Making the Public Case for Child Abuse and Neglect Prevention: A FrameWorks Message Memo

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This Memo reports on the findings from the FrameWorks Institute’s recent research on how Americans view child abuse, neglect and maltreatment in general, as well their reactions to specific reforms and arguments that child policy advocates have advanced in an effort to move beyond public acceptance of tertiary efforts to public prioritization of primary prevention policies. This work was conducted in response to a Request for Proposal solicited by Prevent Child Abuse America (PCA America) and supported by the Doris Duke Charitable Foundation. In addition to original research conducted for this project, this Memo is also informed by several years of investigation by the FrameWorks Institute on early child development and children’s issues funded by the A. L. Mailman Foundation, the David and Lucile Packard Foundation and the National Scientific Council on the Developing Child at Brandeis University.

The goal of this work is to evaluate the existing body of research available to Prevent Child Abuse America against the findings that emerge from new research, and to identify promising ways to reframe these issues in ways that engage people in prevention, motivate them to prioritize proven policies and programs, and overcome existing mental roadblocks. To that end, this Memo attempts to describe the translation process necessary to engage the public in solutions by identifying specific practices that research suggests would advance public understanding as well as those that are likely to impede it.

The findings reported here result from an integrated series of research projects commissioned on behalf of Prevent Child Abuse America by the FrameWorks Institute, based on the perspective of strategic frame analysis. Additionally, this Memo extends this descriptive research by providing another level of more speculative analysis to inform the work of policy advocates. Finally, this Memo synthesizes these findings and makes specific recommendations for incorporating these findings into Prevent Child Abuse America’s ongoing communications campaigns.

This Memo is not intended to take the place of the research reports that inform it; indeed, FrameWorks strongly recommends that child abuse prevention advocates avail themselves of these reports and challenge their own creativity to applying this learning.
Within each report are specific research findings and recommendations offered by the researchers. This Memo differs in that it attempts to look across the full body of research and against the backdrop of past research on children’s issues, and to interpret these findings from the perspective of a communications practitioner.

FrameWorks wishes to thank Meg Bostrom of Public Knowledge and Axel Aubrun and Joseph Grady of Cultural Logic for the rich body of work that informs this Memo. While this Memo draws extensively from the work of other researchers, the following conclusions are solely those of the FrameWorks Institute.

**Executive Summary**

Prevent Child Abuse America stands at a crossroads as it contemplates the future of its public education and advocacy efforts designed to prevent child abuse and neglect and secure the public understanding and support necessary to do so. Ironically, this directional dilemma is as much the product of its own past successes as it is due to any external variable. The public has learned the lessons that this organization and its extensive network of child advocates and experts have delivered over the past decade. There is broad acceptance of the reality and pervasiveness of child abuse, extending even beyond physical abuse to emotional abuse. The problem arises in how to capitalize and build upon this understanding, taking people to the next level of public engagement without bringing into play the inevitable backlash that is likely due to conflicts over public values and the policies the organization wishes to promote.

The research results presented here confirm those of past researchers: continuing along the same path pursued in previous communications campaigns is unlikely to gain any new ground and, in fact, risks alienating the public that has been won over. Currently, child abuse and neglect issues are portrayed as stories about criminal atrocities, bad parents, government failures and sexual predators. By further invigorating the dominant news frames used to tell the story of child abuse and neglect, advocates will reinforce many of the mistaken beliefs that the public currently brings to the issue, from misunderstandings about development and discipline to exaggerated appraisals of government inefficacy and stranger dangers. Most importantly, the ways that advocates or the media currently frame the issue are not leading people to an understanding of societal solutions nor are they prompting a re-examination of their personal behaviors with respect to their own children or families in their own communities. The message of prevention is being lost.

While there are advantages to be gained from all of the four attempted reframes, it is clear that conveying the realities of community impacts and child development remain the key conceptual challenges which any future child abuse prevention movement must address. The continuing obstacles faced by the dominance of the Family Bubble as the appropriate private arena for child-rearing and the sketchy role accorded community must be addressed in future messaging. At the same time, Americans’ misunderstandings of fundamental child development principles leave them in defensive posture, asserting
practices like spanking that they recognize to be ineffective because they reassert the parent’s authority and traditional values.

There are numerous ways to improve the messaging of child abuse prevention that emerge from the research findings. Most importantly, however, the FrameWorks research suggests both long-term and short-term approaches. Among long-term recommendations are strategic partnerships among groups that promote community and child development in order to advance the policies that Prevent Child Abuse America has chosen. Among short-term recommendations are topical-based campaigns that take advantage of those issue areas where Americans are already asking questions about appropriate behavior and the role of community norms, such as coaching.

In either case, Prevent Child Abuse America will need to come to terms with the limitations of the current messaging strategy and substitute strategies that promise to advance the next phase of public learning necessary to support proven practices and policies.

**Background and Goals**

FrameWorks was greatly aided in this investigation by the organization’s own thoughtful appraisal of its communications practice. Indeed, both the volume of research conducted prior to the current investigation and the degree to which this had been analyzed by Prevent Child Abuse America communicators advanced the research design in important ways. In its RFP of September 19, 2003, Prevent Child Abuse America raised important questions about the effects of its past campaign approaches:

*It is almost certainly true that the strategies employed so successfully by the child abuse and neglect prevention field to generate media coverage and public awareness in the mid-1970s have resulted in a vicious cycle in which new communications on the issue tends to conform to, and reinforce, the existing frame of reference....*

*While the establishment of a certain degree of public horror relative to the issue of child abuse and neglect was probably necessary in the early years to create public awareness of the issue, the resulting conceptual model adopted by the public has almost certainly become one of the largest barriers to advancing the issue further in terms of individual behavior change, societal solutions and policy priorities.*

In addition to testing these assertions, the organization provided FrameWorks with a series of 15 working hypotheses which it wished to see tested and elaborated in order to deepen its understanding of the best ways to address them.

And, finally, Prevent Child Abuse America was tasked with providing a series of policy benchmarks against which the existing frames and speculative reframes could be tested.
Making the Case for Child Abuse and Neglect Prevention

The original documents are available from Prevent Child Abuse America. They are also addressed in the FrameWorks research reports, as translated into the various research methods.

The Approach

To answer these hypotheses and questions, the FrameWorks Institute brought a group of communications scholars and practitioners with a unique perspective on communicating social issues. That perspective – strategic frame analysis – is based on a decade of research in the social and cognitive sciences that demonstrates that people use mental shortcuts to make sense of the world. These mental shortcuts rely on “frames,” or a small set of internalized concepts and values that allow us to accord meaning to unfolding events and new information. These frames can be triggered by language choices, different messengers or images, and these communications elements, therefore, have a profound influence on decision outcomes.

Traditionally, news media is the main source of Americans’ information about public affairs. The way the news is “framed” on many issues sets up habits of thought and expectation that, over time, are so powerful that they serve to configure new information to conform to this dominant frame. When community leaders, service organizations and advocacy groups communicate to their members and potential adherents, they have options to repeat or break these dominant frames of discourse. Understanding which frames serve to advance which policy options with which groups becomes central to any movement’s strategy. The literature of social movements suggests that the prudent choice of frames, and the ability to effectively contest the opposition’s frames, lie at the heart of successful policy advocacy. A more extensive description of strategic frame analysis is available at www.frameworksinstitute.org.

While strategic frame analysis brings new methods to bear on social issues, this perspective only confirms something that advocates have known for years: communications is among our most powerful strategic tools. Through communications we inspire people to join our efforts, convince policymakers, foundations and other leaders to prioritize our issues, and urge the media to accord them public attention. Every choice of word, metaphor, visual, or statistic conveys meaning, affecting the way these critical audiences will think about our issues, what images will come to mind and what solutions will be judged appropriate to the problem. Communications defines the problem, sets the parameters of the debate, and determines who will be heard, and who will be marginalized. Choices in the way we frame problems associated with child abuse and neglect and the solutions that would address these problems must be made carefully and consistently in order to create the powerful communications necessary to ensure that the public will engage in these issues.

When communications is effective, research demonstrates that people can look beyond the dominant frame to consider different perspectives on an issue. When communications is ineffective, the dominant frame prevails. When no dominant frame is
available, people tend to rely on “default” frames – less vivid and powerful frames that are, nevertheless, deemed relevant to the discussion and allow people to assign meaning to new information. Understanding this process makes it all the more important that policy experts and advocates understand the likely “default” frames that ordinary people will use in processing new information about child abuse, and that these same advocates are prepared to tell their story using frames that automatically link problems to solutions and to policies.

Working from this perspective, the FrameWorks research was designed to explore the following questions:

- How does the public think about child abuse and neglect? What is the source of the problem? What, if anything, can be done to prevent the problem?
- Are there dominant frames that appear almost automatic?
- Are there default frames that are routinely relied upon to make sense of unfamiliar situations or policies?
- How do these frames affect policy preferences?
- What is the public discourse on the issue? And how is this discourse influenced by the way media frames the issue?
- How can child abuse and neglect prevention be reframed to evoke a different way of thinking, one that illuminates a broader range of alternative behaviors and policy choices, and makes these both salient and sensible?
- What messages, messengers and marketing/communications strategies and vehicles will be most effective in communicating these new frames and motivating changes in societal behavior?

**Research Methods**

To answer these questions, the FrameWorks research team completed a series of three related studies:

- a meta-analysis of existing public opinion on parents and parenting, children, development, discipline, child abuse, child sexual abuse and the political context for these issues, based on an exhaustive review of more than 100 surveys and focus group reports conducted within the past six years, as well as long-term trends. The goal of this research was to root the subsequent stages of original research in the context of recent opinion research. The results are published as “Discipline and Development: A Meta-Analysis of Public Perceptions of Parents, Parenting, Child Development and Child Abuse, Public Knowledge for FrameWorks Institute, May 2003.”

- cognitive elicitations, consisting of recorded one-on-one interviews conducted in summer 2003 by professional linguists and anthropologists with a diverse group of 22 average citizens around Seattle and Philadelphia, one half of whom were parents, of which one half had children living at home. The goal
of this research was to explore the shape of public reasoning about child abuse and neglect, resulting in a systematic mapping of the frames ordinary Americans rely upon to make sense of information associated with child abuse, parenting, discipline, development and related issues. The results are published as “Two Cognitive Obstacles to Preventing Child Abuse: The ‘Other Mind’ Mistake and the ‘Family Bubble’,” Cultural Logic for FrameWorks Institute, August 2003.

- a series of six focus groups with engaged citizens in Manchester, NH, Atlanta, GA, and Chicago, IL in July 2003. Groups were recruited to meet an opinion leader profile: votes, news attentive, engaged in community through volunteer work, etc. Groups were divided by gender and mixed on all other demographic criteria. The goal of this research was to validate and extend the frames identified in the earlier work, to explore their expression in common parlance and in group dynamics, and to identify which frames and messengers advance appropriate policy alternatives. The findings are summarized in “Developing Community Connections: Qualitative Research Regarding Framing Policies,” Public Knowledge for FrameWorks Institute, August 2003.

- a literature review of frames currently in use by Prevent Child Abuse America and in news media. These reviews, undertaken by Cultural Logic, were based upon voluminous materials supplied by PCA America. Comments on chapter and organizational frames are included in the elicitations report, where they are used to demonstrate how ordinary people react to common messages, both positively and negatively. The news analysis was based on 120 news articles provided by PCA America and supplemented by a search conducted by the Center for Communications and Community at UCLA, drawing on their existing database of more than 10,000 news stories, both national and local. We asked the Center to provide typical coverage coded for child abuse, neglect and related stories, resulting in 25 TV news stories which were also analyzed, resulting in the report, “How the News Frames Child Maltreatment: Unintended Consequences,” Cultural Logic for FrameWorks Institute, September 2003.

In addition, FrameWorks’ observations and recommendations are influenced by work conducted contemporaneously with the above research, but sponsored by the A.L. Mailman Foundation and the National Scientific Panel on the Developing Child. This work, conducted by Cultural Logic, was oriented to identifying and testing simplifying models that could help translate the causal story of early child development into metaphorical frames that the public can easily grasp, internalize and repeat. This research culminated in the following publication which has greatly influenced the recommendations reprised in this memo:

It is on the basis of this body of work that FrameWorks researchers have developed the following analysis and related recommendations for improving the efficacy of communications designed to advance public engagement in child abuse prevention and related policies. While we review key findings from the reports described above, we strongly encourage readers to review the full body of research that informs this Memo, available from Prevent Child Abuse America, and to refer to the FrameWorks website (www.frameworksinstitute.org) for further background on framing theory and practice.

**Situation Analysis**

In many respects, the situation facing child abuse prevention experts and advocates in 2003 is similar to the dilemma faced recently by environmental advocates pressing for policies to address global warming. The analogy may prove useful in helping Prevent Child Abuse America and its coalition partners recognize that the situation in which they find themselves is not unique to their issue, but rather a common stage along the advocacy continuum. Consider the similarities:

- Years of effective advocacy and public communications had resulted in general acceptance by the public that global warming was real, and that it was happening now. No longer was global warming questioned by the public as scientific exaggeration or speculation, but it had emerged in the public mind as fact.
- This accomplishment had the potential to provide the important foundation for further learning.
- Yet, without a strong sense of solutions, public acceptance could not move to engagement and policy support.
- Since the public did not understand how global warming worked, they were easily distracted or disillusioned into a kind of adaptive futility.
- Importantly, if environmental advocates continued to press the same message they had in the past – proving global warming and enumerating its detrimental effects – they were likely to lose ground, as the public became focused on the reality question and not the solutions.

This situation, so common in the literature of social movements, represents a turning point for advocacy strategy and tactics. As scholars Tarrow, Snow and Benford have argued, “When a movement wishes to put forward a radically new set of ideas, it must engage in framing transformation: new values may have to be planted and nurtured, old meanings or understandings jettisoned, and erroneous beliefs or ‘misframings’ reframed.”

The ability of social movements to make these important strategic shifts is critical to their ultimate success. Indeed, scholars Snow and Benford have argued that “the failure of mass mobilization when structural conditions seem otherwise ripe may be accounted for by the absence of a resonant master frame.” Put another way, a movement’s ability to translate its essence into large, resonant ideas and organizing principles that connect to well developed American values is as important to its success in galvanizing public support as is the timeliness of its issue or the cash behind it. Message matters.
To its credit, Prevent Child Abuse America began this investigation with an assertion that the child abuse prevention movement may have exhausted the mobilizing force of its current framing strategy – a strategy constructed largely around using the drama and emotion associated with media coverage of the issue to engage Americans in prioritizing identification and treatment. All research conducted for FrameWorks confirms this position. We might characterize the past phase of the movement’s work as an agenda-setting exercise: riding the tide of media coverage and manipulating familiar frames and habits of journalism to get child abuse recognized as a problem by the public.

**Significant achievements** have been made using this approach. Among the triumphs in which advocates should take pride are the following:

- The public is deeply concerned about child abuse and neglect.
- Its concern and its definition of the issue extends beyond physical abuse to emotional abuse.
- People can readily describe both types of abuse.
- They believe abuse has lasting effects.
- They believe abuse is a common problem.

This is an important achievement and one that should affirm the impact of advocates’ past efforts on public understanding.

**However**, there are important deficiencies in public understanding that cannot be overlooked if experts and advocates are to realize their goal of public engagement, not merely passive acceptance. These include the fact that:

- They have an exaggerated sense of its pervasiveness.
- They explain its prevalence with recourse to their stereotype of the “bad parent,” which is then confirmed by child abuse communications.
- Neglect is misunderstood as “under involvement.”
- The problem is perceived as internal to “bad people” or selfish people.
- Current understanding does little to challenge the autonomy of the family or what FrameWorks researchers refer to as the “Family Bubble” – that private space in which child rearing takes place.
- It does little to establish a developmental perspective, as Americans see the lasting effects of abuse as something to overcome through effort, and not as physical and psychic “damage” to the developing child.
- It does little to advance a role for the broader society.
- Current solutions or calls to action make people feel incompetent, what our researchers refer to as “failed villagers,” using the Hillary Clinton metaphor that “it takes a village.”
- When pushed too far – defining numerous common behaviors as abusive, for example – it results in rejection.
- The introduction of government furthers the rejection of outside forces and undermines any notion of efficacy in problem-solving.
• Reasoning from within the current understanding, moral relativism – who are we to judge? – combined with respect for family privacy tend to trump the village arguments for more societal involvement in children’s lives.
• The prevention message is being lost because it is eclipsed by the numerous strongly held and familiar stories people have learned over time about child abuse; importantly, the literal use of prevention as a frame does not advance prevention as a policy.

The issue is poised at a crossroads. Child abuse prevention experts and advocates must identify and focus upon the next frontier of advocacy or risk losing momentum and reinforcing negative aspects of the current frame effects. FrameWorks researchers are unanimous in this assessment:

“Making further headway in engaging the public on the issue will have to involve more than raising the volume on awareness campaigns…Advocates have relied on the power of tragic stories and statistics to move public opinion. These tactics have been effective, but may now have reached the limits of their ability, in themselves, to change people’s thinking. If they are reinforced by explanations that help people understand the problem and its solutions more clearly, communications stand a chance of having a much greater impact.” Cultural Logic, Two Cognitive Obstacles: p1 and 25).

As we will see in reviewing the research results, the options available to Prevent Child Abuse America are not simple. The organization’s policy menu and ambitions are appropriately expansive. And the problems are intricately interrelated – both in reality and in perception. No one message strategy can accomplish all that needs to be done to move this agenda forward. Therefore, Prevent Child Abuse America is left to decide whether it wishes to choose among the viable strategies suggested by the FrameWorks research and forcefully embrace a unified strategy (all eggs in one basket) or to create menus of symbolic projects that intentionally and strategically move the full agenda forward. These options are laid out at the end of this Message Memo in the section entitled Strategic Options.

Research Findings

Dominant Frames in Public Discourse

• News media is attracted to child abuse for its sensationalism, for its personal (episodic) story elements, and because it fits within a well-established news beat (crime) – the best covered news topic in America. It is, therefore, an easy story to tell with well-established conventions.
• The dominant news frame for child abuse is that of a “horrible, criminal atrocity some monstrous parent has committed, and the horrible suffering of the child(ren) in question.” (How the News Frames:3)
• The qualitative research suggests that the effects of the dominant news frames have been to reinforce the notion of widespread parental deficits, to reify the
conclusion that the problem lies internal to the person (not in external circumstances) and to weaken the village by reinforcing the assessment that the only solution is to heighten distrust of others and to put in place safety measures to protect against stranger dangers.

- A second common news frame applied to issues of child abuse invokes the failure of child protective services. Again, the impact of this frame is not entirely positive in advancing calls for prevention and remediation. While it does attract attention to systemic failures, it fails to provide viable alternatives or solutions. Rather than heightening interest in fixing the system, these stories connect to the strongly held belief among many Americans that government is incompetent. Instead of outrage, these stories confirm a well-known story that Americans already know: government cannot protect us. Reasoning from this frame, there is little engagement in fixing the system because the only visible solution is ineffective. The likely take-away is that this is another regrettable social problem for which no solution is available, so the best one can do is to support treatment services for the inevitable victims through one’s charitable dollars.

- A third common news trope is that of the prevalence of unseen sexual predators in our midst. This story frames child abuse as the result of “stranger danger,” in which the story becomes more about personal safety and the personal behaviors one can incorporate into one’s family life than it is about understanding who abuses and why and how patterns of abuse can be predicted and prevented. This too is a familiar journalistic story, as it takes on the script of a consumer safety narrative. Most importantly, this frame erodes trust in community or the Village as a solution to child abuse and parental isolation. It also reinforces the belief that “bad people” commit child abuse crimes, with little attention to circumstances that lead to abuse.

- There are another set of commonly told stories that warrant note in that they have a common characteristic. Focused on children’s rights or judging the behavior of other parents, these stories inadvertently “cross a line,” that the public has established between government and the Family Bubble. The public reaction is predictably negative. These stories are viewed as “meddling in other people’s business,” and violating the strongly held belief in family autonomy.

In sum, the stories that need to be told about child abuse and neglect do not fit the formula as simple, sensational or episodic. The stories we need told – in order to connect the problem to policies and solutions – are complex, contextualized and systemic. When advocates and experts fall into the trap of “framing for access,” or determining how to get the most news by fitting their story into the dominant news frame, they inadvertently reinforce problematic habits of thinking. At the same time, the full complexity of the child abuse story requires translation into narratives and frames that are as familiar and credible to ordinary people as those they see each night on the evening news.

In order to identify these potential reframes, we must step inside the reasoning process that people bring to these issues and identify their patterns of expectation. Only in this way, can we focus on the main conceptual problems that are ignited by the dominant
frames of public discourse and identify alternative ways to tell the story that connect to people’s deeply held values.

**Deconstructing Patterns of Expectation**

The FrameWorks research for Prevent Child Abuse America confirmed patterns of reasoning observed in our earlier work for the David and Lucile Packard Foundation and reported in our Message Memo entitled “Talking School Readiness and Early Child Development” (see [www.frameworksinstitute.org](http://www.frameworksinstitute.org)). This is significant as it helps establish the validity of these earlier findings and raises confidence in their endurance across time, geographies and samples.

While the latest research findings are available from Prevent Child Abuse America, we quote briefly below from the relevant portions of the earlier findings:

*Child Development is a Black Box and default explanations predominate.*

*While many Americans recognize and are articulate about the various stages of child development, few can relate these impressions to a coherent theory or organizing principle about the way children grow. What happens inside the child is largely invisible to them: a black box. When asked to think and talk about what matters in the early years and why, most Americans “default” to three explanations:*

1. **Family:** Child rearing takes place in the family, making those things that occur outside the family largely irrelevant to the discussion. Parents are responsible, making those programs and policies that support and extend good parenting very accessible to the public. Public opinion about these policies is often mixed. On the one hand, as Cultural Logic found in the elicitations, people say parents should be supported in whatever way possible. On the other hand, as Public Knowledge found in the focus groups, people can be easily persuaded that parenting is a diminishing art due to such declining values among parents as selfishness, materialism, and elitism. According to this latter view, the only way to improve outcomes for children is to “fix” their parents.

   - “I think [families] are more like kingdoms in the fact that they have their own rules, their own laws but they interact with other countries.” (Virginia man)
   - “I think it is just the mother's affection, closeness, some kind of bond or relationship between mother and father and the kid. It's a bonding process.” (LA man)
   - “I think one parent at least in the first five years until they get to school ought to be at home because that sets the tone for the kids.” (Virginia man)
   - “I think they absorb. Through three and five – I know my son absorbs just everything that came around him. He just wanted to know everything.
2. **The Self-Made Child:** The goal of this family-centered child rearing is to raise a successful and self-reliant child, who can “stand on his own two feet in the world,” placing the emphasis on autonomy over interdependence. While Cultural Logic reports some important public concern for the socialization of children, for the most part social, emotional and regulatory development are less top-of-the-mind than self-reliance. Furthermore, this developmental view raises concerns for “spoiling” children and equates this with too much attention, too much guidance and “overprotection.” This perspective, so prevalent in the focus groups, often leads our informants to a positive interpretation of age-inappropriate parenting, seeing this as “letting the child make his own decisions.”

- “The parents are so protective now compared to what they were 20, 30, 40 years ago, especially the child that’s born in the suburbs. I did a lot of things on my own. When we played sports, there was no parental involvement. The kids made up their own games and played. We didn’t have to be ferried, driven to a place where we played. There weren’t parents sitting there coaching us, urging us on. We made up our own thing. We were independent… I think this holds back the development of children.” (Boston man)
- “It is kind of overprotecting; keeping them a baby. Let them make decisions. Ask them questions about what it is they want as opposed to always making decisions for them.” (Los Angeles man)

3. **Safety First:** The priorities for child-rearing are defensive: protect from harm and disease, directing parental and community energies to the child’s physical well-being and not to what happens inside the black box. This tendency is no doubt fuelled by the media’s overwhelming emphasis upon crime and safety in news coverage of children’s issues, from child abductions to the dangers of daycare. Moreover, as Cultural Logic points out, when people cannot fathom the internal dynamics of child development, they tend to focus on observable phenomena, making physical development more available to them than emotional growth, for example.

- “I guess you’re looking for clean and safe facilities, and the right number of staff per children, and you’re looking for activities that help the children grow intellectually rather than make sure they stand in line and be quiet.”
- “She’s in this really safe little pre-school, this safe little yard with two adults there…”
- “There’s just so many kids in one area, especially when they’re infants, they just get so sick. Their immune systems are so immature…”
Americans struggle for working models to explain child development. Most popular default frames and current models downplay the full range of a child’s critical interactions, concentrating attention solely on the domain of the family and on observable, largely cognitive, development.

The common sense metaphors and models that people rely upon to convey a child’s development are mostly at odds with expert understanding, and lead people to make inaccurate assessments of what very young children need. As Cultural Logic comments, “It’s almost as though people think about how to ‘fill’ kids’ heads with the right knowledge, but do not think of how we are actually shaping or even creating the ‘tools’ they will have for the rest of their lives (intellectual, emotional, social, etc.).”

- If we don’t instill a sense of discipline and values and that kind of thing in our children, our society eventually is going to be a place where things just don’t have much structure.
- I think it’s evident in our culture with drugs, gangs, violence, all that kind of thing, that the time we don’t spend with our kids keeping them on track and making sure they understand our values and our way of life and what we want for them, and in the end means that it's easier for them to get sidetracked.
- Q: What’s happening inside a kid’s head when he or she is just sitting on Mom or Dad’s lap with a book?
  A: Um, I think without knowing it, they are absorbing a lot of things.
  • “We’ve all seen how children are like sponges in the early years...”

These three default understandings – that child rearing takes place in the Family Bubble where issues of family autonomy are paramount, that children are “little adults” with similar capacities and motivations, and that the (primarily physical) safety of children should be the primary concern for parents – recur in the FrameWorks research for Prevent Child Abuse America. However, they have slightly different implications, viewed against a set of policies and programs oriented toward family support and abuse prevention, as opposed to school readiness.

First, the prevalence of the Family Bubble as the appropriately autonomous and isolated arena in which child-rearing takes place helps us understand the initial rejection of interventions like home visitation or even judging other parents’ approaches to discipline as inappropriate. As long as child-rearing stands uncontested within the Family Bubble, Americans are likely to be nervous about “crossing the line” in terms of interference with family practices. They view this morally as disrespectful and, given that the predominant actor is likely to be associated with government, the situation reminds them further of government intrusion into private life. Even those campaign ads that feature children abused with irons or in closets accept the Family Bubble by calling our attention to cases...
in which the family was so dysfunctional that someone had to step in. But they do little to contest its primacy nor to provide us with a different lens that shows ongoing positive interaction between the family and the community for the good of children. Intervention as a positive force is a largely undeveloped idea; few Americans can imagine what to do or whom to do it with.

Second, the emphasis on personal safety viewed within the context of child abuse further diminishes the idea of a positive community role in family life. Views from this frame, the community is what you protect your child from, not a helping influence in preventing families from enduring the stressful situations that contribute to abusive behaviors. Since the emphasis on personal safety reinforces the Family Bubble as the protective sphere and demonizes outsiders, it reinforces distrust. The idea of the Village presupposes that most people are basically OK. The media negates this through its translation of child abuse issues into the highly sensational crime and personal safety frames, leaving people’s attention focused on identifying the harmful outsiders and keeping them far removed from the protective Family Bubble. Earlier FrameWorks research focused on the “Child as Precious Object” reasoning which emphasizes the physical fragility of the child and the need to protect children from physical harm to the exclusion of all other considerations, such as lack of stimulation, neglect, stress or deprivation.

It is, however, in the area of the “self-made child” that FrameWorks’ recent research proves most informative in helping us understand the pernicious influence of dominant frames on public understanding of child abuse issues. Because Americans have so little understanding of child development, Cultural Logic argues, they make an important conceptual “mistake” that is supported by the “self-made child” frame. When reasoning about children from this frame, Americans:

“… misperceive a child as a little mind which develops through abstract processes like learning, memory and choice; or which does not ‘develop’ at all, and exists from the beginning as something like an adult mind which needs to be ‘filled’ or ‘guided’.” (CL2:12)

This developmental mistake – labeled the “other minds” model by our researchers – inappropriately and erroneously attributes adult intentionality and will to the developing child, pitting child against adult in a struggle for dominance. Reasoning in this frame, as Cultural Logic points out, it is a “natural conclusion” that “even one year-old children can benefit from punishment for breaking moral rules.” The naïve but willful child must be “taught” who is the more experienced boss, who makes the decisions and sets the rules. Spanking, and the oft-repeated “spare the rod and spoil the child” become entirely comprehensible within the logic of this frame. Indeed, from this perspective, “spoiling” a child becomes a more compelling concern than over-disciplining a child.

There are five subsidiary patterns of reasoning identified by the FrameWorks research for Prevent Child Abuse America which are worth noting:
• **Get over it vs. Damage:** Closely related to the idea of children as little adults is the notion that they can triumph over adversity through their own willpower. This “Baby Bootstrap” model undercuts the idea that abuse leads to lasting damage to the child’s developing brain or to deficiencies that are beyond their power to address.

• **Every Child is Unique:** Americans’ strong belief in individualism can result in a denial of scientific observation and prediction. The idea that a child could be scarred for life is repugnant to people. While they are capable of understanding that there are “stages all people go through,” the strongly held idea of uniqueness remains the dominant paradigm.

• **Old Ways are the Best Ways:** Because child-rearing happens within the Family Bubble, the “experts” looked to in most cases are other family members. This is problematic because few people – especially grandparents – have recourse to a deeper understanding of development. The trusted messengers then tend to reinforce the old homilies of “spare the rod and spoil the child,” all the while reinforcing the notion that parenting comes naturally and that only defective parents and families need help from those beyond the Bubble.

• **Money Doesn’t Matter:** Because neglect is translated to underinvolvement, affluent, dual-career parents are the most likely to be “abusers.” Bad parents are perceived as those who have bad priorities and make bad choices, not those who have constrained choices because of socio-economic status, changes in the economy, etc. This mistake leads people to see affluent families as those most “at risk” for child neglect, because they lack the values necessary to prioritize children. This does little to direct public resources toward families who need help.

**Critical Issues of Responsibility and Solutions**

When debating issues of responsibility from within the tight frame of the Family Bubble, one might be tempted to quip that “it’s the family, stupid.”

Indeed, this public assessment is inadvertently reinforced by the ineffectiveness of the other actors. When government is involved, it proves ineffectual. When “outside” individuals are involved, they too prove ineffectual. Confusion over the role of the “villagers” further contributes to this assessment, as ordinary people are advised to “befriend” other families but be ready to “turn them in” as they prove deficient in their child rearing capacities.

“The result is a dilemma in which the bystander to child abuse is constantly informed by the media about the ineffectiveness of government institutions, and at the same time, realizes (and is often reminded) of his own powerlessness as a ‘responsible villager.’” (CL2:19)
Many child abuse prevention messages attempt to enlist ordinary people in “taking a stand” against child abuse or, positively stated, providing support to families. These calls to action, viewed within the current understanding of child abuse, set a very high bar for ordinary people. They are called upon to help unknown parents who are viewed as highly suspect of abusive behavior, without any understanding of how to get ahead of the problem, nor any tools to diagnose who may be at risk or what might constitute effective preventive behavior. Since child abuse is criminal behavior and child rearing occurs in a private realm, people are literally walking on eggshells in entering the Family Bubble and attempting to play the role that government has proven ineffective in resolving.

In sum, there are few solutions advanced by advocates that can penetrate the frame dynamics of the Family Bubble, Government Ineffectiveness, and Personal Safety. Reasoning within these frames, solutions beyond the personal (remove the child, fix the parents) become invisible. To the extent that the problem of child abuse has been defined as internal to the parents (bad people), the solution becomes incarceration of criminals. Problematically, the idea of prevention (versus punishment as a deterrent) is invisible.

Importantly, while child abuse prevention advocates talk about prevention repeatedly, the frame of prevention fails to set up support for prevention policies (see further discussion below). Until the problem in redefined in such a way that prevention policies “make sense” within the operative frame, they are likely to continue to be perceived as a non sequitur.

Effects of Speculative Reframes

In light of these perceptual realities, FrameWorks chose four speculative reframes to take into the focus group testing. Representative news articles were created that fully developed four frame-based arguments: (1) a strong Child Abuse Frame, typical of the best of these news stories being advanced by advocates, that connects horrific cases to the prevention programs and policies that might have prevented it; (2) a Parenting Frame that advances the idea that all Americans have a stake in good parenting and that good parenting is the result of both information and education and environmental conditions that can be addressed through policies that relieve stress on the family; (3) a Community Frame that attempts to broaden responsibility for child rearing beyond the family to coaches, teachers, doctors and neighbors and to emphasize the community’s ability to prevent abuse through family supports; and (4) a Child Development Frame that explains the science of the developing brain and the implications for families, caregivers and communities.

Importantly, no one reframe can lift the full range of policies and programs that Prevent Child Abuse America wishes to promote. Each lifts a certain set of policies, and disadvantages others. For example, “People can use (all four frames) to justify physical discipline, though some frames are more robust than others,” Public Knowledge concludes. Yet, of the four, the Child Abuse Frame does the least to move forward a
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comprehensive prevention agenda. And the Parenting Frame has serious default associations which tend to reassign responsibility to the Family Bubble and individual actors.

While there is no “silver bullet” that contests the strongly held beliefs associated with child abuse and neglect, there are some significant advantages to each of the frames tested over current practice. This is especially true of the Child Development and Community Frames. Perhaps, more than anything else, the effects associated with all four frames demonstrate the possibility that, consistently deployed over time, reframes can result in significant reconsiderations and reconceptualizations of these issues. The effects of each of these frames is summarized below.

(1) Child Abuse: Effects of The Current Reframing Strategy

As Public Knowledge concludes:

“The Child Abuse Frame...is effective in causing readers to question whether or not government has the right priorities when it comes to children and families. However, it also undermines support for government solutions and does not address the perceptions that prohibit people from acting on child maltreatment. Importantly, it does not advance a prevention agenda, providing little impetus for better family support services, early intervention and referral or even parenting education. The article’s prevention message and its call for positive parenting go largely unnoticed due to the vividness of the Child Abuse and Failed Government frames.” (PK:3)

Further, this frame:

• Highlights government’s bad priorities.
• Reminds people of government’s incompetence.
• Connects with other issues on which government is incompetent (security, jobs, health care), which then tends to deprioritize child abuse as a top issue.
• Results in frustration and helplessness, not active engagement.
• While there is strong support for treatment, it is seen as belonging to the domain of charity, which is associated with sympathy for victims, and not with politics, prevention, or social change.
• Lodges the problem in the people.
• Inhibits further learning – no “causal story” is promoted, linking the outcome of child abuse to causes, conditions and the unavailability of proven solutions.
• Consigns the prevention message to inevitability (prevention is impossible).
• Loses the message that positive parenting, and the programs necessary to support it, are important to the vividness of the child abuse frame in which the problem is
the result of “bad people”; while this is retrievable (see below), it works better when decoupled from the child abuse prime.

It is important to note that, every time the organization’s name is used, it introduces the Child Abuse Frame. This constrains the discussion and brings with it associations related to the frame such as crime, bad parents, etc. Moreover, it “limits interest in the organization’s communications” as Public Knowledge concludes (PK:24) By contrast, “Healthy Families America” was universally well-received and was understood as improving families. The organization may want to consider a name change at this point that allows it to move from a negative to a positive.

(2) Effects of the Better Parenting Frames

When reasoning in this frame, problematically, parenting is “an individual choice and individual responsibility, external conditions do not matter to the success of the family, and outsiders (unless they are an extension of the Family Bubble) have no role.” (PK:8)

Further, this frame:

• Cues up the Family Bubble and therefore defines community actors as “outsiders” whose presence is necessary because of the failure of parents.
• Defines the roles for outsiders narrowly as either the rare exception to the “stranger danger” frame or those who pick up the pieces for failed parenting.
• Sets up fragile equation in which, if the Family Bubble is violated, the roles for the Village and Government are automatically defined as intrusion and judgmental, resulting in backlash.
• Effectively counters the unexamined belief that parenting is natural; this frame connects parenting to ordinary people’s experience and empathy (not sympathy); it is, therefore, an important base for shifting the discussion to what everyone needs to know to parent well.
• Makes it more likely that people will look for solutions within the family.
• Fails to contest mistaken understanding of development and to displace notion that the environment doesn’t matter.
• Associates the notion that parenting is a “tough job” with the assertion that “tough love” is an appropriate response (other minds mistake).
• Allows people to default to trusted in-family messengers which further exacerbates developmental mistakes, e.g. money doesn’t matter, all you need is love and child as precious object.
• Promotes a “that’s life” view of the world in which parents acknowledge that everyone learns on the job, so preparing for parenting is not possible and the only solution is to “give parents a break” which is defined as providing an hour of babysitting for a neighborhood parent.
• Can lead to an understanding that child abuse is inadvertent and occurs in stressful situations – BUT this understanding is dependent upon the kind of reasonable, contextualized discussion afforded by focus groups and would need to be extended over time; nevertheless, this is a promising finding.

(3) Effects of the Child Development Frame:

Because the dynamics of child development are so little understood by ordinary Americans, “people’s thinking about child development tends to default to parent-child interactions and disciplinary issues.” (PK:11)

Further, this frame:

• Provides the most “new information,” and therefore causes people to reconsider and re-examine their existing frames.
• Connects to Americans’ insatiable desire for more and better information.
• Like the Parenting Frame, this frame tends to remind people that parenting requires learning and skill.
• Conflicts with people’s deeply held belief that all children are unique and cannot be put into categories.
• Causes people to reject determinism in the early years; because Americans believe in equal opportunity, they tend to reject any constraints that hinder this from childhood; they can only understand socio-economic constraints or “bad seed” genetic inheritance, but continue to believe in the triumph of “boot strap” willpower over circumstance; this does little to advance an understanding of developmental damage.
• Reinforces the idea that neglect is about refusing to spend time with kids, an outcome associated with parents who have the wrong priorities, and made the wrong choices.
• Tends to promote existing practices, e.g. discussions of discipline, not growth and development and to do little to advance an appreciation for interaction as opposed to safety; these responses are a direct consequence of the lack of understanding of what works.

(4) Effects of the Community Frameworks

While the obvious solution to many of the previous frames would appear to be a story in which the role of community is explicit, “people find it difficult to connect children and families to a broader community… For the community frame to be effective in leading to policy support, it is important to establish existing connections to community, not a nostalgic view of a 1950s community that reminds them that they are not connected to others in the way they were in the past. Furthermore, it is important to create the connections to conditions and to institutional relationships (schools, libraries, recreation
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centers, etc.) that will benefit children, rather than emphasize an individual’s responsibility to create connections with other individuals, or to simply see relationships as needed to relieve adult stress.”(PK:14, 16)

Further, this frame:

- Forces people to “fill in” the blanks in their definition of positive community, and they tend to do so with a definition that is merely the positive side of the “bad parent” frame: two parents, women don’t work, people sacrifice to provide for kids, etc. This reduces community to the aggregation of individual choices and does little to define a role for community in expanding choices for parents.
- Leads to nostalgia, which reminds people of the deteriorating quality of life and propels them to prioritize stranger danger and safety issues and to promote traditional discipline as an antidote to the deterioration of values.
- When clarified or deployed as contemporary community, with robust examples of libraries, community centers, schools as the vital link between families, this frame crosses class, reducing the stigma of outside help as associated with failed families. It also makes significant headway toward penetrating the Family Bubble with considerations of environment and non-family relationships.

**Strategic Reframing Recommendations**

Looking across the body of this research, there are a number of important findings that can be incorporated into the organization’s message strategy immediately. In making these strategic changes, the order of the communication elements will be very important, given the highly developed patterns of expectation associated with these issues. Without attention to order, the public is likely to easily grasp the story of child abuse it knows well from media and public discourse and to stop processing any further information.

*When Child Abuse is addressed directly*, these frame elements must appear high in the messaging, in order to prevent the powerful default patterns of thinking that erode its effectiveness in promoting policies and programs:

- *Do not begin the communication with child abuse,* but rather prime it with a strongly held value like children are our future, children deserve opportunities from the beginning, etc. By substituting a common value for the dramatic and highly charged issue of child abuse, you are more likely to benefit from some of the societal role accorded to realizing that value for all children and to avoid the quick default to the stereotypes associated with child abuse and child abusers.
• **Solutions must be spelled out at the top of the communication**, to advance the prevention message and overcome the public’s sense of inevitability (bad parents or bad people pierced the Family Bubble) and to counter the futility of any action (protect your own kids inside the Family Bubble, treat those who are victims).

• **A clear definition of the problem is required**, and this should be careful not to focus on people in the abusive situation but rather on the predictable situations in which abusive behavior happens: poverty, divorce, addiction, drug abuse, stress, limited education, job loss, isolation, etc.

• **Wherever possible, tell stories of efficacy** – demonstrate how programs and policies have worked for the benefit of children by predicting and addressing abusive situations before they happened. This can take the form of touting the effects of Healthy Families America and its home visitation program, or the impact of anti-bullying programs on aggression, or the value of mentoring programs in keeping children in difficult situations on track for achievement. In this way, a subtle point can be made about the interwoven relationship of abuse to internalized anger and social isolation. In effect, it increases the idea of situations, not people, as the appropriate focus for child abuse interventions.

• **Avoid vivid, dramatic details** and the focus on the worst cases, as well as on sexual abuse as the dominant form of abuse, as these frames only serve to reinforce the crime script and related conclusions about bad people, bad parents and the inevitability of abuse.

• **Forget the numbers**, in trying to clarify the exact prevalence of abuse; people believe it is a big problem, they tend to overstate it numerically (as they do many social problems they deem important) and correcting their error is only likely to result in diminished concern for the problem.

• **Stop fighting the fight you’ve won**, by continuing to convince people of the prevalence and seriousness of child abuse. It is time to shift to deepening citizens’ understanding of the problem, not attention-getting or agenda-setting.

• **Elevate the prevalence and definition of neglect**, as the most common form of child abuse; this will require a different term (as neglect is too tightly associated with bad, often affluent parents who ignore their children) like maltreatment. Neglect has the added advantage of being inherently situational and affords a strong messaging opportunity that, once invigorated, can map on to abuse as well.

• **Tell a developmental story**, by using effective metaphors and models (see below) to help people understand the developing brain as a system that can be damaged and needs nurturing from its environment in order to grow.

• **Avoid reinforcing the cognitive mistakes that people make**, by examining your communication to make sure it does not portray the child as willful or intentional, or define abuse as an internal flaw within bad people.

• **Try to get multiple actors into the frame**, and avoid tightly framed communications that reinforce the Family Bubble. Use community elders to explain child development, bring in front-line program directors who have worked with kids and families. Try to broaden the discussion to the Village. Try to promote trust, as opposed to safety measures required to prevent stranger danger.
• **Talk about parenting as a learned skill for everyone**, not a natural or inborn ability that only some (deficient, defective) parents need to work to acquire. Try not to discuss parenting as a private act, but rather one in which society has a stake and other community actors – from pediatricians to home visitors – have important information to offer.

• **Don’t issue calls to action that are doomed to failure**, like expecting outsiders to both befriend and turn in troubled families. Indeed, Prevent Child Abuse America should give some considerable thought to defining the contours of the Successful Village and the role that individual citizens can be expected to play in it. As it stands, this aspect of current messaging is creating confusion and a deeper sense of personal inefficacy.

Tightly focusing the frame on parents and parenting only reinforces strongly held beliefs about the inviolability of the Family Bubble and the prevalence of the Bad Parent. This is not to suggest that discussions of family education, parenting preparation and home visitation be dropped altogether, but rather that they are more likely to benefit by being primed by the Community Frame or the Development Frame than by the Parent Frame. Many of the same recommendations cited above apply to this issue as well; therefore we will highlight only those most critically connected to this frame. *When discussing parenting policies or issues*, these frame elements must appear prominently in the messaging:

• **Do not begin the communication with an overt discussion of parenting styles**, as this tends to reinforce Americans’ sense that “what you do in your own family is your business;” rather, prime the discussion with values like children are our future, we all have a stake in the next generation, etc. that open the door to the Community and Child Development Frames.

• **Use visuals that broaden the perspective** beyond the Family Bubble – no tight shots of children with parents – but, rather, show coaches, mentors and librarians interacting with families.

• **Use recent research in child development and the new brain research as the “new information” necessary** to prompt a reconsideration of parenting skills.

• **Establish that good parents are made, not born** and demonstrate the kind of knowledge and supports that parents should be able to count upon in the community; make explicit what can be learned and avoided through effective programs.

• **Focus on situations** in which many parents find themselves – divorced, out of work, stressed – and connect parent education and family supports to these situations; avoid demonizing certain categories of parents or making parental deficiency the necessary prerequisite to outside help.

• **Use the parenting frame to establish empathy**, and the universality of the predicament in which people find themselves; this frame is especially powerful in promoting workplace reforms that recognize the realities of working parents’ lives.

• **Champion programs that work**, and describe how these programs resulted in healthier situations for children and families.
• *Take care in the definition of abuse*, that neglect is not left open to default misinterpretation as lack of involvement.

• *Avoid using parents as messengers*, as this further validates the Family Bubble and the existing tendency to look to other family members or non-experts for advice.

• *Don’t cross the line*, by boldly asserting a prominent role for government or reinforcing the widely held fear that someone will come and take your children away for arbitrary reasons; bring community in, don’t shut parents out.

• *When addressing issues with strongly developed associations, prime first and use reasonable tone*. For example, don’t tackle spanking or hitting straight on, but first prime with something like, “Universally, parents want their children to learn right from wrong. Most parents admit spanking doesn’t work, but they have few alternatives…now new research from child development experts says there are better ways to get children to internalize discipline, and that hitting may in fact make children weaker and less able to judge right from wrong ….”

• *Do not confuse people with calls to action* that ask people to spy on their neighbors, be ready to turn them in and at the same time provide support; establish and foster trust.

When defining a role for community, with resource to the Community Frame, the following framing recommendations are important:

• *Begin with a strong vision or description of community* – use analogies that define community as the environment in which children, like plants, grow, as well as others that demonstrate all the actors in a community that shape a child over time.

• *Avoid nostalgia*, which only reinforces Americans’ deep concern over the loss of traditional values and may, ironically, send them back to more traditional forms of discipline like spanking; note how closely related are notions of the “Good Old Days” to physical punishment by a wide array of community actors! Talk about, and use visuals that promote contemporary communities.

• *Avoid creating the idea of community as the safety net for failed parenting.* Examine your messages over time to see if community is portrayed as a factor in many parents’ lives, both successful and troubled, and is seen as a force for positive development, not merely prevention of the negative.

• *Don’t cross the line*, by overtly displacing the Family Bubble. Keep parents in the picture, but add other actors to the scenario.

• *Stress community connections* – libraries, recreational organizations, schools, community centers – that affect and benefit children and their families; but don’t fall into the trap of putting the responsibility on the parents to make these connections, or imply that these programs are abundant (leading to the conclusion that only ineffective parents fail to find them).

• *Stress interactivity and mutuality of benefits* – we give to children now so that they can give back to the community and the society in the future.

• *Show other community actors interacting with children and enjoying it* – stress that it is a pleasure to be involved in the lives of children and families; help define
the Village as an attractive place, not a place where children are dumped so their parents can pursue work or bad priorities.

In addition to many of the above recommendations, when discussing child development, the following recommendations are important to consider in developing communications:

- Use new research on child development to get people into the conversation and to reconsider what they know. Take care in establishing an informative and reasonable tone; don’t explicitly challenge “old ways are the best ways.”
- Use simple but highly descriptive models to help people understand how the brain develops (see section below). Do not leave scientific jargon untranslated.
- Describe the process as affecting the whole child. As Cultural Logic writes, “messages that incorporate information about the brain must be carefully framed in order to affirm that they are about emotion, character and values, and not just about a child’s intellect.” (2:14)
- Avoid taking on directly those highly charged issues like spoiling and spanking. This is likely to send people scurrying to defend the importance of discipline, even if the techniques are not perfect. Instead counter them through indirection. For example, describe developmentally appropriate behavior as increasing the odds a child will thrive and succeed, or spanking as a technique that doesn’t work well, that makes children weaker in developing self-discipline.
- Demonstrate alternatives. Don’t tell people what not to do without telling them why and what to do instead and why the latter is preferable. Educate, don’t lecture.
- Back up experts with front-line messengers. When you rely on scientists and new reports, back this up with people who can attest to the validity with their own eyes – people who run programs for kids, pediatricians, teachers, etc.

The Use of Simplifying Models and Other Metaphors

FrameWorks has stressed the importance of “priming” people to see child abuse issues through the lens of strongly held values like Community, the Future, and Opportunity. As Cultural Logic has pointed out in other publications, “An essentially different (but complementary) approach is to provide people with a new model rather than reminding them of a familiar one. In order to be helpful (i.e., both informative and “catchy”), such a model must be fairly simple and concrete – such as a vivid metaphor – while also capturing the essence of an expert perspective.” For example, the depiction of the ozone problem as a “hole in the roof of the sky” made it significantly easier for people to understand and engage with the issue. This is a matter of providing a mental model where none existed before. FrameWorks has been instrumental in providing a similar model for global warming, with research that demonstrates the model’s efficacy in engaging people in solutions. (For a fuller discussion of the principles and rationales of the simplifying models approach see FrameWorks’ KidsCount Ezine number 19: “Opening Up the Black Box: A Case Study in Simplifying Models” – by Axel Aubrun and Joe Grady with Susan
In 2003, with funding from the A. L. Mailman Foundation to FrameWorks, Cultural Logic undertook research to identify a new simplifying model to help explain the complex process of early child development, with special emphasis on ensuring that concepts like child abuse and neglect, as well as family well-being, mental health, and prevention were advanced by the model. The research involved just over 400 subjects, and took place between July and September, 2003. Participants were asked to respond to terms and to interpret explanatory paragraphs, to respond to policy-related questionnaires, and, finally, to explain child development in successive iterations of participants. This method, developed by Cultural Logic, is referred to as “Talk Back Testing.” For a complete report on the process and its findings, see “Moving the Public Beyond Familiar Understandings of ECD: Findings from the Talk Back Testing of Simplifying Models,” Cultural Logic for FrameWorks Institute, November 2003 at www.frameworksinstitute.org.

There are particular aspects of this research which are germane to the work of child abuse and neglect prevention advocates. We summarize these below.

Among the key recommendations was the importance of moving from a “mentalist” communications perspective to a “materialist” perspective. The former focuses on subjective, abstract mental experiences (thoughts, feelings, emotionality, willfulness) while the latter emphasizes the physical changes that take place in a child’s brain (pruning, circuits, hormones, chemicals). As Cultural Logic explains:

“The mentalist perspective does not include the important notion of a “damaged system” (i.e. the idea that a person might behave a certain way because of a damaged internal system rather than a moral failure); it excludes certain kinds of causality, such as the lasting effects of chronic stress; and it tends to imply a kind of “all or nothing” perspective, in which personhood emerges full-blown even in very young children, rather than developing through the growth of individual parts and systems.”

TalkBack testing demonstrated that, when people understood brain development in terms of lasting damage to the system, they took it far more seriously than the more abstract ideas of bad behavior or bad character:

“I think what really gets me ...is that it could actually have a chemical or biological or some sort of impact on the child’s brain...Behavior is one thing, and attitude and personality is one thing, but if it can really negatively impact...the chemistry and make-up of the brain – you can damage that that early – that’s really serious. That’s more than just having a bad personality, that’s really screwing up a kid.”

TalkBack informant
The recommendations that emerge from this aspect of the research include three integrated aspects of the model:

**Brain Architecture:**

The idea of Brain Architecture makes it possible for lay people to attend to and think about new ideas concerning early childhood development more quickly and in a more sustained way than any other models tested. Brain Architecture is both a memorable term and an effective organizing principle, by means of which lay people can think about explanations of brain development – including, for example, the ways in which a child’s brain architecture is built and strengthened, or information about things that can weaken brain architecture or hinder the development of the brain’s structure. Thinking about childhood development in this way can help people see, for example, that it would make sense for pediatricians to take an interest in children’s mental and emotional development.

**Interaction:**

A challenging part of the expert model on ECD relates to the types of interaction children need in order to develop properly. This round of TalkBack revealed that certain terms do have the capacity to engage and inform the public. For example, information about “Mirroring” – the instinctive interaction style in which adults get in sync with babies and mimic their coos, gestures and facial expressions – makes it easy for people to begin to see the importance of interaction. Thinking about development in this way can help people see, for example, that child care must involve one-on-one interaction with attentive providers.

**Stress-related Chemicals in the Brain:**

When lay people are told that stress releases chemicals in the brain, and that these chemicals weaken brain architecture, or hinder its development, they find this explanation important and memorable. When they understand the situations that can cause a baby to feel stress – including lack of interaction, or interaction with an adult under stress – they are able to extrapolate to the kinds of situations which are detrimental to the development of a baby’s brain architecture, including the effects of poverty on families.

Putting these three inter-related components together yields a message platform like the following:

*We now know that if a baby doesn’t have the right kinds of interactions in the first few years of life, the baby’s brain architecture doesn’t build itself properly. And if the brain architecture doesn’t build itself properly, kids can be at a disadvantage in long term ways. We know a lot about what helps and hurts the*
growth of brain architecture. What helps build and solidify brain architecture is interaction like mirroring where adults take time to mimic the baby’s facial expressions, coos and gestures, for example. This practice strengthens the architecture. What weakens and damages brain architecture is frequent stress – from fear, hunger or interacting with a parent under stress, for example. Stress releases toxic chemicals in the baby’s brain. These chemicals weaken brain architecture, by stopping brain cells from growing and forming connections to each other.

While these findings are applicable to many issues advocates within the child advocacy community, they have special relevance for those who work on child abuse and neglect. The TalkBack testing revealed some significant progress in the model’s ability to:

- Elevate consideration of the effects of poverty on the developing child.
- Define neglect as related to poverty and stress.
- Overcome the belief that the triumphant individual can overcome early deprivation and that this might, in fact, be good for character-building.
- Make clear the lasting effects of abuse and neglect without being entirely deterministic – the brain’s plasticity can work around the damage but it is harder, takes longer and costs more in the long run.
- Emphasize the cost-benefits of early intervention and prevention.

Consider the differences in the following frame effects, the first from an informant presented with the school readiness model and the second from an informant in response to an earlier variant of brain architecture – emotional brain – that was later discarded in favor of the more powerful model:

**Q:** How does growing up in poverty affect a child’s school readiness?

**A:** I would say in a lot of cases, I wouldn’t say in all cases, growing up in poverty would hinder them, but I guess in some cases it would hinder them, sort of being ready to get to school as knowing. I guess maybe kids who are not in poverty growing up do have an advantage, as far as they probably know a little more when they do start school than children who are raised in poverty.
Q: How does growing up in poverty affect the emotional brain?

A: I believe because you’re stressed a lot ...because you have a lot of stress, usually parents that do not make a lot of money are usually under a lot of stress, so that makes the child be under stress as well, also that would affect I guess the growth of the brain.

In sum, there are powerful advantages to be gained by child abuse and neglect prevention advocates in their thoughtful deployment of the simplifying model identified and articulated by Cultural Logic. While the model is not a substitute for the values primes discussed above, it helps root them in a mechanism that can overcome one of the major hurdles facing advocates on these issues, e.g. the fact that child abuse and neglect cause lasting damage to a child that is far more serious than “emotionality,” and that derives from a range of experiences to which the child is subjected. Moreover, it offers hope and optimism to counter the determinism that we observed in the focus groups; that is, the very fact that childhood damage can be repaired if a child’s experiences are changed for the better. The simplifying model helps explain both prevention and treatment in ways that seem organic to the now discernible idea of how children develop.

It should be noted that FrameWorks and Cultural Logic will be refining the model in future testing; those interested should refer to the FrameWorks website.
About the Institute

The FrameWorks Institute is a nonprofit organization whose purpose is to advance the nonprofit sector’s communications capacity by identifying, translating and modeling relevant scholarly research for framing the public discourse about social problems. FrameWorks designs, commissions, manages and publishes communications research to prepare nonprofit organizations to expand their constituency base, to build public will, and to further public understanding of specific social issues. In addition to working closely with social policy experts familiar with the specific issue, its work is informed by a team of communications scholars and practitioners who are convened to discuss the research problem, and to work together in outlining potential communications strategies for advancing remedial policies. Its work is based on an approach called “strategic frame analysis,” which has been developed in collaboration with such research partners as UCLA’s Center for Communications and Community, Cultural Logic and Public Knowledge. FrameWorks also critiques, designs, conducts and evaluate communications campaigns on social issues from this perspective. Recent projects focus on such diverse issues as gender equity and school reform, leadership development, neighborhood transformation, global interdependence, early child and youth development, children’s oral health, the environment, global warming, oceans, rural issues and children’s issues. For more information, see www.frameworksinstitute.org.

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Washington, D.C.
Discipline and Development:
A Meta-Analysis of Public Perceptions of Parents, Parenting, Child Development and Child Abuse

By Public Knowledge LLC
Meg Bostrom, President
May 2003

This research analysis was conducted in collaboration with the FrameWorks Institute, and commissioned by Prevent Child Abuse America, with funding from the Doris Duke Charitable Foundation.
Method

The following meta-analysis of opinion research is based on a review of PCA America’s research on child abuse, as well as existing, publicly available opinion research regarding parenting, child development, child abuse and discipline, and the political landscape for child abuse prevention policies. The objective of this phase of research is to develop an understanding of the public beliefs that may influence policy support, with the ultimate goal of developing effective communications to advance policy.

Since survey results can be skewed by the context of the survey (for example, a survey about balancing work and family will likely result in different assumptions about child care policy than a survey about welfare and poverty), the analysis relies primarily on research for which the entire survey was available. More than 100 surveys and focus group reports were reviewed (totaling thousands of public opinion questions). All surveys were conducted within the past six years, except for specific long-term trends.

This report is not intended to represent a catalogue of all available data, nor is it a review of policy evaluation efforts. Rather, this analysis is designed to offer strategic insights that will prove useful to later stages of the research process; accordingly, only the most relevant and useful findings have been incorporated.

The interpretation offered in this review is the author’s alone. Other analysts might provide a different interpretation of the data.
Strategic Summary

Developing effective communications to advance policies that prevent child abuse requires a broad analysis of the public’s perceptions of a number of topics: parents, parenting, and child development, as well as perceptions of abuse. “Child abuse” is, in itself, a frame that brings to mind a certain way of thinking about policies to address a range of situations affecting children. This review of public opinion was deliberately designed to explore a wide array of related perceptions, to explore the advantages and disadvantages of the child abuse frame, as well as to uncover other possible frames. While this review does not recommend re-frames, it does suggest alternatives that deserve further investigation.

The issue of child abuse exists in a cultural context that influences how people view the issue. First, the public has very serious concerns about the nation’s children. They see the next generations as irresponsible and unlikely to make the country a better place in the future. The public holds parents responsible, reporting that parents are doing a worse job than earlier generations and that parental inattention is a more serious problem facing families than drugs, divorce or inadequate schools. The problem, according to the public, is the decline of two-parent families and the rise of dual income families. The public believes children are better off when one parent is at home to look after them. This dynamic both helps and hurts efforts to advance child abuse prevention policies: people want to help children, but the focus on parents as the problem reduces support for policy solutions.

Additionally, a significant proportion of the public is misinformed about child development and many adults define a variety of developmentally appropriate actions as spoiling. This is critical to PCA America’s work, because developmentally inappropriate expectations of children may influence how parents choose to discipline and may undermine worthy policies, programs and activities.

A third element of the cultural context is that the term “child abuse” brings to mind extreme physical harm. The public struggles with where to draw the line between “discipline” and “abuse.” Spanking and many other physical punishments are not necessarily abusive, according to the public, depending on the age of the child and the severity of the act. At the same time, spanking is not the public’s preferred disciplinary option and few say they spank their children often. Most do not believe that spanking helps children develop self-control and many understand that violence leads to violence.

These dynamics provide some insights about the ways in which various frames may influence support for prevention policies. First, the extreme picture of child abuse may add to the public’s perception that child abuse is a serious problem, and may even build public support for solving the problem. However, the research suggests that it may also define the problem too narrowly and attempts to broaden the definition of “abuse” may not improve public perception or action. Those who are stern disciplinarians will not
think of themselves as abusers, and most are reluctant to accuse a friend or neighbor of abuse unless the situation is obvious. Because of its extreme image, child abuse may be popularly defined within a “crime” frame, leading to accusation, embarrassment, and support for criminal punishments for parents, rather than education and support. The following phases of research can help to explore this notion further.

Furthermore, while many say that child abuse can happen in any segment of society, most point to factors such as parental alcohol and drug abuse, poor parenting skills, a past history of abuse, and economic stress as reasons for child abuse and neglect. These factors may cause people to see abuse – and more particularly, neglect – as being confined to troubled families, rather than to understand how pervasive abusive behavior actually is in our society. Even if the image of child abuse and neglect can be de-criminalized, the belief that it is more prevalent in troubled families could cause the issue to be viewed as a problem for a narrow segment of society, rather than for society as a whole.

If the communications frame is shifted to “parenting,” then the issue faces other opportunities and barriers. First, society is just as concerned about leniency as it is about abuse. Many believe that children are disrespectful and ill-behaved because parents are too permissive. This perspective can easily lead to more physical punishment, unless parents have other appropriate and effective forms of discipline to rely upon. If the public believes the problem facing children is a spare-the-rod mentality among parents, then it is difficult to make a case for programs to assist parents. Furthermore, if this issue is about “parenting,” it may face another barrier, which is the public’s concern about privacy and government intrusion in family life. Even so, it may be possible to create a dialogue about parenting without offending parents. The research suggests that a message about parent preparation, such as the following, might prove effective in mobilizing Americans to support training for new parents: “How many of us felt fully prepared when we had our first child? Lack of experience can cause parents to make bad decisions that can lead to neglect or abuse. Parenting is the toughest job in America, but with more opportunities for parent education and coaching, parents can get off to the right start.”

Finally, it may be possible to make this issue about “education and child development” and shift parents’ views of discipline away from punishment towards teaching and correct neglectful behavior that is due to a lack of understanding of developmental needs. That would mean, for example, characterizing physical discipline as inappropriate because it does not accomplish the goal of discipline, i.e., to have self-control and self-discipline. Parents want their children to learn self-discipline and to be able to think for themselves, yet most parents believe they have not accomplished these goals with their own children. A teaching mentality could create an environment for talking and timeouts rather than hitting, and could allow for a conversation about all forms of abuse and neglect, rather than emphasizing physical abuse or ignoring a crying child. This approach could provide an appropriate context for parent education as a policy priority – parents need training to be good teachers for their children – and might allow abusive and neglectful parents to be perceived as in need of training, not jail time.
Perspectives on Parents, Children and Development

Views on child abuse do not exist in a vacuum. Instead, these views are interwoven with perspectives on parents, parenting, views of children, and knowledge of child development. This section examines the perceptions of broader societal issues that can influence the public’s views of the narrower issue of child abuse. The research suggests that the public has serious concerns about the nation’s children, seeing them as irresponsible and unlikely to make the country a better place in the future. The public holds parents responsible, reporting that parents are doing a worse job than earlier generations and that parental inattention is a more serious problem facing families than drugs, divorce or inadequate schools.

Much of the problem, according to the public, is the decline of two-parent families and the rise of dual income families. Americans believe that two parent families are best for children, but just having two parents is not enough. The public gives the same dismal ratings to dual income families that it does to single parents. Americans want one parent to stay at home or work part-time, but not because they are against women in the workplace. In fact, they support working women and think women’s rights have not gone far enough. Instead, the public is concerned about the high proportion of dual income families because it believes children are better off when one parent stays home, and it suspects that greed has outpaced sacrifice, when it comes to family priorities.

In many ways, the public has a good understanding of child development. Americans know that a child’s environment and relationships can influence development and recognize the importance of emotional closeness between parent and child. Similarly, they recognize the detrimental effects of a child witnessing violence between parents. In other ways, however, a significant proportion of the public is misinformed about development. Many people have developmentally inappropriate expectations of children that may influence how parents choose to discipline.

Perspectives on Parents and Children

Americans are deeply worried about the nation’s children. While life has improved for most groups, the public believes that, since the 1950s, life has gotten worse for teens and children. Many see teens and children as rude, wild, and without a strong sense of right and wrong. Less than half believe today’s young people will make America a better place.

People have serious concerns about the status of teens and children, in part because they fear children’s lives have become more difficult and troubled compared to earlier generations. As Americans look back on the century, they note that most people in the country are better off today than in the nostalgic 1950s. However, there are a few for whom life has worsened, with teenagers and children at the top of the list behind farmers. Americans believe life has worsened for farmers (65% worse, 20% better), teenagers
(56% worse, 33% better), and divide over whether life is better or worse for children (44% worse, 46% better). Pluralities believe life has gotten better for every other group of Americans including various ethnic, class, and lifestyle groups.¹

The public holds negative perceptions of teens and children. Ask the public for the words that come to mind when they think of teens, and three-quarters (71%) respond with negative descriptions, such as “rude,” “wild,” or “irresponsible.” Children fare only slightly better: 53% of adults and 58% of parents of children under 18 describe children in negative terms.² Less than half (40%) of parents of children under 18 say that today’s children will make America a better place. Fewer among the general public (38%) believe that today’s children will make America a better place, and even among teenagers, few believe children will make America a better place (32%).³ Many see a lack of values as the top problem facing today’s children: 45% point to “children learning respect and rules” as a bigger problem than education (39%), health care (29%), crime (29%), drugs (26%) or income (17%).⁴

While adults have complained about youth morality for generations, this view is significantly more pronounced than in past generations. The proportion who believe that young people today do not have “as strong a sense of right and wrong as they did, say, fifty years ago” has shifted from a minority opinion in the 1950s, to an overwhelming majority in recent years. Today, fully 76% believe that young people do not have as strong a sense of right and wrong.⁵ When asked in 1965, the public was divided, with 46% saying they do not have as strong a sense of right and wrong, and 41% saying they do.⁶ In the prior decade (1952), a strong majority (57%) believed young people had a strong sense of right and wrong, while only 34% felt they did not.⁷

Many parents are doing a poor job raising their children, the public asserts. Most think parents today are doing a worse job than their own parents did. At the same time, the public overwhelmingly believes it is much more difficult to be a parent today than in earlier times.

When the public considers the problems that children face, they hold parents responsible. Topping the list of a series of problems facing families is “parents not paying enough attention to what’s going on in their children’s lives” (83% say it is a very serious problem). This is rated higher than peer pressure to use drugs (68%), the influence of sex and violence in the media (67%), divorce (63%), or inadequate schools (56%).⁸ Additionally, 45% point to “children learning respect and rules” as a bigger problem than education (39%), health care (29%), crime (29%), drugs (26%) or income (17%).⁹

The public is very critical of parents. Majorities believe poor parenting is common: “people who have children before they are ready to take responsibility for them” (59% say this is very common); “parents who break up too easily instead of trying to stay together for the sake of their kids” (53%); and “parents who think buying things for kids means the same thing as caring for them” (52%). Few (23%) say “parents who are good role models and teach their kids right from wrong” are very common. At the same time,
a majority (53%) notes that “parents who sacrifice and work hard so their kids can have a better life” are very common.10

Parents of school-age children give today’s parents a poor rating for the job they are doing: 36% say parents are doing an “excellent” or “good” job while 61% say they are doing a “fair” or “poor” job. Furthermore, a majority (53%) of parents states that today’s parents are doing a worse job than in the past, while 37% say they are doing about the same. When parents of school-age children compare themselves to their own parents, most (55%) report that they are doing “about the same” job as their parents, while 37% say they are doing better. While they are critical of other parents, they also recognize that the job of parenting is getting more difficult. Three-quarters (76%) of parents of school-age children say it is a lot harder to raise children today compared with when they were growing up.11

**In fact, parents report that they conduct a variety of actions on a daily basis that benefit their child’s well being and development.**

Nearly every parent shows love and affection for their child on a daily basis (97%), teaches their child basic values (88%), helps their child feel they are good at doing something (87%), and helps their child work hard at school (81%). (Table 1)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 1: Parents Who Do Actions</th>
<th>% Daily</th>
<th>% Weekly</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Show love and affection for your child</td>
<td>97%</td>
<td>2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teach your child basic values such as equality, honesty, and responsibility</td>
<td>88%</td>
<td>10%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Help your child feel he or she is good at doing something</td>
<td>87%</td>
<td>11%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Help your child enjoy learning new things or work hard at school</td>
<td>81%</td>
<td>15%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teach your child social skills such as how to understand the feelings of others</td>
<td>74%</td>
<td>19%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teach your child to get along with people of different races and backgrounds</td>
<td>72%</td>
<td>16%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Get to know child’s friends</td>
<td>64%</td>
<td>27%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ensure your child participates in arts, sports, recreation, or educational programs or activities outside of school</td>
<td>53%</td>
<td>34%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Encourage your child to help other people, including volunteering in his or her school, congregation, clubs, or community</td>
<td>46%</td>
<td>33%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Encourage other adults you respect to spend positive time with your child</td>
<td>41%</td>
<td>32%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ensure your child is active in a church, synagogue, mosque, or other religious organization</td>
<td>32%</td>
<td>44%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Adults universally agree that it is essential to teach children to be honest, courteous, self-disciplined, and to do well in school. However, far fewer believe they have been successful in teaching their children these lessons. If they had to prioritize just one goal of parenting, adults say being able to think for themselves is most important in preparing children for life.

There are many lessons that parents assert are essential to teach children, but the most frequently-cited lessons are to be honest, courteous, have self-discipline, and achieve in school. Fewer believe they have actually been successful in teaching these lessons to their children. The gap in teaching self-discipline is particularly notable: 83% say it is essential to teach children to have self-control and self-discipline, but only 34% say they have succeeded in teaching this to their own children. (Table 2)

To be able to think independently is the ultimate goal in raising children. What children need to be prepared for life, they assert, is “to think for themselves” (63%), rather than “to be obedient” (29%). Even when the choice of characteristics is broadened, adults still prioritize the ability of children to be able to think independently as the most important preparation for life (50% choose it first among a list of five characteristics). The characteristics “work hard” and “help others” are closely rated as second and third in priority (67% chose hard work as second or third; 66% chose helping others). The ability “to obey” receives a mix of ratings, but a plurality (41%) rates it fourth in importance. Finally, three-quarters see being well liked or popular as the least important of the five characteristics in preparing children for life (75%). (Table 3)

Table 2: Essential to Teach Children and Have Succeeded

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>% Absolutely Essential</th>
<th>% Have Succeeded</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>To be honest and truthful</td>
<td>91</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>To be courteous and polite</td>
<td>84</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>To have self-control and self-discipline</td>
<td>83</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>To always do their very best in school</td>
<td>82</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>To be independent and to do for themselves</td>
<td>74</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>To save money and spend it carefully</td>
<td>70</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>To have good nutrition and eating habits</td>
<td>68</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>To help those who are less fortunate</td>
<td>62</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>To have strong religious faith</td>
<td>61</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>To exercise and to be physically fit</td>
<td>51</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>To enjoy art and literature</td>
<td>33</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 3: Which in this list is most important for a child to learn to prepare him or her for life? Second most important? Etc.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Rank Order</th>
<th>Think for Him/Herself</th>
<th>Work Hard</th>
<th>Help Others</th>
<th>Obey</th>
<th>Well liked/ Popular</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1st</td>
<td>50%</td>
<td>21%</td>
<td>14%</td>
<td>15%</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2nd</td>
<td>20%</td>
<td>35%</td>
<td>31%</td>
<td>13%</td>
<td>1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3rd</td>
<td>13%</td>
<td>32%</td>
<td>35%</td>
<td>16%</td>
<td>4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4th</td>
<td>12%</td>
<td>10%</td>
<td>17%</td>
<td>41%</td>
<td>20%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5th</td>
<td>5%</td>
<td>2%</td>
<td>3%</td>
<td>16%</td>
<td>75%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Parenting is viewed as an important responsibility, though many did not feel prepared when they first became parents.

Parenting tops the list of adults’ life priorities. Nearly all adults (95%) point to “being a good parent” as “one of the most important priorities” (41%) or a “very important priority” (54%). The importance of parenting is closely followed in importance by “having a successful marriage” (86%, 31% “one of most important”). Success in a “high paying career” is last among the priorities tested. Finally, 89% agree “Being a parent is wonderful – I wouldn’t trade it for the world.”

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 4: Personal Priorities in Life</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Being a good parent</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Having a successful marriage</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Having a satisfying sexual relationship with a spouse or partner</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Having close relationships with your relatives</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Having close friends you can talk to about things that are happening in your life</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Having an active sex life</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Living a very religious life</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Having lots of free time to relax or do things you want to do</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Being successful in a high paying career or profession</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

As much as they value being a good parent, few (35%) felt well prepared for parenthood when they had their first child. College-educated parents of young children are more likely to report being quite well-prepared (41%) than those with a high school education or less (30%). For information and advice on children and parenting, mothers of young children frequently rely on their spouse and mother (69% and 67% respectively) followed by their pediatrician (58%). Fathers of young children report much more reliance on their spouse (87%) with far fewer relying on their pediatrician (49%) and their mother (41%).

While Americans assert that one person can successfully raise children alone, they also believe that children with two parents are better off. But just having two parents is not enough. The ideal situation, according to the public, is a two-parent family in which one parent stays at home or works part-time.

The public believes that one adult can successfully raise a child alone, even a child of the opposite sex. Fully 80% say women are “capable on their own of successfully raising boys into men” and 68% say men are “capable on their own of successfully raising girls into women.”

They do, however, think children of single parents are at a disadvantage. Two-thirds (66%) report that children who grow up in one-parent families are worse off (19% much worse off) than children in two-parent families. Only 21% think they are just as well
Two-parent families provide children with advantages: children with fathers active in their lives “tend to develop more self-confidence” (90%) and “tend to be better problem-solvers” (80%) than children who lack an active father in their lives.21

Additionally, the public sees work status as an indicator of a person’s ability to do a good job of parenting. Most women think that families with a stay-at-home parent, or a parent who works part-time are better able to do a good job than other families. In fact, families with two full-time working parents receive ratings similar to those of single parents.

(Table 5)

| Table 5: Rating of Ability to Do a Good Job as Parents23 (Ratings by Women) |
|---------------------------------------------------------------|-------------|-------------|
| Couples in which the father works full-time and the mother stays home | 66%         | 29%         |
| Couples in which the father works full-time and the mother works part-time | 54%         | 38%         |
| Couples in which both the father and mother work full-time         | 29%         | 50%         |
| Single mothers                                                    | 28%         | 54%         |
| Stepmothers                                                       | 28%         | 52%         |
| Divorced couples who split custody so the children live with each parent some of the time | 17%         | 50%         |

They rate divorced parents as the least able to do a good job parenting, and most would like divorce to be harder to obtain than it is now (62%).24 Even so, they are divided about whether or not an unhappy couple with young children should get divorced (46% think they should, 50% think they should not).25 As they look to the future, most (67%) predict that more babies will be born out of wedlock, rather than fewer (29%).26 They fear that the family structure they think is best for children will vanish. A majority (52%) believes that “mothers staying home to raise their children” will have disappeared within 30 years.27

**Americans continue to feel conflicted about working mothers. While they do not want to limit women’s options, they believe it is better for families if one parent can stay home with the children. The public is worried about the pressures of managing work and family, and is concerned that children will pay the price.**

One at-home parent is the preferred option for families today. More than three-quarters agree (80%, 52% strongly) that “It may be necessary for mothers to be working because the family needs money, but it would be better if she could stay home and just take care of the house and children.”28 A plurality (41%) says that one parent staying home to raise the children is ideal, followed by one parent working part-time (24%) or one parent working from home (17%). The option favored by the fewest is both parents working full-time (13%). Older Americans are most in favor of one parent staying home (56% of seniors support this option, compared to only 31% of those under 30).29

The public’s preference for a stay-at-home parent has little to do with public opposition to women in the workplace. Fully 83% believe that women entering the workforce has been a change for the better,30 and 71% disagree (48% completely) with the statement...
“women should return to their traditional roles in society.” Nearly two-thirds (61%) disagree that “It is much better for everyone involved if the man is the achiever outside the home and the woman takes care of the home and family.” In fact, 66% of women and 58% of men agree “we still need to go further in establishing equal rights for women.”

What the public is concerned about is the stress on families and lack of attention to children that they believe characterizes dual income households. Two-thirds (65%) of women and 72% of men believe that women who work outside the home face more stress than those who stay at home. They believe that changes in gender relationships have made it harder “for parents to raise children” (80%) and “for marriages to be successful” (71%). Majories agree “It’s much harder for families to do a good job raising kids when both parents have to work” (51%) and “To be a single parent has got to be the most stressful thing in the world” (51%).

The public’s worry is the effect of dual-income households on children, not women. Three-quarters (74%) agree “It is better for children if one parent works outside the home while the other parent stays home with the children.” Substantial percentages of women and men think society has gone too far in the amount of time that young children spend in child care (58% of women, 60% men believe this change has gone too far), and too far in the number of mothers who work rather than staying at home with children (39% of women, 44% of men). A slim majority (54%) disagrees and a substantial percentage (46%) agrees with the statement “A preschool child is likely to suffer if his or her mother works.” Two-thirds (67%) believe it is true, and 45% report it is definitely true that “Children usually have stronger bonds with parents who do not work and stay home than they do with parents who work full time outside of the home.” More fathers of young children say this statement is true (72% true, 53% definitely) than mothers of young children (53%, 33% definitely).

However, the public does not believe that a child of a working mother is automatically worse off. Nearly two-thirds (63%) agree “A working mother can establish just as warm and secure a relationship with her children as a mother who does not work.” Nearly three quarters (71%) believe “A woman can have a very successful, high-paying career and also be a very good mother” while only 27% think “A woman must decide between having a very successful, high-paying career or being a very good mother.”

The end result is that the public is conflicted over whether or not mothers should work. Only a slim majority (51%) of both men and women believe “It’s fine for a mother with young children to take a job if she feels she can handle both responsibilities,” over “A mother who is able to financially should stay at home with young children” (43% of women, 41% of men agree).

Most adults assert that dual income families exist because both parents need to work, but the public also believes that society would be better if one parent could stay home with children. Importantly, a sizable minority thinks many families could have one parent at home if they were willing to sacrifice material things.
A majority (57%) reports that most dual income families work because they need two incomes to make ends meet. However, a sizable percentage sees other motivations: 22% think most dual income families are motivated by the desire to live in good neighborhoods with better homes and schools and 18% think they just want more money for things they could really do without. People are struggling with values as they consider these issues. They do not want material things to stand in the way of parents’ ability to raise children themselves (the preferred state). Yet, they recognize that families need to decide what is best for their own situation.

Most parents prefer to work outside the home, except mothers of very young children who would, in large percentages, prefer to stay home. What mothers most want in a job is flexibility in their work schedule.

If they were free to do either, most adults would prefer to work outside the home (62%) rather than stay at home and take care of the house and family (35%). This response is driven by men, who far prefer working outside the home (73%). Women overall are divided, with a slight majority (53%) preferring to work outside the home, and 45% saying they would prefer to stay home. Mothers of young children favor the at-home option most. Fully 80% of mothers of children under 6 years old would prefer to stay home.

Rather than work part-time or work from home, most mothers want flexibility in their work schedule. Three-quarters (73%) choose a flexible work schedule as very important in a job – much higher than part-time work, telecommuting or on-site childcare.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 6: Mothers’ Job Priorities</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>(% Very Important)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Flexible work schedule       73%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Part time hours/job sharing   42%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Telecommuting                 42%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>On-site child care            41%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Most working parents feel they have sufficient time for their children, and can alter their work situations for their family. However, most also feel guilty when they leave their children for work in the morning, and see day care as an option of last resort.

Today’s parents are very involved with their children and desire to be even more involved. Three-quarters (74%) of parents say they are more involved in their children’s education than their parents were, and 71% wish they could be doing even more. Most working parents report they have enough time to spend with their kids (67%), but not enough time for themselves (56%). To meet their family needs, most working parents say their employer would allow them to work fewer hours (69%), have flexible hours (67%), and take paid leave (53%). Few (27%) believe it would hurt their career if their employer heard they wanted more time with their kids. However, half (47%) also report that, when their childcare falls through, it causes problems at work.

A majority of married parents who work agrees (53%, 29% strongly agree) that they “feel bad about leaving my kids in the morning when I go to work.” Men and women
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respond similarly to this question. The public views day care as a last resort: 71% agree (28% strongly agree) “parents should only rely on a day care center when they have no other option.”

Perspectives on Child Development

This section reviews findings from a unique and comprehensive public opinion survey of development knowledge entitled, “What Grown Ups Understand About Child Development,” which provides an indication of the perspective adults bring to child development issues. The findings from this survey demonstrate that adults understand that several factors can influence a child’s development for the long-term, including the emotional closeness between parent and child, a child’s sense of safety and security, and violence between parents. It also suggests that many people have developmentally inappropriate expectations of children that may influence how parents choose to discipline.

Adults understand that babies are influenced by their environment and relationships. They report that a child’s abilities are not predetermined at birth, and that early experiences influence children later in life. Adults believe brain development can be influenced from birth (or earlier) and this early influence will have an impact on later school performance. Emotional development, they believe, is also influenced by these early years, with high percentages of survey participants responding that emotional closeness influences intellectual development, that violence can have long-term effects, and that self-esteem is developed early.

People understand that children are shaped by their relationships and environment. For example, 77% of adults point to the following statement as “false,” with 63% saying it is “definitely” false: “Children’s capacity for learning is pretty much set from birth and cannot be greatly increased or decreased by how their parents interact with them.”

Furthermore, the public believes parental influence begins early: 71% of adults say a parent can begin to significantly affect a child’s brain development right from birth or even before birth. And the early influence can have long-term effects: 76% of adults choose the statement “Some people say that a child’s experiences in the first year of life have a major impact on their performance in school many years later” over the competing statement “Others say babies 12 months and younger are too young for their experiences to really help or hurt their ability to learn in school later in life.”

Much of the early influence on development that the public can identify is grounded in emotions and relationships. Eight out of ten believe “Parents’ emotional closeness with their baby can strongly influence that child’s intellectual development.” A majority of adults (58%) and 72% of parents of children age 6 and younger say that an infant can recognize his mother’s voice within the first week after birth, and two-thirds of adults (66%, 78% of parents of children age 6 and younger) believe that children begin to develop their sense of self-esteem before age two. Finally, three-quarters reject the
statement “A child aged six months or younger who witnesses violence, such as seeing his father often hit his mother, will not suffer any long term effects from the experiences, because children that age have no long term memory.”

**While adults believe that children are influenced by their surroundings right from birth, many do not understand how significantly babies interact with the world around them and how sensitive they are to emotions.**

While three quarters (72%) believe a “child begins to really take in and react to the world around them” within the first 6 months of life, only 26% understand that infants react to the world around them right from birth or in the first week of life. Only 40% of adults understand that babies can be affected by their parents’ mood in the first 1-2 months of life and only 13% understand that a baby 6 months old or younger can experience depression.

**Adults recognize the value of play and the kinds of activities that benefit children such as reading and providing a sense of security.**

Of several activities that child development experts say benefit children, some are universally understood by adults to be effective activities, including: reading with the child (95% all adults rate this activity 8, 9, or 10 on a 10 point scale), talking with the child (92%), providing a sense of security and safety (86%) and providing a healthy diet (84%).

People also understand the value of play in social development (92% of adults rate its importance 8, 9, or 10 on a ten point scale), intellectual development (85%) and language skills (79%). They also recognize the importance of play for children of different ages. Eighty six percent of adults see play as important for a 5 year old, 80% say it is important for a 3 year old and 60% think it is important for a 10 month old.

**The real gaps in public understanding of child development emerge when people are asked to consider expectations of children at various ages. Though most adults answer these questions correctly, a significant percentage set expectations of children too high and view developmentally appropriate responses as “spoiling.” Though a majority recognizes that spanking can lead to physical aggression in children, less than a third say it is never appropriate to spank a child. Inappropriate expectations and views on spoiling and punishment can lead to poor parenting skills as well as undermine worthy policies, programs and activities.**

There are many indications in the survey data that substantial percentages of adults hold developmentally inappropriate expectations of children. For example:

- Most adults (72%) understand that “three years old is too young to expect a child to sit quietly for an hour,” though a sizable minority of parents of young children as well as non-parents (26% each) thinks three-year-olds should be able to sit quietly for this length of time.
• Two-thirds (67%) of adults say a six-year-old who shoots a classmate could not understand the results of his actions, though a sizable minority (26% of adults and 30% of parents of children 6 years old or younger) believes a six-year-old would understand the consequences of this act.

• When asked for the motivation of a 12-month-old who turns the TV on and off repeatedly, most appropriately answered that the child could be trying to get her parents’ attention (89%) or is trying to learn what happens when buttons are pressed (88%). However, nearly half of adults (46%) incorrectly think that a child might do this because she is angry with her parents and is trying to get back at them. Even among parents of young children, 39% believe this motivation is likely.

• Adults set expectations too high for sharing, with a majority (55%) of adults saying that a 15-month-old should be expected to share her toys with other children. Subgroups more likely to expect a 15-month-old to share include non-parents (59%), grandparents (57%), and parents with a high school education or less (59%).

**Views on spoiling demonstrate a pervasive misunderstanding of child development.** Nearly two-thirds (62%) believe a six-month-old child can be spoiled. Grandparents are particularly likely to hold this view (64%), but even a majority of parents of young children believes a six-month-old can be spoiled (57%). Furthermore, many adults define a variety of developmentally appropriate actions as spoiling, including picking up a three-month-old every time she cries (55%), letting a two-year-old get down from the dinner table to play before the rest of the family has finished their meal (44%), and letting a six-year-old choose what to wear to school every day (38%). Again, grandparents are particularly likely to believe these actions constitute spoiling: 60% of grandparents think picking up a three-month-old every time she cries is spoiling and 46% think letting a six-year-old choose what to wear to school every day is spoiling. Fathers of young children are more likely than mothers to see these actions as spoiling. A majority of fathers of young children (52%) think picking up a three-month-old is spoiling, compared to just 37% of mothers. Thirty-nine percent of fathers think letting a six-year-old choose their clothes every day is spoiling, compared to just 33% of mothers of young children. Educational attainment also matters in views of spoiling: a majority (54%) of those with a high school education or less think picking up a three-month-old every time she cries is spoiling, compared to 31% of those with a college degree or more.

**Misunderstanding child development can lead to neglect.** A significant percentage of adults (42%) believe that if the cries of a three-month-old are frequently not responded to by her caregivers it is likely the baby will learn good coping skills. A majority (53%) of future parents agree. More than a third (36%) of parents of young children believes this is true, with less educated parents more likely to believe this (46%) than college-educated parents (25%).
Perspectives on Child Abuse

Severity of the Problem

Americans see child abuse as a very serious problem, as serious as such other high-profile health issues as AIDS and heart disease. They assert that reducing child abuse is an extremely important priority for the nation. However, it is less clear that the public understands the magnitude of the problem, i.e. how frequently children experience abusive behavior and what constitutes abuse.

Nearly all Americans (89%) say child abuse is a serious problem (62% very serious problem). In considering a series of health issues, Americans rate child abuse as serious a problem as heart disease and AIDS. (Table 7)

Similarly, among a series of health policies, fully 51% say it is “extremely important” to make “additional efforts to reduce child abuse.” More prioritize child abuse than drunk driving, medical research, reducing violence, or any other health issue surveyed. (Table 8)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 7 -- Rating of Health Issues</th>
<th>% Very Serious Problem</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>HIV/AIDS</td>
<td>80</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Child abuse</td>
<td>79</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Heart disease</td>
<td>79</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Prostate cancer</td>
<td>61</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Depression</td>
<td>56</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MS or multiple sclerosis</td>
<td>55</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Brain injuries</td>
<td>54</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Deafness and other communications disorders</td>
<td>35</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tuberculosis</td>
<td>33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Baldness</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 8 -- Priority for Nation’s Health Agenda</th>
<th>% Extremely Important</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Making additional efforts to reduce child abuse</td>
<td>51</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Making additional efforts to reduce drunk driving</td>
<td>46</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Spending more for medical research on cancer, HIV/AIDS, and heart disease</td>
<td>43</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Making additional efforts to reduce violence</td>
<td>41</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Making additional efforts to reduce drug abuse</td>
<td>40</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Doing more to prevent the spread of new infectious diseases such as Ebola Mad Cow, and West Nile Virus</td>
<td>38</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Making additional efforts to reduce alcohol abuse</td>
<td>33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Increasing research to understand better the things that affect our health</td>
<td>31</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Providing more support for research and public education about how to help people change their habits so they can be healthier in the future</td>
<td>29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Decreasing the number of Americans who smoke or use other tobacco products</td>
<td>27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Increasing the services and activities available to people who have very little contact with friends and family members</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
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Even when forced to choose just one health issue as most important, half (50%) choose child abuse, followed by drug and alcohol abuse (20%), and chronic illnesses (18%). Furthermore, people feel they understand this issue. Most (87%) say they are informed about

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 9 -- Public Health Issues</th>
<th>% Most Imp.</th>
<th>% Informed</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Child abuse and neglect</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>87</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Drug and alcohol abuse</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>92</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chronic illnesses like heart disease and cancer</td>
<td>18</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sexually-transmitted diseases like HIV/AIDS</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>84</td>
</tr>
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</table>
child abuse and neglect. (Table 9) However, when people consider issues facing children beyond just health issues, child abuse rates lower than other concerns for children, such as a lack of parental involvement. In fact, “lack of discipline” rates higher as a concern than “child abuse and neglect.” (Table 10) Furthermore, few are personally involved in the issue of child abuse, and few express any desire to get involved: only 10% say they are already doing something about child abuse; and only 10% are considering doing something about it. They do, however, say they would like to see something done about it (75%).

Importantly, focus groups by Hart Research suggest that people may not define “serious problem” in the way advocates might expect. Focus group participants noted that child abuse is a “serious” problem, but at the same time raised questions about the magnitude of the problem. Nationally, 43% say child abuse is a problem in their community and, in a statewide poll by the Wyoming chapter of Prevent Child Abuse America, only 29% rated the incidence of child abuse and neglect as a major problem in their community, far lower than concerns about families with both parents working (53%) or children growing up without the emotional or financial support of both parents (53%). Public assessments of seriousness of this problem may, in fact, relate to the crime frame we noted earlier and less to the pervasiveness of the problem.

### Frequency of Abuse

**Americans have personal experience with child abuse, though they may not recognize it as such.** Nearly all adults experienced yelling and spanking as a child, and many were hit hard enough to result in injury or saw one parent hit the other. One-quarter reports that they have witnessed child abuse, but when given examples of abusive behavior, the percentage who remember abusive behavior increases. Emotional abuse is seen most frequently, followed by neglect. More than half have taken some kind of action, though far fewer have reported abuse to authorities.

Nearly all adults (89%) say their parents yelled at them, 82% were spanked (16% were spanked often), 19% witnessed one parent strike the other, and 27% say they were struck hard enough as a child to result in an injury or bruise (6% often).

One-quarter of Americans (25%) report that they have witnessed an act of child abuse; most (53%) are referring to physical abuse. Nearly all Americans (92%) say they would report child abuse if they suspected it, but in reality, only 34% of those who have

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Table 10: Biggest Problem Facing Children (In Percent)</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Lack of parental involvement 28</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lack of discipline            14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Breakdown of the family unit  10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Drugs                       10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Child abuse and neglect</strong>  6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Declining values             6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lack of quality after school and summer programs 5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Increased crime and violence 4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lack of role models          4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Poor schools                 3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lack of quality child care   2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Poor health care             1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
witnessed abuse have actually reported it. One-third of all American adults (32%) say they have intervened in some way to stop child abuse, and 19% say they have reported an abusive parent to authorities.65

When people are given examples of what constitutes abuse, the percentage reporting that they have witnessed abuse increases. The most frequently witnessed form of abuse is emotional abuse. Two-thirds (66%) have seen an adult emotionally abuse a child, such as insulting, taunting or harassing. Nearly half (47%) have seen an adult neglect a child, such as ignoring their needs, failing to feed or withholding affection. One-third (32%) has seen an adult physically abuse a child. In these instances, more than half (56%) asserts that they took action.66

**Defining Child Abuse**

The term “child abuse” brings to mind extreme physical harm. This image is likely drawn from the extensive media coverage of child abuse, coverage that does little to advance an informed public policy dialogue about the issue. The public struggles with where to draw the line between “discipline” and “abuse.” Spanking and many other physical punishments are not necessarily abusive, according to the public, depending on the age of the child and the severity of the act. At the same time, majorities see a variety of actions as abusive, particularly actions that harm a fetus during pregnancy.

When the public thinks of “child abuse” most (55%) think first of physical abuse, with fewer associating the term with emotional abuse (13%), sexual abuse (9%) or neglect (8%). The public struggles with where to draw the line between what constitutes abuse and what constitutes discipline. For example, while using a belt to spank a two-year old is considered abuse by three-quarters (74%), only 54% see it as abuse if the child is twelve years old. If spanking leaves marks, 60% say that is abuse for a two-year-old, but fewer (53%) say it is abuse for a twelve-year-old. If spanking a two-year-old with a hand does not leave marks, 71% say it is not child abuse.67 Since only 34% think that physical punishment of a child leads to injury to the child “very often” or “often,” it seems most adults believe that most physical punishment is not abuse.68

Focus groups commissioned by PCA America and others provide insight into how people define abuse. While focus group participants can cite all forms of abuse, the term “child abuse” causes people to think of severe physical trauma. According to an analysis by Martin & Glantz in 1997, “the phrase ‘child abuse and neglect‘ seems to almost always bring up images of the most extreme and high profile cases which quickly moves the discussion to the problem of dealing with the most severe cases.”69

It should be no surprise that people have this reaction to “child abuse” since a great deal of the news coverage about children consists of abuse and neglect stories. A media content analysis by the Casey Journalism Center found that news about children overwhelmingly consists of stories about violence done to children or by children. Of the newspapers reviewed, 53% of the stories about children were about youth crime and
violence and 40% were about child abuse and neglect. The remaining three categories reviewed were childcare (3%), teen childbearing (2%) and child health insurance (1%). Furthermore, the child abuse stories do little to help people understand the issue in a meaningful way. Only 45% of child abuse stories include some historical context (defined as information at least 1 year old) compared to three-quarters or more for other types of stories. Only 2% of the stories include information of practical use to parents, 9% include statistical information, 17% include information about policy issues, and only 5% include the kind of contextual information deemed important for understanding by experts on this issue.  

Even when people set aside the most extreme, newsworthy cases, they still struggle with the definition of “abuse.” Throughout all of the focus groups reviewed, participants consistently express confusion over how to distinguish between discipline and abuse. A report by Lowe/Lintas, 2001 notes, “Respondents discuss at length what is discipline and what circumstances change it into child abuse. The upshot is that most believe abuse occurs when discipline is out of control, when it is administered with anger, when, if it is physical discipline, visible signs result and when, if it is verbal discipline, words go beyond reprimand and reasonable to hurtful and demeaning so that here too the outcome, even if not visible, is long-lasting.”

At the same time, large percentages of the public see a number of actions as child abuse. Actions that harm a fetus during pregnancy are considered abuse: smoking crack cocaine during pregnancy (81% say this is child abuse), drinking alcohol (75%), smoking marijuana (75%), and smoking cigarettes (56%). Furthermore, an inability to take certain actions is seen as abuse: failing to properly feed a child (77%), or not providing medical treatment due to religious reasons (65%). Nearly two-thirds (63%) believe it is child abuse if one parent angrily strikes the other in front of the child. Finally, some physical actions are considered abuse: using a belt to spank a two-year-old child (74% say this is abuse), shaking a child in anger (69%), or punishment that leaves marks on a two-year-old (60%). Three-quarters (74%) think repeated yelling and swearing leads to long-term emotional problems for the child “very often” or “often.”

**Discipline**

As noted earlier, people struggle with drawing a definitive distinction between abuse and discipline. However, defining “abuse” may not improve public perception or parental action. Those who are stern disciplinarians will not think of themselves as abusers, and few will see a friend or neighbor as an abuser for many types of physical punishments. Furthermore, society may be as concerned about leniency as they are about abuse. Many believe that children are disrespectful and ill-behaved because parents are too lenient. This dynamic suggests that child advocates may need to have a dialogue about appropriate and effective discipline.

Altering people’s definition of abuse requires changing their definition of discipline. Those who believe they are using appropriate disciplinary techniques, even if it includes hitting, will not see their actions as abusive. An analysis of focus groups by Campbell-
Ewald (1983) suggests that “it matters little how intricately discipline is differentiated from child abuse if those occupying the ‘sterner’ end of the spectrum fail to acknowledge that extreme physical punishment is, by definition, child abuse.”

Public Agenda describes four prominent parenting styles based on their analysis of self-reported perceptions of parenting decisions. Importantly, three of these styles implicitly question a parent’s ability to be strict enough with discipline:

- Parents in Chief (18% of parents) which Public Agenda describes as “parents who run a tight parenting ship”
- Overwhelmed (17%) described as “parents who feel stressed and not in control of how their child turns out”
- Softies (17%) described as “parents whose first inclination is to give in or look the other way”
- Best Buddies (8%) described as “parents who want to think of themselves as their child’s best friend”

Views of discipline can differ between cultures and can even differ between spouses. One out of five couples disagree about discipline: 22% of women and 19% of men say they frequently disagree with their spouse about how to discipline the children. There are cultural distinctions as well. In a focus group of young, lower-income African American women who are single parents, strict physical discipline was discussed as acceptable. In fact, white parents were viewed as too lenient.

Leniency may concern society as much as abuse. An analysis by Lowe/Lintas, 2001 notes that parents “are often described as too lenient or too detached, with the result that children grow up with no respect for their elders or for social institutions.” A related complaint is that parents can no longer discipline appropriately because they fear being labeled as abusers. Indeed, this belief may have become so common that it has emerged as a kind of folk myth. A report by Hart research, 2002 explains “In every voter group, anecdotes emerge about parents whose child is taken away because they are witnessed spanking their child and then are unfairly accused of child abuse.”

Many parents describe themselves as being too lenient. Sixty percent say when it comes to enforcing rules for their child, they sometimes give in depending on the circumstances, while 32% say they stay very consistent. Majorities report they sometimes do too much explaining (55%) and they sometimes let too many things go (52%). Majorities also believe that “Parents have to pick their battles – you can’t fight your child over everything” (59%) and “Being too strict can backfire because kids will do things behind your back” (52%).

Significant percentages, however, hold strict views about discipline: 50% of parents agree “When I say something I expect my child to listen – not to question me;” 41% agree “I would have never dared to say to my parents some of the things that my child says to me;” and one-third (33%) believe “When a child doesn’t know how to behave it usually means parents are not doing their job.”
Parents believe that “Children do best when parents set limits and enforce them” (80%), but most also believe that “Sometimes you have to let kids make mistakes and deal with the consequences on their own” (68%).

Most parents rely primarily upon non-physical punishments, such as grounding, denying privileges, or confining a child to their room. However, significant percentages have hit a child or used verbal abuse. The public views spanking as an appropriate form of discipline. Most agree that spanking is sometimes necessary and approve of its use. At the same time, spanking is not the public’s preferred disciplinary option and few say they spank their children often.

Most adults prefer non-physical discipline such as discussing and explaining the behavior with the child (31%), using time-outs (19%), or removing privileges (19%). Only 8% think spanking is the best way to discipline a child. However, nearly two-thirds (63%) think it is sometimes necessary for parents to rely on punishment or threats, while only 33% say it is realistic for parents to think they can raise well-behaved children by relying solely on positive reinforcement and teaching by example. Majorities resort to various disciplinary techniques once in a while: spanking (53%), bribing kids with a reward (61%), and yelling or threatening to punish (67%). Less than 10% rely on any of these techniques “often:” spanking (4%), bribing (5%) and yelling (9%). The most common punishments are non-physical. Most parents have restricted friends (77%), denied privileges (60%) and confined children to their room (53%). Significant percentages have not paid attention to emotional needs (45%), spanked or hit (43%) or insulted or swore (37%). Very few (2%) have kicked or punched. (Table 11) At 43%, the use of spanking is down significantly from 62% in 1988. While these figures represent disciplinary practices for all ages of children, research demonstrates that parents are more likely to use physical punishments with younger children, and denying privileges or insulting with older children.

Even higher percentages of adults support spanking as a disciplinary tool. Three-quarters (73%, 30% strongly) agree “that it is sometimes necessary to discipline a child with a good, hard spanking.” This level of support has been relatively consistent over the past 10 years, but represents a decline from the mid 1980s when 83% agreed with the statement, 27% strongly. Problematically, while the overall percentage agreeing with the statement has declined, the percentage that strongly agrees has increased. As of the most recent surveys in 2002 and 2001, 30% and 31% respectively strongly agree with the statement, up from 26% or fewer through the 1990s.

When asked if they approve or disapprove of spanking, 65% say they approve. In fact, only one-third (32%) believes “Parents who never spank can do as good a job

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 11: Use of Punishments</th>
<th>% Who Have Used Punishment</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Not allowed them to see friends or watch TV</td>
<td>77%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Repeatedly denied privileges</td>
<td>60</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Confined to a room</td>
<td>53</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Not paid attention to emotional needs</td>
<td>45</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Spanked or hit</td>
<td>43</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Insulted or swore</td>
<td>37</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kicked, hit or punched</td>
<td>2</td>
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disciplining children as parents who do spank.” Sixty-eight percent of adults think it is appropriate to spank a child as a regular form of punishment, with 31% saying this form of punishment can begin at age two or younger, 18% think it can begin at age three or four, and 13% think it can begin at age five or older. College-educated parents of young children are more likely to say it is never appropriate to spank a child (37%) than those with a high school education or less (25%).

Depending on the survey, somewhere between 40 and 55% have spanked their children, but fewer use spanking as a frequent form of punishment. Southerners are the most likely to spank their children (62%), compared to just 41% in the rest of the country. Among college-educated parents, 38% spank their kids, while a majority (55%) of less-educated parents do. One-quarter (23%) of parents report that they spank their children often or sometimes, 46% do not spank often and 29% do not spank at all. Parents who were spanked as a child are more likely to use spanking than parents who were not spanked. Among parents who say they were often or sometimes spanked, 26% spank often or sometimes; among parents who were never spanked, only 13% spank often or sometimes.

High percentages approve of spanking and use spanking as a form of punishment, even though they believe spanking has negative consequences. Most do not believe that spanking helps children develop self-control. A majority of adults (57%) and even more parents of young children (61%) reject the notion that “Spanking children as a regular form of punishment helps children develop a better sense of self control.” Mothers and college-educated parents of young children are more likely to say this statement is false (68% each) than future parents (49%), fathers of young children (54%) or high-school educated parents of young children (56%). In addition, people understand that violence leads to violence. Sixty percent agree “Children who are spanked as a regular form of punishment are more likely to deal with their own anger by being physically aggressive.” Mothers of young children are more likely to say this statement is true (66%) than fathers of young children (55%).

**Sex Abuse**

The age and gender of the parties involved influence a person’s interpretation of whether or not certain actions constitute child sex abuse. Furthermore, the public sees sex abuse as likely to lead to somewhat different consequences for a child than physical abuse.

Just as the public distinguishes between discipline and child abuse based in part on the age of the child, the public’s definition of sexual abuse differs based on the gender and age of those involved. If a 25-year-old female and 15-year-old male have sexual relations, 69% believe it is child abuse. When the genders are reversed, more (76%) see it as abuse.

The public views child sexual abuse as different from physical abuse in other ways. They believe a victim of child abuse is more prone to consequences such as depression (67%
think sex abuse contributes greatly to depression, 48% physical abuse), problems at school (54%, 48%), and eating disorders (37%, 25%). Physical abuse contributes more to violence, according to the public, than sex abuse (62% physical abuse, 44% sex abuse). Furthermore, the public is more likely to see experiences with physical abuse and neglect as leading to abuse and neglect as a parent (87% and 84% respectively) than sexual abuse (67%).

Recent survey data concerning child sex abuse revolves around the scandal involving Catholic priests accused of abuse, and the actions of the church to address the abuse. The polling clearly illustrates that the public wants priests who abuse to face severe consequences.

When told “the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops plans to make apologies to victims of abuse, remove priests found guilty of abuse, and adopt mandatory reporting of child sexual abuse to government authorities,” 70% of adults nationally say they need to do more. Fully 91% favor an absolute policy that would banish from the Church any priests who have been proven to commit sexual abuse of minors and 89% favor a policy that would remove any Catholic bishop or cardinal who knew about sexual abuse and had moved the priest to another parish instead of reporting him to the police.

In a separate poll, the policy was described as follows:

As you may have heard, U.S. bishops approved a policy on Friday (June 14, 2002) to deal with the issue of sexual abuse of children by priests. Under the new policy, a priest who has sexually abused a child cannot serve as a pastor or chaplain and is barred from all other public church duties. The policy does not require that this priest be automatically removed from the priesthood.

A majority (60%) opposes this policy while only 38% support it. The opposition is due to the public’s belief that the policy does not go far enough (75%). Even when given a hypothetical situation of “a priest who had committed a single act of child sexual abuse many years ago and had successfully completed a treatment program,” two-thirds (66%) think he should “be prohibited from serving as a pastor or chaplain and barred from all other public church duties.” Even higher percentages (85%) believe that Catholic bishops who did not report allegations of sexual abuse to public authorities and instead relocated these priests, should resign.

Catholics feel just as strongly. Fully 86% of Catholics say the Pope should remove a bishop or cardinal who knew that a priest had been sexually abusing young people and had moved the priest to another parish rather than report him to the police. Two-thirds (66%) want the church to remove from the priesthood any priest found guilty of a single instance of sexually abusing a young person, and if the priest is guilty of repeated instances, the percentage supporting removal increases to 79%.

It is not clear how much of this reaction is driven by the heinous nature of child sexual abuse and how much is due to the public’s reaction to priests as the perpetrators. Most
(70%) believe that child sex abuse is just as much of a problem in other walks of life. However, 62% also agree that “Priests are not more likely to sexually abuse young people than these other groups but abuse by priests seems more shocking because they have taken a vow to abstain from sex,” while only 15% select the alternative statement “Priests are more likely to sexually abuse children and young people than other groups with easy access to young people such as teachers, coaches, and youth organization leaders.”

The public, including Catholics, are dissatisfied with the Church’s handling of the issue, and believes the leadership was more concerned about covering things up than dealing with the situation.

Three-quarters (74%) think the US leadership of the Catholic Church has done a poor job in handling the charges, and 68% think the Pope and Vatican have done a poor job handling the charges. The public and Catholics are dissatisfied (44% and 38% respectively) and angry (29% each) about how the Church acted.

Two-thirds (68%) believe the Catholic Church is “trying to cover up things to avoid more damage and get the situation behind them” rather than “trying to get all the facts and deal with the whole situation” (22%). Furthermore, a majority (54%) thinks the bishops in Dallas were more concerned about the priests accused of abuse than the victims.

The end result is that people have little faith that the Church is doing what it can to address this issue, and opinions of the Catholic Church have declined dramatically. A majority (53%) is “not very confident” or “not at all confident” “that the Catholic Church is now doing everything possible to prevent future sexual abuse of children by priests.” Furthermore, favorable opinions of the Catholic Church have declined over the past year. In February 2002, 63% had a favorable opinion of the Catholic Church. By December of the same year, it had dropped to 40%. Over the course of the scandal, views of how the Church handled the issue worsened, with a majority (59%) disapproving in April of 2002, increasing to 76% by December of the same year.

The public believes that the Church’s actions – not calling police, inadequately screening candidates for the priesthood, celibacy, and homosexuality – contribute to abuse.

Two-thirds and higher believe that a variety of practices have contributed to the problem of sexual abuse of children by priests: not calling the police when a priest is accused of sexual abuse (95%); inadequate screening and preparation of priest candidates in the seminaries (79%); the church’s policy of not allowing priests to marry (75%); and the number of priests who are homosexuals (69%).

Fully 88% believe superiors should turn accusations over to local law enforcement for investigation while only 6% think the Church should investigate the accusations themselves. To prevent abuse by priests, a plurality (35%) believes the church should allow priests to get married, enforce its current standards (17%) and allow women to become priests (8%). Fourteen percent want to see all these changes made.
Causes and Consequences

While many say that child abuse can happen in any segment of society, most point to factors such as parental alcohol and drug abuse, poor parenting skills, a past history of abuse, and economic stress as reasons for child abuse and neglect. These factors may cause people to locate abuse in troubled families, rather than appreciating how pervasive abusive behavior is in our society.

According to several of the focus groups reviewed, people believe that abuse occurs in all segments of society. However, people also understand that external factors, such as economic stress, substance abuse, and lack of good parenting skills, can lead to abuse. Therefore, the public tends to link abuse to substance abuse, poverty, and lack of education. Public opinion polls substantiate that most people cite alcohol and drug abuse as a cause of child abuse and neglect (69%) followed by lack of parenting skills (67%) and a history of abuse in the family (64%). Fewer point to the presence of non-family members (48%), hard-to-control kids (39%) or lack of religion (2%). (Table 12)

When drug and alcohol abuse are removed from the choices and adults are forced to choose just one cause for child abuse and neglect, most point to a parental history of abuse (31%) and parental emotional problems (28%), followed by poverty-related stress (13%).

The public sees several consequences of child abuse and neglect, and believes that children who were abused will grow up to abuse others.

In a survey of North Dakota residents, survey respondents demonstrate that they believe child neglect, child abuse, and child sex abuse can lead to serious difficulties for children, including violence, substance abuse, problems at school, and depression. The most likely consequence of physical abuse, according to the public, is violence (62%) and the more likely consequence of sex abuse is depression (67%). The most likely consequences of neglect are violence (49%) and substance abuse (47%). (Table 13) Additionally, a Massachusetts poll indicates that a majority (57%) thinks that “more than half of abused/neglected children go on to develop behavior and learning problems.”

Children who experience these abuses are likely to repeat them as adults, people assert. North Dakota residents overwhelmingly believe that abused and neglected children are more likely to abuse and neglect as parents (87% and 84% respectively). A significant

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 12: Reasons for Child Abuse and Neglect</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Reason</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Increased alcohol and drug abuse by parents</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lack of parenting experience or skills</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Abusive parents were abused as children</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Presence of non-family members in the home</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kids are harder to control these days</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lack of spiritual guidance/God/religion</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 13: Rate “5” on a 5-point Scale, Child Neglect, Abuse or Sex Abuse Contributes to Various Problems</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Problem</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Violence</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Substance abuse</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Problems at school</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Depression</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Eating disorders</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
percentage, though fewer, believe the same is true of children who are abused sexually (67%).

**Politics and Policies**

This section reviews child abuse and neglect within the context of a perceived public mandate for government action and funding.

The shifts in issue priority caused by the events of September 11th continue to be reflected in public opinion polls. In early 2000, prior to the drop in the economy and the terror attacks, the public most wanted the President and Congress to improve education. By early 2002, concerns about education were eclipsed by the public’s desire to handle terrorism and improve the economy. Terrorism, the economy and jobs continue to dominate the agenda, with education following in priority.

As George Bush was sworn into office, the public was clear about its expectations for the newly elected President. Americans wanted the Bush Administration and Congress to prioritize the economy and education, and placed crime, Social Security, Medicare and prescription drugs just slightly lower in priority. Following the terrorist attacks, the war on terrorism became the top priority, which continued into early this year. Several other issues declined in intensity as terrorism overtook the public agenda. (Table 14)

If they had to select just one or two priorities, however, most want the President and Congress to address strengthening the economy (57%), followed by fighting terrorism (36%), dealing with health care costs (25%) and protecting Social Security (15%). Americans are looking for the President to turn his attention to the economy and other domestic issues.

### Table 14: Priority for President and Congress

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>% Top Priority</th>
<th>2003</th>
<th>2002</th>
<th>2001</th>
<th>2000</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Defending the country from future terrorist attacks</td>
<td>81</td>
<td>83</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Strengthening the nation’s economy</td>
<td>73</td>
<td>71</td>
<td>81</td>
<td>70</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Improving the job situation</td>
<td>62</td>
<td>67</td>
<td>60</td>
<td>41</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Improving the educational system</td>
<td>62</td>
<td>66</td>
<td>78</td>
<td>77</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Taking steps to make the Social Security system financially sound</td>
<td>59</td>
<td>62</td>
<td>74</td>
<td>69</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Taking the steps to make the Medicare system financially sound</td>
<td>56</td>
<td>55</td>
<td>71</td>
<td>64</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Adding prescription drug benefits to Medicare coverage</td>
<td>52</td>
<td>54</td>
<td>73</td>
<td>54</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Strengthening the US military</td>
<td>48</td>
<td>52</td>
<td>48</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Regulating health maintenance organizations (HMOs) and managed care plans</td>
<td>48</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>66</td>
<td>56</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dealing with the problems of poor and needy people</td>
<td>48</td>
<td>44</td>
<td>63</td>
<td>55</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reducing crime</td>
<td>47</td>
<td>53</td>
<td>76</td>
<td>69</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Providing health insurance to the uninsured</td>
<td>45</td>
<td>43</td>
<td>61</td>
<td>55</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Developing a national missile defense system to protect against missile attacks</td>
<td>42</td>
<td>39</td>
<td>41</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dealing with the nation’s energy problem</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>42</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reducing the budget deficit</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dealing with the moral breakdown in the country</td>
<td>39</td>
<td>45</td>
<td>51</td>
<td>48</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Protecting the environment</td>
<td>39</td>
<td>44</td>
<td>63</td>
<td>54</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Working to reduce racial tensions</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>52</td>
<td>46</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Making the cuts in federal income taxes passed in 2001 permanent</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
They believe that George Bush is spending the right amount of time (68%) dealing with the war on terrorism. Meanwhile, majorities feel the President is spending too little time on the economy (51%) and on other domestic issues such as Social Security, prescription drug benefits and education (57%).

The economy is the nation’s top policy priority. The public’s ratings of economic conditions are the lowest they have been since the end of 1993 and beginning of 1994. Most know someone who has been laid off and most say the economy is in recession. Americans have little faith in the country’s leadership on this issue – they give the President low marks for the job he has done on the economy.

Americans are pessimistic about the state of the nation’s economy, with 78% rating current economic conditions as “only fair” or “poor.” The public’s assessment of the economy since the beginning of 2003 represents the worst ratings since the end of 1993 and beginning of 1994. A majority (56%) says the economy is in a recession, 48% say the economy is getting worse, and 60% know someone who has been laid off or fired recently, the highest this measure has been since 1994. As a result, the President’s job performance rating on the economy is low. For most of 2003, George Bush’s economic job approval hovered in the mid-40s. As of the end of April, his rating improved slightly and stands at 52% approval of the job he is doing on the economy.

As of this writing, the public continues to give President Bush high approval ratings overall and on several specific issues. After declining early in 2003, his overall approval rating rebounded with the war in Iraq but has begun to decline again. Bush receives his highest ratings for security issues.

Two-thirds (66%) approve of the job George Bush is doing as President. After declining earlier this year, the President’s approval ratings climbed in late March and April 2003 during the war with Iraq, but as of mid-May, his approval ratings are showing a decline again. Americans give President Bush the highest job approval ratings for security issues, including the campaign against terrorism (79% approve), Iraq (75%), and homeland security (74%). The domestic policy that receives the highest approval rating is education (59% approve). (Table 15)

Table 15: George Bush Job Ratings

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Issue</th>
<th>% Approve</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>The US campaign against terrorism</td>
<td>79</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The situation in Iraq</td>
<td>75</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Homeland security</td>
<td>74</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The situation with North Korea</td>
<td>61</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Education</td>
<td>59</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The situation between Israel and the Palestinians</td>
<td>54</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The economy</td>
<td>52</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Taxes</td>
<td>50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social Security</td>
<td>49</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The environment</td>
<td>49</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Prescription drug benefits for the elderly</td>
<td>44</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The federal budget</td>
<td>43</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The cost, availability and coverage of health insurance</td>
<td>34</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In addition to high approval ratings on security and defense issues, the public believes George Bush is better able than the Democrats to handle these issues. Importantly, the President currently has a slim advantage over the Democrats in dealing with the economy.
The public believes George Bush is better able to handle security and defense issues than the Democrats. The President holds an advantage on Iraq (52 percentage point margin over the Democrats), terrorism (51 points), North Korea (34 points), homeland security (33 points) and defense and the military (31 points). George Bush also holds a slim 10-point advantage on the emerging national priority, the economy. Other than the economy, the public does not give an advantage to the President on any other domestic issue. However, only three issues show a strong Democratic advantage: prescriptions, health insurance, and the environment. (Table 16)

Most voters understand that states are facing serious budget deficits, and that spending cuts will be necessary. Voters are very clear that they want policymakers to prioritize education in the current economic climate.

A majority (58%) of registered voters reports that their state is likely to face an extremely serious (23%) or a very serious (35%) budget deficit. Of all the programs that could be cut, the one program that voters most want to protect is education (54%) followed by health care (32%). Furthermore, in rating a series of funding priorities, the public rates education as the highest priority for federal and state funds. (Table 17)

The public is willing to have the federal government run a deficit for three priorities: to “increase spending for the war on terrorism and our nation’s military and defense” (78% would support a deficit to fund this priority); to “increase spending on education for students from kindergarten through college” (67%); and to “increase spending on steps to stimulate the economy” (62%). Far fewer would support deficit spending to “increase spending on prescription drugs” (46%) or to “make permanent the federal tax cuts implemented last year” (39%).

### Table 16: Issue Advantage

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Issue</th>
<th>George Bush</th>
<th>Democrats</th>
<th>Margin Bush - Dem</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>The situation in Iraq</td>
<td>72</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>52</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The U.S. campaign against terrorism</td>
<td>72</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>51</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The situation with North Korea</td>
<td>62</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>34</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Homeland security</td>
<td>63</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Defense and the military budget</td>
<td>63</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>31</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The economy</td>
<td>51</td>
<td>41</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Education</td>
<td>45</td>
<td>46</td>
<td>-1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Taxes</td>
<td>46</td>
<td>49</td>
<td>-3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social Security</td>
<td>43</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>-7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The cost of prescription drugs</td>
<td>39</td>
<td>52</td>
<td>-13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The cost, availability, and coverage of health insurance</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>56</td>
<td>-21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The environment</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>60</td>
<td>-26</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### Table 17: Priority for Federal and State Funds

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Priority</th>
<th>Federal</th>
<th>State</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Education</td>
<td>55</td>
<td>58</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Health care</td>
<td>51</td>
<td>52</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Creating jobs and economic development</td>
<td>37</td>
<td>40</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Retirement and Social Security/pensions</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Terrorism and security</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>32</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tax cuts</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Transportation, roads and transit</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The existing economic climate will make it difficult to advance new policies within state legislatures. State legislators see their state budgets as requiring spending cuts, and view education, the economy, jobs and a balanced budget as the highest priorities.

More than two-thirds (68%) of state legislators report that their state’s economy has gotten worse over the past year. Policymakers are preparing to make tough choices: 54% of state legislators say they will be “looking at making spending cuts” in dealing with their state’s budget (20% say the cuts will be “substantial”).

State legislators’ top priority is education, with 45% saying that improving public education is “one of the most important priorities.” The economy, creating jobs and balancing the state budget are the next highest priorities (40%, 39% and 39% respectively). (Table 18)

When the role for government and employers is defined broadly, parents appreciate the role both can play in addressing parents’ concerns, though they do not see either entity doing much now.

Parents are divided in their assessment of how much government is doing about parents’ concerns – 36% say government is doing a “great deal” or “somewhat” while 50% say government is doing “not very much” or “nothing at all.” They rate employers similarly, with 44% saying employers are doing something to address parents’ concerns and 48% reporting they are not doing much. However, 81% believe government could do quite a bit (44% “a great deal,” 37% “somewhat”) and just as many (79%) say employers could do quite a bit (38% “a great deal,” 41% “somewhat”).

Concerning child abuse specifically, most believe it is possible to prevent child abuse before it starts. The most popular prevention strategy is to educate parents about child development.

Most (83%) believe it is possible to prevent child abuse and neglect before it starts, and 49% say it is “very much possible.” More than two-thirds assert that “educating all new parents about their child’s developmental needs and stages” is a very effective prevention strategy (69%). Majorities also say, “providing treatment for abused or neglected children” is a very effective strategy (58%), followed by “removal of the abused or
neglected child from the home” (51%). A significant percentage (41%) thinks “voluntary at-home visitation programs for new parents” is effective.\textsuperscript{135}

Even higher percentages support a range of policies to prevent abuse. Eighty-two percent (82%) of parents and 73% of those without children in the home support government funding for home visitation services.\textsuperscript{136} Fully 86% support parent education classes taught in schools and 71% support tougher penalties against child abuse. To fund these policies, 55% would support a specific proposal to fund child-related programs from an inflated tobacco tax.\textsuperscript{137}

**The public states that child abuse is an issue they can do something about personally, but they do not see government intervention as effective.** Two-thirds (65%) agree and 31% strongly agree that there are things they can do to prevent child abuse in their community, slightly higher than the response for drug abuse (60% agree, 26% strongly), but lower than the response for crime (71%, 31%).\textsuperscript{138} Very few think intervention by government officials would be very effective: “intervention by social service agencies or child protective services” (27%) or “intervention by police” (25%).\textsuperscript{139}

**An effective message to advance PCA America’s solutions takes more than a dialogue about effective policies alone.** The policies need to be combined with broader, compelling values that motivate action and support.

In an analysis of focus groups, Hart Research discusses the importance of combining the moral imperative to protect children with a demonstration that programs can work. “Advocates should also return often to the argument that preventing child abuse and neglect is a moral imperative. Hard data is vital in proving that prevention services lower rates of abuse and neglect over time. And one argument has a powerful emotional impact on voters and lawmakers and thus cannot be repeated often enough: If we do nothing, children’s lives will be destroyed.”\textsuperscript{140}

Furthermore, survey data demonstrate that the public gives its highest rating to a simple moral statement, which outranks prevention messages: “No child deserves to be abused or neglected” (9.6 average rating on a 10-point scale); “Abused and neglected children are more likely to become abusive parents” (9.0); “Abused and neglected children are more likely to become violent as teenagers and adults” (8.9); “Child abuse and neglect may cause problems with a child’s brain development” (8.7); “Abused and neglected children are more likely to have drug and alcohol problems as teenagers or adults” (8.6); “It is more expensive to treat child abuse and neglect than to prevent it in the first place” (8.3); “Abused and neglected children are more likely to have chronic health problems as adults” (7.9).\textsuperscript{141}

**Pediatricians are important actors in advocating for and implementing child abuse policies.** Most pediatricians see victims of child abuse in their practices. Compared to domestic violence and community violence, pediatricians are more confident in their abilities to identify child abuse, are more comfortable speaking with parents about abuse, and feel they have had adequate training to deal with child abuse.
Pediatricians believe community-based programs can be effective, and think pediatricians should be involved in community efforts to prevent child abuse. Most feel they spend too little time on violence prevention, but they also feel there is insufficient time to deal with these issues during health visits.

According to a poll conducted in Massachusetts, health care professionals are trusted spokespeople on these kinds of issues: health care professionals (50% would trust), non-profit advocacy organizations (25%), law enforcement officials (11%), business leaders (4%), and political leaders/state officials (2%).

As would be expected, pediatricians have more experience with child abuse than with domestic violence generally. A majority (57%) of pediatricians say they have treated injuries from child abuse in the preceding year. This compares with 39% who have treated injuries from domestic violence and 44% who have treated injuries from community violence. More feel confident in their ability to identify children at risk of injury from child abuse (65%), than for domestic violence (37%) or community violence (33%). They are also more comfortable discussing child abuse with parents (64%) than discussing community violence (58%) or domestic violence (45%). This confidence may be due in part to widespread training efforts in child abuse. Half (50%) feel they have had adequate professional training in child abuse, but far fewer feel they have had adequate training for domestic violence (21%) or community violence (17%).

Pediatricians believe community-based programs can be effective against child abuse (75% say they can be effective), domestic violence (72%), and community violence (76%). Furthermore, they believe pediatricians should be involved in community efforts to prevent child abuse (95%), domestic violence (76%), and community violence (72%). Nearly all pediatricians believe they should screen for child abuse (94%), and significant percentages of pediatricians feel they should screen for community violence (71%) and domestic violence (66%).

Nearly three-quarters (71%) of pediatricians say they spend too little time on violence prevention issues. At the same time, few believe there is sufficient time in health visits to address child abuse (17% of pediatricians agree with this statement), domestic violence (13%) and community violence (16%).
Conclusions

• The issue of child abuse exists in a cultural context that strongly colors how people view the issue:

  - The public is concerned about children. They see the next generations as irresponsible and unlikely to make the country a better place in the future. The problem, according to the public, is the decline of two-parent families and the rise of dual income families. The public recognizes that parenting is problematic, but for different reasons than children’s advocates do.

  - A significant proportion of the public is misinformed about child development and many adults define a variety of developmentally appropriate actions as spoiling. Developmentally inappropriate expectations of children may influence how parents choose to discipline and may undermine worthy policies, programs and activities which appear to fly in the face of public understanding.

  - “Child abuse” brings to mind extreme physical harm. The public struggles with where to draw the line between “discipline” and “abuse.” Spanking and many other physical punishments are not necessarily abusive, according to the public, depending on the age of the child and the severity of the act.

• Because of its extreme image, child abuse may be defined by a “crime” frame, leading to accusation, embarrassment, and support for criminal punishments for parents rather than education and support. Even if the image of child abuse can be de-criminalized, the belief that it is largely localized in troubled families could cause the issue to be viewed as a problem for a narrow segment of society, rather than for society as a whole.

• If the communications frame is shifted to “parenting,” then the issue faces other opportunities and barriers. Society is as concerned about leniency as it is with abuse, which can lead to more physical punishment. If this issue is about “parenting,” it may cue public concern about privacy and government intrusion. Even so, one message alternative to explore is public support for preparation, in the form of parent education and training for new parents.

• Finally, it may be possible to make this issue about “education and child development,” shifting parents’ views of discipline away from punishment and towards teaching: physical discipline is inappropriate because it does not accomplish the goal of discipline, i.e., to have self-control and self-discipline. This approach could provide an appropriate context for parent education as a policy priority and allow abusive parents to be seen as in need of training, not jail
time. In addition, this approach might afford an advantage by offering new information – brain science, developmental research – and a new reason to engage the public in re-examining and re-considering its current child-rearing practice and policy preferences. Further research should explore this possibility.

2 “Kids These Days ’99,” sponsored by Ronald McDonald House Charities and the Ad Council, conducted by Public Agenda, 1005 adults nationally (including 384 parents of children under 18), and 328 teens, December 1-8, 1998.
3 “Kids These Days ’99,” sponsored by Ronald McDonald House Charities and the Ad Council, conducted by Public Agenda, 1005 adults nationally (including 384 parents of children under 18), and 328 teens, December 1-8, 1998.
4 Greenberg/Quinlan Democracy Corps, 12/99.
6 Sponsored by the Catholic Digest, conducted by the Gallup Organization, 2783 adults nationally, Nov. 1965.
7 Conducted by Ben Gaffin and Associates, 2987 personal interviews with adults nationally, June – July 1952.
9 Greenberg/Quinlan Democracy Corps, 12/99.
10 “Kids These Days ’99,” sponsored by Ronald McDonald House Charities and the Ad Council, conducted by Public Agenda, 1005 adults nationally (including 384 parents of children under 18), and 328 teens, December 1-8, 1998.
11 “A Lot Easier Said Than Done,” by Public Agenda, 1607 parents or guardians of children age 5-17, July 31 – August 15, 2002.
12 “Building Strong Families” by the YMCA of the USA and Search Institute, conducted by Global Strategy Group, 1005 parents nationally, May 5-15, 2002. The authors caution that the low response rate indicates the responses may not be representative of all parents.
13 “A Lot Easier Said Than Done,” by Public Agenda, 1607 parents or guardians of children age 5-17, July 31 – August 15, 2002.
17 “A Lot Easier Said Than Done,” by Public Agenda, 1607 parents or guardians of children age 5-17, July 31 – August 15, 2002.
21 Roper Center/University of Connecticut, 3/97.
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<td>Washington Post poll. 1,477 registered voters on September 7-17, 2000.</td>
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<td>The Shell Poll, conducted by Peter Hart Research, 1264 adults nationally, November 5-8, 1998.</td>
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<td>Conducted by the Gallup Organization, 1,015 adults nationally, April 6 – May 6, 1999.</td>
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“What will parents vote for” by Charney Research for the National Parenting Association and Offspring Magazine, 500 American parents and oversamples of 50 black parents, 50 Latino parents, and 50 parents who were welfare recipients, January 26 to February 8, 2000.


“Necessary Compromises” by Public Agenda, 815 parents of children 5 years old or under, as well as 444 parents of children 6 to 17 and 214 adults who are not parents. It also includes responses from a nationwide mail survey of 218 employers and 216 children's advocates, June 1 and June 15, 2000.


Sponsored by Harvard School of Public Health, interviewing conducted by ICR--International Communications Research, 1001 adults nationally, June 20-June 24, 2001. Data provided by The Roper Center for Public Opinion Research, University of Connecticut.

Sponsored by Children’s Institute International, conducted by Penn, Schoen & Berland, Inc., 981 adults nationwide, late April through mid-May, 1999.

Sponsored by Harvard School of Public Health, interviewing conducted by ICR--International Communications Research, 1008 adults nationally, April 27-May 1, 2001. Data provided by The Roper Center for Public Opinion Research, University of Connecticut.


Sponsored by Charles Stewart Mott Foundation, conducted by The Tarrance Group and Lake, Snell, Perry & Associates, 800 registered voters nationally, August 17-August 20, 1998. Data provided by The Roper Center for Public Opinion Research, University of Connecticut.


PCA America tracking post-wave 2, n=465, January 5 – February 8, 2003.

Sponsored by PCA Wyoming, conducted by Phone Based Research, 500 adults in Wyoming, November 27 – December 5, 2002.

Sponsored by Children’s Institute International, conducted by Penn, Schoen & Berland, Inc., 981 adults nationwide, late April through mid-May, 1999.

Sponsored by Children’s Institute International, conducted by Penn, Schoen & Berland, Inc., 981 adults nationwide, late April through mid-May, 1999.

Sponsored by Prevent Child Abuse America, conducted by Schulman, Ronca and Bucuvalas of New York City, 1250 adults nationally, 1999.

Sponsored by Children’s Institute International, conducted by Penn, Schoen & Berland, Inc., 981 adults nationwide, late April through mid-May, 1999.

Sponsored by Prevent Child Abuse America, conducted by Schulman, Ronca and Bucuvalas of New York City, 1250 adults nationally, 1999.


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Sponsored by Prevent Child Abuse America, conducted by Schulman, Ronca and Bucuvalas of New York City, 1250 adults nationally, 1999.

PCA America, by Campbell-Ewald Company, 1983.

“A Lot Easier Said Than Done,” by Public Agenda, 1607 parents or guardians of children age 5-17, July 31 – August 15, 2002.


DC Hotline, by Frederick Schniders Research, 1997.


“A Lot Easier Said Than Done,” by Public Agenda, 1607 parents or guardians of children age 5-17, July 31 – August 15, 2002.

“A Lot Easier Said Than Done,” by Public Agenda, 1607 parents or guardians of children age 5-17, July 31 – August 15, 2002.

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“A Lot Easier Said Than Done,” by Public Agenda, 1607 parents or guardians of children age 5-17, July 31 – August 15, 2002.


Conducted by National Opinion Research Center, University of Chicago, February 6-June 26, 2002 and based on personal interviews with a national adult sample of 2,765. Part of a continuing series of social indicators conducted since 1972. Data provided by The Roper Center for Public Opinion Research, University of Connecticut.

NORC General Social Survey trend.

“A Lot Easier Said Than Done,” by Public Agenda, 1607 parents or guardians of children age 5-17, July 31 – August 15, 2002.


Sponsored by ABC News, interviews conducted by ICR-International Communications Research, 1015 adults nationally, October 25-October 29, 2002. Data provided by The Roper Center for Public Opinion Research, University of Connecticut.

Sponsored by Children’s Institute International, conducted by Penn, Schoen & Berland, Inc., 981 adults nationwide, late April through mid-May, 1999.


Sponsored by Children’s Institute International, conducted by Penn, Schoen & Berland, Inc., 981 adults nationwide, late April through mid-May, 1999.
97 “ND Statewide Child Abuse Survey: 2002” funded by the Child Protection Services in the Division of Children and Family Services within the North Dakota Department of Human Services, conducted in cooperation with the Department of Neuroscience, Medical Education Center, University of North Dakota, and the State Data Center at North Dakota State University, interviewing conducted by the Center for Social Research North Dakota State University, 460 respondents statewide, March and April 2002.


100 Sponsored by NBC News, Wall Street Journal, conducted by Hart and Teeter Research Companies, 1008 adults nationally, June 8-June 10, 2002. Data provided by The Roper Center for Public Opinion Research, University of Connecticut.

101 Conducted by CNN, 1,002 adult Americans, including 212 Catholics, conducted April 29-May 1, 2002.


103 Conducted by CBS News, 892 adults nationally, including 197 Catholics, June 18-20, 2002.

104 Conducted by CBS News, 892 adults nationally, including 197 Catholics, June 18-20, 2002.


110 ABC News Poll, fieldwork by TNS Intersearch, 1004 adults, including 225 Catholics, June 7-9, 2002.


116 “ND Statewide Child Abuse Survey: 2002” funded by the Child Protection Services in the Division of Children and Family Services within the North Dakota Department of Human Services, conducted in cooperation with the Department of Neuroscience, Medical Education Center, University of North Dakota, and the State Data Center at North Dakota State University, interviewing conducted by the Center for Social Research North Dakota State University, 460 respondents statewide, March and April 2002.

117 Sponsored by Massachusetts Citizens for Children, conducted by the University of Massachusetts Poll, Spring 2000.

118 “ND Statewide Child Abuse Survey: 2002” funded by the Child Protection Services in the Division of Children and Family Services within the North Dakota Department of Human Services, conducted in...
cooperation with the Department of Neuroscience, Medical Education Center, University of North Dakota, and the State Data Center at North Dakota State University, interviewing conducted by the Center for Social Research North Dakota State University, 460 respondents statewide, March and April 2002.


123 The Gallup Organization, 1,001 adults nationally, April 22-23, 2003.


125 The Gallup Organization, 1,018 adults nationally, April 7-9, 2003.


131 Sponsored by the Committee for Education Funding, conducted by Ipsos Reid, 1000 adults, Feb. 1-3, 2002.

132 Sponsored by the National Center for Children in Poverty, conducted by the Mellman Group, 553 state legislators, February 15 – March 15, 2002.

133 Sponsored by the National Center for Children in Poverty, conducted by the Mellman Group, 553 state legislators, February 15 – March 15, 2002.

134 “What will parents vote for” by Charney Research for the National Parenting Association and Offspring Magazine, 500 American parents and oversamples of 50 black parents, 50 Latino parents, and 50 parents who were welfare recipients, January 26 to February 8, 2000.


136 Sponsored by Prevent Child Abuse America, conducted by Schulman, Ronca and Bucuvalas of New York City, 1250 adults nationally, 1999.

137 Sponsored by Children’s Institute International, conducted by Penn, Schoen & Berland, Inc., 981 adults nationwide, late April through mid-May, 1999.


140 PCA America, focus groups by Peter Hart Research Associates, American Viewpoint, 2002.


142 Sponsored by Massachusetts Citizens for Children, conducted by the University of Massachusetts Poll, Spring 2000.

143 Periodic Survey #38, American Academy of Pediatrics, Division of Child Health Research, initiated by the Task Force on Violence (TFOV). The mail survey was conducted from October - March 1998; after six mailings the response rate was 62%. Based on responses from 603 post-residency Fellows who provide direct patient care.
Two Cognitive Obstacles to Preventing Child Abuse: The “Other-Mind” Mistake and the “Family Bubble”

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cultural logic LLC
Washington, DC

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This research was conducted in collaboration with the FrameWorks Institute, and commissioned by Prevent Child Abuse America, with funding from the Doris Duke Charitable Foundation.

SUMMARY
Following decades of effective publicity about the issue, Americans are now aware of the horrors of child abuse and have an idea (even an exaggerated idea) of the pervasiveness of all types of maltreatment. Making further headway in engaging the public on the issue will have to involve more than raising the volume on awareness campaigns. Such campaigns can even backfire by intensifying the public’s media-fed association between abuse and sensational crimes – which only “sick monsters” could commit and no programs can ever totally eliminate.

To take the public to the next step in engagement, communications will need to address counterproductive patterns of reasoning that hinder better understanding of the issue. One of the most pervasive of these is the “Other-Minds” mistake: Lay people misperceive a child as a little mind which develops through abstract processes like learning, memory and choice; or which does not “develop” at all, and exists from the beginning as something like an adult mind which just needs to be “filled” or “guided.” This fallacy effectively obscures any scientific understanding of development of biological systems which guide these and all other aspects of behavior. This fallacy is natural, we suggest, because of a highly evolved (and very useful) human mechanism for interpreting the content of Other-Minds (known to psychologists as the “Other-Minds module”).

While the “Other-Minds” module is extremely useful for trying to read the minds of other adults, it also leads to a number of distortions that make child maltreatment more likely to happen, and less likely to be prevented. These distortions include a tendency to believe that an infant has an “agenda” that conflicts with ours; an exaggerated sense of children’s ability to “get past” abuse through force of will; a sense that even one year-old children can benefit from punishment for breaking moral rules; and a difficulty understanding the concept of “neglect” except as something like “underinvolvement;” among others.
An additional cognitive obstacle which communications need to address is the “Family Bubble” – the default mode of thinking in which events within the family (including child rearing and child maltreatment) take place in a sphere that is separate and different from the public sphere. This default understanding is stronger than a mere belief that families should be autonomous. It means that even thinking about the interaction between child rearing and public policy is difficult for people, and that communications based on reinforcing the “Village,” while appealing, can lead to conflictedness rather than change.

**BACKGROUND: AN AWFUL PUZZLE**

At first glance, the persistence of child abuse and neglect in American society is an awful puzzle. After all, it is a truism among advocates on many causes that the best way to motivate people is by showing them the harms that children are suffering because of a given situation or policy. No issue could be more closely connected with children’s wellbeing than this one. Yet though there are roughly 1 million documented cases of maltreatment every year, and abuse and neglect kill three American children every day, our society has not treated the issue as a high priority. How can this be?

Experts in the field of child maltreatment find themselves conflicted on a central question: Does the problem persist partly because Americans simply don’t place a high priority on children’s welfare after all? Peggy S. Pearl opens a book chapter with the assertion that, “Child abuse prevention depends on neither a program nor a system of services, but must be founded on a society valuing its children” (“Prevention,” Recognition of Child Abuse for the Mandatory Reporter, 2002). And Public Agenda has observed (in “Communicating with the Public About Children’s Issues,” an advisory memo to the Advertising Council) that “despite enormous energy and creativity among those working to raise awareness about the children’s issue, it has never achieved the urgency and broad-based support it deserves.” On the other hand, Nicholas Research (“A Qualitative Study on Child Abuse Awareness and Concept Development,” 2001, for PCA America) concluded that “children rank in the forefront of concern when it comes to social issues. … Therefore, a campaign dealing with abuse has the advantage of addressing something that relates closely to core issues.” Do Americans really care enough about children? And if not, are there ways to help them care more?

The question is almost certainly more complicated than simply the degree of Americans’ concern – even when it comes to the seemingly irresistible appeal to help reduce the tragedy of abuse and neglect. As part of its ongoing mission to reduce child maltreatment, Prevent Child Abuse America commissioned the FrameWorks Institute to engage in a series of research projects – including the work reported on here – to discover how the very ways Americans think about abuse, neglect and related children’s issue might be contributing to the slow progress on the issue, and how that thinking might be shifted in productive directions. This report is another step toward solving the troubling questions about why child maltreatment is allowed to persist at such alarming levels.
RESEARCH METHOD

Subjects
The analysis presented here is based on interviews conducted by Cultural Logic with a diverse group of twenty-two individuals in and around Seattle and Philadelphia. Subjects were interviewed in their homes or workplaces. The sample included thirteen women and nine men, and six people of color. Most subjects were evenly distributed between early 20s and late 50s; three subjects were over 60. Subjects’ educational backgrounds were approximately evenly distributed between high-school only, some college, college degree, some graduate study, and graduate degree. The sample also included a mix of liberals, conservatives and independents. Occupations among the sample ranged from blue collar to white collar and professional, including work in both the public and private sectors. Half the subjects were parents, and of these, roughly half currently have children at home.

The Cognitive Approach
Subjects participated in one-on-one, semi-structured interviews ("cognitive elicitations"), conducted according to methods adapted from psychological anthropology. The goal of this methodology is to approximate a natural conversation while also encouraging the subject to reason about a topic from a wide variety of perspectives, including some that are unexpected and deliberately challenging.

This type of data-gathering – and the analysis of transcripts, based on techniques of cognitive anthropology and linguistics – yields insights not available from standard interview, polling or focus group techniques. It doesn't look for statements of opinion, but for patterns of thought that may even be unconscious. It doesn't look for familiarity with issues in the news, but for more well-established, default reasoning patterns. Some of the clues to these important patterns come from topics that are omitted, moments of inconsistency where one understanding clashes with another, and the metaphors people use to talk about a subject. Furthermore, the method is designed to explore the differences between rhetorical mode – in which people define themselves in opposition to other groups and perspectives, and repeat ideas and phrases familiar from public discourse – and reasonable mode – in which they reflect their own experiences, think for themselves, and are more open to new information. Put briefly, this analysis focuses on how people think rather than what they think. (See the Appendix for a fuller discussion of Cultural Logic's cognitive approach.)

Cognitive research works on the premise that unconscious, default understandings of the world (cognitive and cultural models) can guide people’s understanding of an issue in ways they don’t even recognize. One of the most important aspects of these default models is that they often lead people to understandings that they might reject at other moments of more careful reflection. For example, even people who know on some level that children do not possess adult capacities for judgment and moral reasoning may easily slip into a mode of thinking which attributes exactly these qualities to kids. These hidden, underlying understandings can be very difficult to challenge and displace, and, if they are not accounted for, they can derail communications.
HIGH PUBLIC AWARENESS

Elicitations research confirms findings from previous studies that there is a high level of public awareness of, and concern about, the issue of child maltreatment. If anything, subjects in our sample tend to exaggerate the extent of the problem.

Q: If you were to guess in numbers or percentages, how many kids do you think are maltreated enough so that the authorities could be brought in on it? One in a thousand, one in ten, half?
A: Like neglect-wise or abuse?
Q: A combination of all of them. Whatever.
A: Altogether? I would say 20-30 percent. A good amount, at least from what I’ve seen.

*****

Q: If you had to guess, how many kids would you say are abused or neglected, as a percentage of the population?
A: Percentage of the population?
Q: Yeah.
A: Um, 12, 15, 18? Something like that.

They are also aware that abuse and neglect of kids can have lasting effects.

I think the children should be instantly, instantly taken from that situation [i.e. sexual abuse]... I think that child should be given a chance somewhere else. I mean that’s just such a permanent, or maybe not permanent, but that’s just such a long term healing thing. I mean talk about taking away your confidence and taking away everything, to put a child in that kind of environment.

*****

I think adults that had that experience as children [i.e. emotional neglect] have a really hard time expecting those things, because I think early relationships are where you learn what relationships are, and if you don’t get it then you don’t know it, and if you don’t know it it’s hard to expect it or to get it or to give it, even.
Additionally, as previous research has established, people are well aware of how awful child maltreatment cases can be – in fact, their associations with the term “abuse” are usually dramatic. The media’s focus on sensational cases has planted vivid images in people’s minds, which form part of their understanding of the issue. A typical case is Dateline NBC’s “Saving Richard” program, which discusses the boy’s “systematic torture” at the hands of his mother. (See Appendix 1 for further discussion of previous findings confirmed by the elicitations research.)

It is unlikely that additional messages about the seriousness or pervasiveness of child maltreatment will have a significant effect on public engagement, given how high levels of awareness already are. Instead, messages should focus on conveying new understandings of the problem and its solutions. As Richard Krugman has suggested, advocates “need to give the messenger [i.e. news media] the tools to relate a new message” (“The Media and Public Awareness of Child Abuse and Neglect: It’s Time for a Change,” *Child Abuse & Neglect* 20,4).

In order to make progress, communications will have to address two major cognitive obstacles to understanding and engaging with the issue – lay people’s misconceptions about child development, and their difficulty integrating thinking about the family with thinking about the community. These obstacles are discussed in the sections below.

**The “Other-Mind” Mistake**

**The Nurturance Instinct**

Many lay people express the idea that we have a natural, inborn desire to take care of children, that parental nurturing is a relationship set up by nature and genetics:

*If natural baby-ness isn’t able to elicit a warmth and loving response from a parent, that concerns me. Because I think it’s genetic, it’s what they’re set up to do, is to make sure we keep them safe and give them love, and that’s why they’re so cute.*

This insight captures an important truth which has been explored by psychologists, biologists and others. There truly is a universal human mechanism which, all things being equal, leads people to protect and nurture children. This inborn mechanism is triggered by many different cues, including visual features such as large eyes and a large head, which we experience as “cute,” and can be activated by drawings as well as real babies, puppies, and other young animals. The nurturance mechanism has obvious advantages for the survival of our species, and is accepted as one of the clearer behavioral products of our evolution.
The “Other-Minds Module”

On the other hand, there is a less well-known cognitive mechanism – just as well established from a scientific point of view – which often works against our nurturant instincts towards children. This is what is sometimes called the Other-Minds module – an inborn function which leads people to make automatic guesses and calculations about what other people are thinking. Like the “nurturance module,” this mechanism is universal, and has also evolved for clear reasons related to our survival – it allows us to relate to other people, to understand who is on our side and who is against us, to grasp that someone else possesses information. This is the cognitive faculty that takes our perception of bodies moving around us and translates it into the understanding that there are other actors in our presence whom we need to deal with.

Like the nurturance module, the Other-Minds module can be activated by things other than people – by images of people, but also by inanimate objects that seem to have minds and intentions of their own. The notion that a stuck jar lid is deliberately frustrating us – a personifying illusion that can be very powerful! – can be understood as a byproduct of the Other-Minds module.

When it comes to the personification of the objects around us, the operation of the Other-Minds mechanism can seem amusing and even poetic, adding vividness and color to our language and our everyday experience. When it comes to interacting with children, though, this mechanism has a number of distorting effects on our thinking which make child abuse and neglect more likely. The two most general of these are that children are often perceived as disembodied little minds – so that the idea of Developmental Damage is missing from people’s thinking – and the second is that children can be seen as people with the same fully developed intentionality as adults. Particularly disturbing is the fact that the Other-Minds illusion is closely connected to emotional arousal – when emotional stakes are high it can induce a “fight or flight” response, obviously working in an opposite direction from the nurturance instinct. The more particular implications of these distortions are explored below.

Distorting effects of the Other-Minds Mechanism

Some of the distortions caused by the Other-Minds mechanism are relatively harmless, and others are clearly dangerous. (Note: These patterns of thinking are so common that it can take a bit of effort to recognize them as cognitive distortions and metaphors.)

- Children as Threats/Competitors

  One of the main functions of the Other-Minds module is to help us guess how others are thinking so that we can calculate the most advantageous actions for ourselves. This competitive/adversarial stance can easily be triggered by any situation that frustrates us, from difficulty manipulating an inanimate object (like trying to fold a garden hose which “refuses” to coil neatly) to dealing with a crying baby, who can seem to be “assaulting” us with its “rage” and “condemnation.”
In a PSA publicizing Family Source, Parent Helpline of Florida, a mother is depicted yelling at her crying baby, trying to figure out what the baby “wants.” The combination of the high emotional stakes in any intimate relationship and the misconstrual of a child’s reflexive behaviors as intentional challenges can easily lead to a mode in which an adult is ready to “fight” a child, as though the child were a grown adversary.

In fact, this aspect of child maltreatment suggests a possible concept for a public service announcement: a frustrating child who turns into an adult in the parent’s eyes, along with a reminder that this is just an illusion.

• Discipline at an inappropriate age

Some of the most common misperceptions about child rearing, according to previous studies, involve the extent to which young children can respond to “moral training,” such as punishment designed to teach right from wrong, or the withholding of affection to teach self-sufficiency. One study suggests that most people believe that a six-month-old can be spoiled by getting too much attention, and over a third believe spanking is appropriate even for children under the age of 2 (DYG, Inc., “What Grown-Ups Understand About Child Development”).

Thinking like this arises naturally from the Other-Mind mistake, since kids can be seen as either miniature adults, who are bound by moral rules just like the rest of us – or, only somewhat better, as adults-in-training, whose ultimate success depends mainly on moral guidance that starts as early as possible. (Interestingly, grandparents, who are trusted sources of both advice and childcare, are even more prone to mistakes of this kind than young parents themselves – see DYG, Inc.’s report, “What Grown-Ups Understand About Child Development”).

The bottom line for many practices guided by these misconceptions is that they make children weaker rather than stronger. This is the kind of message which, if backed up by additional explanation, should open many people’s eyes to a developmental perspective.

Another point to keep in mind is that while Liberals probably share more views than Conservatives with experts and children’s advocates on the whole, they are not necessarily on solid ground when they emphasize the importance of reasoning with very young children. Here a conservative male complains about what he perceives as the prevailing “PC” attitude:

_They send parents to parenting classes where they’re taught to let the kids do whatever the hell they want and don’t touch them. Reason it out. Reasoning it out with a child. You’re asking a child to reason at 8, 9, 7. Did you have any reasoning ability at those ages? I certainly didn’t. But the government thinks that they should, and do._

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Depending on how we interpret “reasoning ability,” his point is not entirely off the mark. When deciding whether to reason with children, people should, but don’t, have access to understandings about how and when various capacities develop. This kind of understanding would short circuit the rhetorical, anecdotal, yes-no standoff that is the likely result of any debates where clear developmental perspectives are not available.

• **Discipline as “Tit for Tat”**

Related to the previous point is the notion that discipline sometimes slips from a process of “instilling values,” to a process of moral accounting, of the sort that we practice with other adults. This conservative woman begins by talking about instilling values, but quickly shifts to an accounting frame:

*I really feel like we need to instill more values, and consequences, and respect. More respect. We have gotten too lenient. When I rode the bus in middle school, if we did something wrong, we were either kicked off, or we had to write the rules before we could get back on.*

While the practice of moral accounting is laudable, it should not be confused with development. The stance she takes could apply as easily to adult criminals as to developing children.

• **The “Get Over It” Syndrome**

If people are operating in a mode that excludes the idea of Developmental Damage, they are more likely to feel that a person can change his or behavior simply by an act of will or by learning that a given behavior is wrong. For example, they may feel that a child who grew up in an abusive environment can “learn” by example that abuse is the wrong way to treat people. The following comment comes from a highly educated and sympathetic male subject:

*I think that as we grow up and we go into school and do the things we want to do, we watch what other people do, we learn from what other people do and I think that I’m positive just because ... there are children who grow up being victims of abuse who are not abusers.*

While there is certainly some truth to this optimistic, mind-over-matter attitude, it also downplays the lasting effects of developmental damage, and exaggerates the extent to which our intellects and will power can help us overcome dysfunction, if we just choose to put something behind us and learn a better way. Unless people have a concrete understanding of the (objective) mechanisms of Developmental Damage, they are likely to be susceptible to this kind of anecdotal thinking.
CHICAGO, IL – Dave Pelzer grew up in a typical suburb, on a colorful middle-class street, with a life straight out of a horror movie. Pelzer grew up with a mother who decided, when Pelzer was 4, that he was evil – and relegated him to the garage. From then on, until he was rescued at age 12, he was a non-person to his family. He was, as his best-selling book recounts, a child called “it”... “I believe in honesty, dignity and honor,” says Pelzer. “I’m a Jimmy Olsen kind of guy. What’s your problem, get over it and help your fellow man out.”

The recent film “Antwone Fisher” should also be cited as an example of someone using free will and intentionality to overcome severe abuse. While such stories are real and inspiring, they also undercut an important message about the lasting Developmental Damage caused by maltreatment.

• The Cycle of Abuse

While elicitations research confirmed the public’s awareness that abuse in one generation leads to abuse in the next, it also showed that people have a distorted model of the cycle – they can’t really be said to understand it. They nearly always think of it in terms of conscious learning (an abstract mental process) rather than understanding it in terms of Developmental Damage:

I think basically people do whatever was done to them. I mean there’s very little change per generation. I feel like people ... don’t necessarily make a dramatic change during their lifetime. They may try, and they may succeed to a larger degree than somebody else, but I mean basically I think we teach the way we were taught, and whenever we don’t know what to do we fall back on what was done to us.

*****

Q: [The cycle of abuse] seems kind of paradoxical in a way, because you’d think that a kid who has been abused has a better idea than anybody how awful it is.

A: You would think so.

Q: And that they’d never, ever want to inflict that on somebody else.

A: But if that’s all they know, if that’s the only life they know, how would they know there’s any difference, if no one ever told them or showed them along the way in life?
This focus on “teaching,” “knowing what to do,” etc. illustrates the fallacy that treats human behavior as purely the product of abstract qualities like knowledge, choice and intention, while ignoring the very real, objective constraints placed on us by the physical state of our cognitive apparatus.

While it is of course a good thing that the cycle is recognized at all, it is also likely that people with a stronger sense of the Developmental Damage caused by maltreatment would have a reinforced sense of how hard and how important it is to break the cycle.

• Sexual Abuse

The illusion that a child is capable of sexual attitudes similar to those of an adult is one of the more extreme and destructive forms of the Other-Mind mistake. Perpetrators of sexual abuse often explain (and even continue to believe) that the child seduced them. The cognitive systems that control emotional and sexual behavior are obviously not well developed in young children (even if children may have more sexual curiosity and initiative than Western society is comfortable granting them). Prevent Child Abuse Georgia’s PSA, “Other Woman” is based on this theme, as its title reflects – the father in the scenario at first seems to be defending his flirtation with another woman (“I didn’t mean anything by it”), who turns out to be his prepubescent daughter.

This extreme illusion, which requires a person to ignore so much obvious evidence, is thankfully much more rare than the general “Other-Mind” Mistake. This may be part of why, from the point of view of most lay people, sexual abuse is in an entirely separate category from other kinds of maltreatment. While emotional and physical abuse and neglect are all understood as matters of degree, sexual abuse is seen as a distinct kind of behavior that springs from a particular sickness:

Q: Sexual abuse I would say most of the time has got to be a sickness in the individual who’s the molester.

Q: So that’s not the kind [of maltreatment] where anybody is capable of that under the right circumstance?

A: I wouldn’t think so.

• Neglect as Underinvolvement

If people don’t understand the nature of development, especially early childhood development, they are less likely to appreciate the significance of mental neglect – cases where children are receiving too little stimulation and interaction to develop in a healthy way. When thinking along the lines of the Other-Mind mistake, they can even feel that kids need very little in the way of stimulation and interaction before they are old enough to speak – and “learn,” “remember,” etc., and that talking to them at that early stage won’t do anyone any good since they are not yet ready to learn. If children are not yet mental creatures, it follows that
keeping them fed, warm and safe is enough. (Numerous previous studies have confirmed that people underestimate the importance of stimulation and interaction in daycare settings, for example.)

Prevent Child Abuse America’s “Working Hypotheses” document states that, “when the public thinks about the issue of child abuse and neglect, it thinks primarily of the most extreme cases, such as those cases resulting in the death of a child or a dramatic incident of neglect that generates local or national news coverage.” While this statement is true as applied to “abuse,” elicitation research – and a review of previous studies of public understandings – shows that the situation is more complicated with respect to “neglect.”

One of the most striking findings from the elicitations was that when lay people hear the term “neglect,” they very often think of what could be called uninvolved parents – parents who don’t spend enough time providing appropriate guidance, teaching values, attending school events and so forth – though extreme cases of physical and mental neglect also come to mind at times.

Q: Do you think neglect is a serious problem?
A: That's the word. Neglect. That's a good word, yeah.

Q: Do you think there's a lot of that?
A: I think there is. The kids are on their own too much. They get a car when they're 16, or they're dropped off at the mall at 7:00 at night and they're picked up at 11.

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Q: One of the other areas how kids get treated is neglect. There again, it seems like it could be tough to draw a line.
A: It’s very hard. The kids are the ones in the difficult position. They need that guidance, they need that hand. And if they’re not getting it in their own house, they’re going to go get it somewhere else.

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Probably in somebody’s definition, everybody’s been neglectful of their children.

This finding confirms Triad Research Group’s observation that, “Participants tended to define ‘neglect’ as ‘not caring,’ ‘not paying attention,’ and/or ‘not having an investment in your child’” (“San Diego Residents’ Perception of
Cultural Logic LLC

Services for Children at Risk of Abuse and Neglect,” August 2000, for Public Children Services Association of Ohio, on behalf of San Diego Health and Human Services Agency).

Underinvolvement is a very different kind of problem from mental neglect, but unless people have a strong developmental perspective, it is natural for them to interpret “neglect” in terms of concepts and values that are familiar to them.

- Mental Abuse

While the causes of mental abuse are complex (relating to everything from economic hardship to substance abuse to an adult’s emotional history), the Other-Mind mistake is certainly a contributing factor. If parents feel as though they are yelling, screaming and cursing at a person with similar mental qualities to their own, they are more likely to be unrestrained.

Furthermore, even when people do recognize that mental abuse is wrong, a Cognitive perspective may underestimate the seriousness of the damage that is done, and make the “Get Over It” perspective more likely. DYG, Inc.’s study, “What Grown-Ups Understand About Child Development” reports that many people believe that a six-month old “has no long-term memory and therefore will not suffer any long-term effects from witnessing violence.” This belief can easily be chalked up to the Other-Mind Mistake.

Advocate materials vary in the degree to which they helpfully convey the sense of Developmental Damage. The “Watch What You Say” spots prepared by Prevent Child Abuse Georgia present a strong message that verbal abuse hurts children in a lasting way. But they also reinforce the Other-Mind mistake because they present the harm in terms of the negative messages that kids “believe” – rather than in terms of Developmental Damage caused by this kind of betrayal. A different PSA (“Mirror”) depicts a child who becomes more and more upset as we hear a series of insults and other nasty remarks from his mother; the announcer’s statement that “the words you use today can scar a child for life” is more compatible with a Developmental Damage perspective (though it is almost certainly interpreted by parents as damage of a more abstract kind). The “X-Ray” spot goes one step further towards communicating a Developmental Damage perspective, because it presents images of physical damage (broken bones) while asking parents to call “before you have a negative impact on your child.” But not even this ad goes so far as to mention the developmental harm – i.e. harm done to developing emotional and cognitive systems in the brain – when parents are abusive. A general distortion of the “Other-Minds” fallacy is to neglect the fact that children’s mind/brains are not given, but develop.

Summary: When the Other-Minds mistake leads people to perceive children as intentional and adult-like, they are much less likely to be restrained, and much more likely to treat children inappropriately in a variety of ways. When it leads people to think of children’s development mainly in terms of abstract processes like learning,
reason and choice, it minimizes the appreciation of Developmental Damage, and the lasting effects of maltreatment.

**RISK FACTORS AND PROTECTIVE FACTORS FOR THE “OTHER-MIND” MISTAKE**

While we are always inclined to see others in terms of their abstract qualities of mind, personality and so forth, there are situations which make it especially likely that we will misinterpret kids as intentional actors, and there are also some ways of mitigating the problem.

**Risk Factors**

- **Stress**

  One of the main functions of the Other-Minds module is to help us make strategic calculations about how best to survive. One consequence is that we are especially likely to attribute intention to things when we are under stress. Consider that we are more likely to personify an inanimate object that is giving us trouble, than we are to personify the same object when it is working as it is supposed to. Given the inevitable stress associated with raising a child, there are bound to be many moments when we mistakenly attribute intentions to the child – and this illusion can be strong even for people who certainly know better on some level.

  When children cry loudly, they are especially likely to seem like they are deliberately making demands – even infants only days or hours old. Under the stressful conditions of listening to a baby’s scream, it is logical that the Other-Minds module is activated and we try to read the baby’s mind (the activity that the mechanism is really all about), and try to figure out what she wants. This way of thinking can lead to some frightening consequences, as discussed above.

- **The Family Bubble**

  In current American culture, people tend to perceive the family as something like a free-standing world, into which the broader community should not and does not intrude. This is stronger than a simple value or belief, and is closer to a cognitive “filter” – families are understood as a separate domain, and it is hard to even think of family matters and public matters in connection with each other. (See extensive discussion of the Family Bubble model below.)

  One of the consequences of this default cultural pattern is that the nuclear family spends a great deal more time together, and isolated from other generations, than in traditional societies. This intense proximity (even in households where both parents and children are busy with outside activities) can lead to a tendency to interact with children as though they were like adults. This tendency is commonly noted with respect to only children, but is also true for other children.
• Individualism

Americans’ powerful emphasis on self-reliance and independence means that we often want our children to develop adult-like minds as quickly as possible (again, even if on another level we want to enjoy the natural parent-child intimacy). This cultural value makes it even more likely that we will ignore the truth of children’s developmental status, and fall into the Other-Minds mistake.

Protective Factors

• Understanding of Development

Clearly, one of the most direct ways of avoiding the fallacies discussed above is to give members of the public clearer ideas about children’s development. More specifically, it will be helpful to convey messages about What Works, as opposed to What’s Right. Of course, it would never be appropriate (or possible) to displace the moral dimension of child rearing, but even when a parent’s goal is to teach kindness, self-reliance or confidence, there are ways that are objectively known to be either more or less effective.

In particular, messages that incorporate information about the brain, and about the important role of give-and-take between a child and the people and things around him, have the potential to get people’s attention and shift their thinking about children and development. (See Cultural Logic’s report for the FrameWorks Institute and the Mailman Foundation, “Simplifying Early Childhood Development: Findings from Cognitive Analysis and Phone Interviews.” The continuation of this work, commissioned by the National Scientific Panel on the Developing Child, is currently under way.)

An important caveat is that messages about the brain are easily misinterpreted as messages about the intellect rather than the child’s total character. Even a pollster hired by child advocates to research public understandings uses “brain” practically as a synonym for intellect: “Participants display some awareness of brain development in the early years of childhood. For the most part, however, they consider emotional security, physical health, and nutrition to be the primary needs of infants and very young children; brain and intellectual development are perceived as secondary” (Memo from Peter D. Hart Research Associates to I Am Your Child Foundation, April 2001). Messages that incorporate information about the brain must be carefully framed in order to affirm that they are about emotion, character and values, and not just about a child’s intellect.

• Calm

As stress is a risk factor for triggering the Other-Minds module in a way that is destructive to relations with children, a state of calm is more compatible with a nurturant mode, and a more accurate perception of children’s state of maturity.
Family Bubble vs. Village: A Cognitive Conflict that Undermines the Motivation to Prevent Child Abuse

There are three kinds of abusers. There are the inadequate parents, who simply don’t know how to parent. There are people who are crazy, and we really can’t discuss rehabilitation for those people; for them it’s a matter of whether the psychiatric disorder they suffer can be controlled. And finally, we have people who are evil – or whatever you want to call them – people who do what they want to do because it gratifies them in some way. These people are beyond rehabilitation.

Andrew Vachs, Attorney/Consultant on child welfare issues

Besides warning the public about the gravity of the problem of child maltreatment, advocate materials and appeals in the media repeatedly call on the public to get involved in the prevention of the problem, by intervening directly or at least reporting acts of child abuse. The idea that “a child is defenseless, you are not” – that responsible adults everywhere are a kind of safety net for children – is pervasive in what the public hears about child abuse.

In this section, we discuss this general message which is both highly compelling (and thus tempting for advocates and the media), and also likely to have a somewhat disempowering effect on the public. Cognitive analysis suggests that the message implicitly appeals to the public in our “responsible villager” role – our sense that we belong, or should belong, to a close-knit community of people who are aware of each other and work towards common goals. (I.e. the kind of social group that all humans evolved in, and which was essential to their survival – this is the sense of “village” evoked by Hilary Clinton’s book, and borrowed from an African proverb.) But in current American society, this role is hamstrung by the competing value of an inviolable “Family Bubble.” The result is a kind of paralysis on the part of well-meaning bystanders.

Why is the tendency to appeal to the Village so compelling?

A Village is an effective tool for controlling child abuse – appeals to the Village makes practical sense.

It is clear that village conditions work strongly to reduce many categories of child abuse. Anthropological evidence suggests that in traditional village settings neglect of all kinds, sexual abuse of children, maltreatment of infants by their mothers, and chronic physical abuse, all occur at significantly lower rates than in more modern human communities. (The Village condition is not a panacea, of course. Episodic...
and unpredictable violence against children – typically stemming from loss of control, even leading to death – still lead to occasional tragedies.)

The idea of the Village is deeply rooted.

An evolutionary psychological perspective suggests that as a species we are designed to bring up children using both the Family setting and a set of circumstances which can be summarized as the Village context. The “Family plus Village” formula is in this view a basic human adaption, comparable to breastfeeding. Because a Village condition has until recently been a human universal, the idea of the Village is deeply rooted.

The Conflict Between the Village and the Family Bubble

The Village concept seems like an antidote to child abuse, in a variety of different ways, but it tends repeatedly to come up against the competing idea of the “Family Bubble.” The result is often a kind of cognitive paralysis – the literal or figurative bystander wants to do the right thing, but the right thing turns out to violate the value of the “Family Bubble.” Consider the following aspects of the Village:

- Shared Community Standards: Knowing Child Abuse When We See It

One basic feature of a Village setting is that there tends to be a fair amount of agreement about what constitutes acceptable and unacceptable behavior. As a result, the responsible villager is ready to pass judgement in his or her own mind about others’ behavior. This eventually allows a person to take action against the offender.

In the modern setting, however, the situation is often more complicated, since a kind of moral relativism prevails: Some people are much stricter with their children than others. Some believe in corporal punishment while others don’t. Some spend more time with their children, or keep a closer eye on their strollers than others do.

The result can be uncertainty about our own judgment that an event or situation is abusive, and about whether others would agree.

In this quote from the elicitations research, a conservative woman at first resists the possibility that there can be a shared definition of abuse, but then catches herself and acknowledges that there are some standards everyone should agree on:

Q: Do you think it's possible to tell another family what is or isn't appropriate for discipline?
A: No, I don't think anybody should tell them that. No legislature/ uh, well yeah I guess you have to at some point.
One attempt to resolve the question of what constitutes maltreatment is to focus instead on who is committing a given act. Child abuse and neglect are what certain kinds of people do, and we can recognize them by certain markers, such as socio-economic status or race. News stories about maltreatment often highlight things that have little to do with the maltreatment itself, but that serve as signs that the perpetrators are the kinds of people who would commit such a crime: If you can’t keep your yard clean, you’re likely to be the kind of person who beats his kids. Alternatively, the coverage of Michael Jackson dangling his baby over a balcony extends to commentary about the way he dresses his children and other markers of his deviance.

- Trusting Others

The Village condition presupposes that most adults that children encounter are fundamentally decent. This assumption (when true) is very helpful because it allows children to be supervised by a much wider group of individuals than the nuclear family. In contemporary America, this assumption is constantly undermined, especially by media coverage which highlights deviance, and by a constant flow of appalling statistics and events.

News story: Friends and neighbors of the Keintz family reacted with astonishment upon learning that Keintz was charged in the baby’s death. He had been watching the girl and her 11-month-old sister when the infant was injured. One friend remembered seeing Keintz around her baby, and recalled a gentle man who took to children easily. “A lot of us thought, ‘Boy, his wife is really getting a great guy.’”

Several studies have shown that news stories about children tend to focus on violence and crime (e.g. “The Local Television News Media’s Picture of Children,” Children Now, 2001; “Coverage in Context: How Thoroughly the News Media report Five Key Children’s Issues,” Kunkel, Smith, Suding, Biely for Casey Journalism Center on Children and Families, U. of MD., February 2002).

To take an example, “Many Sexually Abused, Study Says” is the headline of an article that reports that in Massachusetts one in five women say they were sexually abused as children. In this media environment, it is easy to internalize the message that many, many of us are depraved.

Do I think [sexual abuse] goes on? Sure. Do I think it goes on any more now than it did in 1900? No. I would say that for the 20 years of government interference, I would say comparing kids from 1900 and the year 2000 in America’s society, I would say the percentages of abuse to a child has not increased since 1900. Or 1800, for that matter.
The implication of this quote is that sexual abuse is a part of human nature. One simple adaptation to the loss of the village is to teach kids not to trust strangers. In a society where it is easy for adults to be alone with children, it becomes important for children to learn how to defend themselves (in cases where this is at all possible). The “You’re In Charge” PSA’s from Prevent Child Abuse North Carolina convey the message to kids that they have choices, and shouldn’t automatically be obedient and acquiescent to adults who do things that make them uncomfortable.

At the same time, however, treating everyone as a potential suspect conflicts with the possibility of creating a Village-like setting, and itself makes people feel uncomfortable. Consider the ambivalence inherent in the following news story:

*As spring arrives, so do baseball games, soccer matches, scout campouts for kids – and criminal background checks for many parents...More drastic steps – such as lifetime supervision for sex offenders – are necessary, some experts say...Also, critics question whether disclosure of long-ago arrests for non-sexual offenses unfairly damages reputations and excludes worthy volunteers.*

The effect (and perhaps the intent) of the story is to elicit a sense of conflict in the reader, one that undermines the message that we should act more like responsible villagers.

**Social Control**

While there might not be formal authority in a traditional Village setting, there is always a good deal of informal social control. Deviant behavior is likely to lead very quickly to sanctions by the group in the form of shaming, physical intervention, shunning and so forth.

In the contemporary setting, as depicted by the media and as experienced by our informants, there is an uncomfortable lack of social control, crudely and ineffectively compensated by formal authority structures (police, courts, social services, etc.).

*TRENTON, NJ – New Jersey’s child welfare officials have lost track of 110 children in cases of suspected abuse, with caseworkers checking their files in the wake of the brutal child abuse death of 7-year old Faheem Williams, whose decomposed body was found in a plastic garbage bin.*

*INDIANAPOLIS, IN – It’s their mandate: Save the children from abuse and neglect. But even after Child Protection Services responds to reports of child mistreatment, Indiana children are dying – at a rate that has nearly doubled in the past five years.*
“Almost every child who is placed in foster care is on some sort of psychotropic medication, usually Ritalin and Prozac,” says Pia Menon, formerly of the Office of the Public Guardian in Cook County... “They were on drugs because it is systematically convenient. The children were easier to manage, and generally drugs were given as a substitute for nurturing.”

Dateline NBC’s “Saving Richard” episode – a typical if longer than average example of media coverage of the issue – focused on the question, “When it comes to child abuse, does the punishment fit the crime?” and expressed shock that the child’s parents had received “no jail, just psychological counseling and parenting classes” from a lenient court, following an earlier episode of abuse.

The result is a dilemma in which the bystander to child abuse is constantly informed by the media about the ineffectiveness of government institutions, and at the same time realizes (and is often reminded) of his own powerlessness as a “responsible villager.”

This aspect of the absent Village is effectively illustrated by the following newspaper column that recounts the columnist’s experience of witnessing a mother verbally abusing her child:

Now what to do with this curbside, open-air child abuser? There’s no guidance counselor out here on the street. No protocol. No institution to guide my action. If I say something to this woman, is there a reasonable expectation she’ll change her behavior? ... Her slurs on the little girl become increasingly unprintable. This woman is forcing the moment to its crisis. Do I dare? No, I don’t. I walk on past like a guilty thing, leaving the mother to her business. Just around the corner on Irving Street there’s a man waiting for the Metrobus. He’s also been watching and listening to the mother. He and I make eye contact for a quick moment. Surely it’s a look of disgust that he and I exchange. Disgust for whom? The mother? Ourselves? The frayed fabric of our community? A combination of all these, perhaps.

Even when advice is offered about ways of getting involved (i.e. recreating the village), the inherent difficulty is implied.

_Bystanders observing a parent on the verge of physical abuse should be ready to intervene – with a sympathetic comment rather than a rebuke, experts say. They advise friends and neighbors to report any serious suspicions of abuse, even without firm proof._ (Newspaper column)

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If you notice that the child’s parents seem stressed, you might offer to watch their child for an afternoon or weekend or run errands for them. You can also mention parenting strategies that work for you during stressful times. Serious signs of abuse, which include frequent and unexplained bruises or injuries,
should be reported to police or to child protective services even in you feel you lack substantial evidence. (parenting magazine)

On the one hand, the bystander is advised to befriend a troubled parent, and on the other hand to be ready to turn in that parent. Though the policy makes sense, the juxtaposition of a recommendation to “build parent’s trust when possible” followed by the recommendation to “betray parent’s trust when necessary” puts the bystander in an uncomfortable position, one that does not necessarily encourage involvement.

• Highly permeable Family Bubble

One characteristic of the Village setting is that a child typically has access to more than one household of relatives, and might normally spend time in more than one. This has clear implications for child abuse at several levels: Parents who feel overwhelmed can be easily relieved of the burden of parenting; children who are unhappy at home and who are old enough to be mobile can “vote with their feet;” relatives can cajole parents into letting a child stay with them for a while. As a result, serious neglect is all but precluded, and cruelty is less likely to dominate a child’s life.

Among the consequence of the “Family Bubble,” by contrast, are the fact that children are less likely to leave a bad home situation, and that families are more likely to feel scarred and betrayed when they lose custody of children to social services. That is to say, there is an inherent opposition between the Family Bubble and the outside world, which greatly amplifies the psychological and moral conflict over custody – and bystanders’ sense of which action is right and appropriate.

A number of symptoms of this conflict are regularly reported on by the media, and our informants were strongly aware of the zero-sum game nature of the relationship between Family Bubble and State.

“This issue of family preservation versus child protection has been with us since Colonial times,” says Cathy Barbelle of the Child Welfare League of America. “Teddy Roosevelt gave us a policy, but the problem of how we address and deal with child abuse remains unresolved.” The tension between the two groups has prevented child welfare from accomplishing the important goals first set in 1909. The opposing views also have created a contradiction between policy and practice. “The policy has been one of family support, but the practice has been one of child protection through family disruption,” says Golden.

To take a different angle on the same issue of the Family Bubble, consider that one of the protective features of the Village condition is the transparency of the
Family Bubble. As Native American informants report, the lack of privacy in traditional villages made child sexual abuse all but impossible. (This changed once villagers were placed in Western-style houses equipped with individual bedrooms.) The point of this observation is confirmed by a recent report commissioned by Prevent Child Abuse America. “What tends to impede action is the very fact that child abuse occurs within the family and is therefore easily concealed . . .” “A Qualitative Study on Child Abuse Awareness and Concept Development” (Nicholas Research, 2001).

The obvious recommendation is to increase the transparency of the home environment, for instance through home visitation programs. This approach, of course, directly conflicts with the deeply rooted understanding of the Family Bubble as a private and protected space. The response from conservatives has been consistent. Consider the opening salvo of a column by Phyllis Schlafly:

*Are the American people willing to allow government agents to come into their homes to “advise” them about how to care for their babies? What if the announced purpose of these home visits is to look for child abuse under the assumption that all parents are suspects.*

Elicitations subjects also routinely interpreted the idea of a home visit as an inspection.

*Q:* It turns out that one of the most effective ways of reducing this problem is through home visits to at-risk families. You send somebody from the Department of Human Services and send them to the house, they talk to the parents, have a conversation, maybe more than once. What do you think about that kind of program?

*A:* It’s all in the follow up. The success of those programs would depend on the resources that the investigating party has to make changes if they deem they’re necessary.

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*Q:* So in terms of reducing this problem, one of the things that people have tried is home visits to families where there seems like there is a risk of abuse or mistreatment. What do you think about that?

*A:* ... It’s a good idea but I don’t think it will work. I mean because / Announced, I don’t think is a good idea. Like if it is announced. Like “okay, we are going to be there on Tuesday at 4 in the afternoon.” ...  

*Q:* So that is not a good idea?

*A:* That is not a good idea at all. Because then they are just going to fix things up, you know? And just put on a show for you.
The same conflict plays out at the level of policy:

CHICAGO, IL – The McHenry County Board may reconsider whether to accept a $102,000 state child-abuse prevention grant, barely one month after rejecting the grant because of concerns over privacy rights and government intrusions into family life.

So even while observing the political process at second-hand, bystanders face an uncomfortable dilemma involving the Family Bubble: child protection or sanctity and preservation of the family.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR PROMOTING THE VILLAGE

Advocates and policymakers who want to take advantage of some of the protective aspects of a stronger, village-like community are a bit like nutritionists who have to design a diet for astronauts in space through careful analysis of nutritional requirements. Just as they can’t simply recommend the “Mediterranean diet,” advocates cannot simply recommend a “Village lifestyle.” Instead, we must carefully identify and implement the most protective aspects of the Village, keeping in mind the tendency for Village-related ideas to conflict with the deeply rooted “Family Bubble.”

With this in mind, the above analysis reinforces the value of several approaches currently being pursued by advocates, and suggests a couple of cautionary notes:

• Creating a sense of Village

  Much of the coverage of child abuse implies the loss or absence of the Village, which strips the audience of a source of motivation for involvement. Some coverage, however, does depict various aspects of the Village, not in explicit terms, of course.

  The creation of childcare “safe environment” programs, or “safe places,” for example, recreates a significant aspect of the Village – a protective lack of privacy more like a village square than a bedroom. It is not a return to the Village, but a recreation of one significant protective aspect of the Village.

  Alternatively, the simple act of recognition by the community can have positive effects. Children are rendered valuable by being recognized as members of the Village, and one home visitation program is described as follows:

  *The program, in effect, will say to such families, “here we have a new life and a new beginning,”* England said.
Associating a home visitation program with a welcoming ritual invokes the Village’s ability to affirm the value of both child and parents.

- Continuing to establish community standards
  
  Advocates have done an excellent job of working to establishing widely-accepted standards of what constitutes appropriate behavior in disciplining children. Polls show that attitudes toward spanking are shifting, and research including elicitation suggest that even many conservatives are coming around – people are ambivalent about spanking even when they do not come out and condemn it.

  At the same time, it is important to avoid getting too far ahead of the curve and suggesting, for example, that the idea of “punishment” is itself inappropriate, and should be abandoned.

- Avoiding recommendations that are difficult to follow or not matched to the problem

  Many of the examples discussed in this section refer to the motivational paralysis that people can feel when put in the position of a “failed” villager. Some public service announcements in particular, leave out any indication of a practical solution – to a truly horrifying depiction of a loathsome crime. The idea behind the ads is presumably to shock and galvanize the public into action. The effect, however, is too often to simply promote a kind of “learned helplessness” in the viewer.

  Sometimes the problem is a disconnect between the problem and the solution – a horrifying crime and the recommendation that we access a website for further information. This tendency can occur in coverage of policy discussions as well. Here is an example of a more helpful framing of the problem and its solution:

  
  CHICAGO, IL – Parents Care and Share of Illinois is starting a chapter this week in Elgin for parents and caregivers of children who need to let off a little steam. “When your kids are misbehaving and you think you’re the only one who’s having that problem, you feel pretty awful about it,” said Susie Kline, regional director of the child abuse prevention program....The Parents Care program...aims to support caregivers of children of all ages who fear stress is affecting their caregiving.

  In this example, the problem (stress) is proportional to its solution (letting off steam).

- Avoid forcing a choice between Village and “Family Bubble”

  When confronted directly with the opposition between family and outside forces, many people tend to support the family and exclude Village thinking. They may
even reject the whole idea that connections to the broader community are valuable:

Q: Do think that when people are more isolated that they're more likely to be abusive? Do you think that could be a factor?
A: What do you mean...
Q: Like a family that has very few connections, or a mother, a father, that has very few connections to other people, do you think that makes them any more likely to be abusive?
A: No, I don't think so. Maybe if they don't have a lot of things going on the outside, maybe they're spending more time with their children, they're more aware what their child's doing. Sometimes I think it's the people who have these, you know, country club action, out here, out there, doing this, going here, and the children are left alone a lot, I think that's the problem.

A number of longer articles in the “soft” news category do a fine job of framing the social support idea, using metaphors of connection and avoiding the psychological conflict between family and community or State:

“It’s like there’s an invisible string from their heart to mine,” says one family support worker. “When they tug on the string, I’m there.”

This quote illustrates a blurring of the boundary between family and Village – the support worker frames herself almost as part of the household’s extended family.

Or in another piece,

Parents who have never lifted a finger against their children – but who fit the profile of those who might – are getting loving, intensive care and friendship that could stop abuse before it happens.

One way to defuse the conflict between family and community is to emphasize the advantages of visitation for the parents as individuals:

CHICAGO, IL – In Rich and Bloom Townships, teen mothers are learning that having a baby doesn’t have to mean abandoning all of their dreams.
CONCLUSION: SIMPLE CAUSAL MESSAGES

On most if not all issues, members of the public respond strongly to clear, simple causal stories. When people understand how carbon dioxide and other greenhouse gases accumulate in the atmosphere and act as a blanket trapping heat, they are more likely to support policies to reduce carbon emissions. When they understand that modern fishing nets can scrape the bottom of the ocean, they realize that preservation of ocean ecosystems requires urgent action.

Simple causal stories are relatively lacking in discussions of the child maltreatment issue. This is partly because the causes of the problem are complex and varied, but also because advocates have relied on the power of tragic stories and statistics to move public opinion. These tactics have been effective, but may now have reached the limits of their ability, in themselves, to change people’s thinking. If they are reinforced by explanations that help people understand the problem and its solutions more clearly, communications stand a chance of having a much greater impact.

Two chief cognitive obstacles currently stand in the way of greater public engagement: people’s lack of a Developmental (as opposed to an Other-Mind) perspective, and the Family Bubble model. On each of these issues there are some simple causal stories that advocates can develop and emphasize. On the one hand, advocates can communicate, for example, that a child who has suffered the stress of severe abuse has a brain that is measurably smaller and less developed in some areas than another child’s (Developmental Damage); that stress triggers a reaction in adults that makes children’s actions look more intentional than they are; that withholding affection stunts certain aspects of development, producing babies who are less able to deal with stress – i.e. weaker and less self-reliant – than those who are showered with affection; that a baby who is talked to very frequently (far from being “spoiled” by the attention), is stimulated to develop preverbal behaviors (“cooing”) faster, and likely to be happier when left alone because she has a more highly developed tool for entertaining herself. These developmental explanations can reduce the confusing and polarizing emphasis on parents’ competence, and help defuse rhetorical, values-based arguments. They can also help people gain a clearer, more objective picture of what counts as abuse/neglect – definitions which are sorely needed, as previous research has pointed out.

There are also simple causal stories about families and “the village” that can be emphasized more in advocates’ communications – such as the (unnatural) burdens placed on individual parents and families by the mobility in our society. These causal scenarios do not need to challenge the Family Bubble directly – which would probably be futile – but can help people see more clearly some particular reasons and methods for bridging between children and the broader community. Concrete examples of practices and institutions that do this bridging can also help shift people’s thinking – for example, a description of a community parenting center, where (normal, competent) parents can came to get helpful advice and support could help open people’s eyes to the value of restoring community connections.

Values-based messages about helping children will always be appropriate and motivating, but they can be powerfully supplemented by these objective explanations.
that help people form a clearer picture of how and why children are suffering, and how adults can help.
APPENDIX 1: CONFIRMING PREVIOUS FINDINGS ABOUT PUBLIC PERCEPTIONS OF CHILD MALTREATMENT

A great many previous studies have explored public understandings relating to child abuse. Data gathered in the course of the elicitations research confirmed many of the findings from this work. While our focus in the report is on aspects of the issue that have received less attention – and some areas of disagreement with previous analyses – it is worth noting the areas where elicitations findings reinforce current hypotheses in the field about what the public thinks.

• The term “abuse” commonly evokes extreme and sensational images.
• People are aware that maltreatment is widespread.
• Child abuse seems to spring from universal and unchanging aspects of human nature:
  • It is hard for people to agree on what counts as child abuse.
• When people do grapple with the definition of child abuse, their thoughts consistently gravitate to a particular set of factors.

These factors are summarized, for example, in Nicholas Research’s “Qualitative Study on Child Abuse Awareness and Concept Development” (2001, for PCAA):

  “[M]ost [focus group participants] believe abuse occurs when discipline is out of control, when it is administered with anger, when, if it is physical discipline, visible signs result and when, if it is verbal discipline, words go beyond reprimand and reasonable to hurtful and demeaning so that here too the outcome, even if not visible, is long-lasting.”

• For the most part, people feel powerless to do much about preventing child abuse; they do not readily perceive solutions.
• People understand that an abused child is more likely to ultimately become an abuser.
• People are very reluctant to remove a child from a family.
• People agree that most parents could use much more help and information.
• African-Americans tend to believe in, and be proud of, “traditional” child rearing methods, which usually means stricter discipline, and a greater emphasis on fear of punishment.
APPENDIX 2: THE COGNITIVE APPROACH
This appendix discusses the assumptions and principles that form the basis for the “cognitive approach” taken by Cultural Logic.

Frames
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. People are usually unaware of the frames they are using, and the frames themselves are usually expressed indirectly. They are revealed most clearly in the language and reasoning a person uses in connection with a concept. Seeming contradictions in the way a person discusses a topic can be particularly enlightening, because they may reveal conflicting frames at work. It should be noted as well that "frame" is a general term — used somewhat differently in different disciplines — to refer to more specific concepts such as cognitive model, cultural model, and cultural theory, discussed below.

Cultural models vs. cultural theories
A cultural theory is a set of explicit propositions that describe the nature of some general phenomenon (The Development of Cognitive Anthropology, D'Andrade 1995). Cultural theories are typically the most apparent and immediately coherent structures of knowledge — the ones that are volunteered by focus group participants for example, and the ones that lend themselves to direct description and summary by the analyst. Cultural theories are closely related to public discourse and, because they are explicit understandings, to rhetorical positions adopted for purposes of argument. A cultural model, by contrast, consists of a set of largely implicit assumptions that allows a person to reason about and solve a problem. A cultural model specifies relationships between a given concept and others — specific domains (e.g., School) are typically connected to broader cultural assumptions (e.g., understandings about Achievement or Growth). Cultural models are associated with private understanding and individual reasoning.

A classic example of the difference between cultural models and cultural theories is provided by Strauss's study of blue-collar workers in Rhode Island (1992). Her informants clearly understood, and explicitly articulated to the interviewer, the American model of self-made Success. In some cases, they even claimed that this style of success was important to them. Close analysis of discourse, however, revealed that these men were actually basing their behavior on an implicit model of a Breadwinner, which is more strongly related to ideals of husband and father than to wealth and status.

Cultural models, while less explicit and more challenging to identify than cultural theories, typically have more directive force — i.e., they are more relevant to understanding what people actually do.
Cognitive Analysis

An important assumption of this view of human motivation is that a variety of cultural models typically compete for expression in a given defined situation. Putting it simply, people often have conflicts about basic issues. For example, many Americans believe that a woman should work outside the home; a contradictory assumption, held by many of these same people, is that women should stay in the home and nurture children. Though contradictions such as this one often find partial resolution (e.g., through the contemporary American notion of the "Supermom"), typically such deeply held beliefs are compartmentalized; i.e., only one will be invoked in a given context.

Cognitive analysis first identifies the relevant deeply held models to which a given subject such as "School" is connected (literally or through metaphor). Second, it attempts to map the fault lines that predict which of the models will be expressed as action in a given situation, often triggered by particular cues. Third, it suggests a picture of the dynamic relationship between public messages, cultural models, and individual action around a given topic.

Metaphors

It is a universal finding of cognitive linguistics that people use metaphors to think, speak and reason about the world, even on topics as familiar as “weather” — i.e., some of the cultural models used to reason about any given topic are metaphoric models. For example, teenagers are sometimes metaphorically understood as unfinished objects, materials that haven't been formed into their final shape. The metaphors people use to think and talk about teenagers contribute to guiding adults' behavior towards adolescents, including whether and how they choose to nurture, ignore, discipline, or otherwise engage with adolescents.

Cognitive interviews

Because cultural models tend to be organized into distinct and recognizable patterns, they lend themselves to qualitative investigation. The cognitive interview format is designed to approximate a "natural conversation" (Quinn 1982). In an interview situation people are often most comfortable providing cultural theories (explicit and familiar explanations which are known to have general currency); the semi-structured interview puts them in a situation which encourages them instead to do their own reasoning about the issues we are interested in, i.e., to use the relevant cultural models.

Skilled interviewing shifts the informant away from a "performing" mode and toward a "training" mode. The natural give and take of a conversation puts informants in a position of teaching the interviewer how to think about a given issue. The analyst's job is to identify cultural assumptions, first in the interview setting by responding to and subtly challenging or asking for clarification of intuited premises, and second in the analysis of transcriptions by making these assumptions explicit.
Subjects and sample size

Because a culture is defined by a set of broadly shared understandings and assumptions, studying cultural models is analogous to studying the structure of a natural language. One does not need a large group of speakers to determine the basics of a language's grammar and syntax — a few speakers will typically suffice. Similarly, working with only a relative few subjects, one can identify the commonly held belief system typical of those subjects’ culture. In-depth work with a relatively small group of informants has been the norm in cognitive anthropology, allowing researchers to work more closely with subjects than is possible using large-scale methodologies. Findings from cognitive interviews may subsequently be expanded upon and refined through quantitative methods, which may establish, for example, how strongly particular models are held in different segments of the population. Where the cognitive approach identifies the nature of the models, carefully devised quantitative research, using fixed-form surveys for example, can establish the distribution of the models (see Kempton et al 1995).
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, analysis of media and other public discourse, and preflighting messages for communications campaigns.

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.

Joseph Grady, Ph.D., cofounder of Cultural Logic, is a linguist whose academic research and publications focus on the relationship between metaphor and other aspects of thought and communication. Grady has taught linguistics at Georgetown University and the University of Maryland, and also spent a number of years as a consultant helping to analyze and develop brand names.
Developing Community Connections: Qualitative Research Regarding Framing Policies

By Public Knowledge LLC
Meg Bostrom, President
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This research analysis was conducted in collaboration with the FrameWorks Institute, and commissioned by Prevent Child Abuse America, with funding from the Doris Duke Charitable Foundation.

Method
The following analysis is based on discussions with six focus groups. All focus group participants were recruited to meet a community opinion leader profile (votes, follows the news regularly, engaged in the community, etc.). Groups were divided by gender and mixed on all other demographic criteria. Two groups were held in each of the following locations:

- Manchester, NH – July 7, 2003
- Atlanta, GA – July 9, 2003
- Chicago, IL – July 14, 2003

Focus groups are a form of qualitative research; the results cannot be projected to a broader population.
Introduction and Summary

The objective of this phase of research was to determine how Prevent Child Abuse America (PCA America) can effectively frame the organization’s communications to advance a broad agenda of policies for children and families, including both policies that directly address maltreatment as well as policies less directly associated with maltreatment, such as early education, health, economic security, and family work issues. To that end, focus group participants were asked to review and respond to four articles, each designed to represent one of four frames: Child Abuse, Parenting, Child Development, and Community. In real news coverage these frames can, and do, overlap, but the research deliberately kept each frame distinct to attempt to isolate the effects of each frame on a proxy list of representative policies and programs. Nevertheless, some order effects were observed and these are noted where relevant in the analysis.

The four frames were developed based upon past research. FrameWorks Institute research suggested that children’s issues need to connect to a role for communities and that a child development discussion could help the public prioritize policies for children. Cultural Logic had identified the public’s lack of understanding about how children develop, the influence of family-centric thinking, and the role of isolation in communicating the importance of community. These findings were further informed by work in progress from the National Scientific Panel on the Developing Child. Finally, PCA America’s own research informed the research, particularly in developing the Child Abuse Frame.

Each frame provides different benefits in communicating child and family issues, and each of the four frames has a role to play in the overall communications strategy. Importantly, the communications strategy cannot exist separately from a policy agenda. This research demonstrates that each frame is effective in advancing different kinds of policies.

There are a number of deficits in existing public perceptions that communications needs to overcome. The most difficult challenge is to bring children’s issues into the public arena. Historically, children’s issues have been hampered by the public’s inability to see societal responsibility for children. Other than education, the public cannot connect children to a broader community. Cultural Logic refers to this as the “Family Bubble” which they define as “the default mode of thinking in which events within the family (including child rearing and child maltreatment) take place in a sphere that is separate and different from the public sphere….It means that even thinking about the interaction between child rearing and public policy is difficult for people….“

The Family Bubble has several consequences for how people think about these issues. If parenting and child rearing exist in a separate sphere, then parenting is an individual choice and individual responsibility, external conditions do not matter to the success of the family, and outsiders (unless they are an extension of the Family Bubble) have no
role. The only role for outsiders is negative and represents a failure by parents, i.e., an inability to provide for their children, or abusive conditions.

To build support for policies for families and children, it is imperative to develop positive connections to a broader community. Otherwise, people will resist new policies on the basis of inappropriate “government intrusion” and the programs that do exist will always be defined as being about parents who are failing.

Child abuse as a topic represents a particularly difficult challenge. Due to the hard work by PCA America and others, the public sees child maltreatment as a serious and pervasive problem, recognizes the various forms of maltreatment, and sees a role for society in intervening to address these situations. However, the media’s vivid portrayal of child abuse also paralyzes direct public intervention and reminds people that there are few viable solutions to the problem.

The Child Abuse Frame, as tested in the focus groups, was designed to reflect PCA America’s existing approach to communications. This frame is very effective in raising questions about government priorities. However, it also undermines support for government solutions, which people believe are broken. The article’s prevention message and its call for positive parenting go largely unnoticed due to the vivid nature of the Child Abuse and Failed Government frames.

The Parenting Frame connects with people’s personal experience and reframes the idea that parenting should come naturally. It introduces the idea of inadvertent abuse, which allows people to question their own behavior in a non-threatening way. The Parenting Frame develops the idea that all Americans have a stake in good parenting, though it does not go far enough in this regard. Finally, this frame is particularly successful in creating a conversation about policies to help people balance work and family. This frame needs to be constructed carefully however, since it can easily reinforce the Family Bubble, and cause people to believe that it is not possible to prepare for parenthood.

The Child Development Frame is a “new” story that interests people. It is a non-threatening way for parents to get advice and training about infancy through the teen years. The Child Development Frame begins to connect children to community, and is less overt in the role for community than some of the other frames tested. It provides an important foundation for future support of policies. In the focus groups, participants began to use child development to reason about child and family policies, demonstrating that it will be an important element of effective communications to advance children’s issues. There are also deficiencies in the frame that careful construction will have to overcome. Currently, people see every child as unique and reject the notion that a child can be limited by early experiences. Furthermore, people’s thinking about child development currently defaults to parent-child interactions and disciplinary issues.

Finally, the Community Frame was designed to avoid the Family Bubble mindset and connect families to communities in positive ways. There are three kinds of communities that come to mind, only one of which advances policies for families. One detrimental
image of community is a nostalgic view of a 1950s community, which is strongly associated with physical discipline and which reminds people that it is no longer safe to allow children to roam neighborhoods freely. A second detrimental image of community is “community” as a government safety net for families that are failing. When connections to community are too overt, people become defensive and worry about government intrusion into families. Finally, to lead to policy support, people need to be reminded of their positive connections to community and the role of those connections in supporting families. The Community Frame is effective in developing those connections, but needs to be carefully constructed to lead to a beneficial image of community, rather than trigger an image that undermines children’s issues.

All four frames have a role to play, but the balance of the four frames in future communications will depend largely upon the policy agenda that PCA America intends to pursue.

The Child Abuse Frame

The attention that PCA America and others have brought to child maltreatment over the years has resulted in several positive achievements. The public sees child maltreatment as a serious and pervasive problem, recognizes the various forms of maltreatment, and sees a role for society in intervening to address these situations. However, the vividness of the child abuse frame also paralyzes direct public intervention, reminds people that the solutions to the problem are broken, and fails to promote child-friendly policies beyond the scope of the child abuse issue.

The Child Abuse Frame, as tested in the focus groups, was designed to reflect PCA America’s existing approach to communications. It is effective in causing readers to question whether or not government has the right priorities when it comes to children and families. However, it also undermines support for government solutions and does not address the perceptions that prohibit people from acting on child maltreatment. Importantly, it does not advance a prevention agenda, providing little impetus for better family support services, early intervention and referral or even parenting education. The article’s prevention message and its call for positive parenting go largely unnoticed due to the vividness of the Child Abuse and Failed Government frames.

Issue Context

Child maltreatment is a high priority for the public. Focus group participants believe maltreatment is pervasive in society and are quick to label a variety of actions as representing “child abuse.” “We hear it all the time,” a Chicago man explained. “You can't turn on the TV or read the paper without seeing [it].” Furthermore, the public is familiar with a variety of different kinds of abuse. “There’s not really one definition,” a Manchester woman explained. “You’ve got intellectual neglect, you’ve got neglect at school, you’ve got nurturing neglect, you’ve got neglect of love. Then you’ve got the
physical and emotional and sexual abuse.” “It's all those different points,” an Atlanta man noted, “physical, emotional, spiritual.”

For some participants, “child abuse” has come to mean any kind of negative interaction with a child. “I would even put [abuse] as inappropriate behavior,” a Manchester woman described. “Even with teachers singling out kids and that’s a form of abuse, like teachers, you know...God bless them for doing it, but there’s some that for whatever reason, they clash with a kid or they’ve just been there so long that they definitely have inappropriate ways.” A Chicago woman summarized: “I tell you any time that you are treating a child...treat them anything worse than nice. I think it's abuse.”

The broad and vague definition of abuse is a barrier to understanding and action, in part because it makes the problem seem overwhelming. “It’s such a broad topic,” a Manchester woman stated. “There are so many aspects of child abuse that...sometimes you don’t even know where to begin.” Furthermore, this expansive understanding of abuse causes focus group participants to worry that society is going too far, for example, by equating spanking with abuse. “I even think sometimes how people take it too far. When they take child abuse too far,” an Atlanta woman worried. “When they say, ‘Okay, you spanked your child in Wal-Mart and so now you are going to jail.’...If that child was stealing, that child needs to be spanked and that's not child abuse.”

While focus group participants recognize all forms of child maltreatment, the dominant image of “child abuse” is one of extreme physical harm. “My visualization of abuse is what I see on the TV,” an Atlanta man described, “when they show malnutritioned (sic) and beaten kids with black and blue and deformed and whatever.”

“Abusive behavior” conjures up somewhat different images of less extreme, but still inappropriate actions such as yelling, that could be done by any parent in a stressful situation. “Yelling at the kid,” an Atlanta man explained. “Always telling them they are bad,” a Chicago woman suggested. “Different degrees that's all,” remarked a Chicago man.

For many, “abusive behavior” is an isolated act that any parent could commit, while “child abuse” is ongoing, repetitive behavior. “I think abusive behavior can be isolated,” a Manchester man explained, “while child abuse I consider to be long term; it happens repeatedly. Abusive behavior can be one incident. You can be abusive just once, but child abuse I consider to be repetitive.”

According to focus group participants, child neglect is different than child abuse, and includes not paying enough attention to a child. Asked for the images that come to mind when they think of child neglect, Chicago respondents described: “dirty, homeless,” “emaciated, hungry,” “unloved,” and “latch key kids at seven years old, letting themselves in.” “You sit the child in front of a television and just let them go,” an Atlanta woman stated. “I mean in today's age it's either a Playstation or the TV. That way you can do your thing and work on your work that you brought home from the office, and you just don't deal with that child.”
Sex abuse is perceived as a different category from other forms of child maltreatment. For some, it is a criminal act. For others, it is an illness. “I think it’s a little different because it’s not the parent,” a Manchester man explained. “It may be a parental figure for the child, but it’s not their parent.” “It is a crime, pedophilia is a crime,” a Manchester woman argued. “I don’t see why it’s falling under church jurisdiction here. I think people should be slammed for it.” “I think it’s illness,” a Manchester woman remarked. “I think they’re pretty sicko’s; they’re sick, sick people.” Furthermore, while many acts of child maltreatment may be unintentional, “sexual abuse is very intentional.” (Manchester woman)

Most say they are willing to intervene personally if they see an extreme case of child abuse. At the same time, most are also uncomfortable with the prospect of intruding in another family’s affairs. “I think there’s a balancing act in our society,” a Manchester man noted. “There’s something that tells us that the family is sacred, and that we hesitate to intrude upon that family unit unless it’s very extreme.” When reasoning in this frame, focus group participants cannot see a positive way to be involved with children other than their own. Instead, involvement is confrontational and accusatory. Focus group participants report that people are reluctant to intervene, in part because there are differing definitions of abuse and it is within the prerogative of the family to draw the line between discipline and abuse unless the situation is extreme. “It would be my definition of abuse versus your definition of abuse,” stated an Atlanta woman. At the same time, most say they would intervene in the case of obvious maltreatment: “If I saw something that in my mind I knew was wrong, nothing would stop me.” (Atlanta woman) Problematically, the “proof” of maltreatment is significant. Focus group participants indicate that they would have to see repeated inappropriate acts, or would need to see extreme evidence, such as iron marks, etc.

To protect the child, the public expects government intervention. At the same time, people are uncomfortable with government intrusion into families and worry that the definition of “abuse” goes too far. “I think it has a lot to do with the government being involved in how you rear your children,” an Atlanta woman complained. “I just think they have too much say in the whole matter. I don't agree with the yelling and screaming and belittling your child, but I think children need to be disciplined and when they aren’t, you end up with a monster.”

Furthermore, everything focus group participants hear about government’s handling of children who have been mistreated tells them that the solutions are broken. “Their caseloads are phenomenal,” a Manchester woman remarked. “One person has a load of caseloads.”

“Child abuse” cues government intervention in focus group participants’ minds. Similarly, when they think of government’s role in families, focus group participants think of children who have been mistreated. This close mental connection between child maltreatment and government intervention creates a barrier for promoting positive government solutions, including most forms of prevention, and community interventions for families.
Framing Effects

The child maltreatment article tested in the focus groups was able to convey persuasively that the government has the wrong priorities, i.e., politicians are ineffective and make the wrong choices. “There are other places they could cut that money,” an Atlanta woman argued. Another added, “I do think we pay a lot of lip service to saying we want to take care of the children but we don't want to put our money where our mouth is and we don't want to fight the good fight to save them.”

However, this approach also reminds focus group participants of all the other bad choices that government makes, such as funding an expensive war in the Middle East. This distracts participants from children’s issues. “What I can't understand,” a Chicago man stated, “I'm not a mathematician, just the average guy. If they can cut $13 million of whatever amount of money from programs that would benefit citizens, how in the world can we get up and allocate $50 billion to go to another country to build that country?” “I am so sick of it, all these promises,” a Manchester woman emphasized. “From the top all the way down, I’ve had it. It’s like I’ve almost become to the point where I’m almost ashamed to say I’m a registered voter.”

Furthermore, the article does not address any of the existing perceptions that prohibit people from acting on this issue. It does not clarify the definition of maltreatment, nor help focus group participants see the problem as manageable or solvable. Without these important clarifications, it appears to them to be an overwhelming problem. “This is enormous, to sit here and even begin to think how would we do this. It’s just beyond putting into words. It’s enormous. It’s horrifying,” a Manchester woman stated. “And you can see that two or three times a week,” noted a Chicago woman, “these kids dumping babies in the garbage.” The article reminds them that, like the families they equate with the problem, the presumptive responsible agent for resolving this problem is also “broken.” “They are desperate. They need to place these kids somewhere, so they will accept anybody,” a Manchester woman explained. “They really don’t check the backgrounds.” “The caseload just gets larger and larger and there is not enough time,” remarked an Atlanta man.

Though focus group participants recognize that child abuse and neglect can occur in any family, this frame quickly becomes about the poor, drug abusers, teen mothers, etc. “I think it's more prevalent when you have a lower socio-economic scale,” an Atlanta man noted, “because they have a lot more hardships. Sometimes they don't know where their next meal may be coming from. They don't know if they are going to pay the rent.” This dynamic could be helpful if people linked the problem to economic conditions that can be prevented, and not some flaw internal to poor people – a challenging task. “If you can somehow alleviate their socio-economic position so there are not as many pressures,” an Atlanta man suggested. “If a single mom has three kids to feed and she has a high school education, she is going to have a lot of pressure to feed those children. So somehow you can
improve her condition whether it is through education, whether it is through housing, whether it is through day care.”

Many participants miss the article’s prevention message. For some, prevention seems impossible. “I think it’s almost impossible to prevent it,” a Manchester woman confessed, “and I know that sounds just so negative but if you look at how long it’s been going on, and it’s always been a problem and no one has seemed to stop it or deter it yet, I just don’t know.” For others, prevention means deterring people from having children before they are ready. “Don't teach a teenage mother how to take care of a kid,” an Atlanta man argued. “Teach her not to have that kid, if she is not ready for it.” This perspective makes life education in high school an obvious solution. A Chicago woman described a high school parenting class: “They have to take care of the baby so it makes them aware that this child cries. They cannot turn it off. I think that is a good thing. I think actually abstinence is not a bad thing to teach either. So there is a lot of things like that that I think if we postpone having children -- I'm sure there are studies about child abuse being more prevalent among certain ages versus other ages.”

The article’s positive parenting message is also overwhelmed by the vividness of the child abuse frame. When prompted, participants discuss positive parenting favorably. According to a Manchester man, it means “doing the things that we mentioned, spending the time, providing for the kid, not leaving them to fend for themselves. Make them feel loved.” Atlanta women described positive parenting as “a good role model,” “nurturing, loving,” and “encouraging.”

Finally, focus group participants begin to see child maltreatment as inadvertent, which creates a sympathetic view of abusive parents and underscores that any parent can engage in abusive behavior. “When this one child continues to be defiant and disobedient over and over and over again cause you got this strong willed child,” a Manchester woman explained, “they don’t intentionally want to scream ‘shut up’ at the top of their lungs...but they don’t have another coping skill.” This perspective allows parents to question their own behavior in a non-accusatory way. “I think all of us that have been parents,” an Atlanta man explained, “we've been doing something, the child has been bothering you and you turn. ‘Wait a minute. Hold on, I'm sorry. I didn't mean to say that. What do you need?’ We all get in that thing.”

It is important to note that, while focus group participants make most of the sympathetic comments in the course of discussing the child abuse article, it is fairly clear that the parenting article (discussed in the following section) creates this perspective, not the child abuse article. Comments about abuse being inadvertent only occur in Atlanta and Manchester, when the parenting article preceded the child abuse article, and did not occur in Chicago, when the parenting article came after the child abuse article.
The Parenting Frame

Historically, children’s issues have been hampered by the public’s inability to assign societal responsibility for children. With the exception of education, the public has a difficult time identifying the ways in which children connect to a broader community. Cultural Logic refers to this as the “Family Bubble” which they define as “the default mode of thinking in which events within the family (including child rearing and child maltreatment) take place in a sphere that is separate and different from the public sphere….It means that even thinking about the interaction between child rearing and public policy is difficult for people…."

The Family Bubble has several consequences for how people think about parenting. If parenting and child rearing exist in a separate sphere, then parenting is an individual choice and individual responsibility, external conditions do not matter to the success of the family, and outsiders (unless they are an extension of the Family Bubble) have no role. The only role for outsiders is negative and represents a failure by parents. To build support for policies for children, people need to see positive connections to the community. Otherwise, policies will always be defined as being about parents who are failing.

The Parenting Frame tested in the focus groups was designed to frame parenting as a job which requires training, rather than a natural instinct or morality taught by family. It also sought to define a societal stake in the success of families.

While the Parenting Frame is not able to completely overcome all of the existing perceptual barriers, it does have several benefits that advance the conversation. It connects with people’s personal experience. It reframes the notion that parenting should come naturally and instead helps people to see that most people are not prepared for parenthood. As discussed in the previous section, the Parenting Frame allows people to see abuse as inadvertent, which allows them to question their own behavior in a non-threatening way. It establishes empathy, not sympathy – an important distinction in constituency building for social policies. Moreover, it takes some small steps toward helping people understand that all Americans have a stake in good parenting. Finally, this frame is particularly successful in creating a conversation about policies to help people balance work and family.

Issue Context

When focus group participants’ attention is centered on parents, their default thinking strongly suggests that parenting is an individual choice and responsibility, and people have to live with the consequences of the choices they make. “They made a choice,” an Atlanta man noted, “and if the choice is to work the 12 hour days and have a nanny or a grandmother do it, that's a choice they made that they have to live with.”

Furthermore, focus group participants indicate that parenting is either an innate ability, or, that it should be taught by family. “Good parenting breeds good parenting,” an Atlanta
man stated. “Trust your heart,” a Chicago man recommended. “You can't be naive and think of raising your child by yourself and just do everything from How to be a Good Parent Handbook, that my wife got when she was pregnant,” a Chicago man sneered. “It's good to read all of that stuff but you've got to listen to your mom, your grandmother, your aunts, your cousins. Those people had babies before you.”

Conditions are largely irrelevant in raising children successfully, according to focus group participants. “It doesn’t matter how much money or how little money,” a Manchester woman explained. “You can live in the lower incomes in New York City, and you can have some of the nicest kids with happy, loving, either single parent families or multiparent families...you can have any kind of combination but if your kids are loved and they feel safe they’re bound to foster.”

All that good parents really need is to love their children. “You have to love the event and enjoy the idea that you are going to be a parent,” a Chicago man noted. “The rest will follow because I'm going to tell you there are a lot of people that don't want to be parents and when they find out they are parents, they go through a real problem adjusting to the idea.” “I'd say do the best you can,” a Manchester man recommended, “and, you’re going to make mistakes. Don’t be too hard on yourself, as long as you love your child, spend time with the child, be there for them.”

However, several focus group participants suggest that parents are scrutinized constantly, putting pressure on parents’ decisions and abilities. “They judge you every aspect of the way,” a New Hampshire woman complained. “What do you feed your kids? Oh, you don’t feed all natural? Oh, you don’t feed all soy? Oh, you give them milk. Oh, you didn’t breast feed.’ You know...there’s just one judgment after the next.”

Indeed, focus group participants describe a variety of different kinds of bad parents, with the upper-class, dual-income family the most frequent example of parents who are not doing what is best for their children. “They have over a million dollar home,” a Chicago man stated, “but the kids -- what good is it for the kids? They are always like you said in a day care or they have a nanny or whatever. Parents today that have a lot of money don't bring up their kids. Somebody else brings up their kids.”

Due to the Family Bubble mindset, people see no role for others unless it is to give parents a break. “I think that having those other people in those children's life is relieving some of the stress off the parents,” an Atlanta woman explained. “It doesn't necessarily mean that those kids need to listen to other people, those other influences before they listen to the parent. I just think the more caregivers you have in a child's life, the better that child is. Yeah, the parents should teach the child and they should be the first priority that that child is going to listen to. But I come from a very large family, and I don't think there is anything wrong with the aunties or the uncles taking time out with those kids or spending the weekend. It gives the parents a break; it gives the kids a break.”

In this way of thinking, if “the community” does get involved, it is due to a failure of the family. After reading a series of policies for families, a Manchester man remarked: “Just
the general feeling I had as I was reading it. It’s almost as if society is trying to take over
the role of the parent because the parent doesn’t have time to do it.” “Are they trying to
make them feel better?” an Atlanta woman asked in response to reading policies for
families. “Like all the burden and responsibility is not on them, and there should be help for
them but it really is their ultimate responsibility. You decided to have kids.” Government
involvement in family is a particularly offensive intrusion. “I don't think the government
does anything that is positive in that sort of situation,” stated an Atlanta woman. “Because
you are bringing government into people's morality issues in raising their children and that's
just too much.”

Framing Effects

The Parenting Frame tested in the focus groups begins to reframe the strongly held belief
that parenting should come naturally. A Manchester woman confessed her personal
struggles after the birth of her first child: “I cried for a week every day because I felt like
I had no control and we made the biggest mistake of our life. But then after five days,
life was fine again but I don’t think initially you’re prepared.” “When I left the hospital, I
got home, and just sat down and said, ‘Wow, I’m a father’ and that was kind of an
exciting feeling,” stated a Manchester man, “but it was also terrifying in a way, cause
now we have a third mouth to feed, and this little thing that I can hold in one hand is
going to hopefully grow up to be a productive individual, so do you feel well prepared?
No, absolutely not.”

However, unless carefully crafted, this message can also reinforce that it is not possible to
prepare for parenthood, further reinforcing the belief that the natural condition is for parents
to be alone and without help. “You can be around people who have children,” an Atlanta
woman shared, “but until you actually give birth and you bring that baby home, it's not real
to you. And you are grossly unprepared for it. I mean it is overwhelming.”

Positioning parenting as “a tough job” reminds people that parenting is difficult and all
parents would benefit from assistance rather than being left alone to learn on the job.
“What is needed besides preparing someone to be a parent is the support once they are a
parent,” a Chicago woman stated. “When that kid is crying for four days straight and you
don't know what to do anymore, you've got to have somebody that you can call or some
place that you can go. “You have prenatal classes,” a Manchester woman explained.
“You go with a coach, you go with your partner, you go through it, but then when they
hand you that baby and you take it home, I don’t know what programs are out there.”

The parenting frame is particularly effective in building support for work-family policies.
“The last paragraph where it talks about the stress with more flexible work places,” an
Atlanta woman described, “it's very difficult to have a child and be a full time working
mommy outside of the home. It's very difficult and when you do fight for flexible work
hours, you get the biggest, in my experience, I had the biggest fights with not only the men
but even the women who couldn't do their job outside the office.”
Finally, positioning parenting as a “tough job” allows people to have some empathy for a parent who commits an abusive act, seeing them as in need of training rather than jail time. “If you are struggling financially or your relationship isn't going well and your job isn't going well, you lash out at the person you can control,” an Atlanta woman stated. “You can control this little person, and I think parents do that and it is not intended. It doesn't mean they don't love their children. It's just that they have no outlet and there is no accommodation for them in their lives.”

The Child Development Frame

People are interested in the Child Development Frame and are open to hearing new information about it – this is an important opportunity. It offers a non-threatening way for parents to feel OK about seeking advice and training about infancy through the teen years. Currently, people see every child as unique and reject the notion that a child can be limited by their early experiences. Furthermore, people’s thinking about child development currently defaults to parent-child interactions and disciplinary issues.

The intention of the child development frame was to provide readers with a new way of thinking about what children need to thrive, and to connect those needs to what communities should provide. The child development frame begins to connect children to community, but is less overt in the role for community than some of the other frames tested. As will be demonstrated in later sections, focus group participants frequently use child development to reason about child and family policies. It is an important element of effective communications to advance children’s issues.

Issue Context

The topic of child development sounds new – people are interested in the topic and are drawn to reading about it. “Development is one of the few areas where people always want to know more,” an Atlanta man remarked. “They're always curious about that….because there is an immediate applicability in their life, betterment of their own kids, better understanding of the world around them.” “I always wish I knew more,” noted an Atlanta woman. “No matter how much you read, or how much you ask, or how much you talk. It's always the fear of the unknown.”

Child development applies to older children as well as younger children, and several parents in the focus groups confess that by the time their children enter the teen years, they feel desperate for information and advice. “The teenage years are a little bit tenuous,” an Atlanta man worried. “I haven't gone through that but I think everybody is terrified when their kids get to the age of 13, puberty, and push the parents back and dating. It's pretty scary.” “I could use some [information],” a Chicago woman stated. “I was fine until last year. And then a year and a half ago, if you would have said when she turns 13, things will change and I would have thought ‘not mine.’ But now I'm there.”
At the same time, as people consider children’s development, they stress that each child is unique, which implies that there are no universal principles for raising children. “There is no right answer,” an Atlanta woman cautioned. “Every child is different. What I did with my first child was completely different from what I would do with my second.” Another added, “They are all different. That's the miracle, that they are unique.”

While people recognize that early experiences influence later development, they reject the assertion that a child’s future can be written by their experiences in infancy. According to these focus group participants, anyone can overcome early adversity and achieve great success. This is a variant of the self-made man, bootstrap frame so dominant in American thinking about adult fate. Note the following conversation among Chicago men:

*I was reading an article; I think it was a year ago. They had assessed that children at that time who were two years old, they projected they would be inmates in a public facility or some jail. They predicted this at two years old.*

*How did they do that?*

*They projected environmental influences on the child?*

[talkover]

*They would come up with an assumption and with a percentage that this kid will be an inmate and nine times out of 10 times or would have kids like that. It was in the paper. It's been documented in [talkover]*

*How did they -- did they do that racially or…*

*They had made a study to come up with the findings. They didn't really go in-depth but I could surmise what they. . .*

*It has to be socio-economic.*

*Yeah.*

*It couldn't be physiological.*

*Right.*

*Moderator: You couldn't tell based on the development of the child at age two?*

*As everyone knows in the world of sports you get a guy like LaBron James who [is in] professional basketball. He's a $90 millionaire all of a sudden. This is mind boggling to me and he's never played a minute of sports. This is crazy.*
A discussion of what should be included in a book on child development reveals that focus group participants focus on parent-child interactions, not what is happening internal to the child or outside the family. “Spending time with the kids,” a Manchester man suggested. “I think a lot of parents today don’t spend enough time, kind of shove ‘em off to daycare, and you know, they have their own agenda and kids seem to come second.” “It’s very important to listen to a kid,” a Chicago woman remarked. “I told mine whatever it is -- I don’t want them to go next door or down the street to learn something. Come to me.” “Love should be the key to any relationship with your child, the number one thing,” stated a Chicago man.

Furthermore, focus group participants’ recommendations for a book on child development stress disciplinary issues, not positive growth and development. “You’ve got to learn how to say no,” a Chicago man recommended. “There’s got to be tough love. You’ve got to give tough love. You’ve got to be tough.” “Effective discipline for each age,” an Atlanta woman stated. Another added, “I think boundaries, too. The kids want structure and discipline and I think there have been generations that have not had that.”

A few suggest that a better understanding of child development would have influenced their choices in physical discipline. “Knowing what to expect at each age of the child,” an Atlanta woman noted, “which now that I’m reading up on that -- like they say terrible two’s -- there are things that they go through at two years old and had I known, my kids probably wouldn’t have got spanked so much.”

Child development reminds focus group participants that parenting requires learning and skill. “You can’t drive a car without learning,” a Manchester man remarked, “and I think raising children is a little bit tougher than driving a car. It’s practically ignored, you know, they show you how to balance a checkbook, but they don’t teach you how to raise kids and most people will experience that at some time in their life, one way or another.”

Finally, due to the Family Bubble mindset and a lack of understanding about child development, people see child care as warehousing children rather than a beneficial activity. Not only does this undermine support for child care policies, it also reinforces that parents are doing a bad job of raising children if they do not work and leave their children in the care of others. “I have a granddaughter who has a brand new baby and cries every day taking him to day care,” a Manchester woman shared. “Now I’m sure the baby is fine at day care but it’s killing her, it’s just killing her.” “It’s awful,” an Atlanta woman complained. “I don’t see how they are raising these children. I don’t think mothers are raising their children. They’re at work.”

**Framing Effects**

The child development message helps focus group participants to connect children to the broader community. “I think it’s important to have a library, where the children can learn to take out books and, now of course, there’s audio, video, and everything else you can take out as well, but just being exposed to it sometimes,” a Manchester man suggested. “They need more…activities for either the whole family or for the kids like the Girls and
Boys Club,” a Manchester woman stated. “They have stuff going on all the time, all year round. But they do I think need more summer activities.”

At the same time, most do not see this article as being “about” community, since the connection to community is subtle. Instead, several believe the article is emphasizing the role of parents, which they see as a good thing. “This is emphasizing the parent as opposed to the community, the previous one with the community,” an Atlanta man observed. Another added, “Yeah. The parents and the caregivers are primary. Everything else is secondary or further down the line and that is where community will come in.”

One statement tested in the article “how young children feel is as important as how they think, and how they are treated is as important as what they are taught” is confusing for focus group participants. Though in other points in the group discussion, several demonstrate that they intuitively understand the importance of emotional development, several could not define this statement. Others missed its meaning. “It means modeling with the behavior that you want to instill in them,” a Chicago woman explained. “It means you've got to give them love and discipline,” a Chicago man noted. Another added, “It's a feeling of security. A child needs to feel that they are safe whether they are in their parents arms or in its home or wherever.” “I guess you have to love your child,” a Chicago man surmised.

Finally, later sections of this report describe how focus group participants rely upon their limited understanding of child development to reason about issues and actions that concern them, including physical discipline, child care, family leave, and community activities. When they have a firm grasp of how children develop, they are better able to effectively advocate for policies. While child development is not the only frame that needs to be communicated, it is a critical element of effective communications.

The Community Frame

As noted earlier, people find it difficult to connect children and families to a broader community. When thinking about the perfect community for kids, many think of elements that reinforce the family, such as a community with two parent families or strong relationships between individuals. “The perfect community would have two parent households,” stated a Manchester man. “To be able to have a society like that where women do not have to work,” a Chicago woman reminisced. “Neighbors that talk to each other, communication,” a Chicago man suggested. Fewer think of community supports beyond recreational activities.

The Community Frame was designed to remind people of their positive connections to community and the role of those connections in supporting families. While it is effective in developing those connections, it needs to be carefully constructed to lead to a beneficial image of community, rather than one that undermines children’s issues. There are three understandings of community that emerge in the focus group conversations, two
that undermine policies for families and children, and one that will help advance those policies.

**The 1950s Community**

Three images of community come to mind for focus group participants. The first is a nostalgic view of a 1950s community in which everyone knows everyone else. Discipline is strongly associated with this image, i.e. the benefit of this style of community, according to focus group participants, is that other adults help to discipline unruly children. “When I was coming up the village did raise the child,” a Chicago man remembered. “I mean if I went somewhere and did something wrong, he could whip my butt and my dad would get on me and he would whoop me too.”

This image is not useful in building support for community-level policies, since it puts discipline and personal interactions center stage, rather than broader connections to a nurturing community. Furthermore, it reminds focus group participants that people can no longer trust their neighbors. “People don't want their kids to go out because the pedophile or whatever,” remarked an Atlanta woman, “so they keep them in front of the TV or computers. But you know we used to go through the woods and pick apples and blackberries. You can't do that. You wouldn't send your child like that now.” Due to a lack of close relationships with neighbors, most people feel they cannot engage with other people’s children. “I think if you were to tell a lot of parents that their child was misbehaving, they would jump down your back,” an Atlanta woman warned.

**A Community Safety Net for Failing Parents**

The second image of “community” is a safety net for children meaning that others, including governmental entities, are forced to become involved with kids due to the failures of parents. “As I was growing up I saw parents get involved with their kids,” a Chicago man explained. “Normally the mother would stay home and raise the child while the father went to work. Now it just seems like there are a lot of throw away kids. The parents are too concerned about their careers and the money, and they put the kids in day care...Teachers today have to become parents.” “If we had perfect parents we wouldn’t need any community solutions to these problems,” a Manchester man suggested. “Are we going towards the government going to help us with all these programs, or are we going to take control of our lives and our own families?” a Chicago woman challenged.

There is a caution for communications in focus group participant’s conflicting views of community. If community is stressed too overtly, it can create a backlash among some readers and reinforce the Family Bubble. “So again, we can abdicate responsibility,” an Atlanta woman complained. “So no one wants to take responsibility and nobody wants to say that ‘I am in control. I'm making this choice and I'm in control and this is what I'm doing.’ I'm just saying that this particular article to me doesn't reinforce that. I think it makes excellent points but to me I think it is very easy for somebody to buy into this and say, ‘okay yeah, I don't have to do anything.’”
Community Connections

Finally, the third image of community is the relationships and connections between people and community institutions such as libraries, recreational organizations, schools, etc. This is the definition of community that the article tested in the focus groups seeks to develop. This image reflects people’s personal experiences, and reminds them of the value of relationships and the danger of isolation. “Kids are a great way to meet your neighbors,” an Atlanta woman suggested, “but if you have other things: centers, libraries and that type of thing, not exactly in your neighborhood but more of a community center type of environment, I think you would get to know each other a lot better even with kids or without. You could certainly play a role in other families to help as a support to other families whether you have kids or not.”

It reminds them of the positive influences others can have on children. “We all have a contribution to make,” a Manchester man suggested. “I think if the child growing up is exposed to the care, the teaching, the coaching, that they’re going to mature into a well-rounded adult that will give back to the community.”

This image of community crosses class. In fact, focus group participants believe that members of the working classes are more likely to experience these beneficial community connections than wealthier citizens. “I was a tenement kid,” a Manchester woman explained. “We lived in three deckers, everybody lived in three deckers all close together….There was always someone we could go to, and then I married my husband and he was in the Air Force for twenty years, there again every base was a community and you looked after each other….Then you move to the suburbs and what happens?”

For the community frame to be effective in leading to policy support, it is important to establish existing connections to community, not a nostalgic view of a 1950s community that reminds them that they are not connected to others in the way they were in the past. Furthermore, it is important to create the connections to conditions and to institutional relationships (schools, libraries, recreation centers, etc.) that will benefit children, rather than emphasize an individual’s responsibility to create connections with other individuals, or to simply see relationships as needed to relieve adult stress.

Focus group participants react positively to the phrase “children do well when their families do well”; however, some seem to attach an economic meaning to the phrase “do well.” “They have to be in the family unit to do well,” a Chicago man suggested, “and they have to have a certain level of economics, otherwise there is a lot of pressure just for that alone.”

While the community frame as a whole helps people understand the value of relationships in helping children grow and develop, the specific “environment of relationships” language is difficult for focus group participants. They struggle to explain its meaning. “To me that meant young kids don't have anything else to tie it to,” a Chicago woman explained. “They don't have the vocabulary. They don't have the knowledge base to say ‘I'm doing this because of this’ or ‘I'm doing this because of that.’ When they
participate in an activity or when they go some place with their parents, it is always… ‘How do they relate to me?’” Another added, “When a child looks around in their environment, they have a title: parents or man and a woman married to each other, or a teacher. That everyone has a title, the mailman, whatever. That's how I took it.”

**Frames in Action**

As the four frames unfolded in the focus group discussions, participants began to use the frames to reason on specific issues and policies. The dominant frame would then direct the reasoning in the conversation. This section explores the effect of the tested frames on policy support, messenger effectiveness and on two major topics of discussion in the groups – hitting and sports.

**Hitting**

All four frames are apparent in focus group participants’ discussions of hitting. Problematically, people can use each frame to justify physical discipline, though some frames are more robust than others. Most importantly, the close association between hitting and the Child Abuse Frame has caused people to stake out a position “for” or “against” physical discipline, even if they do not rely upon hitting personally. Further efforts directed at hitting may entrench these positions, or at least result in few additional gains in the short-term. As will be explored in the next section, an indirect route may prove more effective.

Physical discipline is very clearly associated with the Child Abuse Frame – as a backlash to the frame. People recognize that there is not a clear definition of abuse and worry that the definition of abuse and government intervention in families is being taken too far. “I had a friend of mine was raising her sister's four boys,” a Chicago man described. “One was kind of fair skinned. She spanked him and when he went to school and they saw some red mark, the next thing she knows the police is at her door. She said the boy stole from the babysitter. Do you think I'm not going to whoop his butt? They said no, I'll tell you what you do. Pack him up and take him back…You cannot discipline your own kids without going to jail.” “Then the kids are educated,” stated a Chicago woman. “It's like ‘you hit me. I'll call.’ And you go to school and the kids got a welt on them, the school will call.”

When in the Child Abuse Frame, people stake out a position as being either “for” or “against” physical discipline, even though they may not personally rely upon physical discipline. Whether for or against, focus group participants look to their own childhood for confirmation that their view of physical discipline is justified. “My mother, we laughed the other day,” a Chicago man shared. “I told her, ‘You know I could have sent you to jail for what you beat us.” We both laughed and she said, ‘Well look at you now though. Are you all right?’ I said, ‘Yeah.’ So I don't necessarily agree with that. I don't think you should beat a child half to death, no, I don't. However, spare the rod and then what's left?”
Similarly, those who were raised without hitting tend to oppose physical discipline. “I come from a family of ten,” a Manchester man stated. “I’ve never been hit, and everybody seems to be doing fine. I see my brothers and sisters they don’t hit their children. I think a lot of it is how you been brought up. If you been decked, maybe if that worked, that worked. My family it was, you knew when you did something wrong.”

Some have not yet decided about hitting and are looking for alternatives. “I don't know,” struggled an Atlanta woman. “I do use spanking but every time I do it, I'm like, ‘I shouldn't be doing this. I'm telling them not to hit and I'm hitting them.’ So I don't know. I want somebody to teach me. I don't know.”

When in the parenting frame, focus group participants defer to the right of parents to determine appropriate discipline for their own children. “The parent is still responsible for the upbringing of the child,” a Manchester man stated, “because we have such a wide variety of what is good to discipline a child, there are no community standards.”

As indicated in the Community Frame section, hitting also resides in the community frame, where people associate their nostalgic view of community with a neighbor’s ability to physically discipline a child, and lament the loss of such community relationships.

When considering child development, people struggle with their views of physical discipline, and use development as a reason both for and against hitting. When in this frame, many are uncomfortable with relying upon hitting, but believe it is an effective tool for discipline, when used “correctly,” meaning when it is used with the intention of furthering child development. “Not all the time,” an Atlanta man cautioned, “because my son, he got spanked a few times but always with an explanation as to what you did and this is why you're getting a spanking. ‘Don't do those things. Don't do it again.’ I think with an explanation and not doing it all the time, not just hitting a child for hitting sake. Make sure they understand why it is happening.”

Some also use child development reasoning to reinforce that hitting is needed as an option, because all children are unique and respond to different methods of discipline. “It doesn't work with all kids,” an Atlanta woman suggested, “because my head strong little angel, I'll say, ‘do you want to go 10 minutes [for timeout] or do you want a spanking?’ She's just put her little hiney up and I'm like God. She wants to go back out and play.” “At 12 months, two years old or whatever, they can't comprehend it,” an Atlanta man explained. “That is part of the child development. They don't understand that piece. But at 13, she understands it very well.”

**Sports**

Throughout the discussions, participants would repeatedly refer to verbally abusive situations in youth sports by coaches and parents. Focus group participants are universal in their criticism of the yelling and belittling they have witnessed – recognizing that it is harmful to the child, even if they cannot adequately verbalize why it is harmful.

**Public Knowledge**
Participants see coaches as well as parents who act abusively. “There are coaches that talk to kids that should never talk to kids like that,” a Manchester woman complained. “You know people don’t realize that…I mean I’ve seen people paying a coach to coach their child and I’m thinking I wouldn’t pay him to walk my dog because of the way you’re talking and treating these kids.” “The kids that are on the soccer field and they're just a tad bit aggressive because dad is telling them that you've got to beat them,” an Atlanta woman reported. “I think that is emotional abuse. I think that's terrible.”

Unlike the typical “private” child maltreatment that a person might witness, people are more willing to get involved in a situation on their child’s team. These situations happen in a public venue, where all parties have a clear stake in the interpersonal interactions of the team or team parents. People are willing to act when they see this behavior. “I had a kid get pulled off a hockey team because the parent came in the locker room and yelled at the kid,” an Atlanta man stated. “I grabbed the parent by the arm and drug her outside and I said, ‘you don't do this in my locker room.’”

There is an enormous opportunity to use youth sports to promote a conversation about child development, positive parenting (or positive coaching), and the importance of community. It should not be associated with the child abuse frame, as that will cause parents to worry about accusing another person of “abuse” and therefore refrain from getting involved. Instead, guidelines for goals for youth sports, tips on how to coach positively, how to be a supportive parent, etc., can help people learn new ways to interact with youth and learn about development. Since people will be learning positive skills, it may also indirectly cause people to question the value of physical discipline. By peering over the shoulder of a coach, parents may receive the important permission and information necessary to reconsider their own practices. And, it pushes child development into the public square.

Policies

Focus group participants support a wide range of policies for families and children. The purpose of discussing support for policies in the focus groups was to see if participants begin to reason from the frames that were introduced during the course of the focus groups, or if they continue to rely upon their existing frames. Existing frames as well as the newly introduced frames emerged in the policy discussion, but the mix of frames depended upon the specific policy. The most controversial policies elicited the richest examples of how focus group participants could utilize the four frames tested in the groups.

Focus group participants want to prioritize children and funding for children’s issues, but struggle to communicate why funding matters. Due to the Family Bubble, some resent funding for government and would rather put those resources into families. “I'm not for the government getting more and more pay,” a Chicago woman argued. “I think the parents have to watch their children more. They've got to be involved. They've got to do it, not
always the government.” “I’d rather put the money in for the parent to stay home and educate the parent instead of paying all these other people to babysit,” a Chicago man remarked.

Focus group participants’ dominant frame in support of funding is prevention – pay now or pay later. This does not mean that prevention is necessarily the most powerful frame – note how rarely it was volunteered in these discussions – but the tested frames serve to advance prevention policies to greater and lesser degrees. “If there were additional resources available so that children got proper treatment and care and they could grow up to be proper functioning members of society,” an Atlanta woman explained, “we would see a decrease in crime. We would see a decrease in other areas. So you could say yeah, we might be spending more money over here but in the long run we are going to save money over there.” “Because if we don't fund it, then we don't do the prevention, then we'll wind up paying for it in the end,” stated an Atlanta man. “We'll be building more prisons and more jails.” “You either pay for it on the front end, or you pay for it on the back end,” a Chicago man stated. It is important to distinguish between prevention as a frame and as a policy. Prevention as a policy is helped and hindered by various frames, but prevention as a frame did not appear implicit or intuitive to focus group participants, despite its inherent connection to the frames tested.

Importantly, as people discuss each specific policy, other frames (beyond prevention) emerge in the discussion. The most controversial policies demonstrate the ability of different frames to hold up, or fold, under debate.

**Paid Leave**

The policy that elicited the most debate was “increasing the number of months of paid leave that employers are required to offer working parents after the birth of a child.” Those who most strongly support this policy rely upon a child development frame to make their case. “I think that's essential for mom and baby to be together for the first couple months of life. That's for breastfeeding or bonding, I mean everything. Everything you've ever read -- any kind of psychological studies towards that, it's just a slam dunk. That should be the way it is,” an Atlanta man argued. “I think the child to a certain degree is more impressionable, can learn better,” a Chicago man remarked. “They say babies can learn foreign languages at three months. Again you could better help develop and influence the child when it is very young, maybe get its health needs in line and just able to connect the child with who the family is.”

Without a child development frame from which to reason, focus group participants turn to the mother’s stress and convenience as the main concerns. “You’re not even sleeping the first month,” stated a Manchester woman, “so imagine going back and forth…I was home for twelve weeks and that was great, by the time I went back the baby was more on a schedule and I was okay.” This means that experienced parents do not need the same time with a newborn that new, inexperienced parents would require. “I could see if it is a first time,” a Chicago woman suggested. “Yeah, you want more bonding. You’ve got a normal baby and
stated a Manchester man. Focus group participants do not default to a discussion of parental choice and individual responsibility:

Participant 1: *What I'm hearing from that is that we're saying that because this group of people can afford to take off six months, then that is good. But for the people who choose to have children and they work for a company who can't give them six months, then they don't have that option. I'm saying that all the children are valuable and everybody needs to get the best start that we can give them. That to me is what America should be about.*

Participant 2: *But that's not the most valuable. I just think you can't require a small employer to do that and expect to come back and get your job, that they can afford to pay you and someone else to do your job while you're gone. Or to have other people take up the slack. I just don't think that is the way it is and I think it is the choice of do you have to have two cars? Do you have to have the big house? And I think a lot of people think we have to have two incomes but it is because we all have to have cell phones and all this other stuff.*

Participant 1: *And I guess my thought on that is I'd much rather pay for Betty who works for McDonald's to be at home with her child for six months and give that child the love and attention that he needs for six months before throwing him into a day care center, than paying for her child when he is 16 and he is a juvenile delinquent.*

Participant 3: *And he's in jail.*

Participant 4: *I'd much rather pay for Betty's birth control.*

**Living Wages**

Several focus group participants support “creating living wage criteria, meaning adjusting the minimum wage for the cost of living in an area to lift more families out of poverty.” However, few reason on the basis of the frames explored in the focus groups. “I think if someone’s working full-time, they ought to at least be able to make a wage that they can live on, otherwise you’re talking about the working poor, and what’s the sense of working if you can’t make ends meet?” a Manchester man argued. Many understand the influence of economics on families, but they do not reason on the basis of what is best for children and families unless pushed to explain the connection. “I don’t think you’re going to find a better family and a better environment for the kids unless you provide [a better] economic situation,” stated a Manchester man. Focus group participants do not reason about wages based on the importance of economic security for families and
children, unless forced to explain the connection. Other frames (fairness) are more available to them.

**Early Childcare Credentials and Salaries**

People struggle over raising credentials and salaries for early care and education providers. Most participants who support this policy base their support on concern for child education and development: “The best time to invest in kids is younger than older.” (Atlanta man) Those who oppose this policy change are not convinced that money will make a difference: “Throwing money at problems is not necessarily going to solve it.” (Chicago man) “I think it sounds wonderful,” a Chicago woman stated, “but can we really guarantee that by increasing salaries, we're increasing our quality? Or are we really just giving more money to somebody that is still not doing a good job?” Furthermore, several worry that costs are already too high. “Have you seen what child care costs are?” a Chicago man asked. “In some places now it costs $400 a week for these people to have someone else watch their child. How much more money can you give?”

**Home Visits**

Focus group participants like the idea of “providing voluntary home visits by nurses or trained personnel to help new parents.” Many express their support for this policy based on existing frames: “stress reliever.” (Atlanta woman) However, elements of the introduced frames are mentioned as well. A Manchester man suggested that parenting doesn’t come naturally and parents could use training: “If it’s a young parent they may not know how to deal with something that may be going on. If it’s a newborn, they may not know what the problem is.” A Chicago woman referred to isolation: “Not everybody has family nearby.” Finally, some referred to the prevention of abuse: “Educate, do not incarcerate” and “It costs less in the long run to educate.” (Chicago men)

**Community Organizations**

“Enlisting libraries, health care and child care providers, churches, and community organizations in efforts to build community support for families,” is also popular, but people believe these efforts already exist. One Atlanta woman expressed her support by referring to the community as a safety net, a deficit model that is not a preferable way to think about communities: “At least there is a community where there are other people that are going to have an influence on them to give them some of the advantages of life.”

**Health Professional Training in Abuse**

Similarly, focus group participants overwhelmingly support “increasing the ability of pediatricians, doctors, and school nurses who interact with children and families to recognize and intervene in instances of child maltreatment,” but they believe this already occurs. “I thought by law a pediatrician has to report,” an Atlanta woman stated.
Mental Health Counseling

“Counseling for parents and early interventions for both children and adults in situations where the mental health of the family is troubled” cues the Family Bubble and privacy concerns. “I have a real issue with someone walking into somebody's home and saying, ‘well, I don't like the way, you are not doing this right.’” Another added, “I agree, who is sending them out and then it is the privacy issues and all of that. Is a record kept?” “Who’s going to point out to the parents that they need counseling?” a Manchester man asked. “Or is the parent just going to say, ‘I'm doing a bad job.’”

Life Education

At the end of the focus groups, when people consider the value of “making life education a part of every school's curriculum, including information on child health and development, child abuse and neglect prevention, parenting skills, etc.” many still base their support on their original goal of encouraging teens to delay parenthood. “Maybe they would wait a little while before they hurry up and get pregnant,” a Chicago woman stated. “Like not have it the freshman year or sophomore.” Others, however, value this policy recommendation as a way to begin to give future parents some necessary training. “Awareness,” an Atlanta woman remarked. “When they ever get out there in life and start having children this may impact them at least a little bit. Even like child shaking a baby, baby shaking.”

Messengers

Focus group participants suggest that any of the four messengers (PCA America, Healthy Families America, a pediatrician, and a Reverend/Director of a boys and girls club) could speak credibly on the four “issues” tested, but each messenger brings different advantages and disadvantages to the topic.

Pediatricians see children regularly and bring a wealth of expertise, particularly on physical health and abuse. Furthermore, several recognize that pediatricians are increasingly addressing a range of issues with parents, beyond just physical health. “They are at the grassroots level,” an Atlanta man explained. “They would see the physical abuse. They would see the mental abuse on the child and they see the frustration from the parent, the parent coming in and telling them. A lot of parents do that…They are first line and they get a lot of the abuse cases and they can report that.” At the same time, focus group participants are wary of “expert” advice on these issues, and would feel more confident in the advice of a pediatrician who is also a parent. “We're inundated with experts,” a Chicago man complained. “Everybody is an expert. We don't believe it.”

Similarly, focus group participants respect the advice of a director of a regional boys and girls club due to frontline experience. “I believe that he’s had a lot of hands on experience,” a Manchester woman suggested. “He’s dealt with a lot of teens; a lot of teens end up there. I just would think that they’ve had to utilize coping skills.” “I'm
making the assumption that he’s the hands-on director and that he would be a person that would be in contact with the kids and what their issues are and from that perspective would be able to speak to them effectively,” a Manchester man stated. Importantly, most say the religious association is less important and may even detract from the spokesperson’s effectiveness if readers believe a reverend does not have children. Finally, it reminds some of the sexual abuse cases in the Catholic Church. From this we conclude that direct experience with children and families may be more important in the messenger’s credibility than the institutional affiliation.

When it concerns an organization’s ability to provide credible information, focus group participants say it does not matter if the organization is local or national. While they are unfamiliar with Healthy Families America and Prevent Child Abuse America, they assume the organizations are national in scope.

Focus group participants say that Prevent Child Abuse America could write credibly on any of the topics. However, several also indicate that the name conveys that anything they would concern themselves with would really be about child abuse. This limits interest in the organization’s communications. Note the following conversation among women in Chicago:

*I think it would fit [for Prevent Child Abuse America to write about parenting] but I think my first thought if I were to see Prevent Child Abuse America is “I don't abuse my kids. I don't plan on abusing my kids so...”*

*I can't relate.*

*I'm not going to read it.*

*Or I might read it as a passing interest but I'm not going to think it is about parenting. I'm going to think it is only about child abuse. It's about abuse and not parenting, all aspects of it.*

Furthermore, the close association between abuse and government intervention, causes some to worry that a child abuse organization would be judging them. “They're watching us,” a Chicago man worried. “Or are they a watchdog that is going to [want a] camera in everybody's house?” a Chicago man asked. “I don't know.”

Finally, focus group participants have positive associations with the name “Healthy Families America,” particularly in comparison with Prevent Child Abuse America. “It’s a positive name, as opposed to Prevent Child Abuse,” a Manchester woman stated. The name says that the organization is about improving families. “I think it is keeping families together not just leaving the kids go here and there but trying to keep a family together, making them healthy,” a Chicago woman explained. The name does not have the stigma that is associated with child abuse.” “I think that people would walk into Healthy Family America instead of walking into Prevent Child Abuse America,” a Manchester woman suggested.
Conclusions

All four frames have a role to play in building support for child and family policies, but the balance of attention to each frame will depend upon the specific policies that PCA America intends to advance.

The Child Abuse Frame can effectively call into question government spending priorities for children and families. However, it is too developed in people’s minds to easily transition to a message about positive parenting and policies that are not directly associated with child abuse. The vivid image of the child abuse story (which is a story that people believe they already know well) conjures up associations that prevent people from hearing new information or connecting their own experiences to the issue.

The Parenting Frame matches with people’s personal experience and reframes the idea that parenting should come naturally. It introduces the idea of inadvertent abuse, which allows them to question their own behavior in a non-threatening way. This frame is particularly successful in creating a conversation about policies to prepare for parenthood and to help people balance work and family.

The Child Development Frame is a “new” story that interests people, so people are likely to pay attention to new information. It is a non-threatening way for parents to get advice and training about infancy through the teen years. It provides an important foundation that helps people reason about policies, particularly early education, family leave, home visits, and life education.

Connecting people to communities is a critical component of any message to build support for child and family issues. However, it cannot be too overt or people will become defensive about government intrusion into families. To lead to policy support, people need to be reminded of their existing positive connections to community (not a nostalgic view of the past) and the role of those connections in supporting families. The Community Frame is effective in developing those connections.
Appendix – Articles Tested in the Focus Groups

Community Solutions for Kids
By Reverend A. Wear, Director of Regional Boys and Girls Club

A parent is a child’s first teacher, but not their only teacher. Daycare providers, teachers, doctors, neighbors, coaches, and grandparents, all influence children as well. Young children experience their world as an environment of relationships and these relationships affect virtually all aspects of their development. Children learn a lot in their early years – they learn respect for others, right from wrong, and how to get along with each other. All the people they come in contact with help to reinforce this learning and influence their long-term development. The quality and stability of a child’s human relationships in the early years of life lay the foundation. And we can all play a positive part.

Every community should ask itself: Are we providing the kind of environments that will allow children to grow into citizens who give back to communities? Surround a child with secure relationships and stimulating experiences, and he will incorporate that environment to become a confident, caring adult, ready to be a part of society. But if he is surrounded by violence, or is given little intellectual or emotional stimulation, then it will be much more difficult for him to grow up successfully.

It starts with eliminating the isolation that so many parents feel. Imagine coming home from the hospital, with no family members nearby and no close ties to your neighbors. Add in financial worries and a job in jeopardy and you really turn up the heat. The loneliness and stress would put a strain on the most loving parent and could cause parents to neglect a child due to their own despair. Social isolation is common for new parents, because we leave them alone to figure out how to juggle jobs and parenting, but it doesn’t have to be that way.

Some communities are working to prevent problems before they start by developing the neighborhood ties that can bring people together, by creating playgroups for new families held at community centers, local libraries, or schools. Parents meet others who are having the same experiences, and can build relationships that lead to long-term friendships and support. Other communities are working with health professionals to provide at-home visits to new parents – to help them adjust to the new demands of parenthood and provide a link to the community. From financial support to better housing, there are many ways that communities can support families. Children do well when their families do well. And families do better when they live in supportive communities.
What to Expect – Child Development and Successful Parenting
By Dr. R. Braun, Pediatrician

We all know that milk is important for children to grow strong bones, but how many of us know how important it is to feed children’s hearts, souls, and minds, right from the start? Children need more than love to develop intellectually, socially and emotionally. And they need different things at different ages – a 2-year-old and a 6-year-old see the world differently, so we need to pay attention to the unique needs children have at different ages, and set our expectations appropriately.

For example, sometimes parents worry that their 12-month-old is selfish, because she won’t share toys with playmates. But she isn’t being selfish – most 12-month-olds are not developmentally able to understand the concept of sharing. So instead of punishing, parents should use techniques that are appropriate for that age, such as distracting her with another activity. She’ll learn to share around the end of her preschool years when she is developmentally ready.

Similarly, hitting a child at any age does not accomplish the main goal of discipline, which is to teach a child to have self-control and self-discipline. Hitting just teaches a child that hitting is an appropriate way to solve a problem.

New research from scientists who study brain development concludes that how young children feel is as important as how they think, and how they are treated is as important as what they are taught. A baby with caregivers who feel pleasure when they hold the baby, and who look the baby in the eyes and rock and sing, help the baby to develop her brain. A child with a depressed caregiver, or one who is under stresses that distract from giving the right attention, will have an underdeveloped ability to attach to people, and be less likely to share, volunteer, or meet her potential in emotional and behavioral areas.

So many of the struggles we all have in raising children would be so much easier to handle if more of us had a better understanding of child development. Children do not come with instruction manuals, but there is a lot that we could all learn about how to better understand what our children are thinking and feeling at different stages of development – from birth through young adulthood.

Many communities are taking steps to help families and caregivers learn more about how children develop at different ages, and what that means for how each of us should interact with them at different ages. Some communities are now holding parent discussion groups at neighborhood schools, with different topics every month. Other communities are making child development classes a pre-requisite for high school graduation. Professional development for caregivers is being funded by community organizations as scholarships. Still others are working with hospitals and pediatricians to provide at-home visits to new parents – to help them adjust to the new demands of parenthood, to identify and address emotional and financial stresses that threaten the home environment, and get families off on the right start.
We Must Prevent Child Abuse and Neglect
Sid Johnson, Prevent Child Abuse America

It’s happened yet again. Another horrific case of a child literally imprisoned in his home, the victim of the most extreme abuse and neglect imaginable. Similarly tragic stories about severe maltreatment and even death befalling children who have been placed in the protective custody of their states have appeared all over the country.

Reports like these send a shock wave through the public consciousness, first triggering concern and sympathy for the victim, followed quickly by the all-too-familiar blame game. Blame the parents. Blame the social worker. Blame the child protective service system. Blame the governor. And to read theses stories, it would appear that there is plenty of blame to go around. But the assignment of blame will not fix the problems. Our state chapters all over the country are reporting that the budget axe is falling heavily on programs to support children and families. In many states, budget deficits are prompting governors to impose hiring freezes on desperately needed child protective service workers, leaving hundreds of vacancies unfilled. The U.S. Senate passed a spending bill that cut $13 million for programs that help abused and neglected children. We’re also seeing drastic cuts in funding for programs that help prevent abuse and neglect from occurring in the first place.

Can every incident of abuse and neglect be prevented? Sadly, no. But, much of it can be prevented, and effective prevention programs are proving their value every day. For example, a public-private partnership between local and state governments and Prevent Child Abuse America has resulted in a new program that intervenes in the lives of troubled mothers-to-be. Through weekly visits, a young mother learns to care properly for her child, and learns techniques to alleviate stress that can lead to abuse.

At its heart, the prevention of child abuse and neglect is really about positive parenting – so there is a role that each of us can play. It’s about reaching out to parents, particularly those who might be struggling, and offering a kind word and a helping hand. And when the concern exists, it’s about calling the local authorities to report suspected abuse or neglect.

Let’s throw away the labels and perceptions that allow us to distance ourselves from child abuse and neglect. Let us acknowledge the problem for what it is and recognize the role that each of us can play in reducing the risk of abuse and neglect to the children in our communities by reaching out to their parents and by increasing our investment in the prevention of child abuse and neglect. It is one of the best investments we can make, guaranteed to save money down the road in family support services, juvenile justice, special education and health care.
The Toughest Job in America
By K. Kirpatrick, Healthy Families America

How many of us felt fully prepared when we had our first child? I know I didn’t. After a night of a crying baby with gas pains, I was ready to take him back to the hospital. For some reason we expect that parenting should come naturally, but it doesn’t. We all make mistakes along the way.

Parents share a desire to provide the best for their children and see their children have better lives than they have had. But raising confident, happy children is very difficult, and lack of experience and stressful conditions can cause parents to make bad decisions that can lead to neglect or abuse. A frustrated parent who is not prepared for parenthood or is under emotional or financial pressures might lash out in anger or leave a child unattended – putting that child’s health and well-being at risk. Or an inexperienced parent might not understand how belittling, yelling or harsh scolding can result in emotional abuse and undermine a child’s sense of self-worth. This doesn’t necessarily mean they are a bad parent, or that they do not love their child – they are simply unprepared or in stressful circumstances and need a helping hand.

Parenting is the toughest job in America, and we all have a stake in making sure that parents have access to the tools they need to be successful, rather than rely upon on-the-job training. Because every time you give a parent a sense of success, you’re offering it to the baby indirectly. Every time a parent feels good about being a parent and has the time and support to parent, a child bursts with feeling good about himself. With more opportunities for parent education and coaching, parents can get off to a good start. And major causes of stress for families can be alleviated with more flexible workplaces, access to affordable health care, and other assistance to address the problems that can put a significant strain on families. Parents need everyone’s support. It is an even exchange. To raise children who will give back to society in the future, we need to give them environments in which families can thrive.
INTRODUCTION

While advocates are usually gratified to see attention paid to their issue in the news, the coverage can often be a mixed blessing, as research by the FrameWorks Institute and others has shown. It is the way that stories are told in the news that affects public thinking, and many of these stories do not guide thinking in constructive directions. A story that seems to convey important information may also have unintended, damaging consequences for public understanding and engagement.

This document summarizes some of the major patterns in news coverage of child maltreatment – the key narratives, frames and causal stories that are conveyed to the public on the issue. The material for the analysis includes a collection of roughly 120 news articles collected by Prevent Child Abuse America and Cultural Logic. Additionally, the review included a collection of several dozen TV news stories assembled by the Center for Communications and Community at UCLA.

The premise behind this study is that once advocates have a better idea about the way their issue is portrayed in the media, they can be strategic about choosing which narratives to reinforce, which to challenge, and which to downplay. A close examination of news coverage also gives advocates a window into what they are up against as they try to increase public engagement.

This discussion follows up on Cultural Logic's findings from cognitive elicitations, and readers are referred to that report for more in-depth discussion of some of the patterns of reasoning described here (see Two Cognitive Obstacles to Preventing Child Abuse: The 'Other-Mind' Mistake and the 'Family Bubble' prepared for the FrameWorks Institute).

The analysis presented here complements quantitative studies of news coverage (e.g., “The Local Television News Media’s Picture of Children,” Children Now, 2001; “Coverage in Context: How Thoroughly the News Media report Five Key Children’s Issues,” Kunkel,
Smith, Suding, Biely for Casey Journalism Center on Children and Families, U. of MD., February 2002) by taking a cognitive perspective on the material, and exploring the frames and assumptions in news stories. Two of the key questions we ask are: “Why do certain kinds of stories (framed in a particular way) count as news?” and, “What patterns of reasoning are reinforced by the way the stories are presented in the news?” There are various patterns of thought which people can default to even when they know better*, and news stories can trigger or reinforce those patterns.

* For example, Cultural Logic’s interviews with members of the public have established that people tend in many situations to treat even very young children as though they had adult-like intentionality – despite the fact that they consciously know better.

General patterns in news coverage

Some of the important aspects of child maltreatment coverage are related to tendencies in media coverage that apply to almost any issue:

- Sensationalism
  The emphasis on sensational events and images pervades the news media and has obvious consequences for coverage of child maltreatment. It means that the shocking results of maltreatment receive a tremendous amount of attention, while the "mundane" risk factors, and the "not-very-sexy" solutions, are often ignored. It follows that the more complex and larger context of the problem is not explained, leaving the public to rely on (and reinforce) its own default patterns of reasoning to understand the awful events.

- Simple Causal Stories
  When journalists offer explanations, they typically present issues in terms of simple and vivid causal stories. On some issues, this preference can actually help the audience better understand the big picture. For example, when reporters offer vivid examples of how recently-developed industrial fishing technologies are able to "scrape" the sea floor and "flatten" ecosystems, this can help readers understand the ecological threats the oceans currently face.

  On child-related issues, on the other hand, many simple causal stories are provided that are not helpful, because they don't tend to teach anything new, but rather to reinforce unproductive associations with the topic – e.g. a parent gets violent with his child because the parent is a sick, drunken monster.

- Episodic Vs. Thematic Information
  Political communications expert Shanto Iyengar has pointed out that news stories tend to be episodic, as opposed to thematic (Is Anyone Responsible?: How Television Frames Political Issues, 1991, U. of Chicago Press). That is, they tend to present stories as individual episodes happening in a particular time and place, rather than showing how

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they connect to broader causal contexts. "Human interest" stories, for example, are episodic by definition, since they focus on individuals rather than presenting a bigger picture.

On the child maltreatment issue, this bias plays out in ways that demonize individuals and prevent learning about causes and solutions.

THE MAJOR FRAMES AND THEIR IMPACTS

Criminal Atrocity

Child maltreatment is most commonly portrayed in the media in terms of a horrible, criminal atrocity some monstrous parent has committed, and the horrible suffering of the child(ren) in question. Stories like this are easy to tell (and to gather information for), and they fit the mold of simple, sensational and episodic: they are about a terrible thing that one person does to another. They are especially sensational because of shared taboos against harming children, and shared cultural models of "monsters" whose actions can't be chalked up to any rational causes.

While of course the suffering is real and important, and the evil of certain acts is undeniable, this dominant frame does not take the public towards constructive thinking or rethinking of the larger policy issues, even if on some level advocates appreciate the stories because they draw attention to the seriousness of the problem.

Impacts

Parental Deficit: One negative consequence of the Atrocity frame is that it exacerbates the blinkering effects of the very common “Parental Deficit” model, according to which bad, irresponsible parents are to blame for everything from crime to poverty to a breakdown in civility. (Notice that this view is nearly the exact opposite of the stereotypical liberal view that "society is to blame" for an individual's actions. This clash between the Personal Responsibility view and the Societal Context view is one of the chief tensions in American society.) When people are in Parental Deficit mode, there is very little interest in educating parents or helping them do a better job. Atrocity-based news stories evoke this mode, by framing perpetrators as fundamentally bad individuals, whose motivations and weaknesses have nothing to do with the rest of us.

Weakening "the Village": Another negative consequence of the Atrocity frame is that it makes people less likely to trust the people around them. Advocates on the child maltreatment issue know that increasing social connections is one effective way of reducing the risk of child maltreatment, but stories about the other "monstrous" adults in our community work against that goal, by strengthening the walls that Americans put up between their families and the dangerous outside world.
Variants

Other Adults: The Atrocity story can also take the form of abuse committed by an adult outside the nuclear family – an uncle, neighbor, teacher, etc. This is in some ways less shocking – since it doesn't involve the especially powerful taboo against harming one's own children. But it has a perhaps even more destructive effect on our trust in the Village.

Trial: Another important variant is the Trial story, which follows the ups and downs of a court proceeding against an accused party. This type of story holds inherent interest because of the “win-lose” and “search-for-the-truth” elements. It does nothing positive for the child maltreatment issue, however, since it focuses on whether a given individual has committed the acts in question, and obscures the relevance of risk and protective factors. Local TV news is littered with stories about sensational crimes, and the trials of accused abusers. These stories can often last for weeks as additional testimony and arguments are offered.

Examples

- A Dateline NBC episode called "Saving Richard" (April, 2000) is a typical, if unusually detailed example. The show reports that "doctors made a chilling diagnosis. [Doctor:] 'Much of what happened to him I would classify as systematic torture,'" and Richard's "mean mommy" is the focus of much of the discussion.
- The following story starts with a quick summary of an appalling event. The "rationale" offered two-thirds of the way through the story feels like an afterthought, and the sketchy contextual information in the story's last paragraph can hardly compete with the impact of the crime narrative.

Pa. Woman Who Abandoned Baby Gets Prison, Associated Press, 8/5/03

PHILADELPHIA - A woman who gave birth in a factory bathroom, then put the baby in a trash bin and went back to her job packaging chocolate, was sentenced Tuesday to 6 to 12 years in prison.

... During the trial, defense attorney Charles O'Connell said Liem was confused and suffering from blood loss after giving birth. He said she may have discarded the baby because she thought she had a miscarriage.

... A state law allowing mothers to abandon their newborns at hospitals without fear of prosecution took effect in February.

- This example adds the twist that the abuser seemed harmless, or even much better than harmless. How much more dangerous are the adults around us if we can't even recognize the threat they pose!
Shaken Baby Deaths Defy Easy Answers, Chicago Tribune, 3/5/01

Friends and neighbors of the Keintz family reacted with astonishment upon learning that Keintz was charged in the baby’s death. He had been watching the girl and her 11-month-old sister when the infant was injured. One friend remembered seeing Keintz around her baby, and recalled a gentle man who took to children easily. "A lot of us thought, ‘Boy, his wife is really getting a great guy.’"

Failure of Child Protective Services

Almost as common as the Atrocity frame is the story about the failure of the systems set up to protect children. While always offering sensational descriptions of the atrocities that should have been prevented, these stories also play on widespread suspicion of bureaucracies and a universal fascination with public failure. The stories often present images of particular workers who have failed to follow up on a case (playing on the cultural model of the Incompetent Worker), and invite us to shake our heads in disgust at the lack of competence and accountability in the world. Again, while the tragedy of these failures is undeniable, and the need for improvement is very real, these stories also have very negative consequences for the public's thinking about the issue.

Impacts

Condemning the System: These stories exacerbate the common tendency to condemn complex systems rather than thinking about how to reform them. When we do not understand how a system works (because it is complex or simply because we lack experience with it), it is easy to assume that it doesn't work – consider widespread attitudes among the American public towards the Federal Government. Stories about agencies that have failed to protect children bring up chronic suspicions about the money that is spent on bureaucracies, and about the motives and competence of people who are part of them.

Weakening the Village: These stories not only inflame anger at the systems that currently exist, they also threaten to reduce overall trust that communities can set up collective solutions to problems. Instead, they reinforce the powerful model that each family should protect itself, even from people who appear to be harmless and/or helpful.

Variants

Stories about the failure of CPS can either focus on individual cases, or on trends and an agency's overall bad record. While the second kind of case sounds promising in that it at least paints a bigger picture, that picture is more likely to discourage than to encourage engagement. They tend to reduce the story to one about Incompetent Workers, or about the suffering of the injured parties, rather than presenting contextual causes and potential solutions.
Examples

• The *Dateline NBC* special "Saving Richard," referred to earlier, asks the question, "When it comes to child abuse, does the punishment fit the crime?" and focuses much of its attention on failures of the Montgomery County, Maryland system for child protection. The story questions how so many children can fall through the cracks, and asks, "Why were numerous cries for help ignored"?

• A typical article describes a parent who has been brutal in the past, but who nonetheless likely to retain custody of her children.

**Mom who beat son, but seeks to regain 6 kids, violates parole**, Houston Chronicle, 7/30/03

A mother, who was on the verge of regaining custody of her six children after being convicted of severely beating one, has been ordered incarcerated for parole violations.

...  

Children's Protective Services, which has repeatedly argued for terminating Kegg's parental rights, noted the severity of the injury to Kegg's oldest child, 14-year-old Tyler.

A 911 audio tape recorded sounds of whacks and screams as Tyler was hit 60 times with a board on Dec. 10, 2001. He is living with other relatives.

...

• Some articles, like this one, focus on problems with the broader system for children's welfare, including adoption bureaucracies. The article focuses on the suffering caused by a budget crisis – but rather than emphasizing the need for allocating greater funds to the system, it frames the story as a bizarre failure on the part of the bureaucrats involved.

**State budget crisis puts kids' adoptions in limbo**, Houston Chronicle Austin Bureau, 7/27/03

...  

Parents like the Sanfords, who have yet to be matched with a prospective child to adopt, were put on hold six weeks ago when the state agency ordered new adoption placements to halt until the new budget year begins Sept. 1, Wool said.

"It's very dramatic. Now they're being forced to wait and held in limbo. It's a tremendous waste. It's horribly counterintuitive," said Todd Landry, president and chief executive officer of the nonprofit adoption agency Spaulding for Children in Houston.

After weeks of intensive training for prospective parents to understand a child who has suffered abuse, after required screening for tuberculosis, after undergoing a home study, making loving preparations and winning official approval, it's hard not to vent, Sanford said.
"To know I am potentially the right family for a child who's being denied the right to a family simply because the state won't fund an adoption, then you get mad and then you get angry," she said.

Meanwhile, as child protection workers tried to figure out what to do about 433 contracted adoptions already under way, confusion over renegotiated contracts and whether adoptions could be done free of charge created a series of delays, adoption officials and families say.

For some, bureaucratic misunderstandings turned personal, confusing children and upsetting adoptive parents.

• Articles like this one add official condemnation to the journalist's implicit condemnation.

**Child agency rebuked by judge: Sex by underage teens brings contempt order**
*Free Press, 7/24/03*

A Monroe County judge has held the state's child welfare agency in contempt of court for failing to stop two teens from having sex in a foster home.

In issuing the contempt order, Family Court Judge Pamela Moskwa also cited problems within the Family Independence Agency that have the potential to put other children in danger.

…

In her five-page order, Moskwa cited a series of problems within the FIA, including:

• The agency was not advocating for children.

• Caseworkers, supervisors and top managers at the agency are not communicating with each other.

• The agency has a lack of training, and morale is low among caseworkers.

…

• This article talks about a decline in the number of charges against parents in Washington, DC. The implicit question is whether the decline has happened because the agency is doing a poor job of keeping up with cases, or because they are being less aggressive in removing kids from families.

**Abuse Cases Rise in D.C., But Fewer Go to Court**
Henri E. Cauvin
*Washington Post, Sunday, July 27, 2003*

…

Children's Rights sued the District in 1989 on behalf of children in the child welfare system, and in 1995, a federal judge placed the system under the control of a court-appointed administrator. As part of the agreement that ended the receivership in 2001,
the Child and Family Services Agency must make a host of improvements and provide regular reports to the monitor appointed by the federal court. 

...

- Additional examples

**Kids in N.J.’s Care Missing: 110 in Abuse Case Unaccounted For as Files Are Checked, Washington Post, 1/11/03**

TRENTON, NJ – New Jersey’s child welfare officials have lost track of 110 children in cases of suspected abuse, with caseworkers checking their files in the wake of the brutal child abuse death of 7-year old Faheem Williams, whose decomposed body was found in a plastic garbage bin.

**Deaths Rise Despite State’s Intervention: Agency is Plagued by Inadequate Training, Excessive Caseloads, Indianapolis Star, 12/8/02**

It’s their mandate: Save the children from abuse and neglect. But even after Child Protection Services responds to reports of child mistreatment, Indiana children are dying – at a rate that has nearly doubled in the past five years.

When Parents Fail. *Chicago Tribune, 11/16/97: “Almost every child who is placed in foster care is on some sort of psychotropic medication, usually Ritalin and Prozac,” says Pia Menon, formerly of the Office of the Public Guardian in Cook County… "They were on drugs because it is systematically convenient. The children were easier to manage, and generally drugs were given as a substitute for nurturing.”*

**Sexual predators**

This kind of story is appalling and compelling because it involves the violation of a powerful taboo. While the stories might be thought of as raising awareness in a healthy way, various studies have shown that awareness is already high, and the perceptions of risk may even be exaggerated (if distorted in certain ways – see below).

One of the more positive aspects of these stories is that they tend to emphasize the lifelong impacts of sexual abuse. This fact can help readers adopt a Developmental perspective – i.e. one in which maltreatment is understood in terms of developmental damage that is hard to overcome, rather than merely a mental challenge to put behind us.

**Impacts**

The "Family Bubble": Like stories of monstrous physical abuse, stories of sexual abuse and sexual predators reduce our trust in those around us and strengthen the "Family Bubble," the unconscious understanding of the family as a separate and distinct realm with few and limited connections to the broader community. The stories may serve to raise awareness of a
legitimate danger, but as they are typically presented – without reference to community-strengthening approaches to safety – they also reinforce the belief that our own children are only safe when our locks (both real and metaphorical) are strong enough to protect them.

In addition, this sort of story reinforces the idea that there is an absolute divide between “normal” parents and people on the one hand, and “monsters.” This makes it difficult to think in terms of “risk factors” and to consider the possibility that even regular folks may in some situations become abusive.

Examples

• The Internet presents many opportunities for sexual predators. This story goes on to name all the individuals involved, and is certain to frighten parents, without offering them any reassurance about overall risk levels, or any information about how children can be protected (other than by locking up offenders).

  Online sexual predator task force nets nine arrests, USA Today 12/20/02

  LOUISVILLE (AP) – Agents posing as a 14-year-old girl have arrested nine men on charges of surfing the Internet to find and lure minors for sex over the last 18 months.

  Some of the men arrested by agents and officers with the Louisville Innocent Images Task Force also were charged with crossing state lines for sex with a minor.

  To find sexual predators, task force members surf the Web's chat rooms, often posing as a 14-year-old girl, and exchanging messages with older men.

  …

• Churches and orphanages are institutions where violations of children seem especially shocking. This story also makes a strong case that the harms from sexual abuse are lasting (though it does not offer much help in conveying expert understandings of the nature of the damage).

  Parents of man who committed suicide sue church for alleged abuse
  Associated Press

  LOS ANGELES -The parents of a man who committed suicide last year filed suit against the Archdiocese of Los Angeles, alleging their son took his life because he was emotionally scarred from childhood sexual abuse by a Roman Catholic brother.

  The wrongful-death suit filed Friday in Los Angeles County Superior Court claims that a despondent 36-year-old Richard Lukasiewicz Jr. hung himself 12 hours after being admitted to a psychiatric hospital in April 2002. The lawsuit states that Lukasiewicz was still traumatized by the sexual abuse he suffered while a young student at John Bosco Technical Institute in Rosemead.
Richard and Blanca Lukasiewicz said in their suit that: "The horror and betrayal associated with years of sexual abuse drove Richard Jr. into severe depression." They added, "The sexual abuse stole Richard Jr.'s youth, it took his self-esteem and drained his ability to cope."

 Attorney Raymond Boucher said Lukasiewicz tried to overcome the mental distress he suffered as a result of the molestation, which allegedly began during a 1979 camping trip when he was about 11 and lasted four years. ... Lukasiewicz tried to deal with the trauma through yoga classes and by confiding in friends and family.

**4th Lawsuit Claims Abuse at Boys Town,** Associated Press, 7/8/03

OMAHA, Nebraska - A fourth man who lived at Boys Town, the home for wayward youths that was made famous in a 1938 Spencer Tracy film, has filed a lawsuit claiming he was sexually abused by a staffer.

• While stories like those below are legitimate, they also create a media environment where it is easy to internalize the message that many, many of us are depraved.

**Many Sexually Abused, Study Says,** Boston Globe, 3/30/03: [The article reports that in Massachusetts one in five women say they were sexually abused as children.]

**Boy Scouts step up screening of leaders; Little League also planning checks,** Chicago Tribune, 4/1/03

As spring arrives, so do baseball games, soccer matches, scout campouts for kids – and criminal background checks for many parents.

**The confusing divide between discipline and abuse**

Quite a few stories address the trickiness of the divide between discipline and abuse – either directly, by referring to the difficulty of defining the boundary, or indirectly by presenting stories where it is unclear whether an adult has "crossed the line."

**Impacts**

Weakening the "Village": These stories not only reflect people's confusion about the definition of child abuse, but may reinforce this confusion. The stories typically do not include any information about the consensus that does exist among developmental experts, for instance. In this way, they exacerbate the loss of shared values, which are one of the most important kinds of "glue" holding the traditional Village together.
Weakening the Developmental Perspective: If these stories strengthen the “Family Bubble” by implying that discipline is a moral area where every family must make its own subjective choices, they also directly work against the developmental perspective that children have universal developmental needs, and that the impacts of certain kinds of treatment can be judged scientifically and objectively rather than morally or ideologically.

Discrediting Advocates: A third downside is that such a story can frame advocates as ideological, PC extremists who are bent on taking away a legitimate and traditional tool of child rearing.

Variants
A closely related type of story is the one in which a person has hesitated to intervene between an adult and child because of uncertainty about whether it would be appropriate to get involved. This uncertainty is a result of both confusion about the line between discipline and abuse, and because the “Family Bubble” mode of thinking frames almost any kind of intervention as inexcusable meddling.

Examples
• In the first story below, the difficulty of drawing the line between abuse and discipline is explicitly addressed. In the second, there is no explicit discussion of this difficulty, but two competing perspectives are presented.

Second parent arrested in spanking incident, Slidell Sentry News, 4/3/98

SLIDELL – For the second time this week, a parent has been charged with cruelty to a juvenile for spanking a child.

Gregory Magee, 28, of 2021 Covington Hwy allegedly whipped a 9-year-old boy in his care with a belt, inflicting deep bruises on the boy's legs, said Tim Reichenbach, spokesman for St. Tammany Parish Sheriff's Office.

Magee told investigators that he had spanked the child, which is not illegal. But investigators believed the spanking was "carried too far." Magee allegedly whipped the boy because he was acting out in school and getting bad grades, said Reichenbach.

…

A local woman was also charged this week with cruelty to a juvenile after a spanking incident. She allegedly spanked her 10-year-old son three times after he was suspended from elementary school for five days.

In that case, police and juvenile authorities in Slidell made the determination that Himber had gone beyond corporal punishment and into the realm of cruelty to a juvenile.

…
The question of parents' rights versus children's rights becomes complicated when corporal punishment is at issue. "It is a bit of a grey area," said Alan Black, an attorney in Slidell whose practice includes both criminal and family law. "These are tough cases. ..."

"There was a time when (corporal punishment) was generally accepted. Then it was viewed as disastrously negative for children. Now we are back to using more physical punishment and believing it is OK," said Peter Clark, a child psychologist in Slidell.

There is a trend toward more rigid discipline these days born out of a worry that society has become too liberal and out of control, said Clark.

He never advises people that corporal punishment is a necessary parenting tool, "but how they discipline their children is up to them," he said. "Some people believe one thing and others believe another."

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**Port Charlotte school director arrested for paddling student**, Daytona Beach News-Journal wire services, 7/4/01

PORT CHARLOTTE – The director of a parochial school was arrested after paddling an 8-year-old student as punishment for lying, officials said.

Paul King, director of Charlotte Regional Christian Academy, was arrested Monday and charged with aggravated child abuse for spanking the girl twice with a board, officials said.

"I'm shocked charges were filed," said King, a pastor at Harborview Christian Church. "I look forward to being vindicated."

Students at the academy are disciplined with paddling as a last resort after other punishments fail, King said. Parents must sign a note agreeing with the policy before their children enroll, he said.

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• The next example is an excerpt from a newspaper column recounting the columnist’s experience of witnessing a mother verbally abusing her child:


… Now what to do with this curbside, open-air child abuser? There’s no guidance counselor out here on the street. No protocol. No institution to guide my action. If I say something to this woman, is there a reasonable expectation she’ll change her
behavior? … Her slurs on the little girl become increasingly unprintable. This woman is forcing the moment to its crisis. Do I dare? No, I don’t. I walk on past like a guilty thing, leaving the mother to her business. Just around the corner on Irving Street there’s a man waiting for the Metrobus. He’s also been watching and listening to the mother. He and I make eye contact for a quick moment. Surely it’s a look of disgust that he and I exchange. Disgust for whom? The mother? Ourselves? The frayed fabric of our community? A combination of all these, perhaps.

**The sanctity of the family**

Quite a few stories about child maltreatment raise questions about whether it is appropriate to interfere with families. There is a perceived tension between protecting children and granting families an appropriate degree of autonomy.

**Impacts**

Strengthening the Family Bubble and Weakening the Developmental Perspective: While questions about whether children are best off with their families are complex, these stories often obscure such questions by emphasizing the issue of family autonomy. In this context, the issue of children’s developmental needs is often downplayed or ignored.

**Examples**

- **When Parents Fail.** Gail Vida Hamburg, *Chicago Tribune*, 11/16/97:

  “This issue of family preservation versus child protection has been with us since Colonial times," says Cathy Barbelle of the Child Welfare League of America. "Teddy Roosevelt gave us a policy, but the problem of how we address and deal with child abuse remains unresolved." The tension between the two groups has prevented child welfare from accomplishing the important goals first set in 1909. The opposing views also have created a contradiction between policy and practice. "The policy has been one of family support, but the practice has been one of child protection through family disruption," says Golden.

- **Price of Abuse Prevention Debated: Parents’ Privacy Pitted Against Child’s Well-being,** *Chicago Tribune*, 2/17/00:

  The McHenry County Board may reconsider whether to accept a $102,800 state child-abuse prevention grant, barely one month after rejecting the grant because of concerns over privacy rights and government intrusions into family life.
**Children accidentally harmed by parents**

There is a large category of news-you-can-use stories about the risks children face everywhere they go. Often these stories focus on children who have been injured because their parents were unaware of a particular type of hazard. Stories like these often imply that parents’ ignorance or negligence amounts to something very close to child maltreatment.

**Impacts**

Of course these stories perform a service by reminding people of risks. They can also have the positive effect of framing harm to children as something that even “normal” people can cause, but that can be prevented through education. The more the stories to do condemn individual parents, though, the less effective they are at promoting the Educational Frame, and the more they evoke Parental Deficit thinking.

**Example**

**Texas Baby Dies After Being Left in Car,** Associated Press, 7/31/03:

HARLINGEN, Texas – A 2-month-old girl died after being left inside a sweltering parked car while her mother was in a Target store applying for a job, police said.

After consulting prosecutors, police charged 24-year-old July Vreeland with abandoning-endangering a child Wednesday. Vreeland was in jail Wednesday night.

…

**CONCLUSION: Important stories that don’t get enough attention**

Experts on child maltreatment know many things about the issue that they wish the public knew – about risk factors, protective factors, and trends, for example. Unfortunately, this kind of information is not, in itself, the stuff of "good" news stories. First because by definition such contextual information is not simple, sensational or episodic. But also because it may not even count as "news" – it is background information about the world, rather than a surprising incident.

In order to have the best chance of moving public opinion forward, advocates must avoid reinforcing the patterns of reasoning discussed above, and must also find ways of helping journalists write stories that evoke the right frames, including the value of social connection and a developmental perspective. Stories that promote these frames, and include information about causes and solutions, can be news when they include new findings, for example, or when they discuss the beginning of a new program – see the examples below.

**Child Abuse Prevention Effort Starts,** Chicago Tribune, 6/13/00

Parents Care and Share of Illinois is starting a chapter this week in Elgin for parents and caregivers of children who need to let off a little steam. "When your kids are
misbehaving and you think you’re the only one who’s having that problem, you feel pretty awful about it,” said Susie Kline, regional director of the child abuse prevention program….The Parents Care program…aims to support caregivers of children of all ages who fear stress is affecting their caregiving.


… [P]arents who have never lifted a finger against their children – but who fit the profile of those who might – are getting loving, intensive care and friendship that could stop abuse before it happens.

Each of these stories moves people away from the Family Bubble and Parental Deficit modes of thinking, by reinforcing the important ways in which social connection help reduce the risks of child maltreatment.

For advocates on the child maltreatment issue, the struggle to create news that promotes productive ways of thinking is certainly a challenge, but as on other social issues where public perception started from a basis of individual demonization, it is likely that persistent efforts can lead to real shifts in understanding.