

Communicating Prevention Policies for Children

Focus Group Research – October 2005

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For the FrameWorks Institute

Introduction

The Connecticut Commission on Children is planning to launch a major communications effort to build public support for a preventive approach to children's issues, partnering with Connecticut Public Broadcasting and the Committee for Economic Development. As a result of such a campaign and its related efforts, these groups would expect to see, among other outcomes, a significant shift in state budget allocations, as politicians responded to clearly expressed public priorities. This research is a first step in helping the Commission and its partners to determine the most effective way to communicate a preventive approach.

This research finds that the *concept* of prevention is very compelling and can build public support for prevention policies. However, the *language* of prevention triggers problematic patterns of thinking that undermine support for prevention policies.

A Prevention Frame causes focus group participants to think of physical threats to children such as drugs and alcohol, while problems such as learning disabilities and mental health issues are not considered. With drugs and alcohol in mind, focus group participants assume that parents are both the cause and the solution to these kinds of problems. Poor parenting results in undisciplined children who participate in risky behavior, so more discipline from parents is the best solution, according to focus group participants. Their vision limited to a narrow family-child relationship, focus group participants can see no relevant role for government unless it is to intervene to protect a child when families are completely dysfunctional.

Focus group respondents' limited understanding of child development explains why they see discipline and education as the solutions for risky behavior. Some focus group respondents describe children as self-absorbed beings that need strict discipline to avert disaster. Following this line of thought, the quality of the parent-child relationship is the only criteria that matters in shaping a successful child.

In short, the Prevention Frame is unlikely to lead to increased public support for prevention policies, because the Prevention Frame causes the public to: consider a limited

number of safety issues; assume parents are the only actor that can address these issues; and see government intervention as largely unnecessary and inappropriate.

In contrast, a Child Development Frame builds support for prevention policies, because it provides the conceptual framework that allows people to understand what prevention means and how it works. With an accurate understanding of child development, people can begin to understand the importance of prevention and the role for collective action in helping children develop well. Importantly, the Child Development Frame allows people to see a broader range of risks to a child's development than just the immediate physical threats highlighted in the Prevention Frame.

The Child Development Frame had a stunning influence on focus group participants. The Prevention Frame created a heated conversation about neglectful parents, spoiled children and intrusive government. Despite the fact that the Child Development Frame followed, it nevertheless was able to quickly turn the conversation around to a rational discussion of children's needs and the role for policy in addressing these needs.

A Child Development Frame causes focus group participants to have a better understanding of Brain Architecture and the positive and negative influences on developing brain architecture. Thinking developmentally, participants gain a more nuanced view of why children behave as they do, how they interact with their environments, and what they need to succeed. Participants begin to discuss social and emotional development, rather than just behavior or academic achievement. The need for quality early intervention then becomes obvious to participants, and the cost-effectiveness of early intervention underscores the intelligence of a preventive approach. They assume that government has a role, though focus group participants continue to worry about government competence and cost.

In short, the Child Development Frame influences public understanding of children and support for prevention policies because it: places social and emotional development at the same level of priority as academic achievement; explains why relationships matter to development; includes parents while expanding definitions of important relationships; describes why interventions are centrally important; makes the cost-effectiveness of prevention visible; and suggests a role for government.

The Child Development Frame is far more effective than the Prevention Frame in building public support for prevention policies for children because it describes *what prevention is and why it matters*. Ironically, the Prevention Frame cannot deliver on prevention policies, leading us once again to underscore the importance of differentiating between policies and frames.

Method

This phase of qualitative research was designed to determine public perceptions about the concept of prevention and prevention policies for young children. To determine these perceptions, two focus groups were conducted on October 17, 2005 in Wethersfield, CT.

Both focus groups were conducted with those who meet an engaged citizen profile (i.e., people who say they are registered to vote, read the newspaper frequently, are involved in community organizations, and have recently contacted a public official or spoken out on behalf of an issue.) The focus groups were divided by party identification, with one group consisting of Democrats and Independents, and one of Republicans and Independents. Otherwise, focus group participants represented a mix of age, education level, occupation, and so on. The groups were recruited by a professional focus group facility, using standard procedures.

Specifically, the research was designed to explore answers to the following questions:

- When people think about prevention for children, what associations come to mind?
- What comes to mind when the public considers prevention policies?
- How does a prevention frame and a child development frame compare in effectively building support for policies?
- Which messengers are effective in communicating these concepts?

To explore answers to these questions, focus group participants were encouraged to have an open-ended dialogue about prevention and consider specific goals for prevention policies. Then, participants reviewed a fictional radio talk show transcript that communicated early child issues with a Child Development Frame. We wish to thank the National Scientific Council on the Developing Child for the development information that informs this part of the guide.

All groups were conducted by Public Knowledge LLC in collaboration with the FrameWorks Institute. They were commissioned by Connecticut Public Broadcasting and the Connecticut Commission on Children. The focus group guide is included in the Appendix.

Findings

The Prevention Frame

The *concept* of prevention is powerful in building public support for early child policies. However, the *language* of prevention triggers problematic patterns of thinking consistently found in our research.

The language of prevention causes focus group participants to:

- highlight concerns about safety
- see parents as solely responsible for children’s wellbeing
- assume that lack of discipline is the central problem
- dismiss the role of government, and
- prioritize more information as a prevention-based solution.

When focus group participants consider the word “prevention,” they tend to think of circumstances that can lead to physical harm for children. “The way prevention has been drilled into everyone’s head at least in the past 10 years, 12 years that my kids have been alive, I keep thinking drug or alcohol prevention,” stated a Democratic man. “When you have children it’s the drugs, the alcohol, gangs, like she said. Trying to keep them away from the bad elements,” remarked a Democratic woman. With prevention in mind, a bad outcome for a child would be, according to a Democratic woman, “Selling drugs, running the streets, running with the gang.” Less dramatic threats to a child’s wellbeing, such as learning disabilities or mental health issues, are far less apparent when a safety mindset has been cued.

Once the Prevention Frames causes them to think about drugs, alcohol and other immediate threats to a child’s wellbeing, most focus group participants automatically place responsibility solely on a parent to protect his or her child from harm. “I think it’s all at home. I think it’s from the parents. You start your kids out right when they’re young, they are going to stay good,” warned a Democratic man. When in this mindset, many dismiss the role of “outsiders” in helping children. “People expect other people to do their jobs for them. You send your kid off to school and you think, ‘I don’t have to watch my kid. I don’t have to teach them anything because that is what school is for,’” a Democratic man insisted.

If parents are responsible for protecting children, then the solution must be more discipline and more education, according to focus group respondents. If children are increasingly at risk for drugs, alcohol and the other threats that come to mind when

What comes to mind when you think about the word “prevention”?

Drugs.
Gangs.
Disease.
Stopping anything bad from happening.
Birth control.
Drinking. Drinking and driving, under age.
Fear.
Caution.
Sex education.
Communication.
Safety.
Awareness.

people think of the word “prevention,” then many focus group participants assume that parents are not disciplining children strongly enough. “It’s the old-fashioned way of thinking but that’s the right way. In the old days you used this here [sound of hand slapping]. Now you’ve got to use this here: ‘time out; put you in your room; sit down in the corner,’” a Democratic man explained. A Republican man insisted, “Each generation that goes by, it seems like the children get more out of hand and more out of hand. They don’t have a grasp on things and they are more spoiled.”

Similarly, since focus group participants are focused on the parent-child relationship as the solution to risky behavior, they fasten on education as the best deterrent. Information becomes a prevention-based solution. “Working with children, making them aware of some of the things that are out there. A big thing that we work on in Girl Scouts is stranger danger. You need to make them aware and communicate with them that in order to prevent anything from happening to you and keep you safe, you need to be aware of what to do in these situations,” a Republican woman asserted. “You have to talk to your children and teach them, train them. That’s what you’re supposed to do. That is part of parenting, to point out the thing -- watch out for strangers, walk on the right side of the road, look both ways,” a Republican man explained.

Caught in the parent-child relationship, focus group participants have difficulty imagining any role for government. In fact, the role for government is frequently dismissed when people are thinking of child safety. “They try to legislate safety,” a Republican man sneered. “I have a three year old son and just going for a bike ride, you have to have your helmet. Even when I was a kid, you rode on the handlebars...you never wore a helmet. You never wore elbow pads or you know. So I mean everything is so protected, so afraid,” complained a Republican man. A Republican woman added, “From what I understand, a lot of schools don’t have anything that has peanuts. One kid might have some allergic reaction so no one can bring in peanut butter and jelly sandwiches because of one kid...That’s ridiculous.”

When forced to imagine prevention policies, focus group participants tend to think of broad concepts such as education, rules and a sense of caring. Those who can imagine more specific policies tend to think of approaches that give parents more influence, because they are unable to see influences outside the parent-child relationship. “I would like to see a prevention plan where they are a little bit stricter with kids who do become that typical bully, not only working with the child but bringing the parents and involving the parents,” a Republican woman remarked. “I lived in Rocky Hill for a while and they have an awful lot of activities there for the family. They have movies in the park where they just set up a big screen and show a movie. The family goes...They have all kinds of things set up for the family,” a Democratic man explained.

Focus group respondents’ understanding of child development explains why they see discipline and education as the solutions for risky behavior. Some focus group respondents describe children as self-absorbed beings that need strict discipline to avert disaster. Note the following explanations of child development:

What does a child come into this world as? They are a humongous ego that has only one goal – get satisfied. ‘I want to eat now; I want you to change me now. I want you to pick me up now. I want you to burp me. I want you to do this for me. Me, me, me, me.’ We are born guinea pigs. And if you keep feeding that, what do you think you’re going to get? Parents all the time are trying to reason with a three year old. How can you reason with a three year old? They don’t know squat.
(Republican man)

I have a three year old and that is my pride and joy. I would like to see her grow up and if she doesn’t respect my household or respect me and my husband, she won’t respect her teacher. She won’t respect the law. She will get herself into trouble and what I try to enforce at home is that. I say, “No, you can have your opinions. You can have your views. You can everything. You can do your things, but you have to know there are consequences of what you’re going to do. If you misbehave at home or you disrespect mom and dad, you’re going to get your time out. You’re going to get your punishment whether it is not watching TV or doing something else. You’ve got to understand.” (Democratic woman)

Following this line of thought, the quality of the parent-child relationship is the only ingredient that matters in creating a successful child. Therefore, the only appropriate role for government is to intervene when the parent-child relationship is broken. “What happens if you have parents that are [absent], where the children bring up themselves so to speak? There is no supervision. How do you get them on the right track?” asked a Democratic woman.

Similarly, in developing a prevention plan for Connecticut, focus group participants’ vision is limited by the Prevention Frame. They suggest more money for education, which is the one vehicle the public sees for collective action for children, and more resources for families to spend time with children, which reinforces their existing understanding of the exclusive importance of the parent-child relationship. Otherwise, the policies they consider respond to the dominant Prevention Frame image of a troubled kid in crisis that needs to be protected. “There should probably be more mentoring programs for these kids after school rather than running home and hanging out in the neighborhood,” suggested a Democratic man.

Focus group respondents were asked to consider a series of desirable statewide outcomes for children developed by the Connecticut Commission on Children.

Problematically, these prevention outcomes reinforce the central role for parents in raising children and create a

backlash against government involvement. “The government is not responsible for parenting somebody else’s kids,” argued a Republican woman. “It all goes back to the home. It all goes back to the parents. It all starts with the parents. You start with the

Prevention Outcomes for Children and Youth:

- Every child is born healthy
- Every child is ready for school
- Every child and youth succeeds in school
- Every child and youth is safe
- Every youth chooses healthy behaviors
- Every youth is ready for the workforce

parents, the parents get involved. Then you can let everybody else come in and get involved in it. But you've got to start at home," suggested a Democratic man.

The only role for government, according to focus group participants, is to get involved when parents are failing. "So if the children are not getting this at home, who is going to give it to them? ...I'm very involved with pediatric dentistry also. And to have a two year old come in because their teeth are entirely rotted out and we have to take them out, and there is the mother, as soon as we've done the surgery, handing the child a lollipop. It's like it is not dawning on them what is going on," explained a Republican man.

Even when focus group participants accept that there is an appropriate role for government, they worry about cost. "There isn't enough money in the world to get all these successfully," stated a Democratic man. Others suggest that programs already exist, but people do not use them. Note the following conversation among Republicans:

- Man: *There are programs for everything here that are already assisted by the state. Whether the people that need it use them. . .*
- Woman: *Right. So it's the education.*
- Man: *Or if they're abused or whatever the case may be, I think government has done what they can and the rest is up to the people to use it successfully.*

Similarly, as participants consider overall goals for state investments in prevention policy, they continue to struggle with the same assumptions that emerged in the earlier conversation: parents are responsible, programs are too expensive, and programs already exist. However, some recognize that communities would look substantially different if the state embraced prevention as a policy goal.

Goals for State Investment in Prevention:	
➤	To improve child outcomes in health, safety and learning through proven policies and programs in prevention;
➤	To invest in early cost effective programs that decrease the need for later costly crisis expenditures;
➤	To adopt a budget process that accounts to the public for the outcomes of state expenditures;
➤	To establish an on-going prevention budget as part of the state's budget planning.

Once the Prevention Frame has been established, it is difficult for focus group participants to consider an appropriate role for government even when that role is as simple as defining goals for state investments in children. "They've shifted the burden to the government to raise our children pretty much," a Republican man complained.

Some participants become frustrated and concerned by the prevention goals. "Way too broad. I have no idea what they're thinking," a Republican man worried. Others state that government has already addressed these needs. According to a Republican man, "They have programs and programs and programs that come out in all sorts of prevention."

Even though the stated goals emphasize cost efficiencies, it is very difficult for focus group participants to come to the realization that prevention costs less. "It sounds great

on paper but the state of Connecticut does not have this kind of money,” according to a Democratic woman. Even those who accept that a preventive approach would be cost-efficient continue to assume that government intervention is necessary only because parents are failing. “It may work, if things were done properly...keeping them healthy rather than letting them go and get sicker and sicker. That is what happens a lot. Parents aren't taking them to be seen by the doctor,” noted a Democratic man.

At the same time, several participants recognize that communities would look substantially different if the state really embraced goals for prevention. “Their test scores would go up,” suggested a Democratic man. “You'd have maybe more kids going to college,” a Democratic man stated. Another added, “Crime will go down.” “I think it also depends on the community,” a Republican man cautioned. “We have some very affluent communities such as the Greenwich area where their policies might not fit into Bridgeport.”

The Child Development Frame – Overview

Over several years of research, the Frameworks Institute and its research partners have developed a deep understanding of the public’s perceptions of children and families. Much of this work suggests that the Child Development Frame is both a necessary and an effective master frame to unite a number of policy objectives for children. In working with neuroscientists at the National Scientific Council for the Developing Child, the Frameworks Institute has refined years of research findings into a core story for child development that should result in increased public support for a range of prevention policies. The elements of the core story are detailed below.

The Core Child Development Story Developed by the FrameWorks Institute for the National Scientific Council for the Developing Child

- Brains are built over time.
- Experiences, interactions and relationships supply the conditions that guide how brain architecture gets built.
- Genes are turned on and off by interactions with a child’s environment and relationships.
- Physical and mental health, learning and behavior intertwine to define development.
- Skill begets skill, creating a sturdy or weak foundation for successive stages of development.
- Toxic stress damages the developing brain; stress alters susceptibility.
- Windows of opportunity open and close on schedule, making some development easy then, and harder later.
- Getting it right early is less costly, to society and to individuals.
- Child development is community development and economic development, as the solid kid becomes the building block of solid communities and economies.

The Child Development Frame builds support for prevention policies, because it provides the conceptual framework that allows people to understand what prevention means and why it matters.

Following the initial conversation about prevention, focus group participants were asked to review the transcript of a fictional radio news show that was written to reflect all of the

necessary elements of the core story for child development. This approach has a dramatic influence on public understanding of children and support for prevention policies because it:

- places social and emotional development at the same level of priority as academic achievement,
- explains why relationships matter to development,
- includes parents while expanding definitions of important relationships,
- describes why interventions are centrally important,
- makes the cost-effectiveness of prevention visible, and
- suggests a role for government.

The Child Development Frame causes focus group respondents to place more priority on social and emotional development, rather than just consider academic achievement. “That school community is just a glimpse of the future. It teaches you how to interact with your peers,” a Republican man explained. They recognize that if a child does not develop socially or emotionally, that child will be “under a tremendous amount of stress and he is going to become suicidal or he is going to break the glass, pick up the chair and put it through the window.” (Republican woman) Instead of blaming children for behaving badly, or blaming parents for lack of discipline, as they did in the first experiment, these same focus group respondents begin to express a more nuanced view of children’s actions that takes developmental issues into account. “A lot of them are acting out because they are frustrated. They can’t read and write,” acknowledged a Republican woman.

Rather than assume that a child acts based on innate strength of character (or lack thereof), the Child Development Frame explains why relationships matter to development. “You’ve got to spend time with the child reading, playing, the exposure to things around. You have to be the early teacher...like he said a foundation, if it is cracked the building isn’t going to stand for long,” a Democratic woman explained. “These kids are damaged because they have nobody. They are basically thrown out. ‘Okay, swim. If you can swim, fine. If you can’t, you are just going to tread water’ and most of these kids are treading water. It’s like he was saying, without connecting with someone, having a base, having that safety zone to come back to, they are floundering without a safety net,” a Democratic woman noted.

As noted in the earlier section, when people think of children’s needs, their vision is frequently limited to the parent-child relationship. The Child Development Frame makes other important relationships visible and explains why relationships matter to development. It includes parents, while expanding the definition of important relationships. “I come from a divorced family. I was 11 and my mom worked so hard to put food on our table, but yeah thank God that we got good pastors that helped my mom get through those hard, hard times which we were focused on the choir at church. We had activities that were after school. My mom tried so hard but she had that helping hand,” a Democratic woman confessed. “I grew up with grandparents, my father’s parents, at our house. Since I was born, they always lived in our house until they passed away. Close Italian family and grandma was making spaghetti on Sundays and my grandfather would tell me stories. A lot of times, even when my father was working overtime and long hours and

my mother was busy cleaning the house or what she was doing, my grandparents had an effect as far as raising me,” remembered a Republican man.

The Child Development Frame is far more effective than the Prevention Frame in helping people to understand the importance of prevention. “Everybody can be helped, if they do it early enough,” noted a Republican woman. “It is so much harder to go back and fix it...do it right the first time. Just like everything that you do in life...why should children be any different? You either do the job right, or you don't do it at all...So if you are going to have children, they are worth raising right,” a Republican woman argued.

After explaining the concept of prevention through a Child Development Frame, participants began to note that interventions and programs are centrally important to a child's success in life. “I've had kids in sixth grade that literally cannot read pre-kindergarten books...stop passing them to the next poor slob that gets them because finally they are going to become such a problem that they get thrown out of the schools, so get early intervention. Start at kindergarten. Don't wait until they are in the sixth, seventh and eighth grade, a Republican woman argued. “Starting everybody off on the right foot right from the beginning; you've got to start them from the beginning,” noted a Republican man.

Some even begin to include developmental criteria in their consideration of programs. “I think it's a great idea to have kids do all this sort of stuff because, like the woman said, it improves teamwork, social interaction,” stated a Republican man as he considered after-school programs. “My take away is I never really realized how important it is going to be to pick out your pre-school. It is not just a day care. It's an education...to determine if they do have areas where they need to develop a little bit more than others so that they can begin school in a positive perspective,” a Republican woman, who was the mother of an infant, explained.

When in a child development mindset, they begin to see prevention as practical and cost-effective. “It costs a lot less to just start from the beginning than it does to have knee-jerk reactions to things when something goes wrong,” noted a Democratic man. “Maybe prevention is the way to go instead of always trying to fix the problem. Let's not have the problem,” suggested a Republican woman.

Finally, as people become convinced of the importance of early intervention, the role for government becomes obvious, not intrusive. “The state and government needs to be there to support parents in situations where they may need extra help. They are not getting the development that they need or there are areas where they are lacking. But I really think that trying to set up programs that will determine problems in the early stages is the best way to go, and I think that their childhood will be much happier because of it,” explained a Republican woman.

By the end of the focus group, participants were motivated to act, asking why solutions were not readily available. “My question is if everybody in here knows what the problems are, why don't they address the fixing of the problems?” a Democratic man asked.

The Child Development Frame – Detailed Findings

As noted earlier, the Core Child Development Story incorporates a number of specific elements that are intended to work together to create a solid understanding of how children develop and what that means for public policy. The Core Story was tested in the focus groups by asking participants to review a transcript from a fictional radio talk show that featured four spokespeople. While several concepts crossed interviews, each spokesperson emphasized different elements of the core story. After each spokesperson, focus group participants discussed the main message and their reactions to the message.

The first segment featured a pediatrician as a spokesperson. The main message of this interview, according to focus group participants, is the importance of consistency and early intervention. Several rely upon the Brain Architecture Simplifying Model¹ to explain their new understanding of child development and to discuss consequences for policy.

In the first segment of the radio interview, the host interviews a pediatrician from the Boston area. The pediatrician's comments were designed to include the following elements of the Child Development Core Story:

1. The values of future, nurturance and prevention
2. Collective responsibility
3. The goal of childrearing as raising good, solid adults
4. The Brain Architecture Model²
5. Genes establish the basic architectural blueprint for the developing brain, but a child's ongoing interactions and relationships with the important people in his or her life supply the conditions that guide how that architecture gets built.
6. Both brain architecture and developing skills are built in a hierarchical "bottom-up" sequence.
7. Brain plasticity and the ability to change behavior decrease over time.

Pediatricians are trusted spokespeople on this topic because they have the academic training as well as the frontline experience to speak credibly on child development. "I trust my pediatrician with everything. Any questions that I have as far as whether he is healthy, even development. He, in my opinion, is and should be, studying and paying attention, going to the seminars and talking to other professionals in his field to get the information to me that is accurate and most up-to-date," explained a Republican woman. "He's probably seen it in his practice," stated a Democratic woman.

¹ Cultural Logic explains that "people typically rely on analogies in order to learn complex, abstract concepts. These concrete analogies are simplifying models - they help people organize information into a clear picture in their heads, including facts and ideas that they have been exposed to, but never been able to put together in a coherent way." For more on simplifying models, see the FrameWorks Institute e-zine, Issue No. 19, "Opening Up the Black Box: A Case Study in Simplifying Models" by Axel Aubrun and Joe Grady for Cultural Logic, with Susan Bales of the FrameWorks Institute, available at www.frameworksinstitute.org.

² For more information on the Brain Architecture Model, see "Moving the Public Beyond Familiar Understandings of Early Childhood Development," by Cultural Logic, November 2003, available at www.frameworksinstitute.org.

According to focus group participants, the pediatrician's main message is consistency and early intervention. Some participants noted that what most caught their attention was "Where it talks about a different day care provider every day or a story just here and there; lack of consistency." (Republican woman) The early intervention message is also apparent. "Everybody can be helped, if they do it early enough," a Republican woman summarized. "Starting everybody off on the right foot right from the beginning; you've got to start them from the beginning," added a Republican man.

The Brain Architecture Simplifying Model helps people to understand child development in a new way. Focus group participants are comfortable using the model and readily add building metaphors to their descriptions of development:

He is using that as a metaphor. That you build a foundation and you build on that, and if the foundation isn't solid, the whole building is not going to be solid. It's basic. We don't normally think of it that way because a lot of it is instinctive. (GOP man)

Connecting at an early level, like he said a foundation, if it is cracked the building isn't going to stand for long. (Democratic woman)

And with consistency and in doing it the right way with each level, you're building a stronger unit, a stronger building. (Republican man)

But it all ties in together because it all starts with the ground floor. (Republican man)

Importantly, focus group participants are able to use this new image of child development to discuss consequences for policy. They assume that government should have a role. "You have to offer them this, and if you don't have it at home, you have to have it somewhere else," a Democratic woman stated. Some discuss the consequences of this information for creating quality child care. "I'm thinking early nurturing and what have you, but I think that goes along with really good day care, child care because some of them have to go into child care very young. So therefore, you would have to have well-trained people to provide this, if the parents or the single parents have to go out and work," a Democratic woman explained. "When you're going into the child care, like you were saying, there are too many children allowed for one person to watch. They should not allow that," suggested a Democratic man.

While this discussion highlights a role for government and intervention programs, it does so in a way that reinforces the importance of good parenting. "I think he is just basically saying that it is very important even from day one that the child has relationships with people who are around him on a consistent basis. I think that is where the parenting needs to come in...Interact with them and talk to them," a Republican woman remarked. "Parents are important, as we said before. The right parenting makes a heck of a difference," a Democratic woman suggested.

The second segment featured a teacher as a spokesperson. While prevention continues as a main theme, after this segment focus group participants begin to

discuss social and emotional development in addition to academic success. This segment introduces mental health as an issue, in a discussion of extreme shyness. Participants have difficulty understanding some mental health issues as developmental problems that require early intervention.

In the second segment of the radio interview, the host interviews a teacher from Manchester, NH. The teacher's comments were written to include the following elements of the Child Development Core Story:

1. The values of prevention and future
2. Brain plasticity and the ability to change behavior decrease over time.
3. Cognitive, emotional, and social competence are inextricably intertwined, and learning, behavior, and physical and mental health are inter-related over the life course.
4. Getting it right early is less costly, to society and to individuals, than trying to fix it later.

While a teacher can speak with credibility on this issue, focus group respondents are somewhat cautious in their assessment of teachers as messengers. Some express concern that teachers can be biased or have a political agenda to influence education funding or policy, for example. "Well, she's balanced here, this one is. Some of them have agendas," stated a Republican man. "They are professionals; they are trained to see this stuff. Why would they intentionally steer you in the wrong direction?" challenged another Republican man. "I think the teacher has a better gauge than the parents do at this point because it's an unbiased opinion. They also are supposed to have some sort of professional development to recognize what is going on with the child," a Republican man explained.

This section of the interview reinforces that prevention matters. "Starting everybody off on the right foot right from the beginning; you've got to start them from the beginning," noted a Republican man. "Start at kindergarten. Don't wait until they are in the sixth, seventh and eighth grade and say, 'Okay, fix them,'" asserted a Republican woman.

They recognize that the teacher is talking about more than academic achievement. "It may not be academic. It may be sports or something that will give them self-esteem that they can feel good about themselves," suggested a Democratic woman. The consequences of being behind in emotional competence are severe, they say. "You are going to put him under a tremendous amount of stress and he is going to become suicidal or he is going to break the glass, pick up the chair and put it through the window," according to a Republican woman.

This section of the radio interview also included a discussion of mental health issues, such as shyness. While people can talk about the consequences of low self-esteem or even depression, mental health issues are widely misunderstood. As they consider a case of extreme shyness, focus group participants explain that most children will simply grow out of it on their own, so it is wrong to treat extreme shyness as a developmental or mental health issue. Note the following conversation among Democrats:

My grand daughter is shy and she was very shy and in one year's time she went from here to here. Now she wants to be on stage doing everything. (woman)

Did anybody help her along? (man)

No, no. (woman)

Just developed. (man)

No. She just grew out of it; became more sure of herself. (woman)

A few participants are concerned that intervention in mental health problems may do more harm than good, including over-medicating for concerns like ADD. “I have a problem with some of the statements they're making because you shouldn't stereotype a child right away. Because a child is quiet, that could be just the way the child is. Sometimes you have to let them feel their way through things. They find their way but I think if there is too much intervention at the beginning, it could lead to different things,” a Republican man warned.

Problematically, many do not have an accurate view of what constitutes intervention. A Democratic man described how a child can grow out of shyness, not recognizing the interventions they assumed to be present in the child's environment: “So I think if children have the right tools, the right environment, a teacher that knows what she's doing, a child can find their way.”

The third radio segment featured a spokesperson from the Connecticut Commission on Children. This messenger highlights the role of government, which can have positive and negative consequences. On the positive side, defining responsibility collectively causes some to simply assume a role for government. In addition, those who understand the cost prevention message find it compelling and the brain plasticity information helps underscore the importance of prevention. On the negative side, some continue to reject a role for government and assume that this spokesperson is recommending new, unaffordable and unnecessary government programs. Finally, participants find the discussion of bullying compelling. Bullying offers an opening to discuss social and emotional development, and may even provide a way to talk about mental health issues.

In the third segment of the radio interview, the host interviews an expert from the Connecticut Commission on Children. These comments were written to include the following elements of the Child Development Core Story:

1. The values of prevention, prosperity and future
2. Brains are built over time.
3. Getting it right early is less costly, to society and to individuals, than trying to fix it later.
4. Brain plasticity and the ability to change behavior decrease over time.

Most focus group participants see the Connecticut Commission on Children as an organization that protects children's rights, but many are not clear about how it relates to government agencies in Connecticut. “They look after children's rights,” stated a

Democratic man. “Kind of like a watchdog,” explained a Republican man. While a spokesperson from the Connecticut Commission can speak with credibility, this type of messenger also puts the role of government forefront in the conversation. For some participants, a “government” spokesperson is suspect. “It’s going to make anyone’s taxes go up,” a Republican woman asserted. “More jobs for bureaucrats,” added a Republican woman.

Many focus group participants understand the cost prevention message and find it compelling. “The main thing is that she wants us to be preventive as opposed to reactive... It costs a lot less to just start from the beginning than it does to have knee-jerk reactions to things when something goes wrong,” a Democratic man explained. At the same time, others assume that government prevention programs will be very expensive. “It says we provide prenatal care for all pregnant women and sustain access to regular healthcare for -- who is paying for this?” asked a Republican woman. Moreover, they assume that ample government programs already exist. “There is (sic) already substantial programs out there for anybody, whether you have insurance or not. There is (sic) programs for prenatal care and wellness care that is available to say the underemployed,” asserted a Republican man.

The interview includes a statement about parents not having the expertise to spot certain kinds of developmental problems. Some focus group participants took issue with this reference, assuming that it was discounting a parent’s abilities or excusing parents from taking responsibility. “Her first statement: parents should not be expected to spot problems. Why not?” asked a Democratic woman. “The statement that parents should not be expected to spot problems in the various early stages. Some of that I obviously agree with, but then parents -- I don’t know if you have to hit them in the head with the largest hammer you have to let them know that there is a problem. Some parents are very defiant to admit that there is something wrong with their child,” a Republican man insisted.

Focus group participants reinterpret the explanation of Brain Plasticity in the text as meaning that young children have more capacity to learn quickly than older people. “A child learns the most quickly the earlier they are. And it slows down as they get older,” explain a Democratic woman. Some discuss how young children can learn something as complicated as a computer while adults have more difficulty. “I can’t touch a computer; I can’t work a computer. The grand kids...” stated a Democratic man.

Much of our research on children’s issues, including these focus groups, suggests that bullying is a very compelling problem that the public wants to address. The issue of bullying provides an opportunity to discuss social and emotional development and may even offer an opportunity to communicate mental health issues. “Bullying is really big...if you’re being intimidated, how are you learning? Because you’re sitting there fretful. ‘Oh God, after school or as soon as I leave this class that person is going to be there waiting for me.’ So they can’t learn in that type of environment,” a Democratic woman concluded.

The last radio segment features a CEO as the spokesperson. Businesspeople can most effectively address child development from the perspective of a community leader who is concerned about the future of the community. Focus group

respondents were also introduced to the effect of stress. It is critical to strongly communicate the severity of stress on the developing brain. Otherwise, people confuse the scientific discussion of stress with a layperson's understanding of stress and stressful situations. "Toxic stress" communicates severity, but more research should be done to determine the most effective approaches to communicating stress, particularly in relationship to poor children.

In the fourth and last segment of the radio interview, the host interviewed a CEO from New Jersey. The business executive's comments were written to include the following elements of the Child Development Core Story:

1. The values and sequences of responsibility, stewardship, give now to get back later
2. Child development is a foundation for community development and economic development, as capable children become the building blocks of a solid and productive society.
3. Toxic stress damages the developing brain and leads to problems in learning, behavior, and increased susceptibility to illness over a lifetime.

A business person can be an effective spokesperson on this topic if s/he approaches it through the lens of community development and stewardship for the future. A Democratic woman responded to this spokesperson as a community leader: "They have a vested interest in the community as well. If they have a community where the people aren't ready to go into the workforce because the kids aren't learning, they don't have the proper home environment, the proper social skills or education, that is going to hurt their business. So they have a vested interest in the community."

Stewardship and the future are compelling values for this topic, particularly when conveyed with an economic perspective. "Because that is the building block; it's the next generation that is supposed to be running your businesses. You need to have a reserve when you tap into these workers, and if they're not being educated, then what's going to happen at some point?" asked a Republican man. "They will be the future leaders of the country. If you are a thug or a drug dealer, it is not really who you want in the White House," a Democratic woman noted. "Basically look at it like a disease. It's one spot now but if you don't take care of the problem, it's just going to keep spreading out and then, 20 years from now, instead of one community, you have a whole city. You have a whole state that can't function on its own because they didn't take care of the issues early enough," a Republican woman explained.

However, the role of government in influencing business practices was criticized by some Republicans, even though the recommendations were being made by a businessperson. A Republican woman argued, "Then this person...says we need the government to level the playing field, that no one business is at a competitive disadvantage. What kind of communistic..." "It's not communistic; it's socialistic," a Republican man added. Part of the energy behind this response is the interview's reference to healthcare policy, which causes Republicans to immediately think of national healthcare.

This section of the interview included a description of the effects of different levels of stress on the developing brain. For some focus group participants, the discussion of stress has a dramatic impact on their understanding of development. “It was interesting to me to realize that it can actually have that much damage on your growth and your development. As adults we all understand that stress is bad in any way, shape or form but when it basically -- it says when you are exposed to the same stress day after day that it can actually affect your immune system; it can affect your mental stability. Just to hear that, it's eye opening that it can be that detrimental; it can be that damaging,” asserted a Republican woman.

“Toxic stress” clearly states that this type of stress is damaging. A Republican man described toxic stress as “going to eat a hole in your driveway, if you drop it there. Your antifreeze is toxic.” For one or two, “toxic” also implies that the damage is so severe it cannot be fixed. “This toxic stress is -- you can't recover from it. When something is toxic, if taken an overdose of something, you might as well take cyanide,” asserted a Republican man.

Regardless of whether people believe this is overstating it, or dislike the imagery, they are processing a new way of looking at the issue. It is critical that communicators convey the severity of the effects of stress on the developing brain. Otherwise, people confuse the scientific discussion of stress with a layperson’s understanding of stress and stressful situations. Note the following conversation among Republicans:

It just kind of reminds me of when I worked in Chicago and you would just see these high-rises full of families -- generations of families that never worked. (woman)

I don't know. Is that stressful? (man)

True. Maybe it's not. You're right. They're not working. (woman)

I don't understand. (man)

For them the thought of getting a job is stressful. (man)

The layperson’s definition of stress interferes with the public’s understanding of the chemical effects of stress on the developing brain. In reacting to maternal depression as an example of toxic stress, a Republican man disagreed, “That's not stress. This is a child that isn't going to get developed because it isn't loved. I found out if they take a monkey away from its mother and it doesn't get any hugs, the thing just kind of withers up and dies. It will happen to a human...Interaction, but that isn't stress. That's neglect.”

Using poverty as an example of toxic stress cues up stereotypes of the inner city and undeserving poor. “As far as the stress that they're talking about, that seems like a lot of the stress is their experience in the inner city,” noted a Republican man. “I believe that toxic stress is probably more limited to the inner cities. I'm sure suburbs have some sort of toxic stress as well. Nothing like inner city,” stated a Democratic man. “We have it because it is spilling over from the inner city,” added a Democratic woman.

With an image of the undeserving poor in mind, some participants revert to their long-held stereotype of welfare cheats and apply it to this situation. Note the following conversation concerning depression and mental health services:

There is a lot more help for people that are low income. People abuse it. Sometimes I get upset because I'm a working person. I've always been. I've always worked since the age of 14. I worked summers and whatever. Unfortunately, we have people that are abusing our government and the people that really do need it, they're not getting the help. Right now...(Democratic woman)

Moderator: *In this instance, you mean people who are using mental health services that don't need it?*

Some people do need it but some people don't want to get ahead in life. That's what I'm trying to say. (Democratic woman)

Conclusions

Communicators should rely upon the Child Development Frame to advance prevention policies. The Child Development Frame influences public understanding of children and support for prevention policies because it explains what prevention means and why it matters. This frame: places social and emotional development at the same level of priority as academic achievement; explains why relationships matter to development; includes parents while expanding definitions of important relationships; describes why interventions are centrally important; makes the cost-effectiveness of prevention visible; and suggests a role for government.

Appendix: Discussion Guide

**Connecticut Engaged Citizens
October 17, 2005**

I) Introduction

- Standard intro – not vested, kitchen table conversation, one at a time, audio, video, speak opinion, etc.
- Let's go around the table and introduce ourselves. Just say your name, a little about yourself and your family, how you are involved in the community.

II) Prevention Introduction

A. When I say the word “prevention” what comes to mind?

- 1 What does “prevention” mean?
- 2 In what context do you think of it?
- 3 How does it make you feel?
- 4 What is being “prevented”?

B. Now, what comes to mind when you hear the phrase “prevention policies for children”?

- 1 What does it mean?
- 2 What kind of policies do you think of?
- 3 How does it make you feel?
- 4 What is being “prevented”?
- 5 How can back outcomes for children be prevented?

C. Let's say the state of Connecticut passed a prevention plan, to prioritize state investment in prevention for children and families. What would that plan look like?

- 1 How would the state's budget look different if it prioritized prevention?
- 2 What would the state do differently?
- 3 What would be different in communities?
- 4 In our quality of life?
- 5 Would health, safety, or learning be changed from prevention?
- 6 Is this a good idea or bad idea? Why?

D. Let me pass out to you a list of prevention outcomes for children and youth. These are the desired outcomes of a prevention plan for the state.

- 1 What's your reaction?
- 2 How would the plan achieve these outcomes? What would have to happen?

Prevention outcomes for children and youth:

- Every child is born healthy
- Every child is ready for school
- Every child and youth succeeds in school
- Every child and youth is safe
- Every youth chooses healthy behaviors

- Every youth is ready for the workforce

E. Let me pass out to you a list of goals for the state's investment in prevention.

- 1 What's your reaction?
- 2 How would our communities look different? (Schools, etc?)
- 3 How would the state budget be different if it incorporated these goals?
- 4 Is this a good idea or a bad idea? Why?

Goals for State Investment in Prevention:

- To improve child outcomes in health, safety and learning through proven policies and programs in prevention;
- To invest in early cost effective programs that decrease the need for later costly crisis expenditures;
- To adopt a budget process that accounts to the public for the outcomes of state expenditures;
- To establish an on-going prevention budget as part of the state's budget planning.

III) Elements of the Frame

A) For the rest of our conversation, we've been asked to review a radio news program. I have copies of the transcript of the program for each of us. We'll be going through it in sections – reading some of it together, then stopping and discussing it for a bit, then moving on to the next section.

B) After each panelist, stop and ask:

- 1) What is your reaction?
- 2) What kinds of things were you thinking and feeling as we read this part of the interview?
- 3) What point is (panelist) trying to make?
- 4) Is anything confusing?
- 5) Is this an issue here in Connecticut?
- 6) What should be done about it?

Morning Show Transcript
August 23, 2005

HOST: Good morning. This is your host, Chris Wilson, here with another edition of the Morning Show. We have a great show for you today. We're taking a break from our traditional format, to devote an entire show to one topic. In my humble opinion, there is

no other issue that is more important to our future, and to our present, for that matter. Today we will be discussing child development. We will be asking and answering important questions, such as: What do we need to know about how children develop? What do children need to become good, solid adults? What happens if children don't receive a solid foundation for future growth? What can we do in our communities to help?

To answer these questions we have gathered a panel of experts from a variety of backgrounds. But before we go to our panel, let's take a quick break for today's headlines.

(Break for headlines)

HOST: We're back. Today's topic is child development. Our first guest is Dr. James Cannon, a pediatrician from Boston, Massachusetts. Dr. Cannon, based on your experience, what is it that our audience might not understand about child development?

CANNON: Well, it's been my experience that most people have a good intuitive understanding of how children develop, but there is a lot that we are now learning about brain architecture that will help us all do so much more to ensure that all children have what they need to develop well.

We now know that both genetics and experiences have important roles to play in developing brain architecture. Genes establish the basic blueprint for the developing brain, but a child's relationships with important people in his life guide how that architecture actually gets built, what parts of the structure actually get worked on.

HOST: That's interesting, so, the brain is not just an empty vessel that gets filled up with knowledge over time. Instead, the brain is a structure that is actually being built.

CANNON: That's right, and genes determine *when* specific connections are formed but individual experiences shape *how* those connections unfold. You are born with the basic blueprint for how your brain will be built, but it is only through experiences that the building occurs in the right way.

HOST: How can experiences make a difference? What's an example?

CANNON: Children experience their world through relationships with people. Nurturing, responsive relationships build healthy brain architecture that provides a strong foundation for later learning, behavior, and health. So when a grandparent sings to a child, or a librarian tells stories week after week, or in the later years when a soccer coach encourages teamwork week after week, those consistent and confirming interactions are developing brain architecture and laying an important foundation for later development. But when positive and stable relationships are not provided, a different day care provider every week, or a story just here or there, then healthy connections are less likely to be formed and the result is a weak foundation for later development.

HOST: So early development has a ripple effect on later development? A child cannot simply catch up later?

CANNON: In most instances a child can catch up, but it takes more time and energy than if you got the foundation right in the first place. If you were building a house, and you started to put up the framing before the foundation was set, then you might end up with a crack in the foundation. You can go back and patch it, but it takes more time and energy than it would have to get the foundation right in the first place. The same thing happens with the developing brain. You see, brain architecture and developing skills are built in a hierarchical or bottom-up sequence. The neural circuits that process basic information are wired earlier than those that process more complex information. In other words, neural circuits build on neural circuits, and skill begets skill.

HOST: Very interesting. We also have with us Jacqueline Richards, a school teacher from Manchester, New Hampshire. Ms. Richards, welcome and thank you for joining us today.

RICHARDS: I'm happy to be here.

HOST: You've been listening to Dr. Cannon's explanation of early experiences providing the foundation for later learning, behavior, and health. Do you see this dynamic with the children in your school?

RICHARDS: Absolutely. Most children enter school just fine, but in every class there are children who have not reached normal points in development. Some may be slow in language development, others might be having problems in social development, or in managing their emotions. We try to intervene early, otherwise these issues become increasingly difficult to address, and they can have a profound impact on a child's success in school and in life.

HOST: So it's not just that some kids start school without knowing their letters and colors? You might have some children with social and emotional problems?

RICHARDS: Oh, of course. Development is about much more than intellectual development, and schools allow an opportunity to learn a lot more than just the three Rs – reading, 'riting, and 'rithmetic. Intellectual, emotional, and social competence are intertwined. If an adult goes to work not feeling well, or they don't know how to get along with coworkers, they won't perform at their best. The same thing happens with children. Learning, behavior, and physical and mental health are interrelated over the course of our lives. If a child doesn't know how to play well with others in school, or struggles with reading comprehension, and these problems are not addressed, then she is likely to have difficulty communicating or working well with others later in life.

HOST: So can anything be done, or is a child's fate determined in kindergarten?

RICHARDS: (laughter) Oh no, there is a lot we can do, but the longer you wait the more difficult it is. My school district is very focused on early intervention and prevention. Children with 2 years of preschool are twice as likely to be ready for kindergarten in language and math skills, and one and a half times as likely in social and emotional skills. So, if you have a preschooler who struggles with anxiety and extreme shyness, there is an ability to intervene and address those issues at early age. A trained preschool teacher with a referral system in place can prevent a child from losing out at a critical moment of development.

HOST: Sounds like a win-win situation.

RICHARDS: Yes, schools benefit too, because interventions during this early period mean that children will need fewer remedial services later. Unfortunately, these types of effective, early interventions are not the norm in all school systems. They should be, but they aren't. So, many kids start school with a weak developmental foundation that presents vulnerabilities that need to be addressed now.

HOST: Why don't more school districts do this?

RICHARDS: Good question. I think that in recent years there has been a lot of attention given to testing and academic skill preparation. But children learn best when academic skills like letters and numbers are provided in a rich environment of social interaction and age appropriate play. We need a more balanced and developmentally appropriate approach to the whole child.

I include all ages, by the way, not just preschoolers. We know that the brain continues to develop in significant ways into young adulthood, meaning early to mid-20s. One thing that has happened in recent years is that school systems have cut back on afterschool programs. This is particularly problematic for adolescents. Sports teach teamwork and discipline. Volunteerism provides experience in caring for others, which makes one a good citizen in society. Performance arts promote determination, confidence and positive self-esteem. These are the experiences that shape adolescents now and into adulthood, yet these are exactly the programs under the chopping block in state budgets. It's important that our schools and communities provide them with these opportunities as they go through this stage of life where they practice the roles and values they will take on as adults.

HOST: Our next guest is Elaine Zimmerman of the Connecticut Commission on Children, which works with policymakers and the public sector to advocate policies for children. Ms. Zimmerman, you've been listening to this conversation. Ms. Richards just explained that interventions should be more widespread than they are, but some states are moving backward. What's the case in Connecticut?

ZIMMERMAN: I couldn't agree more with Ms. Richards. The key to healthy development is to create the right environment from the beginning, and not wait until problems emerge. You see, brains are built over time. The basic architecture of the brain

is constructed through an ongoing process that begins before birth and continues into adult life. We could eliminate a great number of developmental delays if, for example, we provided prenatal care for all pregnant women and sustained access to regular health care for all children, from birth through adolescence. That regular source of care could make sure that development is on track and not allow a severe problem to take hold.

HOST: But wouldn't parents be able to spot developmental delays?

ZIMMERMAN: Parents should not be expected to spot problems in the very early stages. This is the particular expertise of specialists and people trained in nuance rather than the broad picture that parents see. It is critical to spot a problem as early as possible because brain plasticity, meaning the brain's ability to create particular connections, decreases over time. The circuitry of the brain is built according to a genetically-programmed, pre-determined schedule, and once circuits are "wired" they stabilize with age, making them increasingly more difficult to alter. Consequently, skill development is easier if the underlying circuits were formed properly at the "sensitive period" for the development of those circuits, and it is more difficult if that opportune moment has passed.

HOST: I understand the science, but how do you accomplish all this from a public policy standpoint? It sounds pretty difficult.

ZIMMERMAN: It takes a shift in focus from *fixing* problems toward *preventing* problems. In Connecticut we're trying to re-focus 10% of the state's budget toward prevention for children. Research clearly demonstrates that getting it right early is less costly, to society and to individuals, than trying to fix it later. For every dollar invested in early child education, over \$7 is returned to society. Because if a child gets an early education they are less likely to need special ed, less likely to be retained in the first grade, then they are more likely to graduate from school, businesses benefit from educated and committed workers, and the state sees a huge return in tax revenue from the increase in a more highly-skilled workforce. The phrase, "invest in kids" is thrown around a lot, but when taken literally, it can be the smartest investment a state can make.

HOST: Is early child education the focus of the prevention budget?

ZIMMERMAN: It is one example of dozens of research-based approaches. There are others such as anti-bullying programs in all middle schools and high schools. Bullying is a pervasive problem that can have devastating consequences on social and emotional development. When a child is in an atmosphere of intimidation, they can't concentrate and are fearful of those very relationships that should be supportive. We're also looking at wellness programs to improve health and address problems such as child obesity. Sodas are more prevalent in schools while physical education programs are shrinking, so obesity rates are on the rise. If this continues, we are setting kids up for a lifetime of health problems. Physical education, sports programs, parks, bike paths, as well as healthier foods in school and access to fresh foods at farmers markets, are all approaches that communities can emphasize to encourage healthier lifestyles.

HOST: Also joining us is Pat Redding, who is the chief executive officer of the CLS Corp., based in New Jersey. You've taken a leadership position in trying to get the business community more engaged on these issues. Why is that?

REDDING: Quite simple. It is the responsibility of every generation to provide for the Next Generation so they are prepared to be good, solid citizens and run our communities when it is their turn. It's a relay race. That is the only way that society can continue. If we want our communities to prosper, we have to look to this Next Generation and make sure they are on track for success and hand it off to their own children.

HOST: Sounds pretty noble.

REDDING: (laughter) Oh I don't know about that. I think it is really practical. Child development is a foundation for community development and economic development, because capable children become the building blocks of a solid and productive society. All aspects of adult human capital, from workforce skills to cooperative and lawful behavior, build on foundational capacities that are developed during childhood, beginning at birth.

All over this country we can find communities that are disintegrating because the environment does not foster basic human development. Can you imagine how damaging it would be to grow up in severe poverty, surrounded by violence, or with few stable adult role models? We need to pay particular attention to those children whose life circumstances put them at considerable risk for failure in school and then in life. We already know, studies have shown, that there are very favorable returns on investment, such as benefit-cost ratios of 17:1, that are generated by quality preschool programs for three and four-year-olds living in poverty. It is wasteful for our society to treat these communities, and these children as disposable. We need them to be productive.

HOST: So what role can business play? What are you asking your colleagues to do?

REDDING: Well, one thing we can do is work to alleviate the damaging effects of poverty and communities in distress. One part of that is working together to address the problems facing our health-care infrastructure. Many children, particularly those in struggling communities, have little access to health care providers. It is inexcusable that vision or hearing problems, or other physical disabilities go unnoticed because children do not have a regular source of healthcare. That leads to developmental delays. Small businesses want to provide health insurance, but costs are rising out of control. We need a national solution that fixes the infrastructure for all of us.

HOST: You mentioned that poverty and the community environment can be damaging to a child's development. Let me ask Dr. Cannon to comment on that. Dr. Cannon, does poverty influence child development? My family had very little money and I had a fine childhood.

CANNON: The problem is less about poverty and more about the stressful circumstances that tend to go along with poverty. Toxic stress damages the developing brain and leads to problems in learning, behavior, and increased susceptibility to illness over a lifetime.

HOST: Toxic stress?

CANNON: Yes, there are different kinds of stress, some damaging, some not. Some kinds of stress can be positive learning experiences, if the stress is moderate and short-lived like the challenge of meeting new people, or overcoming a fear of animals. Tolerable stress refers to experiences that could potentially affect development, but if a child has a safe supportive home environment, they can recover and cope. This kind of stress would be caused by the death of a loved one, or parental divorce. The kind of stress that negatively affects brain architecture is toxic stress, which is strong, frequent stress that results in a prolonged elevation of stress hormones which can have an adverse effect on the developing architecture of the brain, leading to difficulties in memory and learning. It can even affect the immune system and lead to greater susceptibility to certain physical and mental illnesses. Extreme poverty can have this result, recurrent abuse at home or by bullies in school, or severe maternal depression can have this result as well.

REDDING: So take a problem like severe maternal depression. Here you have a mother who may be unable to get out of bed in the morning, let alone attend to a child. Without positive interactions – singing, playing, talking, hugging – that child is likely to struggle developmentally. Depression occurs in all communities and income levels, but mothers in poverty, who have no mental health coverage, and probably no access to mental health providers in the community, will go without treatment. This results in two victims – mother and child – and it weakens the community because that child is unlikely to develop to her full capacity. But it doesn't have to be this way. Community-based mental health services put a preventive system in place that catches children before they fall.

HOST: Aren't business executives like yourself in the best position to address poverty and gaps in health coverage?

REDDING: Yes and no. We need the government to level the playing field so that no one business is at a competitive disadvantage. When government provides support for small businesses to provide health coverage to employees and their dependents, or enhances earned income tax credit so that low wage employees have more income, or even when government increases the minimum wage, it may sometimes cost business, but it helps to level the playing field. What costs us a lot more is having whole communities that go under due to poor economic opportunity, underfunded schools, and little access to health care. If we don't take care of this, where will our workers come from? Where will our buyers come from?

HOST: Well, we're out of time. I'd like to thank my guests for a stimulating program, and I hope we can continue this conversation. Now, a quick check of the headlines and weather.

END

IV) Wrap Up

We reviewed a lot of information tonight.

- Tell me, honestly, how important are these issues to you really? Why?
- Let's say you are going to sit down and write a letter to the governor on this issue. What would you write?
- What would you like to see done? What policies would you like enacted? Why?
- Was there anything new or particularly interesting that you heard or read tonight? What?
- What is most sticking in your mind as you walk out the door?