



Communicating About the Importance of Family Care for Children

*A Strategic Framing Brief for GHR Foundation and Alia
November 2019*

Introduction

This brief offers a set of framing recommendations for GHR Foundation, Alia, and key stakeholders to use in developing a new messaging strategy as well as to refine existing communications and outreach strategies to help shift people's thinking around the role of families and children in foster and orphanage care.

Orphanages and foster care conjure up particular images in the public imagination. In the absence of expert knowledge, people's ideas about these institutions are shaped by the stories we tell about them throughout our culture: news broadcasts about cracks or failures in the system that perhaps led to a child's injury or death, Dickensian imagery of pitiful children from the most desperate of families, overburdened or callous social workers. Notions such as these do not help the mission and goals of GHR and Alia. If members of the public, including potential stakeholders, volunteers, or faith-based communities, draw conclusions about foster-related issues based on dominant narratives that parents (or relatives) have failed their children or that the system has failed them, how can Alia and GHR make the case for keeping children in their families and shifting our collective focus toward the "UnSystem"?

Strategic framing enables advocates to account for the widely shared assumptions and perceptions, or "cultural models," that structure public thinking about an issue. Knowing which of these assumptions may help and which may hinder how people reason about an issue allows advocates to make evidence-based communications choices that improve the effectiveness of their messages. A well-framed narrative can displace less helpful, but more dominant, ones. Reframing GHR and Alia's efforts to revolutionize how we help families involved in the care

system—by filling in people’s knowledge gaps and answering their key questions—can move public attitudes about and support for these efforts in a productive direction.

This guide is designed to help communicators tell more effective stories about families’ and communities’ roles in raising and supporting children. The recommendations shared here draw on and synthesize more than a decade of FrameWorks’ multi-method, multidisciplinary communications research on subjects ranging from the science of early childhood development and adolescent development to human services, the causes and consequences of poverty and the effects of racial inequities and other social disparities. Our staff also reviewed GHR Foundation’s and Alia’s existing communications materials, including social media content, reports, presentations, and one pagers, in order to analyze their current framing strategies and identify opportunities for redirection. The FrameWorks team used FrameWorks’ extensive portfolio of research to assess the likely effectiveness of GHR Foundation’s and Alia’s current framing strategies (as analyzed in the FrameCheck of both organizations’ materials) and to derive the following set of evidence-based recommendations for improving upon these approaches. The research base for these recommendations comprise a sample size of more than 95,000 members of the public.

The report is laid out in two sections:

The first, **Primary Communications Challenges**, identifies the dominant assumptions and beliefs that guide public thinking on issues related to foster care and children’s wellbeing and analyzes their implications for communicators.

Next, **Redirections** explains and models a set of eight distinct but related framing strategies and tools that can be used in Alia’s and GHR’s communications to increase public understanding and support for their goals:

1. Order matters.
2. Choose your tone wisely.
3. Engage people by establishing why the issue matters.
4. Use explanatory chains.
5. Tell a “brain story.”
6. Remember solutions.
7. Use data strategically
8. Choose visuals that support framing choices.

Primary Communications Challenges

Whether a framing strategy is effective depends on its ability to break through, or navigate around, the longstanding, widely shared, preexisting assumptions about “how the world works” that the public brings to any discussion of social issues. These enduring, well-established default modes of reasoning about a problem and its solution—what anthropologists call “cultural models”—act as cognitive shortcuts that help our brains to process incoming information quickly, and they influence how people respond to messages. The problem is that this mental efficiency comes at a cost, since some of these defaults act as barriers to processing new information and can lead to interpretations at odds with the intended takeaway of a communication. The good news, however, is that these models are activated by the cues in a message: words, turns of phrase, images, messengers, and so on. Knowing what cultural models the public is likely to use to reason about an issue gives communicators a strategic advantage, helping them to avoid cues that may lead to unhelpful interpretations and to choose others that can engage people more deeply.

FrameWorks’ research projects begin with a discovery process that identifies and analyzes what preexisting assumptions dominate the public’s patterns of reasoning about an issue. Below, we identify and describe several cultural models that our cultural models findings on issues related to Alia and GHR’s work—early childhood development and trauma, equity, and human services—suggest are likely to be activated by the framing strategies we identified in our review of the GHR and Alia communication materials. Because our research has found these dominant models to be ineffective or even problematic in helping the public to think more deeply about child-related issues, GHR and Alia staff, leaders, and partners should avoid communications cues and framing strategies that may activate them:

Black box of childhood development: Two decades of FrameWorks’ research demonstrate that members of the public have a very limited understanding of what, exactly, happens inside the developing brain and are unsure how environments and biology interact as children grow. Without a nuanced understanding of the science of development, people diminish the importance of environments and contexts on children’s health and wellbeing. Instead, they rely on widespread misperceptions to reason about why children experience good or bad developmental outcomes. For example, people commonly assume good or bad outcomes are predetermined by genetics or that “kids just grow naturally.” When reasoning from this perspective people are hard-pressed to see how system-level solutions are necessary or relevant. *To guide people towards a different interpretation of the problems and solutions, include step-by-step explanations of the science of development, including the role of social determinants, in messages to the public.*

Fatalism: A major challenge communicators face in talking about early childhood is the American public’s profound pessimism about our ability to solve longstanding social problems. This deeply ingrained fatalism—the sense that any attempt to improve things will be futile, so we shouldn’t try—cuts across issue areas and weakens the public’s will to act. When reasoning from this perspective, people have difficulty identifying feasible solutions and ultimately disengage out of a sense that the problem is too overwhelming to fix. Crisis-oriented cues can feed the public’s fatalism. The tendency in some Alia and GHR communications to build the case for social change with staggering statistics or to use urgent or sweeping language to compel action may have the opposite effect, overwhelming the audience and weakening their will to act. For example, consider the opening sentence of the report, “Families Not Orphanages”: “AIDS and other diseases, armed conflict, natural disasters, forced displacement and extreme poverty leave millions of children orphaned, separated, or on the brink of family breakdown.” The extreme conditions listed here, especially as the very first sentence in the report, invite readers to think, “This is a problem too big to solve. What can I do to stop armed conflict or natural disasters?” *To avoid stoking people’s fatalism, avoid crisis cues and be intentional about priming people to feel optimistic about our ability to address problems related to foster systems and family unity.*

Causal attribution (who is responsible?): FrameWorks’ research across social issue areas has found that when Americans are left on their own to attribute responsibility for social change or for addressing problems, they tend to conclude that everyone’s responsible, e.g., “It’s up to all of us to save the environment.” In the public’s mind, “everyone’s responsible” actually means “everyone’s responsible for themselves and their actions,” which effectively means that nobody is responsible for large-scale change. Because non-experts generally lack the sophisticated understanding of policy-based solutions that experts may take for granted, this blanket “we” can render systemic solutions invisible, along with the experts, policy makers, practitioners, and collective civic action necessary to enact them. Collective appeals are a good framing strategy to engage people’s civic-mindedness, but they should be accompanied by an explanation of the specific roles different actors must play (e.g., citizens must advocate for sound policy and be informed consumers of information, government must implement and enforce evidence-based policies, etc.). The everybody’s/nobody’s responsible model dilutes people’s sense of social and collective responsibility. The GHR and Alia messaging analyzed here lacks the explanatory power to steer the public towards more concrete attributions of responsibility. Without a better understanding of which stakeholders should be accountable for addressing challenges (and how) within foster systems and strengthening families, the public is less likely to see the need to support the efforts of those stakeholders. *Be clear and explicit about who is responsible for taking what actions and for what purpose.*

Self-Makingness and Separate Fates: While foster care, orphanages, and families are the main messaging priorities for GHR and Alia, communicating about the role of racism in families' experiences and outcomes is also an important element of the work. Family separation as a response to immigration enforcement is a good example of this. When an issue intersects with race, advocates should consider what set of assumptions the public may hold about both.

There are two critical ways in which issues of race tend to inform people's reasoning about social issues. The first is the deeply held American belief in "self-makingness," or the idea that an individual's life outcomes are due solely to their personal traits, abilities, effort, and character. FrameWorks' research has found that when considering problems and solutions related to, or that affect most directly, certain groups—e.g., people of color, immigrants, low-income communities—the public's implicit bias against these groups leads people to reason that the individuals or groups so affected have failed to live up to this core principle of "the self-made individual." In other words, the public concludes that those who are perceived to have failed did not try hard enough to overcome adversity, thereby assigning the blame for systemic social problems to the groups most affected by them. When those affected are people of color or immigrants, implicit bias factors in even further, often leading to conclusions that the affected group is taking advantage of the efforts of others.

The "separate fates" model is another pattern of thinking that structures opinions about race. It is the belief that white communities and communities of color live in distinct worlds, shaped by different forces and moving in divergent directions. When reasoning from this cultural model, people perceive that the concerns of people of color are disconnected from the shared concerns and aspirations of the broader society. Both people of color and whites can and do reason from this model, though their lived experiences may lead them to different conclusions. For example, whereas whites may be more likely to conclude that Black concerns about public policy issues are demands for "special treatment," people of color may be more likely to conclude that the interests of white people are diametrically opposed to their own and that the odds of people of color "winning" are low because the game is rigged. In both cases, this way of reasoning limits dialogue about positive-sum approaches that could result in a system that is meaningfully improved for all.

Additionally, "separate fates" thinking can make it easier for white people to characterize people of color as the "other," which, in turn, allows white people to place the concerns of other communities "over there," disconnected from themselves. This model makes it much harder for people to connect the dots between structural factors and life chances for children of color. *Communicators must consistently remind their audiences that addressing inequality will positively affect everyone.*

Individualism: The American public shares a deeply held belief that life outcomes are determined primarily by individuals' good or bad choices and their level and application of willpower and drive. When people reason from this perspective, they have difficulty seeing how social determinants and contextual factors influence and constrain individuals' choices and outcomes. Consequently, they have difficulty thinking about solutions that move beyond educating individuals to make better individual choices. They also tend not to understand the collective benefit of social policies and programs designed to improve the contexts and systems that shape people's lives. This has implications for communicating about childhood development, foster care systems, and family unity: for example, a message about maximizing individual children's human potential so they can do better in school or land a better-paying job later in life will reinforce the tendency to reason about large-scale social issues through the narrow lens of individual drive and personal outcomes. Individual stories also encourage people to lay responsibility at individuals' feet; in the context of foster care, this means people reason that foster care exists because some people are bad parents (or bad people, more broadly), and there are no real solutions available to solve for this "fact" of human nature. Similarly, when Alia's and GHR's communications neglect to explain what solutions are needed and how they will work, the public is likely to conclude that the primary fix is for people (parents, particularly) to change their behavior at an individual level. *Contextualizing individual stories within a "big-picture" story of the systems and contexts that expand or constrain people's choices and outcomes will broaden the public's ability to reason productively about the structural causes of social problems and the large-scale change needed to adequately address those problems.*

Redirections

RECOMMENDATION 1:

Order matters. An explanatory narrative structure can guide people's thinking.

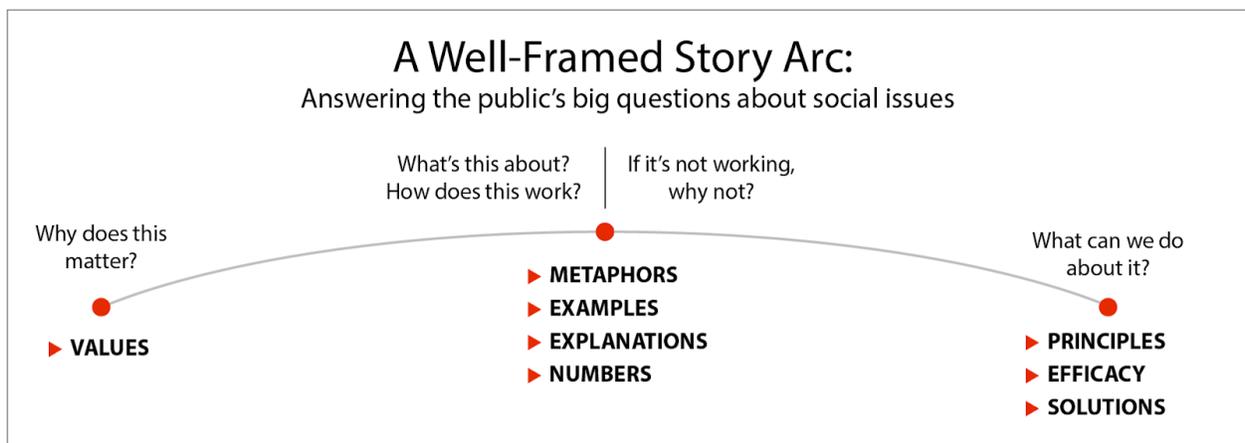
In our audit of Alia's and GHR's communications materials, we noted that the order in which many of your communications present information may be hindering people's engagement with, and productive interpretation of, your key ideas.

A message intended to improve people's understanding of an issue typically has to answer a few key questions in order to fill in their knowledge gaps and steer them towards a productive interpretation of the problem and its solutions. These key questions include:

- Why does this matter?
- How does this work? (Or if it isn't working, why not?)
- What can we do about it?

Making sure your communications about foster systems, child development, and family unity answer these questions will increase people’s understanding of the causes and consequences of, and solutions to, the social problems that GHR, Alia, and your partners seek to address. A strong “narrative arc” is one way to accomplish this task.

The human brain is wired to think in narrative—we use storytelling all the time to make sense of the world around us and to tie together pieces of information that might otherwise lack meaning or significance. Strategic framing capitalizes on this feature of cognition by organizing information into story form, in order to aid people’s interpretation of a message and increase the likelihood they will remember it and pass it on to others. A well-framed narrative organizes the answers to the key questions identified above in a way that satisfies people’s expectations about what good stories sound like. It uses specific frame elements to accomplish specific communications tasks: engagement, building understanding, gaining support for solutions and collective action. An effective arc for a story about social change looks like this:



The order in which these answers are delivered matters. For example, priming an audience at the opening of a message to consider the big picture—what’s at stake for all of us in solving an issue—engages people by tapping into their own sense of civic-minded duty and fostering their active listening. Once motivated to engage with the message, people are more likely to process and remember its central content—the “how it works” explanation—of the problem and the proposed solutions designed to resolve it.

RECOMMENDATION 2:

Choose your tone wisely and make your vision clear.

Framing means making a set of strategic choices about what information is presented and how it is presented, including what to highlight and what to leave unsaid. Those “choice points” are considered “frame elements,” and tone—the style, philosophical outlook, or mood of a message—is one of them.

Advocates tend to rely on a crisis-oriented tone to capture people’s attention and compel action but, perhaps counterintuitively, that strategy can backfire, causing audiences to feel overwhelmed and thus to disengage. Across a myriad of social issues, FrameWorks has consistently found that crisis framing simply does not have the intended effect. Though it may create a sense of urgency, it tends to feed people’s deep fatalism about the lack of feasible solutions to longstanding social problems. Messages that emphasize high urgency but low efficacy do not move people to take action or to believe that a solution can be effective.

To sustain audience engagement over the long term, establish an explanatory and reasonable tone instead. When people are presented with a reasonable discussion about a problem, its causes, and potential solutions, they are much better at listening to and using new information. An explanatory tone activates people’s instinct to problem-solve and redirects them away from considering the agenda of the messenger or rationalizing why a problem exists. And given the issues at hand—poverty, immigration, early child development—the rationalizing prompted by crisis-oriented cues may lead audiences to blame families for the urgent situation under discussion.

In addition to tone, it is also important to make your vision clear. For issue-based communicators, naming the problem is the easy part. For the public to meaningfully engage with an issue and support the solutions put forth, however, solutions need to be laid out (explained further in this brief) and the expected positive outcomes from those solutions should be stated. Show what that future world could look like.

RECOMMENDATION 3:

Engage people by establishing why the issue matters (to them).

Values—widely shared ideals about what is right, important and desirable—can be a powerful framing tool, because they help audiences to form an association between your issue and a deeply felt personal belief, such as the importance of love or our moral obligation to protect children. This is especially important for audiences who may not otherwise see why an issue such as child wellbeing, orphanages, or family reunification deserves their attention. A strong values appeal in a message helps to foster people’s sense of civic responsibility by pointing to the common good at stake in addressing a problem.

FrameWorks researchers have found that which values work best to frame an issue varies widely from issue to issue and from culture to culture. For example, appealing to our shared prosperity or a return on investment builds American and Australian audiences' support for child-related policies and programs, but in the United Kingdom and Kenya, members of the public respond best to appeals to social responsibility.

Across issues and audiences, however, the most effective values appeals share a few key attributes. Keep these points in mind when appealing to values in your own communications:

- Values guide people's interpretation of information, so they work best at the start of a message.
- The most effective values appeals invite people to think about the issue from the perspective of the common good.
- Values foster people's sense of optimism about our collective ability to solve tough problems—think “can-do,” not “crisis!”.
- Repetition of a values appeal throughout a message strengthens active listening by reminding people of what's at stake.

RECOMMENDATION 4:

Use explanatory chains to show what causes what, with what consequences.

GHR and Alia are working to address complex issues—foster systems and child development and wellbeing—that are unfamiliar to most members of the public. As we noted in our audit of the two organizations' communications materials, in the absence of a deep and nuanced understanding of an issue, non-experts fill in the gaps in their knowledge about an issue with whatever associations, beliefs, and perceptions are top of mind. A good rule of thumb is to assume nothing about the depth of your public audiences' knowledge and to take care to create logic chains in communications that keep people's interpretation from wandering off course.

This is a common communications challenge: helping non-experts understand the largely invisible cause-and-effect processes that lead to the visible symptoms of a social problem.

Explanatory chains are brief, powerful, reasonable explanations of cause and effect that leave nothing to chance. They show the connections among the many complex factors contributing to a given problem. Explanatory chains work especially well when people are struggling to see how existing conditions might be changed by collective or systems-level action.

A strong chain typically has at least three links:

- Initiating factor: what is the original cause of the problem or issue?
- Mediating factors: what is set in motion by the initiating factor?
- Final consequence: what are the effects?

Consider this excerpt from Alia’s core messaging:

Decades of research show that living in institutions is harmful to children. Many children who grow up in orphanages, even those that are well resourced, experience attachment disorders and developmental delays and lack the life skills and stability that come from growing up in a family environment. These problems can continue into adulthood. Young adults leaving institutional care are more likely to become victims of trafficking, exploitation, unemployment and homelessness and are at increased risk of suicide.

While this series of ideas will make sense to a well-versed advocate, a non-expert may struggle to understand the causes that lead to each effect described. We can imagine how a member of the public might fill in the gaps:

You say: Many children who grow up in orphanages . . . experience attachment disorders, developmental delays and lack the life skills and stability that come from growing up in a family environment.

They think: Those poor kids. No doubt they came from rough backgrounds to begin with. I bet a lot of them are predisposed to the same kinds of problems their parents had.

You say: Young adults leaving institutional care are more likely to become victims of trafficking, exploitation, unemployment and homelessness and are at increased risk of suicide.

They think: That’s terrible, but I guess life’s not fair. I remember reading a story about a kid who survived foster care and went on to do [insert impressive accomplishment]. I think some kids are just better able than others to overcome their circumstances.

Building a step-by-step explanation that helps readers see what factors lead to these outcomes will help them not only to understand the causal chain but to imagine alternatives—and see feasible opportunities for intervention. Here’s the same passage, rewritten as an explanatory chain:

Decades of research show that living in institutions is harmful to children. Interactions with nurturing caregivers and stable relationships with those caregivers are crucial for building the architecture of a child’s developing brain. When children lack these kinds of relationships and interactions, the foundations for brain development are undermined—and orphanages generally have few opportunities for children to develop these critical caregiving relationships. This is one reason why many children who grow up in orphanages, even those that are well resourced, experience attachment disorders, developmental delays, and can find it difficult to build life skills. When children do not receive the support they need early on, these problems can continue into adulthood. Young adults leaving institutional care are more likely to become victims of trafficking, exploitation, unemployment and homelessness and are at risk of suicide.

In this revised version, the sentences link to each other—like dominoes—through deeper explanation and “linking words,” closing gaps that might otherwise allow an audience to fall into less productive avenues of interpretation. Also note that in phrases like “when children lack these kinds” and “this is one reason why,” the words “when,” “this,” and “these” refer back to ideas in the preceding sentence, a writing strategy that makes the links between ideas more apparent and easier to follow.

RECOMMENDATION 5:

Fill in knowledge gaps with the “brain story” of childhood development.

The “Core Story of Early Childhood Development,” a suite of framing tools developed by FrameWorks in partnership with the Harvard University Center for the Developing Child over the past two decades, is an explanatory story that has been empirically shown to improve the public’s understanding of children’s development and build its support for evidence-based policy solutions. The Core Story explains how brains are built over time through serve-and-return interactions between children and caregivers, emphasizing the importance of supportive, nurturing, deep relationships between children and the people who care for them.

One way this “brain story” is told is through explanatory metaphors—simple, concrete, and memorable comparisons that quickly and effectively explain an abstract or complex topic (like child development). Three of these metaphors are especially well suited to the communications needs of GHR and Alia: *Brain Architecture*, *Serve and Return*, and *Toxic Stress*.

- ***Brain Architecture*** is a metaphor designed to emphasize that brains do not just develop by themselves passively, but are instead built, and certain periods of development are especially important. It explains that the basic architecture of the brain is constructed through an ongoing process that begins before birth and continues into adulthood.

- ***Serve and Return*** positions responsive interactions between children and adults as foundational for this brain-building “construction project.” The metaphor helps advocates to explain how the building blocks of brain architecture are back-and-forth interactions (much like a game of tennis, ping pong, or volleyball) between children and responsive adults, and that healthy development occurs when young children “serve” through babbling, gestures, or words, and adults “return” by getting in sync with the child.
- ***Toxic Stress*** explains the effects of adverse experiences on childhood development. The metaphor helps people to understand that chronic, severe stressors can cause a response that is toxic to the developing brain and that has long-term effects on health and wellness. It also emphasizes the tremendous importance of supportive relationships as a buffer against these toxic stress responses.

Telling a “brain story” is critical for helping people see the lifelong implications of childhood experiences, especially relationships. By translating the neuroscience of key aspects of childhood development, advocates can redirect people’s thinking away from unproductive assumptions (e.g., that genes are set in stone or that development is a passive process) and towards a deeper understanding of the role that systemic and structural factors play.

For example, consider the following assertion of the importance of stable, nurturing relationships with caregivers:

Decades of research show that living in institutions is harmful to children. Many children who grow up in orphanages, even those that are well resourced, experience attachment disorders, developmental delays, and lack the life skills and stability that come from growing up in a family environment. These problems can continue into adulthood. Young adults leaving institutional care are even more likely to become victims of trafficking, exploitation, unemployment, and homelessness and are at increased risk of suicide.

This paragraph highlights many of the *effects* of the problem, but does not explain *how* child development happens, and thereby misses an opportunity to explain how it is *disrupted*. When people do not fully understand why a problem is a problem, it becomes much more difficult to build support for the sorts of solutions that would actually solve the problem.

This additional, crucial information can be added by using the metaphors of *Brain Architecture* and *Serve and Return*:

Decades of research show that living in institutions is harmful to children. One reason is that living in institutions limits opportunities for what scientists call “serve-and-return interactions”—the back and forth interactions between a child and nurturing caregivers that are the building blocks of a child’s developing brain. Their absence undermines the foundation of future brain development. Orphanages simply cannot provide the same kinds of opportunities for children to develop these critical caregiving relationships as families do. As a result, many children who grow up in orphanages, even well-resourced ones, experience attachment disorders, developmental delays, and difficulty building life skills. When children do not receive the support they need early on to build a strong foundation for brain development, these problems can continue into adulthood. Young adults leaving institutional care are more likely to become victims of trafficking, exploitation, unemployment, and homelessness and are at risk of suicide.

Toxic Stress can be used to assert the importance of family or community care by explaining what happens when children are separated from the people they love. The following paragraph makes the case for family or community care by explaining the negative impact of orphanages on children’s development:

Private philanthropic support for vulnerable orphaned children often has a strong focus on the funding of orphanages. Despite powerful evidence of the negative impact of orphanage care, private donors continue to provide large amounts of funding to orphanages through donations, volunteer tourism, mission trips, and other forms of fundraising—adding to the pull factors drawing more vulnerable children into institutional care and away from family or community care.

By adding in an explanation of *why* orphanages have a negative effect on children and *why* family or community care is better, the paragraph can more effectively make the case for a shift in philanthropic priorities:

Private philanthropic support for orphaned children is motivated by a wish to see all children grow up to be happy and healthy, but this support focuses heavily on funding orphanages. We know that separation from loving caregivers can cause stress that is toxic to a child’s developing brain, but despite powerful evidence of the negative impact of orphanage care, private donors continue to support orphanages through donations, volunteer tourism, mission trips, and other forms of fundraising. Children need strong relationships with loving caregivers to build a strong foundation for brain development. Changing current funding structures is one key step to ensuring children maintain these supportive relationships and avoid the toxic stress of institutional care.

The revised passage uses *Toxic Stress* to explain why the problem and current solution (philanthropic funding of orphanages) are mismatched. Communicators should note, too, that the appeal to “vulnerable” children has been omitted in this reframe. Explanation of the science of brain development works much better than appeals to audience’s sympathy to generate support for policy-based change.

RECOMMENDATION 6:

Remember to give solutions a starring role.

As discussed above, communications that adopt a reasonable and explanatory tone (rather than crisis cues or an alarming or combative tone) create space for audiences to engage with the content in a more productive way. When audiences are in “reasonable mode” themselves, they can consider new information and begin to problem-solve as well.

Because members of the public often lack a deep understanding of the mechanisms or processes that make an issue “work” the way it does, they are typically hard-pressed to identify what solutions best match the problem. Too often, however, advocacy communications focus on describing the problem in great detail and spend scant time explaining how the problem can be fixed. It is common communications practice to name the problem up front and reinforce its severity throughout the message. Solutions tend to be a footnote.

The social change landscape is vast and there are many issues vying for public attention. Compassion fatigue can easily set in. Couple that with the public’s strong sense of fatalism that little can be done about the social issues we are facing nationally and globally, and the public may opt for doing nothing at all.

To build public will for social change, the public not only needs to be made aware of an issue, but also needs to be convinced that change is possible. Solutions do that. FrameWorks’ research has found that it is much more effective to outline the solution(s) early on in communications real estate and then ease into explaining the problem. Frontloading your communications with solutions leads the public to solutions-based thinking. Making solutions clear and visible to readers or audiences also gives them an indication to where they fit into social change.

When incorporating solutions into your messages, remember that they should be:

- *Concrete*: Your audience should be able to picture the solutions you describe.
- *Feasible*: Offer solutions that seem attainable or foster people’s sense of efficacy.
- *Collective*: Audiences should see how effective solutions implicate all of us.

RECOMMENDATION 7:

Use data strategically.

Numbers, like all information are understood using the cultural models in the swamp of public understanding. This means that data must be selected (and rejected) strategically, thinking carefully about how the public is likely to interpret the communication. Numbers don't speak for themselves, and without careful framing data can be easily misinterpreted by non-experts.

Consider the following data point:

Globally, 80% of children in orphanages have a living parent.

This fact is used to convey the scope of a problem. However, because we know that the public tends to attribute responsibility for what happens to children solely to parents, we can use that information to determine how this data is likely to be received, namely, as a confirmation that many parents are not doing their job because they are bad parents, rather than as an indication of the existence of wide-scale social determinants that contribute to this big number. This likely misinterpretation makes it more difficult to advocate for the kind of system-level solutions that can address the problem and reduce the number.

To interpret this statistic the way experts do, the public needs more information. Additional context—particularly of the attribution of responsibility—is crucial if the data point is to contribute to a deeper understanding of orphanages, rather than reinforce a misperception. Presenting that context *before* the data point helps ensure that the data is viewed through the productive lens of that deeper understanding.

A reframed version of the statistic presented above might look like this:

Poverty can leave many families without resources they need, like healthcare and education for their children. Put in this situation, they may send their children to live in orphanages so as to access these resources. That's why, globally, 80% of children in orphanages have a living parent.

The first data point leaves it to the reader to attribute responsibility for the problem, which is likely to end with members of the public blaming family members for not taking care of their children, thus limiting the kinds of solutions they are likely to support—especially solutions aimed at more systemic problems. The reframed data backs up to give a systemic explanation for the problem, making it less likely that unproductive models of understanding children and families will be cued, and making it more likely that the public will support systemic solutions.

RECOMMENDATION 8:

Choose visuals that support text-based framing choices.

The images in a communication provide quick contextual cues that can either reinforce or undermine the text-based content. Because people’s eyes are naturally drawn to pictures or graphics in a message, these provide important opportunities to support a well-framed message. For example, if the text of a message is intended to help people think more productively about the role of the community in raising healthy, thriving children—say, the benefits of a program to reduce parents’ social isolation or the importance of community-based nutritional and early learning supports—then a close-up image of a single child or a parent and child would not only fail to support this message but might even undermine the main point by reminding people of their dominant assumptions about children’s issues: “This is about individual parents and their kids, so it has nothing to do with me,” or “Every child is unique. How they turn out is anyone’s guess.”

Given GHR’s and Alia’s emphasis on systems and the numbers of children, families, and communities affected by systems that don’t serve their needs or best interests, we recommend choosing visuals for your communications that support the big-picture goal of healthy, thriving communities of people and systems that work for them:

- groups rather than individuals
- contextual settings rather than close-ups
- diverse ages and populations rather than only children and parents
- people of all backgrounds occupying a variety of roles (e.g., images should represent professionals in the field who are of the same race, ethnicity, gender, etc., as the family members represented).

Conclusion

Strategic framing—with the right explanatory tools, solutions, and well-chosen data—helps a field tell an effective story about its work. By incorporating these research-based framing strategies into their communications, GHR Foundation and Alia can displace unproductive stories about children in the foster system, their families, and the system itself in favor of a new narrative that builds public understanding of how best to help children and families thrive, and why it is our shared responsibility to do so. The next step for GHR Foundation and Alia is to disseminate these recommendations across communications materials and channels in order to amplify the reach and effectiveness of this reframed story.

About FrameWorks Institute

The FrameWorks Institute is a nonprofit think tank that advances the mission-driven sector's capacity to frame the public discourse about social and scientific issues. The organization's signature approach, Strategic Frame Analysis®, offers empirical guidance on what to say, how to say it, and what to leave unsaid.

FrameWorks designs, conducts, and publishes multi-method, multi-disciplinary framing research to prepare experts and advocates to expand their constituencies, to build public will, and to further public understanding. Over the past two decades, FrameWorks' social science research has grown to a database of more than 400,000 participants and 400 research studies. The organization has investigated the communications aspects of more than 40 social issues, with significant bodies of work on early childhood development, aging, climate and ocean disruption, education, and numerous public health issues. For more information about our research methods and about specific research findings, visit FrameWorks online at www.frameworksinstitute.org.