** People often believe that prenatal development is the sole responsibility of the mum-to-be; which can be isolating and stigmatising.
- **Offer concrete solutions that reinforce society's role:** Tangible examples help people connect the dots between society's support and benefits for families – whether that's counselling services to help parents build resilience, policies that enable healthcare professionals to give the right support, or helplines for questions about pregnancy.

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What to avoid when talking about pregnancy

Watch out for landmines that distract people and derail the conversation:

When we say...	People tend to think...	Which means that...	Instead, use...
The first 1,000 days	'It's all about what happens once the baby is born.'	Pregnancy and prenatal development are overlooked.	From conception onwards.
Medicalised, technical language	'Doctor knows what's best for baby.'	The needs of parents and the wider family aren't seen as important; people are more likely to switch off or miss the point.	Everyday language, such as 'pregnancy' rather than 'during gestation'.
Education and awareness	'It's all on mum to educate herself.'	We become more likely to blame and shame pregnant women for 'not knowing' rather than see gaps in support and services.	Support for parents-to-be.

TOP TIP: To find out more, take a look at our guide about [Adding Prenatal Development to the Core Story](#).

Child Mental Health

Building resilience and ability

To frame Child Mental Health, we can begin with a short version of the Core Story:

‘Supporting early childhood development and learning supports both physical and mental health. However, some young children aren’t currently getting the support they need. We can create fairness by supporting every child and community, according to their needs.’ Having set the scene, we can move on to specific messages about child mental health.

TOP TIP: Our research shows that the public tends to misunderstand mental health, believing it’s not relevant for young children. Try starting with an explanation of what mental health is, and why it matters for children.

For example: ‘Having good mental health means having a positive sense of wellbeing, being able to cope with problems and meet your potential. This is just as important for children as it is for adults.’

Top tips for framing Child Mental Health

- **Virtuous Circle:** Show that good physical & mental health supports learning and development – and vice versa!
- **Describe it in terms of resilience and ability to cope with problems, both big and small:** These terms feel tangible, positive and important. They’re qualities we all want all children to have.
- **Show that interaction builds skills and mental health:** Many people don’t know that simple back-and-forth interactions with caregivers drive development. They’re vital to help children thrive in the early years, and beyond.
- **Explain how mental health has many different influences:** By showing that environments, experiences, genetics and skills all play a part, we can help broaden minds on an issue that can be stigmatizing.
- **Talk about a wide range of public policies & programmes:** This shows that there are lots of different ways we can boost wellbeing.

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What to avoid when talking about child mental health

Watch out for landmines that distract people and derail the conversation:

When we say...	People tend to think...	Which means that...	Instead, use...
Words that focus on emotions only	'It's just about feeling a bit sad, worried or hyperactive.'	Mental health is seen as less important and more transient than it is.	Language about emotions, skills and ways of thinking.
Medical terms	'This is only a concern for doctors or therapists.'	We're less likely to support non-medical initiatives or see how wider society can help boost child mental health.	Everyday terms, such as 'coping with feelings.'
Mental illness	'Mental health is about sicknesses of the mind.'	We overlook positive mental health and preventative action.	Wellbeing, stability, resilience.

TOP TIP: To find out more, take a look at our guide about [Adding Child Mental Health to the Core Story](#).

Play

Creating more opportunities to play

To frame play, we can begin with a short version of the Core Story:

‘Supporting early childhood development and learning supports both physical and mental health. However, some young children aren’t currently getting the support they need. We can create fairness by supporting every child and community, according to their needs.’ Having set the scene, we can move on to specific messages about play.

Top tips for framing play

- **Show how play supports early development:** It helps build brains and boost skills.
- **Explain that some children don’t have access to the same chances to play:** This shows that some are missing out, due to factors such as where they live.
- **Show how concrete solutions can solve the problem:** Describe services, policies and initiatives that give children the opportunities they need to develop and learn through play.
- **Use everyday language:** Talk about play using natural words, rather than technical terms. For example, ‘playing a game with rules, such as dodgeball’ instead of ‘structured play’.
- **Show that adults can be active participants in play:** This helps show that interaction and engagement help children develop and learn. Without this, people tend to think of play as something that children should always do alone.

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What to avoid when talking about play

Watch out for landmines that distract people and derail the conversation:

When we say...	People tend to think...	Which means that...	Instead, use...
Play is natural	'Play is something kids just do; they don't need help to do it.'	We don't see that play is a vital ingredient in helping children develop and learn, and needs to be supported.	Play is even better when it's supported.
Play as human right	'That's politics; what does that have to do with my child and how they play?'	We resist ideas of 'government intervention' into our children's lives.	Opportunities to play, spaces to play.
Structured play, free play, imaginative play – or any other technical terms	'Why are we overcomplicating this?'	We miss the point that's being made.	Everyday terms such as 'playing catch', 'dressing up' 'drawing or painting.'
Modern life; screen time	'The impact of technology on kids is scary, but that's just modern life.'	We become fatalistic, believing that this is just the way things are and can't change.	Be specific about causes and effects, or avoid these terms entirely.

TOP TIP: To find out more, take a look at our [guide about Adding Play to the Core Story](#).

Framing Tools

Do's and Don'ts

Do talk about...	Don't talk about...
Health and wellbeing as a benefit of supporting early childhood development and learning.	Early childhood development and learning as a standalone concept – because the public doesn't yet fully see <i>why</i> it's so important.
Every child and community, according to their needs.	'Every child, everywhere' – because people respond negatively to one-size-fits all approaches.
Fairness: Every child needs the opportunity to thrive, no matter where they live.	Fairness between types of people or social groups – this leads to finger-pointing and dismissing it as 'not my issue.'
Positive benefits both now and in the future.	Benefits only in the future – because our brains prefer immediate gains to distant ones. Benefits only now – because this makes it feel less significant.
Ways in which development needs to be supported.	"Growing" or "nature" – because this triggers the belief that development 'just happens naturally.'

Cut out and keep this as a reference



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Framing Thesaurus

Helpful words & phrases

Health, good health, thriving, vibrant, wellbeing, strong, positive, resilience, functioning.

Early, early years, earliest days, from conception, during pregnancy.

Support, guidance, practical help, meeting needs.

Learning, building, drawing, reading; Healthy development, developing well; Communication, talking, listening, engaging, connecting; Managing feelings, coping, patience; Making friends, sharing, developing relationships; Coordination, balance.

Fair, just, equal.

Neighbourhoods, safe places, libraries, playgrounds, schools, day care centres.

Common needs, community needs, neighbourhood needs (with specific examples, such as counselling services, childcare, housing, spaces to play).

Less-helpful words & phrases

Ill, sick, pathology, disease, medication, depression, anxiety, time-bomb, diagnosis.

First 1,000 days, antenatal, prenatal.

Information, education, awareness, scaffolding.

Attachment, spatial awareness, cognitive development, structured play, guided play, executive function, emotional regulation, social skills, fine/gross motor skills, linguistic competence.

Fairness between types of people or social groups – this leads to finger-pointing and dismissing it as ‘not my issue.’

Human rights, economy, long-term savings, Return on investment (ROI), investment, cost-effectiveness, efficiencies.

Infrastructure, town planning, policies, structural investment.



Want to learn more?

The insights in this guide are just the beginning of the story.

To explore more framing strategies for each topic, and to discover additional helpful resources such as eLearning, visit: [the Core Story webpage](#)

Any questions or comments?

If you're using the Core Story, or exploring different ways to tell it, we'd love to hear from you. Get in touch: CoreStory@telethonkids.org.au

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