



Navigating Waters

Talking About Parenting

A FrameWorks Institute Toolkit

This is a preview of a digital toolkit soon to be published at <http://frameworksinstitute.org/toolkits/parenting>.

Summary

Quick Guide to Talking About Parenting

- [Summary Table](#)
- [Eight Ways to Talk About Parenting](#)

Framing is about [making choices](#) and doing things a little differently. Here are a few you can make:

When talking about parenting...

Avoid:	Do:
Talking about how all parents struggle and that parenting is 'hard work'	Start with children and their needs.
Talking about 'improving' parenting or pointing to 'effective' or 'good' parenting	Build understanding of childhood development – and the support all parents need to raise thriving children
Using stats that show poor outcomes for children to argue for parenting support	Explain how circumstances affect parents and families using the 'Navigating Waters' metaphor
Starting communications with the idea of 'parenting skills'	Focus on parenting skills after establishing how circumstances affect families
Rebutting or disproving ingrained ways of thinking about parenting	Telling a positive, consistent story about supporting child development
Talking about 'evidence-based parenting' or the 'science of parenting'	Explain why parenting matters for positive childhood development

And when developing your own communications:

Eight ways to talk about parenting...

1. Start with children and what they need to thrive

Before

We need to invest in the right programs to support effective parenting.

After

To raise thriving children, Australia's parents need better support.

2. Build understanding of childhood development to engage and shift public thinking about parenting

Before

All parents need help sometimes. We can we can give parents the tools they need to be at their best. Evidence shows that the right support for parents makes a big difference.

After

Children's brains are built over time. The early years provide the foundation for future learning. We need to support parents to lay the strongest possible foundations.

3. Show how children's skills and abilities develop through an active process and what parents need to support that process

Before

Good parenting is hard work and all parents struggle at some time. Parents need support to give their children the best start in life.

After

The skills that kids start to develop when they're very young couldn't be more important. Skills like problem solving and planning. Parents help build these skills and by supporting kids and we can give all parents the tools they need.

4. Avoid prompting any judgement of parenting (good parenting, effective parenting or improve parenting)

Before

Effective parenting builds futures.

After

Children thrive when parents have the support they need.

5. Use the navigating waters metaphor to show the impact of context on parents

Before

To support effective parenting, we need to help families dealing with problems like poverty and ill health. It is very hard for parents to give their children a good start in life when they are experiencing hardship and adversity. We need to provide the right support and we need to provide it early.

After

For healthy development, children need life to be on an even keel. But for families experiencing poverty and stress, raising children is like sailing in rough waters. Helping parents with counselling, quality child care and financial support makes sure that they have the lighthouses and safe harbours that they need to navigate these rough waters.

6. Focus on parenting skills only after establishing the role of context

Before

Parenting is a skill that parents can learn with the right help and support. We need to help parents learn to be adaptable, flexible and to seek help when they need it.

After

To develop in healthy and positive ways, children need life to be stable, even when families face rough times. Just as a strong skipper learns to be adaptable and to seek help when they need it, we can help parents to navigate life's storms.

7. Avoid rebutting or disproving ingrained ways of thinking about parenting

Before

We often think that parenting should be instinctive or that it's natural, but effective parenting doesn't just happen. Parents need help to learn the skills it takes to be good parents.

After

Raising thriving healthy children is all-important and building young brains takes work. Parents need support to help children develop the skills they need.

8. Avoid normalising parents' struggles

Before

All parents struggle to keep up with the demands of family life. This is a normal part of life. We need policies that help all parents gain the right skills to deal with these challenges.

After

Raising thriving children is like building a house from the foundations up. When they interact with their children, parents are building brains. We need better policies to support parents to help children to learn and grow from the earliest days onwards.

What to do

Talking About Parenting

We can increase understanding of the programs that help parents and children. We can make parenting a collective issue, rather than an individual one. And we can build support for the policies Australia's families need to thrive.

- [What is framing and why does it matter?](#)
- [What's the new story – or, how can we change the big idea?](#)
- [What does the Australian public think about parenting?](#)

What is framing and why does it matter?

Framing an issue effectively means doing things a little differently to standard awareness raising or campaigning.

To frame an issue, we need to:

1. Know what we're up against – and the opportunities – by understanding how people think and feel about this issue
2. Make deliberate choices when presenting information: what to emphasise, what to explain and what to leave unsaid
3. Trigger certain ways of thinking and bypass others – it's very hard to argue against a feeling or belief once it's activated
4. Show why it matters by aligning solutions with people's ideals of what's desirable and good
5. Show that change is possible, not that problems are huge and challenging
6. Give your audience ways to think differently instead of meeting them where they are

We can change hearts and minds on an issue if we change how we talk and the stories we tell.

What's the new story – or, how can we change the big idea?

From: Effective and ineffective parenting

To: Supporting child development

The big idea on an issue is what we say it's **really** about. Why an issue matters. And what's at stake if we do nothing.

We can change the big idea of parenting in Australia with a child development frame.

This frame avoids criticising or judging parents. It grounds our story in what effective parenting is really for - children, and their healthy development.

Here's what this could look like in practice:

Before:

ANS OPINION

Australia is hurting new parents with conflicting advice - and now this needs to be put right

Published 27 minutes ago by Dr Amy Moore, Melbourne Institute of Parenting in OPINION





PHOTO Different advice is given to parents from different health sources from the moment their child is born.

After:

ANS OPINION

We are hurting children with conflicting parenting advice - Australia's kids need us to get this right

Published 27 minutes ago by Dr Amy Moore, Melbourne Institute of Parenting in OPINION





PHOTO Different advice is given to parents from different health sources from the moment their child is born.

Big ideas guide thinking. The child development frame:

1. Focuses on children and what they need to thrive, rather than blaming or evaluating parenting
2. Establishes the importance of interaction with parents and caregivers to child development, rather than assuming that young children simply grow
3. Helps people see that circumstances shape options, rather than assuming that good parenting comes naturally to individuals.

When we frame child development as an issue that matters to all of us, we prime our audience to see how they have a role in creating change.

Use the third person to talk about parents and children, and focus on society and community. For example:

The skills that kids start to develop when they're very young couldn't be more important. Australia's children need us to get this right - and parents need more support.

This doesn't assert a moral high ground. It instead establishes our shared - and unmistakable - grounds for action.

Frames work best when given space to breathe, so make sure it's reinforced throughout the rest of your content.

Checklist: Changing the Big Idea

- The big idea is explicitly stated
- It's used early on in a communication
- It's used to signal what your issue is about, and why it matters
- It promotes collective action
- No competing or untested big ideas present
- It is reinforced throughout written and/or spoken content
- It is reinforced or illustrated with images

How does the Australian public think about parenting?

The public thinks:	This matters because:	Communicators should:
The goal of parenting is to create happy children .	It narrows thinking about what healthy development looks like and requires from parents.	Avoid presenting happiness as the sole goal and instead bring in child development and skills.
People assume good parenting comes naturally .	It renders parenting support and resources unnecessary, unnatural and unlikely to work.	Avoid leading with parenting and instead lead with children and what they need to develop and thrive.
Parents' capacity to parent is determined by how they were parented as children. Little can be done to change this pattern.	This fatalistic perspective suggests that programs to support parents cannot make a difference.	Show contexts affect parents using the 'Navigating Waters' metaphor.
Good parenting is a choice . It is up to the individual's discretion and willpower.	This makes it difficult to see how circumstances limit and shape people's options. It's hard to see how programs and support can help parents.	Explain how context impacts on parents using the 'Navigating Waters' metaphor.
Social environments can be a source of either stress or support for parents.	This line of thinking helps people think more deeply about the systems and structures that shape parents' lives.	Build on this thinking using the 'Navigating Waters' metaphor. Talk about the specific ways that support for parents can keep families on an "even keel."

<p>Modern life and Australia today are to blame for many of the challenges parents face. Parenting is not 'what it used to be.'</p>	<p>A sense of nostalgia for a mythic past lost forever shuts down people's ability to imagine solutions and causes them to disengage entirely.</p>	<p>Avoid references to "the pressures of modern life" or talking about "parenting nowadays." Avoid normalising the struggles parents face. Instead talk about what children need to develop healthily and how support for parents helps make this happen.</p>
<p>Men are important, but women are responsible. Women are to blame for poor parenting outcomes.</p>	<p>This undermines men's role in parenting, disparages women, and makes it difficult to establish men's <i>equal</i> role in parenting responsibilities.</p>	<p>Avoid presenting women as the default parent or carer. Talk about and show men being actively involved in children's development.</p>
<p>Child development happens to older children. Young children simply grow.</p>	<p>People fail to recognize the significance of early childhood. They frequently mistake communications about early childhood as being about older children.</p>	<p>Show babies and toddlers and focus on foundational development processes that happens when children are below four. Use metaphors to explain how this works.</p>
<p>Every child is unique so there is no 'right' way to parent.</p>	<p>This concept weakens support for evidence-based help that can be applied across different situations. If every child is unique, nothing can be done to improve parenting.</p>	<p>Avoid cueing this way of thinking. Instead focus on the universal processes of child development.</p>
<p>Parents can act as either a filter or a wall to external threats.</p>	<p>The filter metaphor helps people think about parents' roles in supporting children's learning. The wall makes it difficult to see that <i>positive</i> development can be facilitated through support.</p>	<p>Talk about parents' role in supporting their children to develop vital skills.</p>

That the **government** is either intrusive, an incompetent problem solver, or a supportive partner in the parenting endeavour.

The **support** model opens people up to how public programs and infrastructure can be changed to create better parenting outcomes.

Talk about the specific support that government can provide families after leading with the idea of child development to establish why this matters.

How to do it

How to Talk About Parenting

Different audiences and communications contexts have different needs. Here are a few ways to vary the frames by context and audience.

- [How should we frame...?](#)
- [How should we frame with metaphor?](#)
- [How should we frame with media and images?](#)

How should I frame...?

1. Advice for parents

When talking to parents:

- Start with children, their positive development and the important role parents have in it
- Use a positive and encouraging tone and avoid inadvertently making parents feel judged with talk of 'good' or 'effective' parenting
- Don't focus on the uniqueness of different children, but the developmental processes that are common to all

Before

All children and families are different. Evidence-based advice helps parents and carers make decisions that work for them in their individual family circumstances.

After

Raising thriving healthy children is all-important – and parents build their children's brains every day. Our child development advice is easy to understand and use. It can help all Australian families thrive.

2. Advice for new parents

When talking to new parents:

- Show how child development starts straight away
- Focus on interaction and its positive, brain-building effects
- Avoid presenting parenting as a struggle

Before

Babies don't come with a manual but advice and support in the earliest weeks can help parents adjust to the life-changing responsibility of a new baby.

After

Healthy child development starts early and babies' brains are being built from their first days. The interactions you have with your baby and the relationship that you develop—even in the first few weeks—will help them grow and thrive.

3. How to talk about parent support programs and policies to a broader audience

When talking about policies and programs to a broad audience:

- Make your message about Australia's children and their development
- Broaden your focus to all of society, rather than narrowing in on individual parents or parenting
- Show how circumstances impact families and parents

Before

Every family needs support. We need a range of services to give families the knowledge and skills they need to meet their children's needs.

After

Australia's children thrive when our policies and programs support parents. We need to help all children develop healthily, especially when families experience tough times.

4. How to call for improvements to parent support

When calling for improvements to the policies and programs that support parents:

- Keep a clear focus on children and their healthy development
- Explain how challenging contexts affect families using the navigating waters metaphor
- Put the solutions centre-stage, not the problems

Before

We are experiencing a national crisis in the number of children in protective care. We need more support for parents and families, especially those who are hard to reach. When families disengage from the system altogether, very bad things can happen.

After

For children to develop healthily, they need life to stay on an even keel. Support for families can help parents to navigate rough waters like stress or financial problems. We need to

make more support available to all families so that parents can get through challenges and all children can thrive.

How can we frame with metaphors?

Explanatory metaphors explain how context shapes behaviours and outcomes.

When we're trying to change how people understand an issue, metaphor is a powerful tool. A metaphor provides a familiar way to think and talk about an issue. It opens up new ways of understanding. It turns an abstract, complex concept into something simple and concrete.

Metaphors trigger strong mental images - so journalists will often use them in an article headline. Here's what this could look like:

Before:



The Canberra Herald

News | National

Parenting programme will help carers and parents with troubled children

By Ava Lucas
Published 57 minutes ago





'I thought it would all come naturally,' said Tom Johnson, 46, from Lyneham. He'd just become the primary carer for his two young nephews. And he had no inkling of the trouble ahead.

After:



The Canberra Herald

News | National

New programme 'a lighthouse' for carers and parents in troubled waters

By Ava Lucas
Published 57 minutes ago





'Staying calm and keeping them safe. That's what's important for my kids,' said Tom Johnson, 46, from Lyneham. He'd just become the primary carer for his two young nephews. Only he had no inkling of the trouble ahead.

When we explain an issue, problem or process using metaphor, we show **how** it works. We explain why it happens - rather than accepting it as normal or how things just naturally are.

Metaphors inform the thinking that follows, so use them early. After you've established your big idea (and why it matters), and before going into detail.

Primary Metaphor: Navigating Waters

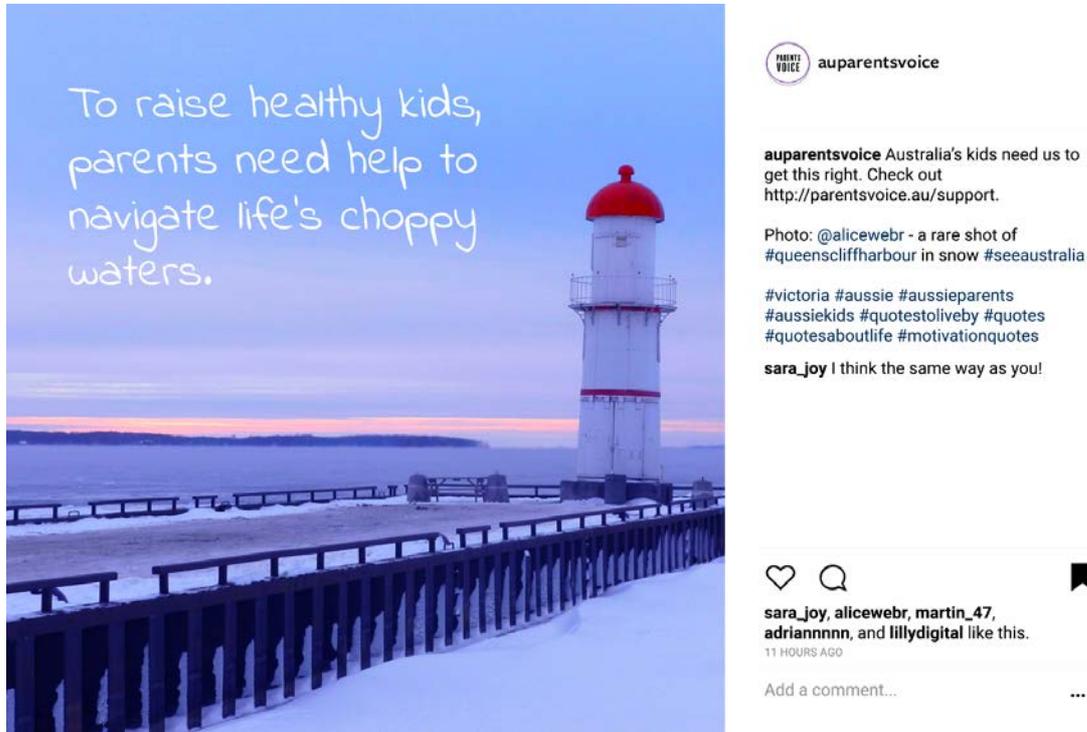
To develop healthily, children need life to be on an even keel. But for families experiencing poverty and stress, raising children can be like sailing in rough waters. Just as we provide lighthouses and safe harbours, we can help parents with support like counselling, quality child care and financial support.

This metaphor brings in the idea of context - and the external factors that affect parenting. It's designed to:

1. Show that effective parenting needs skill and practice

2. Show that effective parenting is influenced by a range of factors - and not just how someone was parented
3. Show what effective parenting looks like at different times - and that it's important in the early years.

Example: #QuotesToLiveBy on Instagram



Secondary Metaphor: Building Brains

Brain development is like building a house. The basic architecture is constructed through an ongoing process that begins before birth and continues into adulthood.

Example: #AussieParents on Facebook



Parents Voice

Children's brains are built over time. Their earliest years provide the foundation for future learning. We need to support all [#aussieparents](#) to lay the strongest possible foundations.

Timeline Photos · Yesterday at 17:58 · 🌐

Secondary Metaphor: Serve and Return

Scientists now know that the interactive influences of genes and experience shape the developing brain. The active ingredient is the "serve and return" relationships that babies have with their parents and other caregivers in their communities.

Example: [#AussieParents](#) on Twitter



Parents Voice @AUParentsVoice · Jul 25

Peekaboo builds brains. Just like in the [@AustralianOpen](#), every rally adds value - helping build up a child's long-term resilience & skills. We need to help [#AussieParents](#) deal with anything life - or their kids - serve up.



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Metaphors work best when part of a bigger picture - so extend one throughout the rest of your content. With 'navigating waters,' for example, parents are on a journey. They'll encounter different challenges and supports along the way - and these will shape their path and progress.

Checklist: Using Metaphor

- Metaphor used early - before details and data on impact
- Metaphor used to show how an issue, process or problem works
- Metaphor focuses on shared challenges and goals
- Metaphor extended throughout written and/or spoken content
- Metaphor reinforced or illustrated with images
- No competing or untested metaphors present

How can we frame using media and images?

Social Media

Changing the big ideas on social issues takes time. We need a constant drip-feed of well-framed content to change hearts and minds.

Incorporate the new big idea and explanatory metaphors into your social media strategy. You can also use the default public thinking to inform your audience personas.

Here's how this might work across channels:

Instagram

Harness existing conventions on [Instagram](#) with framed images, stories and inspiring quotes.

Example: a weekly photo competition, bringing in national landmarks that extend the 'navigating waters' metaphor. We can engage with our audience - and use them to generate content - while also reinforcing our metaphor.



 aparentsvoice

aparentsvoice This week's #evenkeel winner - congrats @janebrigale for this beautiful photo of #otwaylighthouse.

For healthy development, children need life to stay on an even keel. Programmes that help parents navigate life's choppy waters - like work stress and financial worries - help make sure that Australia's children thrive.

#seaaustralia #victoria #aussie #aussieparents #aussiekids

james_mc Beautiful photo!



29 likes.

4 HOURS AGO

Add a comment...

Twitter

Drive site visits and tap into existing conversations on [Twitter](#).

Example: a call to action, directing our audience to find out more about support for parents on our website - and a striking image to make the post more visible.



Parents Voice @AUParentsVoice · 8s

Healthy children need supportive and attentive relationships from their earliest years. When #AussieParents are supported, Australia's children soar.

Find out more at parentsvoice.au/support #childdevelopment



Facebook

Share thematic stories that tie into policy and programme needs on [Facebook](#).

Example: a series of personal stories tied to a new service for parents. We can reinforce the big idea with our audience, showcase solutions, and invite them to share their own stories.



Parents Voice

Children thrive when parents have the support they need. Here's the story of Dan and Dylan - and Kalgoorlie's new library:
<https://parentsvoice.au/dan-dylan-reading-programme>.

Timeline Photos · Yesterday at 12:14 · 🌐

Google Ads

Drive site visits for specific landing pages with [Google Ads](#).

Example: a simple ad, suitable for a [Google Ad Grant allocation](#).

Parents Voice - parentsvoice.au

Ad www.parentsvoice.au/support

Kids thrive when parents have the support they need.

[Get Support](#) · [Join Us](#) · [Volunteer with Us](#)

More Information

Full research and recommendations are on [the FrameWorks Institute website](#).