Effective Communication about the Early Years
The Elements of the Frame – Part Two

Early childhood development is a complex process and communicating it effectively can be difficult. To help infant-toddler professionals successfully communicate with policymakers and the public about early childhood development, the ZERO TO THREE Policy Network is publishing a series of articles in *The Baby Monitor* focused on effective communication about the early years. The first two articles in the series can be found at http://www.zerotothree.org/policy/framingissues.html.

Introduction
This article continues our look at the elements of a frame and the ways in which infant-toddler advocates can use these elements effectively in communicating with policymakers. The elements of a frame help people understand new information by providing cues for how to interpret the communication. In the previous framing article, we examined the first three elements of the frame – context, numbers and messengers. This article examines three additional elements of the frame – **visuals, tone, and metaphors and simplifying models** – the research which supports each element, how to use it effectively in your communications and examples that relate each element directly to communicating infant-toddler issues.

The concepts and research in this article are derived from the work of the FrameWorks Institute, a non-profit communications research organization in Washington, DC.

Visuals
Words, whether written or spoken, can be a powerful tool in communicating a message to other people. But we should not forget that visuals – photographs, video footage, graphics, illustrations, etc. – can also contribute to, or detract from, your communications in significant ways. Visual images surround us and tell as much of a story as the words that accompany them. As effective communicators, how do we utilize visuals to establish our frame?

As with all the other elements of the frame, it is important to consider the frame consequences of your visual selection. Our tendency as infant and toddler professionals is to use visuals of babies alone or of very young children and their parents. We should keep in mind, however, that when communicating about policy change and policy solutions, an image of an infant and parent alone is likely to place responsibility for the problem only with that parent rather than on society at large. Instead, we should work toward using images that place very young children in a more public context (such as a library or a park) and interacting with public figures. Choosing the right visual becomes a critical first step toward framing your message in the best possible way. In addition, "Location, size, and color can all

affect the impact of your visuals. Images seem more important when they are centered, in the foreground, brightly colored, sharply defined, or overlapping with other elements."[1]

<div style="text-align:center">*RESEARCH SUGGESTS:[2]*</div>

- Pictures trigger the same models and frames as words.
- Pictures can undermine a carefully constructed verbal frame.
- Pictures are visual short hands.
- Close-up shots emphasize the personal and conceal environmental and systems-level influences.
- The narrower the frame, the less opportunity for systems-level thinking.

So how can we use visuals to positively impact our communications? The FrameWorks Institute proposes the following strategies[3]:

1. Avoid traditional images that have dominated the news regarding your issue.
2. Avoid close-up shots of individuals unless they serve your framing goals, as they tend to assign responsibility to those individuals.
3. Suggest the public nature of the problem with pictures of public and community settings.
4. Use sequence and placement of photos to demonstrate cause and effect, and trends instead of isolated events.

Let's take a look at two examples of using visuals in a communication that impacts infants and toddlers.

<div style="text-align:center">**EXAMPLE 1:**</div>

<div style="text-align:center">**Headline: "Maternal Depression on the Rise in U.S.: Health Community Encourages More Supports for Mothers of Newborns"**</div>

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[1] Bales, S.N. (June 2004). *Framing Public Issues*. Washington, DC: 24.
[2] Ibid.
[3] Ibid: 25.

<div align="center">**EXAMPLE 2:**</div>

<div align="center">**Headline: "State Increases Funding for Early Head Start: Program
Supports Social and Emotional Development of Young Children"**</div>

In the first example, the headline focuses on an important issue – maternal depression – and the health community's efforts to draw attention to it. However, the photo that accompanies the headline conflicts in many ways with the message being communicated by the words. Because the photo is a close-up of a mother and infant, the focus is on them and their particular story rather than on the systemic issue of maternal depression. Members of the health community are good messengers on issues related to young children, so perhaps a photo of a physician or nurse with a mother and infant might have better supported this frame.

In the second example, the image is of a young child with a park ranger in a social interaction. This photo appropriately supports the message of the headline, which focuses on social and emotional development and the state's funding for programs that address those aspects of a young child's development.

Tone

"Tone refers to the style, mood, manners or philosophical outlook of a communication... [and can fall into] two categories...: reasonable and rhetorical."[4] Rhetorical communications are often political or ideological and tend to remind people of their own firmly held beliefs or turn people off from considering a new position.[5] On the other hand, reasonable communications invite people to be more open to listening to and using new information. As a result, the tone of a communication can effectively shutdown an otherwise well-crafted frame.

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[4] Bales, S.N. (October 2002). "Taking Tone Seriously as a Frame Cue." *KIDS COUNT E-Zine*. Issue No. 17. Washington, DC: FrameWorks Institute. http://www.frameworksinstitute.org/products/issue17framing.shtml. Retrieved June 30, 2006.

[5] Ibid.

> - Rhetorical communications polarize people, turning many off, and are characteristic of much political and media discourse.
> - Reasonable communications make people more open to scientific findings and practical problem-solving.
> - Extreme statements and partisan attacks turn many potential supporters off and do little overall to increase support for solutions on the issue.

Strategies[7] for using tone effectively include:

1. Check your communications to make sure you are not inadvertently communicating partisan or political cues.
2. Establish a reasonable tone, focusing on problem-solving and "American can-do."
3. Use a strong Level One value to provide a universal cue by which the issue should be evaluated.
4. Use tone to reinforce other frame elements, not to undermine them.

Let's take a look at two *fictional* examples of using tone in a communication about infants and toddlers: one rhetorical and one reasonable.

> *Rhetorical:*
> Governor Turner is all talk and no action. He gives speech after speech about supporting families with young children. But when it comes to policy, he's done nothing to make that a reality. In fact, his budget proposal for this year cut funding for child care, family support, Medicaid, and more.

This example polarizes people from the outset. If you like Governor Turner, you are not going to be open to considering the communicator's point of view. And even if you are not a fan of Governor Turner, the temptation to play partisan politics is likely to turn your readers off.[8]

> *Reasonable:*
> All parents want their children to have the opportunity to do better in life than they did. And when children do better, we all benefit from it. Unfortunately, the recent budget proposal does little to make that possible. By eliminating funding for early learning programs, parent education and mental health consultation in child care, we are preventing opportunities for our youngest citizens to succeed.

This example uses tone effectively, by criticizing the plan rather than the people.[9]

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[6] Bales, S.N. (June 2004): 29.
[7] Ibid.: 32.
[8] Bales, S.N. (October 2002).
[9] Ibid.

Metaphors and Simplifying Models

Metaphors and simplifying models are the most difficult element of the frame to grasp, but when mastered can be one of the most effective tools in crafting your communications. "'An explanation that reduces a complex problem to a simple, concrete analogy or metaphor contributes understanding by helping people organize information into a clear picture in their heads, including facts and ideas previously learned but not organized in a coherent way.'"[10]

Metaphors allow us to explain a new or complex subject by likening it to something with which people are already familiar. We use, hear and read metaphors all of the time. They can often be found in newspaper articles and columns, quoted by media, etc. For example, Senator Joseph Lieberman utilized an effective metaphor when talking about global environmental treaties during the 2004 Presidential campaign.

> "Bonn surprised people…The feeling was that, if the United States took its football and left the field, the game wouldn't go forward. But the rest of the nations found their own football, and they completed the game. They left the United States on the sidelines." (Senator Joseph Lieberman, *Los Angeles Times*, July 25, 2001)[11]

This example demonstrates how using a metaphor can help everyone understand what was at stake, regardless of their knowledge about environmentalism or the global treaties being considered at the time.

Likewise, simplifying models have the ability to distill scientific concepts into analogies that can easily become commonly used among society, such as, "the heart is a pump," "the eye is a camera," etc.[12] There are numerous simplifying models that people use to try and describe early childhood development. Many of these models are based on one element of development, but they often obscure other factors and can distort what we know about development.[13] For example, a child as a "ticking clock treats early development as a default, automatic process which 'just happens' unless some terrible mishap interferes."[14] We know, of course, that this is not true. Therefore, we need to be sure that the models we use provide an understanding of early childhood development that is as complete and accurate as possible.

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[10] Bales, S.N. (June 2004): 26.
[11] Ibid.: 28.
[12] Ibid.: 27.
[13] Bales, S.N. (2002). "Opening Up the Black Box: A Case Study in Simplifying Models." *KIDS COUNT E-Zine*. Issue No. 19. Washington, DC: FrameWorks Institute. http://www.frameworksinstitute.org/products/issue19framing.shtml. Retrieved June 30, 2006.
[14] Ibid.

How can we use metaphors and simplifying models in our communications about infants and toddlers? FrameWorks proposes the following strategies:[16]

1. Use metaphors and models to help people understand how your issue works.
2. In general, use metaphors and models to connect the issue to larger systems.
3. Use metaphors and models that emphasize prevention and/or causality.

Let's take a look at an example of a metaphor and its impact on our understanding about infants and toddlers: a child as a precious object.

Researchers have identified that "when adults think of children as 'precious objects,' child care is often conceptualized as a container that provides protection for the child."[17] If child care is a container, there are a number of associated consequences to how we reason about everything related to child care.

Child Care as Container Frame[18]

Child care center	→	Container
Children	→	Package
Leaving children at center	→	Putting objects in a container
Caring for children	→	Handling objects
Child care workers	→	Package handlers

This hidden reasoning focuses on safety rather than quality, effectively shutting out certain important features we want to communicate about child care.[19] For example, why would we want to pay child care workers higher wages if all they are doing is package handling?

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[15] Bales, S.N. (June 2004): 26.
[16] Ibid.: 28.
[17] Ibid.: 27.
[18] Ibid.
[19] Ibid.

FrameWorks proposes using simplifying models to help convey the complex nature of early childhood development. Through their research, they have tested potential simplifying models and examples of how they might be used in your communications. To read more, visit: http://www.frameworksinstitute.org.

Conclusion
There are several strategic elements that contribute to the ways in which a communication is understood – context, numbers, messengers, visuals, tone, metaphors and simplifying models. By appreciating these elements and utilizing them in the most resourceful ways, you can improve your communications and advocacy in support of healthy early childhood development.

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Photographs by Debbie M. Rappaport
Photo 1, mother and baby, © 2006
Photo 2, toddler and park ranger, © 2003