WHITE PAPER #2

Reframing Child Abuse & Neglect for Increased Understanding & Engagement:

Research Findings & Their Implications

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B*y 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."[1]*

Introduction

This is the second in a series of white papers describing an initiative undertaken by Prevent Child Abuse America (PCA America) to reframe the issue of child maltreatment for increased understanding and engagement. The first white paper, also funded by the FRIENDS program, described how PCA America came to identify the need for strategic reframing of the issue and summarized the working hypotheses developed by the organization to help guide the project. These hypotheses were based on PCA America's own experiences and those of our state chapters and other advocates working over the past three decades to advance a social movement to prevent child maltreatment.

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[1] Bales, Susan Nall. "Making the Public Case for Child Abuse and Neglect Prevention: A FrameWorks Message Memo." (Washington, D.C.: The FrameWorks Institute, April 2004), pg. 2.

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The first white paper also described the fundamentals of strategic frame analysis as developed and practiced by the FrameWorks Institute under the leadership of Susan Nall Bales. Additional information about the theory and practice of strategic issue framing can be found on the organization's website, *www.frameworksinstitute.org.*

The quotation appearing at the top of this white paper captures quite succinctly the nature of the challenge confronting those seeking to advance a social movement to prevent the maltreatment of children. Based on the research conducted by the FrameWorks Institute and its partners, Public Knowledge and Cultural Logic, it is clear that the strategies used with varying degrees of success by advocates thus far in putting the issue of child maltreatment "on the map" may no longer be either appropriate or effective in building public will to prevent the problem or in motivating changes in behavior either individually or collectively.

As with any research exercise, while many important questions were answered, many new questions and areas for further study were identified. Nevertheless, it is possible at this point to make preliminary recommendations on how the issue of child abuse and neglect prevention can be more effectively advanced.

"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."[2]

In a very general sense these recommendations were summarized by Axel Aubrun and Joseph Grady of Cultural Logic when they wrote the following: "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."[3]

In developing and communicating these new messages, care must be taken to address two major "cognitive obstacles" identified during the research phase. The first of these obstacles is that the general public fundamentally misunderstands child development, and the second is an inability to comprehend a role for the community (either formally or informally) in supporting families and promoting child health and development.[4] Both of these obstacles will be discussed in detail below.

… doing "more of the same" will not help …

One thing is clear above all else: doing "more of the same" will not help. Indeed, continued reliance on the strategies and messaging of the past (and in too many cases, the present) will only serve to further undermine efforts to advance a social movement to prevent child maltreatment, undoubtedly minimizing the issue as an

[2] Bostrom, Meg. "Discipline and Development: A Meta-Analysis of Public Perceptions of Parents, Parenting, Child Development and Child Abuse," (Severna Park, MD: Public Knowledge, LLC, August 2003), pg. 4.
[3] Aubrun, Axel, Ph.D. and Joseph Grady, Ph.D., "Two Cognitive Obstacles …", pg. 5.
[4] Ibid.

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important social problem, and perhaps relegating issue advocates even further to the periphery of public policy.

Summary of Research Findings

Research Process

To lead the research phase of the reframing initiative, PCA America contracted with the FrameWorks Institute utilizing funding from the Doris Duke Charitable Foundation. As part of this effort, the FrameWorks Institute and its partners at Public Knowledge and Cultural Logic conducted an exhaustive review of more than 100 existing public awareness, understanding and opinion research documents. The research team also conducted in-depth one-on-one interviews and focus groups, as well as reviews of news coverage of the issue and marketing materials developed by advocates over the years in advancing the issue. At the conclusion of the research phase, the team developed a "message memo" that reported on the findings, discussed their implications, and made recommendations for moving ahead.

The results of this research are described in detail in a series of reports available through Prevent Child Abuse America and the FrameWorks Institute (see note at the conclusion of this white paper). Readers wishing to review these documents in their entirety are urged to do so. This white paper will summarize the key findings of the research phase and review the implications and recommendations of the FrameWorks Institute and its research partners. The paper will also include observations from this work drawn by PCA America, which may not necessarily reflect the views of the project's research partners.

"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."[56]

Situation Analysis

Research conducted as part of the reframing initiative confirmed the working hypothesis that strategies and messaging employed by advocates in creating awareness of the issue had been remarkably effective. Americans are remarkably and broadly informed on the issue of child maltreatment, although their sense of its scope in terms of the number of affected children is exaggerated. They also understand that child maltreatment is a problem passed from one generation of parents to another, even though they misunderstand why that phenomenon occurs.

The research also confirms the lingering impact of the political realities that necessitated the narrow definitions applied to child abuse and neglect in creating federal and state laws to address the problem in the 1960s and 1970s. The public sees child abuse and neglect as consisting of the extreme behaviors that tend to fall within these narrow definitions, with a primary focus on those behaviors that result in observable and serious physical or emotional harm to the child. Attempts

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[5] Aubrun, Axel, Ph.D. and Joseph Grady, Ph.D., "Two Cognitive Obstacles …", pg. 1.
[6] Bostrom, Meg. "Discipline and Development ...", pg. 4.

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over the years by advocates to broaden the public's understanding of child maltreatment beyond these narrow constructs have been unsuccessful.

As concluded by Axel Aubrun and Joseph Grady of Cultural Logic:

"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 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."[7]

Media Frames

Cultural Logic conducted a review of media coverage of the issue of child maltreatment, based in part on news stories collected by PCA America over the years. The review by Cultural Logic's Axel Aubrun and Joseph Grady found three general patterns in news coverage:

1. Sensationalism: According to Aubrun and Grady, the media relies on the sensational details of events and their related images at the expense of any reasonable discussion of the risk factors that contributed to the incident or the solutions to the problem. "It follows," they observe, "that the … 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."[8]

2. Simple Causal Stories: While the use of simple causal stories can help to explain complex events, they are often damaging in the context of child maltreatment news coverage because they "don't teach anything new, but rather … reinforce unproductive associations with the topic – e.g., a parent gets violent with his child because the parent is a sick, drunken monster."[9]

… this bias plays out in ways that demonize individuals and prevent learning …

3. Episodic vs. Thematic Information: The ramifications of the news media's preference for episodic as opposed to thematic discussion of social issues has been widely documented in recent decades, resulting in a diminished capacity to understand an issue within its larger context or to see beyond the individual responsibility at the heart of an episodic story. In the context of coverage of child maltreatment, "this bias plays out in ways that demonize individuals and prevent learning about causes and solutions."[10]

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[7] Aubrun, Axel, Ph.D. and Joseph Grady, Ph.D. "Two Cognitive Obstacles to Preventing Child Abuse: The 'Other-Mind" Mistake and the 'Family Bubble.' (Washington, D.C.: Cultural Logic LLC, August 4, 2003), pg. 1.

[8] Aubrun, Axel, Ph.D. and Joseph Grady, Ph.D., "How the News Frames Child Maltreatment: Unintended Consequences." (Washington, D.C., Cultural Logic LLC, August 22, 2003), pg. 2.

[9] Aubrun, Axel, Ph.D. and Joseph Grady, Ph.D., "How the News Frames Child Maltreatment:", pg. 3.

[10] Aubrun, Axel, Ph.D. and Joseph Grady, Ph.D., "How the News Frames Child Maltreatment:", pg. 3.

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In reporting on the issue of child maltreatment, Aubrun and Grady confirm PCA America's working hypotheses regarding the preference for stories that reinforce the criminal nature of the issue, the perceived failure of child protective services, and the "stranger danger" messaging associated with sexual predation. In addition, they observe that media coverage also tends to focus on the sometimes confusing divide between discipline and abuse, and the "sanctity of the family" and its related tension "between protecting children and granting families an appropriate degree of autonomy."[11]

Taken together, the media's tendency to frame the issue in these ways reinforces the perception that both parents and government are failing, and further weakens the sense of community responsibility (i.e., the Village Mentality) that must be in place to allow for creation of public will to address child maltreatment.

Key Challenges

The two most critical challenges to be addressed by advocates seeking to advance a social movement to prevent child maltreatment are a fundamental misunderstanding of how children develop and the inability to imagine a positive role for the community in supporting parents and assuring the healthy development of children.

Fundamental Misunderstanding of How Children Develop
When asked to describe the process of child development, the general public tends to think in very abstract terms, often resorting to folk wisdom and overly simplified notions, such as "all you need is love" and "the apple doesn't fall far from the tree." The concept of a child's developing brain as anything more than a "sponge" is difficult for people to grasp or explain, and there is little understanding of the science of the developing brain and its impact on the overall development of the child.

This misunderstanding poses a number of difficulties in advancing children's issues broadly, including maltreatment prevention. For instance, the misperception that children are capable of intentionality at very young ages increases the likelihood that age-inappropriate discipline strategies will be employed. Also, the reason for why abused children are more likely to become abusive parents is generally explained as the result of "having learned bad habits" instead of as a consequence of developmental damage caused by the abuse or neglect.

"Family Bubble"
The second fundamental challenge to be addressed by those seeking to build a social movement to prevent child maltreatment is the public's uncertainty with

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[11] Aubrun, Axel, Ph.D. and Joseph Grady, Ph.D., "How the News Frames Child Maltreatment:", pg. 13.

how the larger community (however it is defined) can support child health and development without threatening the sanctity, privacy and primacy of the family unit.

Aubrun and Grady describe the challenge in the following way:

"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."[12]

This "family bubble" has a number of consequences for both parents and the general public at large. For parents, the concept results in the unrealistic expectation that parenting skill should come naturally and that the seeking – or accepting – of assistance implies some form of failure on the part of the parent. And for the extended community, the role of the community is largely seen as a safety net for rescuing children from parents who fail.

Over the years, the conflicts resulting from the "family bubble" phenomenon have been exacerbated by the ambivalent "calls to action" frequently employed by child maltreatment prevention marketers, as described by Aubrun and Grady:

"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."[13]

As a result, the unwillingness of parents to seek or accept help, coupled with the general public's inability to imagine a supportive role that might actually be valued and effective, results in continued reinforcement of the pervading sense of helplessness surrounding the issue.

Implications

The analysis conducted by the FrameWorks Institute and its partners suggests that the primary messaging employed by advocates in attempting to engage the public – namely, encouraging direct involvement as a responsibility of all adults – is counterproductive. "Cognitive analysis suggests that the message implicitly appeals to the public in our 'responsible villager' role – our sense that we belong,

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[12] Aubrun, Axel, Ph.D. and Joseph Grady, Ph.D., "Two Cognitive Obstacles …", pg. 13.
[13] Ibid., pg 20.

or should belong, to a close-knit community of people who are aware of each other and work towards common goals," write Aubrun and Grady. "But in current American society, this role is hamstrung by the competing value of an inviolable 'family bubble.'"[14]

Further, since the general public cannot conceive of a way in which communities can make a positive difference in supporting families and promoting child health and development, entreaties for greater individual or community involvement fall on deaf ears. FrameWorks researchers describe the resulting impasse as a form of "cognitive paralysis."[15]

To address these obstacles, our consultants suggest that advocates must: 1) find better ways to communicate with the general public about child development in an objective manner that focuses on "what works" instead of "what's right"; and 2) articulate a vision for what community support of parents and families looks like without triggering the default to the "family bubble."[16]

Recommendations

In responding to the central challenges identified by the reframing research, it is clear that the public must be given a clear and coherent picture of how communities can support child health and development, but it is equally clear that great care must be taken to promote community involvement appropriately in supporting parents in their primary role without implying or actualizing any minimization of the parent.

Not, "it takes a village to raise a child." But, "it takes a village to help a parent raise a child."

Child development advocates are already starting to employ new messaging that reflects the research conducted both as part of, and peripheral to, the reframing exercise commissioned by PCA America. The degree to which child maltreatment prevention advocates take on any portion of this broader agenda and/or employ the new messaging related to child development is, of course, a matter of choice.

Nonetheless, the research findings of this project are clear that continued reliance on the traditional ways of framing child abuse and neglect will not be effective at advancing the concept of prevention nor in building a social movement to accomplish that objective. The extent to which advocates at all levels can articulate a more clear notion of individual and community involvement in supporting families and promoting healthy development of children will ultimately

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[14] Ibid., pg. 15.
[15] Aubrun, Axel, Ph.D. and Joseph Grady, Ph.D., "Two Cognitive Obstacles …", pg. 16.
[16] Ibid., pg. 14.

determine the degree to which attempts to prevent child maltreatment find public acceptance, understanding and support.

"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."[17]

Looking Ahead

At this writing, Prevent Child Abuse America is continuing to take advantage of every opportunity to share the results of the strategic reframing exercise with child advocates across the country. Progress is being made in drafting new marketing, communications and fundraising messages and materials that respond to the challenges and recommendations arising from the research phase of the reframing project. Time will obviously be required to determine the degree to which these new messages and materials will be successful.

Additional research questions remain to be addressed and testing is required of strategies and messages that have been suggested as a result of the reframing initiative, particularly regarding the most effective ways in which to promote the concept of community responsibility for preventing child maltreatment. Another potential research project centers on testing various means by which advocates can effectively deliver these new messages through the news media.

As mentioned above, the research findings and their related implications discussed in this white paper are explored more fully in the original research documents prepared on PCA America's behalf by its reframing project partners, the FrameWorks Institute, Public Knowledge LLC and Cultural Logic LLC. Readers who wish to examine these reports in their entirety are urged to do so, and may access PDF versions of each report from *www.preventchildabuse.org* or *www.frameworksinstitute.org.*

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[17] Bostrom, Meg. "Developing Community Connections: Qualitative Research Regarding Reframing Policies," (Severna Park, MD: Public Knowledge, LLC, August 2003), pg. 2.