

Why aren't kids a policy priority? The cultural mindsets and attitudes that keep kids off the public agenda

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**FRAME
WORKS**

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Preface by David Alexander, Leading for Kids

Why aren't American kids doing better? Why, in the world's wealthiest country, blessed with a culture of innovation, and citizens and politicians who profess their love for kids, are our children lagging behind those in other developed countries? Why has it been so difficult for nonprofits across the country to scale up and spread their efforts on behalf of kids? These are some of the questions that led to the creation of Leading for Kids in 2018.

Leading for Kids is committed to creating a culture that prioritizes kids and considers the impact of all of our decisions on their wellbeing. Thanks to generous funding from the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation and the Children's Hospital Association, we are partnering with the FrameWorks Institute to answer some of these questions. By understanding the mindsets we have about kids, we will develop tools to help shift them to increase the salience of children's issues and build our collective responsibility to better address them.

This is the first of several reports from the project. It focuses on American mindsets about kids and how these mindsets limit the effectiveness of advocacy messaging. These findings expose significant challenges but also provide a new perspective on how, working together, advocates can create deep and fundamental change.

Over the next several months, we will be releasing several additional reports, including an analysis of the way kids' issues are currently being framed by advocacy organizations, an analysis of the framing of children's issues in the media, and a historical analysis of how children's issues have been framed.

The findings in this first report raise a number of questions that we will look to answer in the final part of the project. Should advocates enter the conversation by talking about kids in the context of their families and caregivers, or focus on the kids themselves? How can advocates counter racialized perceptions of deservingness—the idea that some families and kids don't deserve our collective support? How can advocates stretch people's understanding of “kids

issues” to include the full range of policies that affect them—and not just those that center on home and school? How should the relationship between government and kids be characterized to get around the idea that government should stay out of families’ lives?

I am incredibly optimistic that this research will provide all of us who work to make kids’ lives better with tools to make our work more effective in the future. We are very appreciative of the support we have been given by our funders and by the many children’s advocates, social scientists, and communications experts who have collaborated to allow this research to more fully develop. I hope this will be a major step toward creating an America where all decisions are made with the best interests of kids in mind!

Introduction

“Children are our future.” “It takes a village.” “All children are special.” These tropes are intended to signal how much we love kids and want to make sure they do well in life. But when it comes to policy, there is a gap between what we appear to value and what we actually do. By many measures, we are failing America’s kids. The United States has worse child health outcomes than other wealthy nations despite greater per capita spending on health care, and we rank 37th out of 41 rich countries in UNICEF’s 2017 report card measuring progress in meeting child-related sustainable development goals.

So why isn’t there as much collective action to support children as our love for them would seem to predict? The answer lies in how our society thinks about children and policy.

In partnership with Leading for Kids and with funding from the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation and the Children’s Hospital Association, the FrameWorks Institute is engaging in research to understand the cultural barriers to prioritizing children in policymaking and to develop a new narrative that can help put children’s wellbeing more squarely on the public and policymaking agendas. In this strategic brief, we report findings from the first phase of this project, which centers on understanding these cultural barriers and identifying possible directions for the development of a new narrative around kids.

After briefly describing our research methods, we begin our review of findings with a description of the problem, which begins with the puzzle of salience: the reality that while people *do* care about children, children *aren’t* at the center of their thinking about public policy. We then go on to identify and discuss two fundamental obstacles that help explain this puzzle—cultural barriers that make it hard for people to see how our society could improve kids’ lives through policy change:

1. People don’t see most social policy issues as children’s issues. When people think about children, they focus on spaces where children receive care—home and school. As a result, when thinking about children and policy, people think almost exclusively of education and family policy. This means that when people think about other policy issues, children are simply out of mind.

2. In general, people assume that individuals' choices rather than social systems shape their lives and outcomes and, in turn, feel that government can't and shouldn't do too much. These foundational ways of understanding the world extend to and shape how people think about children. When thinking in these ways, people assume that government shouldn't overstep its role and try to do more for children than it's already doing.

In describing these obstacles, we offer some recommendations about how advocates can use communications to counter these tendencies and move children into the center of public policy conversations. These recommendations are, we believe, a helpful starting point, though it's important to note that they do not constitute a new narrative around kids. This narrative will emerge from the next phase of this project, which will draw on the findings from this report and ideas from the field to develop and test possible narratives. While the full narrative is yet to come, the findings in this report provide a crucial basis for building that narrative and offer some clear directions for communications.

What We Did: An Overview of Research Methods

To answer the questions at the core of the first phase of this project, FrameWorks researchers conducted original qualitative and quantitative research and reexamined our two decades of research on children, youth, and families. In contrast to public opinion research, which explores people’s explicit beliefs about an issue, FrameWorks’ research is designed to look below the surface of these beliefs to understand the tacit assumptions and implicit understandings that support them.

Reexamination of previous research. FrameWorks has built two decades of research on how the U.S. public thinks about the health, development, and wellbeing of children, youth, and families. This research base includes multi-method research on a wide range of specific issues, such as early childhood development; adolescent development, child mental health; developmental relationships; foster care; dual language learning; and family, school, and community engagement. FrameWorks has also conducted research on public thinking about a wide range of social issues that strongly impact children, such as education, affordable housing, food insecurity, and health equity, among many others.

For this project, we reviewed this large body of research to understand how the public’s existing understanding of these issues might shape how people think about children and policy. This reexamination yielded specific research questions for us to explore in original research. It also provided crucial context for our analysis and interpretation of new data.

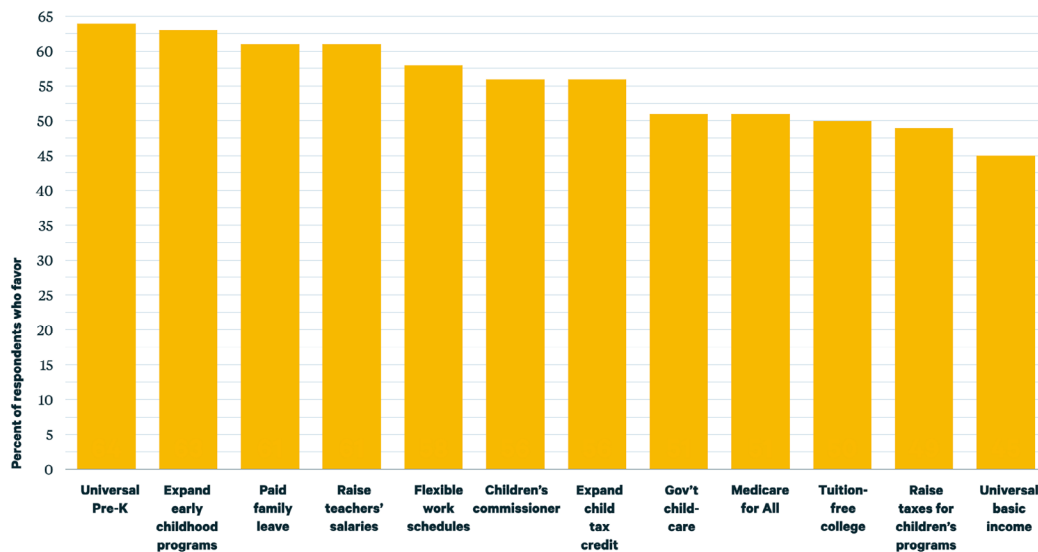
Survey on cultural mindsets and attitudes. To understand how cultural mindsets—people’s assumptions and understandings—are related to attitudes toward children and policy, we conducted a nationally representative survey. The survey measured how strongly people endorsed different cultural mindsets, and measured attitudes (including salience, collective responsibility, and efficacy) and degree of support for policies that would benefit children. In our analysis of responses, we examined the relationship between endorsement of different mindsets (i.e., which mindsets are related to one another), as well as the relationship between endorsement of specific mindsets and people’s attitudes. The survey results provide critical information about which mindsets enable people to prioritize children in considering policy and which mindsets prevent this.

Peer discourse sessions. Following the survey, we conducted a series of six virtual focus groups, or “peer-discourse sessions,” to more fully understand public thinking about children and policy. These were group-based, facilitated conversations designed to identify patterns of reasoning and explore intergroup negotiations around an issue.¹ We led participants through different activities to uncover how they worked with and publicly negotiated existing ideas and assumptions about children and policy. These sessions enabled us to more fully understand why children are not salient in public conversations about most policies and how specific mindsets come into play. As the sessions were conducted during the pandemic, we were also able to get a sense of whether and how the context of COVID-19 is informing people’s thinking about children and children’s issues.

The puzzle of salience

Members of the public widely support policies that they see as benefiting children. A majority of Americans support key policies, as the figure below indicates. The most popular of these policies have comparable levels of support to other popular policies, such as raising the minimum wage to \$15 per hour and reentering the Paris Agreement on climate change.²

Support for policies that would benefit children



Despite these high levels of support for children’s policies, Americans do not *prioritize* children in their general consideration of public policy. In other words, people are in favor of policies that would benefit children, but when people assess policy priorities, they tend *not* to focus on kids and what’s good for them. To put it bluntly, children are not salient in Americans’ thinking about policy.

This lack of salience has been apparent in FrameWorks’ previous research on children’s issues, but our past research has not focused on lack of salience or its sources. Original research for the current project, including focus group conversations and survey results, confirm the problem. When focus group participants were asked who they vote for and why, children and children’s issues were not part of the conversation. When people talked about their policy priorities, they focused on the economy and jobs, and saw these issues in terms of their effects on adults.

In the survey, we looked at the salience of children in policy thinking through five questions. The first asked participants how much weight they give to candidates’ positions on children’s issues when deciding whom to vote for. The second asked how important it is to people that candidates have a “children’s platform.” The third introduced the idea of child impact assessments—formal assessments by government officials of the impact of proposed policies or laws on children’s wellbeing. The question explained what these are and asked people whether they would favor or oppose requiring them for all proposed federal policies and laws. The fourth question asked participants how important they think it is for new policies to include a child impact assessment. And the fifth question asked participants to imagine that child impact assessments were already required for all proposed policies and that there were two candidates running for office, one of who had a record of supporting policies that had been determined to have a positive impact on children, and another who lacked such a record. Participants were then asked how much these candidates’ records of supporting or not supporting policies with a positive assessment would affect their vote.

Answers to these questions showed a pattern of ambivalence. For all five questions, the mean, mode, and median response was always the midpoint on the scale provided. For example, participants said they would give *a moderate amount* but not a lot of weight to candidates’ positions on children’s issues, or they thought it was *moderately important* but not very or extremely important to include child impact assessments for new policies. (See appendix for question wording and graphs showing results for each question.) People are certainly not *opposed* to considering policies’ effects on children, but the consistent pull toward the middle response reflects what we saw in focus groups: that children aren’t in the foreground of people’s thinking when they’re considering policy; they are *not* a policy priority.

Focus group conversations clearly showed that people *do* value kids. Our society’s rhetoric about caring for kids isn’t just lip service. The problem is that people’s genuine concern about children doesn’t translate into prioritizing them in policymaking.

Why Don't People Prioritize Kids When Thinking About Public Policy?

The remainder of this brief draws on our research to answer this question and shows that, in large part, the answer lies in the tacit assumptions people use to think about children on the one hand and public policy on the other.

There are, within our culture, a set of existing ways of thinking that shape how we make sense of the world. These taken-for-granted understandings and common sense assumptions are the lenses through which we see the world, the prisms through which we process information and experiences. Importantly, they shape how we make sense of the messages we receive.

There are two ways in which the tacit understandings that are part of American culture prevent people from prioritizing children when thinking about public policy. We now turn to these two obstacles, describing their contours and tracing how they keep children out of view in conversations about policy.

Obstacle #1: People struggle to see children in most policy issues.

When people think about children and policy, they focus almost exclusively on education and family policies. In focus groups, participants consistently struggled to connect other policy areas to children and couldn't see how issues like housing or transportation could be thought of as children's issues. Our evidence is clear: Beyond education and family policy, people just don't think much about children when considering policy questions.

This is a clear obstacle to salience: If people don't think of children when considering most policies, they won't prioritize children in evaluating these policies.

People only see children in spaces and issues that center on care.

People’s difficulty in connecting children and policy stems in large part from the centrality of care in people’s thinking about children. In people’s minds, children’s issues are issues that involve direct care provided to them by adults—mainly parents, caregivers, and teachers. Issues that don’t involve the provision of care simply aren’t thought of as children’s issues.

Across FrameWorks’ research on children and education, we have found that people see care and caring as the key factor that shapes children’s wellbeing. Children need to be cared for at home by their parents, at school by their teachers, and occasionally in the “medical home” by pediatricians and nurses. At the deepest level, people define children in terms of care: Children are beings in need of care and protection. And just as children are defined by their need for care, adults in children’s lives are defined by their capacity to provide it. Care is seen as both the function of adults in children’s lives and their proper motivation—it’s the main and best reason why adults engage with children in the first place. People reason that what makes a good parent is the natural love and care they feel for their child. They think that what makes a good teacher is not so much teaching skills or well-resourced schools as it is an innate love for teaching and a drive to care for children.³ Care, understood as a personal bond between parents or teachers and children, stands at the center of people’s thinking about children and children’s worlds.

Because of this centrality of care in people’s thinking, when people think about children, they think about the spaces and issues that involve direct care: the family and home where children are cared for and protected, and schools, where children engage with caring teachers who nurture their learning and growth. When people think about social issues that don’t involve direct care for children—like housing, transportation, or criminal justice—they don’t see children in the picture and struggle to understand how the issue relates to children at all.

This centrality of care explains why, in focus group discussions, participants often pushed back against the idea that universal basic income or affordable housing could even be considered “kids’ issues.” Participants struggled to connect public transportation issues and policies with children unless they explicitly focused on transportation to and from school, which again evidences people’s consistent and fundamental focus on care in thinking about children. The association between children and direct care is so powerful that when participants were pushed to see how a given social policy could affect children, their first instinct was to look for ways that it might affect care at home or school.

The survey similarly found that participants thought of policies that directly connect to care as different from those that don’t. In the survey, we asked participants to express their level of support or opposition to 12 different policies. The policies were presented in randomized order.

A cluster analysis, which analyzed survey responses to identify commonalities and differences in responses to different questions, found that, with the exception of government provision of childcare (which fit to some extent in both sets), policies sorted into two separate sets:

Policies that directly connect to care	Social policies that people <i>don't</i> think of as children's policies
— Expanded early childhood programs	— Medicare for All
— Paid family leave	— Universal basic income
— Universal pre-K	— Tuition-free college
— Flexible work schedules for parents	— <i>Government provision of childcare</i>
— An established children's commissioner	
— Increased teacher salaries	
— Expanded early childhood tax credit	
— Increased taxes to benefit children's programs	
— <i>Government provision of childcare</i>	

These results indicate that participants responded to these two sets of policies in fundamentally different ways, indicating that they think about them differently. In other words, *how* people responded to these policies shows that people think of the policies on the left as different in kind from the policies on the right.

The first set consists of policies that relate to home or school, or that explicitly mention children. The second set consists of broader social policies that would have tremendous impacts on children but that—with the exception of government-provided childcare—don't directly relate to children or spaces of care.

To be sure, people's thinking about these policies isn't *only* shaped by the connection between children and care, but these results confirm the strength of this connection and its effect on thinking.

The centrality of care in thinking about children not only explains why children are off the radar in people's consideration of most policies but also helps explain why policies that *do* center on care of children are consistently a low priority. The key is the gendered nature of care.

The assumption that children only belong in spaces where they receive care from the adults in their lives is implicitly shaped by a patriarchal worldview. In Western societies, the act of care (at home, at school, and in the medical professions) has historically been viewed as

a women’s role. This way of thinking builds on the claim that different genders belong to separate spheres,⁴ with women best suited for the domestic and the private, and men “naturally suited to the active, aggressive and intellectual domains of public life.”⁵ As a result, “feminine” issues and work have been implicitly and explicitly devalued for centuries. We see the devaluation of the “women’s work” of home and caring professions across our public conversations, in discussions of the care of older adults and people with disabilities, as well as in discussions of care of children. Caring professions are critical to the economy, but these jobs aren’t centered in conversations about the economy and aren’t discussed in the same terms as, say, manufacturing jobs—in terms of wages, productivity, and other “hard” economic concerns.

Policies that center on care of children are deprioritized in substantial part, because they relate to feminine spaces and concerns. Because care is typically thought of as a women’s issue, children—whose defining need is thought to *be* care—are treated as women’s province, and children’s issues are similarly undervalued by the public.

When people think of “children,” they mainly think of kids age 3 through 12.

When people hear the words “children” and “kids,” the images that come to mind are of children age 3 through 12. When we asked about children or kids in focus groups, people focused almost exclusively on this age range. Unless we explicitly asked about infants, babies, or adolescents, these groups did not come up, especially when policies were at stake.

People do, to be sure, have well-established ways of thinking about early childhood and adolescence. As we discuss below, public understandings of early childhood have grown more robust over the past two decades (see p. 13 below), and people hold a range of well-formed beliefs and understandings about adolescents.⁶

Yet because people’s top-of-mind images of “children” and “kids” are of children between these two important developmental windows, early childhood and adolescence remain out of mind in general conversations about children or childhood. This means that general references to “children’s issues” are likely to leave these age groups off the radar.

What does this mean for advocates and communicators?

- **Be explicit** about age groups. If you’re talking about adolescents or young children, make this clear. Don’t just talk about “children” or “kids.”
- **Emphasize** and **repeat** how a children’s policy agenda affects young children and adolescents to build a mental association between these groups and “children’s issues.”

Parenting is an entry point for connecting children to a broader range of policies.

While people often think individualistically about parenting (as we discuss below), they also, at times they are also able to see that meeting the obligations of parenting requires economic resources and that the high cost of goods and services like housing, health care, and education makes parenting more challenging. In focus groups, participants talked extensively about the challenges working parents face in a high-cost, low-wage economy. These challenges were especially salient for participants due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

Parenting can thus be an entry point for productive thinking about how a range of social issues and policies might impact children. When people are thinking about how policies around housing, health care, and other social goods affect parents, it's a short step to connect the thinking and conversation about these policies to children. Advocates and communicators may be able to help people see how a wide range of social policies affect children by highlighting their effects on parents and making explicit connections between parents and children to extend the conversation to include kids.

It's important to note that while parents are especially attuned to the economic challenges of parenting, non-parents also recognize these challenges. In other words, the idea that parenting is impacted by economic context—and, in turn, by social policy—is something that *everyone* recognizes, even those who don't have experience parenting.

The dangers of talking about “working parents”

Mentions of “working parents” get people thinking about deservingness and invite them to draw a line between parents who are deserving and those who aren't. In focus groups, discussions about “working parents” prompted participants to focus on parents who do not work, which left space for familiar, racialized stereotypes of parents who are trying to “get something for nothing” and, as such, shouldn't benefit from policy in the same way as “working parents.” This echoes the familiar frame of the “working poor,” which similarly reinforces the idea that those who don't work are undeserving of aid.

This is a clear example of how individualistic thinking, often mixed with stereotypes of low-income Black communities, gets applied to the issue of parenting. Adults are assumed to be primarily responsible for what happens to them in life. This is also true of parents. When focus group participants discussed policies that did not center on care of children (e.g., Medicare for All, universal basic income, free college tuition, expanding food assistance to people with criminal convictions), they consistently drew on ideas of self-reliance and deservingness. Participants—not just conservatives, but participants with different ideological views—talked about how adults in general, and parents specifically, shouldn't be able to receive support from the government or society without

having “earned” the help. When discussing policies like universal basic income or food assistance, participants raised concerns about public support encouraging laziness and government dependency. We see here a toxic mix of individualism and racist stereotypes of poor Black people as lacking will and character.

When we talk of “working parents,” we inadvertently cue ideas of deservingness, which in turn invites people to ostracize and stigmatize nonworking parents as unworthy of experiencing wellbeing instead of promoting support for all parents according to their needs.

What does this mean for advocates and communicators?

- **Be careful** with the term “working parents.” The term should be avoided if it’s not necessary. If it is, communicators must be careful not to imply that nonworking parents *don’t* deserve support.
- **Explain** how supporting parents supports children. Connecting support for parents to children’s wellbeing is likely to shift thinking away from whether adults do or don’t deserve support.

How can advocates and communicators start to get past Obstacle #1?

The key takeaway from the findings above is that the centrality of care in public thinking about children makes it hard for people to recognize how children are affected by *all* policies. Because people only associate children with spaces of care, policies that don’t directly relate to spaces of care—home and school—are not thought of as policies that have anything to do with children, much less as children’s issues. And given the gendered nature of care, the policies that *are* thought of as children’s issues are devalued because they’re also thought of as “women’s issues.”

A new narrative needs strategies both to help people connect children to issues other than care and to prioritize policies that relate to spaces of care. We need ways of helping people to see how children are implicated across all policy domains while simultaneously affirming the importance of care and building respect for the importance of caring professions and work.

These two goals are potentially in tension, and further research is needed to understand the best way of accomplishing both simultaneously. Yet several general strategies are clear:

- **Highlight and explain** how social policies affect children. Don’t assume that people already see the connections. Unless policies involve spaces of care—home or school—the ways that policies affect children are not on people’s radar. Clearly explain the ways in which policies impact children.

Before

During the early years of life, emotionally nourishing relationships lay the foundation for lifelong health and wellbeing. This means we have a shared obligation to support children and families.

After

Supporting children means shoring up the ways we support families. Every policy we set—from tax credits to paid leave—should reduce financial pressures on families and increase the time and capacity for supportive family relationships.

- **Repeat** these explanations as often as possible. While the field is already providing them at times, repeatedly drawing connections between social policies and children is necessary to disrupt the assumption that “children’s issues” are a niche set of issues around spaces of care. By helping people see social issues they already consider political priorities as kids’ issues, we can not only increase support for those policies but also move children up the public agenda.
- **Mix** examples of policies that concern home and school with larger social policies. By talking about social and care-related policies in the same breath as children’s issues, communicators can expand existing perceptions of this concept. If repeated enough times, the pairing of broader social issues with policies that people already think of as children’s issues will stretch how people think about this idea.
- For social policies with a less obvious connection to children, **use** parents/caregivers to draw a link between the two. Don’t stop with explaining the challenges that parents face; complete the story and explain how these challenges end up affecting kids. Drawing on this available pathway helps people see how bigger social issues and policies affect children, and places children at the center of policy considerations.

Before

Astronomical health care costs and lack of access are driving Americans past their breaking point. Insurance companies are raking in profits while the basic needs of millions of children go unmet. It’s time we have a Medicare for All, single-payer health care system that would guarantee everyone access to high-quality care.

After

Health care costs put parents under tremendous strain. Many are forced to forego essential treatment for themselves in order to afford basic care for their kids, which can in turn lead to illness that reduces their caregiving capacity. Medicare for All will guarantee everyone high-quality care and support parents’ wellbeing, which will translate to responsive care for children.

Once people start to connect a broader set of policies to children, it makes them more likely to care about and support those policies.

Initially, people have a narrow understanding of what children’s issues are. But when they start to see how a broader set of social policies would ultimately affect children, it can boost support for those policies.

In focus groups, when participants were explicitly asked to think about how policies not related to direct care for children (for example, universal basic income, Medicare for All) would affect children, participants were able to draw some connections. Participants often relied on economic arguments, focusing on how policies would bring an infusion of cash into kids’ spaces. While they tended to remain focused on home and school, they were able, with time and a bit of prompting, to recognize that a broader range of policies affects children. And once they started drawing these connections, they became more willing to support the policies, often in spite of their ideological leanings. In other words, when conversations focused on how social policies affect children, participants tended to express more positive attitudes toward these policies.

What does this mean for advocates and communicators?

These focus group conversations reinforce the idea that untethering people’s thinking about children from spaces of care will be difficult, yet they also show that it is not impossible for people to recognize a broader set of policies as relevant for children. This shows that stretching people’s thinking about children and policy is doable.

In addition, these conversations suggest that highlighting effects on children may actually increase support for policies, which may help convince advocates from other fields to make common cause. Advocates from other fields can potentially advance their own goals by helping children’s advocates make kids more salient in a broad range of policies. While further research is needed, this suggests that being explicit about social policies’ effects on kids may be a useful strategy not only for children’s advocates but for others as well.

Obstacle #2: Deep assumptions about what shapes social outcomes and the role of government short-circuit a collective orientation toward kids.

People increasingly understand what children need, yet they don't see why systemic changes are necessary to meet those needs.

Our research shows that when people reject or deprioritize major policy changes to advance children's wellbeing, it has less to do with a misunderstanding of what children's wellbeing requires and more to do with deep assumptions about where these supports come from and the role of government in providing them.

Public understanding of child development has improved.

The good news is that our research suggests that public understanding of child development—what facilitates and might derail positive development—is stronger than in the past.⁷ When FrameWorks began studying public perceptions of child development almost 20 years ago, public understandings were at best thin and in most cases counterproductive. When people don't understand development, it's hard for them to recognize the value of policies, practices, and interventions that address key influences on this process.

While many of the same unproductive understandings of development remain in circulation, our new research confirms a trend that we've seen in other studies over the past several years—these understandings now *coexist* with more robust views of child development that are in line with key findings from science.

Survey results indicate that while less productive ways of thinking are still available and part of American culture, more productive ways of thinking about development are now more strongly endorsed. For example, an active model of learning was more strongly endorsed than a passive model. Support for the idea that stress can harm development was much more strongly endorsed than the notion that stress makes kids stronger. This stands in stark contrast to research a decade ago that found the idea that “what doesn't kill you makes you stronger” to be dominant in American culture. Participants more strongly endorsed the idea that children can do well after trauma if they have the right supports than the idea that children who experience trauma are permanently damaged. Again, this marks a dramatic difference compared to results of FrameWorks studies from a decade ago. Participants also agreed much more strongly with the idea that children's response to stress depends on their relationships and supports than with the notion that responses to adversity are a function of natural makeup

(innate characteristics and genetics). The appendix provides more detail on the new findings, but the trend is clear: people’s understandings of development have deepened considerably over the past 10 to 20 years.

It’s important to point out that, despite these more productive understandings, people still sometimes draw on less productive ways of thinking about child development. In focus groups, for example, participants frequently drew on a passive understanding of learning—that children are sponges—and, in discussing stress, evoked the sense that what doesn’t kill you makes you stronger.

This points clearly to the fact that the field must continue its work in establishing and reinforcing productive understandings of child development. These messages need to be set and stay on repeat.

Despite the need for continued work, our research shows that the main obstacle to prioritizing children in policy is no longer a lack of understanding about what children need to do well. The communications challenge has shifted; now, the main problem lies in people’s assumptions about how children’s needs should be provided for.

People struggle to see how systems and environments shape social outcomes, which narrows thinking about the role of policy in children’s lives.

Individualism is deeply embedded in American culture. Americans widely assume that it is individuals’ choices, first and foremost, that shape how well they do in life. For adolescents, this thinking is applied directly—people assume that it’s adolescents’ choices that shape how well they do. However, when people think about younger children, individualism is instead transferred to parents: it’s their choices that are assumed to exclusively determine how well their children do.

When individualistic beliefs are applied to children’s parents, they are often bound up with racist stereotypes of families and communities of color—especially Black families. The racist trope of the poor, single Black mother who lacks drive and is dependent on government support exemplifies the toxic stew of individualism and racism. The assumption that parents and children who are struggling must be in the situation they’re in because of their own bad choices opens the door for racist stereotypes and obscures how structural racism and other sources of inequity work in American society. The overlap between individualism and racist stereotypes was reflected in our survey results, which found that endorsement of individualistic ideas was strongly correlated with endorsement of the idea that poverty is the result of a “culture of poverty” in low-income Black communities that devalues work.⁸

Systemic thinking—the focus on the role that social systems and environments play in shaping individual outcomes—has long been lacking among the American public. Our recent research for the Culture Change Project⁹ suggests that the upheavals of the previous year (the pandemic, the economic disruptions that flowed from it, and the mass protests for racial justice) have provoked a rise in systemic thinking. This systems thinking remains underdeveloped—even when people recognize that systems matter, they often struggle to understand how they work—and it is uneven across groups (stronger in young people and Democrats than in older people and Republicans). Nonetheless, there is empirical evidence to suggest that it is increasingly emerging as a meaningful alternative to individualism.

Our research for the current project indicates that the deep clash between individualism and systemic thinking has profound impacts on Americans’ thinking about children and policy.¹⁰ In our survey, whether or not participants embraced systemic thinking was one of the most important predictors of attitudes about children and policy.

Participants in the survey were asked how strongly they agreed with a series of different statements, some of which articulated individualistic ideas and some of which articulated systemic ideas. Participants who more strongly endorsed systemic statements scored higher on key attitudes: they prioritized attention to children in policy considerations (*Saliency*); they expressed a stronger sense of *Collective Responsibility* toward children; and they had more confidence that collective action can make a difference for children in the United States (*Collective Efficacy*).

While these correlations do not themselves indicate causality, we can infer causality from the nature of mindsets. Mindsets are the underlying ways of thinking that shape thought and, in turn, lead to particular beliefs, attitudes, and policy preferences. We can thus infer that it is endorsement of mindsets that is yielding particular attitudes and opinions, rather than the other way around. Moreover, the relationship between mindsets and attitudes discussed here tracks with the pattern of reasoning we see in qualitative research—when people think systemically, they recognize how our collective policies and systems affect children and recognize the need to change policies to improve children’s lives.

When people fail to see how social systems and environments shape outcomes, for children and for all of us, they fall back on individualism and conclude that children’s wellbeing isn’t, for the most part, a public policy issue or concern. The assumption that what matters is the choices made by parents and children themselves substantially narrows understanding of the proper role of policy.

When people reject a strong role for government, this leaves children outside the scope of government responsibility, and children fall out of the policy equation.

There is a clash in American culture between expansive and more limited understandings of the role of government. We find that both ways of thinking are in circulation. On one side, Americans frequently think of government as the problem, assuming government is inept and corrupt, that it should limit itself to protecting only the most basic aspects of human health and safety, and that it should be run in this limited role like a business. According to this way of thinking, government should never run a deficit, and receiving benefits from the government is thought to breed unemployment and laziness. These views of government were cultivated by conservatives in the wake of the Great Society, weaving anti-government thinking with racist stereotypes and subtle dog whistles that warned white Americans about Black Americans' unwillingness to work and their moral turpitude. On the other side is a more productive understanding, with roots in the New Deal, of government as capable of and responsible for providing for people's needs, and as a body that can and should be responsible to popular will.

Just as individualism and systems perspectives drive thinking about children and policy, so too do foundational understandings of government.

Our survey found that, along with systems thinking, endorsement of expansive models of government was one of the largest predictors of positive scores on key attitudes. When people think government can and should respond to and provide for the needs of ordinary people and communities, they think policymaking should prioritize children's wellbeing. They also support policies that would benefit children, have a sense of collective responsibility for children's wellbeing, and think that society has the ability to ensure children's wellbeing through our collective actions. The idea that government can and should address people's and communities' needs opens space for people to see how policy can and should address a broad range of children's needs.

When people don't endorse these positive understandings of government, productive thinking about children and policy falls away. The assumption that government should have a limited role is bound up with a strong distinction between public and private responsibilities. Children, who are relegated to the domestic and caring spheres, are left on the outside of this more limited role for government. When thinking this way, people assume that, beyond basic protections, children are the responsibility of families and communities rather than government.

The good news is that positive understandings of government may be on the rise. FrameWorks' Culture Change Project is finding—perhaps surprisingly—that Americans are more likely now than in the recent past to think that a more responsive government is possible.¹¹ In the current project, survey participants, on average, more strongly agreed with the idea that it's

government’s job to provide individuals and communities with the resources and services they need than the idea that government should limit itself to protecting health and safety and shouldn’t try to provide for people’s other needs. There may thus be an opening to reinforce understandings of government that lead to support for a children’s policy agenda.

Why we need to clarify what we mean by “children are the future”

The “children are the future” trope is used often, both by members of the public and by children’s advocates. It is sometimes used performatively, to signal that one cares for children, and sometimes in appeals—as a way to attach a sense of urgency and priority to children’s issues.

Our research found that people understand “children are the future” in two different ways:

- Kids are future adults in the making who need us to invest in their potential.
- Kids will inherit the consequences of our actions and decisions, and we have a responsibility to create a better future.

While it has sometimes been effective in communications, framing children in terms of their future importance as adults can also be problematic. Arguments that frame children as investments (*Return on Investment* framing) can end up instrumentalizing children, reducing them to a means of achieving cost efficiency. This framing can undermine concern about children as an end in themselves.¹² Without enough context, this idea can also trigger individualistic thinking. In focus group discussions, it often led participants to reason that parents’ goal should be to support children in becoming financially self-reliant and capable of making responsible choices that benefit them individually. This line of thinking can lead people to focus on the children in their lives, rather than promoting the good of all children.

The second interpretation of “children are the future” is more helpful, as it enables people to see that society has a responsibility to leave children with a better world. When focusing on their duty toward future generations, focus group participants were more likely to support a broader range of social policies (e.g., universal basic income, Medicare for All). They were also more willing to acknowledge the need to support children through policy regardless of whether it would directly benefit themselves, pulling discussion away from a self-interested calculus.

What does this mean for advocates and communicators?

- **Avoid** just stating that “kids are the future,” as this can be taken in individualistic or instrumentalizing directions.

- **Stress** that supporting children is a good thing for society both now and in the future. Future-oriented arguments are often more powerful when they are coupled with the idea that children’s wellbeing as children matters right now, as an end in itself.
- **Cue** the idea that “kids will inherit the consequences of our decisions” to help people think about the future not only in terms of a return on investment but also as the legacy they will leave for future generations.

Before

Children are the future. Ensuring all kids have what they need to thrive is an investment that’s guaranteed to pay dividends.

After

The decisions we make today will create the world our children will live in tomorrow. We have a responsibility to make sure all kids have what they need right now and in the future.

How can advocates and communicators start to get past Obstacle #2?

The key takeaway from the findings above is that when people think about providing children with what they need, the main challenge *isn’t* their understanding of what children’s wellbeing involves but rather their understanding of how children’s wellbeing can and should be supported. In other words, the challenge isn’t people’s understanding of children so much as their deep assumptions about society and government.

This suggests that in order to be effective, a new narrative about kids can’t just be about kids. Narratives that focus just on kids and what they need won’t address the individualistic and anti-government thinking that are primary barriers to recognizing the need for major policy action to advance children’s wellbeing.

One hypothesis that these findings suggest is that communications about children’s issues shouldn’t begin with kids, but rather with the systems that need to be reformed to better support them. By reframing systems in ways that help people better understand how they affect us all, such a strategy might create space for people to see how these systems affect kids and build support for the systemic changes that would benefit kids. This shouldn’t be misunderstood—the idea here wouldn’t be to talk about systems *instead of* children. Any communications using this strategy would, after talking about systems, quickly turn to children

and talk about what is needed to advance their wellbeing. In other words, the question isn't whether to talk about systems or talk about kids. The question is whether starting with systems is necessary to create space for productive thinking about children and policy.

At this point, this is nothing more than a hypothesis. Further research is needed to determine how best to address this obstacle. Is it better to start with what children need and then bring in systems? Is it better to start with systems and then situate children within them? And *how* can systemic thinking and productive understandings of government be most effectively cued and expanded to increase demand for systems that fully include and support children? More research is needed into these and other questions.

While there is still a lot to learn about the best ways to address the obstacle posed by individualism and anti-government thinking, the following recommendations are clear:

- **Foreground and explain** *how* kids' lives, like all of ours, are shaped by the society and the environments in which we live. Connect the dots between social systems and specific outcomes to reinforce and deepen systemic thinking.
- **Cue** government *responsiveness* rather than simply government *efficiency* to avoid reinforcing the belief that government should be run as a business.¹³

Before

Our elected leaders need to eliminate wasteful spending and focus on what is really important—the needs of children living in poverty.

After

We need to focus on the issues that contribute to child poverty and make sure our ideas reach elected leaders, who are in a position to make meaningful change.

- **Use** FrameWorks' existing empirically tested frames to help people see the benefits of government playing a more expansive role. Use the *Public Structures* explanatory metaphor and appeal to the common good to build a collective orientation toward and understanding of government actions and services.¹⁴

Before

Child well-being is not only the responsibility of parents and neighbors, but also of government. To fulfill the government's responsibility to the nation's children, it must act now.

After

Our federal spending should reflect our nation’s priorities. With government partners, we can build a strong and stable foundation that supports child well-being and elevates outcomes for everyone.

- **Reinforce** productive understandings of child development and learning. While building understanding of development may no longer be the primary task, it’s important to make sure that people have an accurate understanding of child wellbeing in mind when they think about how government can ensure children have what they need.

People’s identity shapes how they think about children’s issues in complex ways.

Our identities—racial, gender, partisan, and other—shape whom we interact with, how we are treated by others, and how we experience the world. Although people share beliefs and assumptions that are characteristic of the dominant culture they exist in, the identities they live by frequently influence how prominent certain ways of thinking will be for a given group or community—or lead to differences in how people apply commonly held ideas.¹⁵ Our research indicates that survey participants’ gender, age, education, and income level did not have a substantial influence on their thinking about children’s issues. On the other hand, three identities—ideology, parental status, and race—did shape people’s thinking in relevant but distinct ways.

According to our survey data, **political ideology** is—unsurprisingly—closely linked to degree of support for policies like universal pre-K, paid family and medical leave, and raising teacher salaries. Ideology is also tied to how strongly people endorse the competing understandings of society and government discussed above: People who identify as being on the right more strongly subscribe to a limited view of government and a strong form of individualism, while people on the left tend to subscribe to these ideas less strongly or to oppose them.

Parental status also shapes people’s thinking about children’s issues in important ways. In the survey, parents tended to agree with *every* view more strongly than respondents who were not parents. For example, parents of children under 18 more strongly endorsed individualism than non-parents, but they *also* more strongly endorsed systemic thinking; they more strongly endorsed a limited view of government, but also a more expansive one. Agreeing with competing views is not particular to parents—participants from all groups frequently agreed, to some degree, with contradictory statements, which simply reflects how our minds work—we simultaneously hold in mind different, sometimes competing ways of thinking. What was distinctive about parents was the relative strength of their endorsements. These results suggest that parental status doesn’t fundamentally change people’s perceptions of children’s issues, but it does universally boost levels of personal concern and engagement on children’s issues. In other words, the strength

of parents' responses to the survey questions doesn't indicate a difference in *which cultural mindsets* parents use to think about children's issues, but rather indicates greater engagement with and concern about children's issues generally. Parents endorse the same basic ideas as non-parents, but they feel more strongly about children's issues, which comes out in the strength of their endorsement of these ideas.

Survey results suggest that **racial and ethnic identity** shape people's views on children's issues in complex ways. In comparisons between white and Latinx participants, and between white and Black participants,¹⁶ we found significant differences on some attitudes and mindsets, but not on others:

- Compared to white participants, Black and Latinx participants showed stronger support for policies that would benefit children; they more strongly prioritized children in considering policy (i.e., scored higher on salience) and had more faith that our society can take steps to improve children's lives in the United States. Black participants also expressed a stronger sense of collective responsibility for taking action on children's issues than white participants.
- Black and Latinx participants also endorsed the idea that systems and environments shape social outcomes more strongly than white participants. They also tended to agree more strongly with every statement about the role of stress in child development than white respondents: They more strongly endorsed the idea that stress can support positive development, but also the idea that stress can harm children's development.
- On the other hand, we found no significant difference between white, Latinx, and Black participants' endorsement of individualism, the idea that government's role should be limited, and even the belief that differences in the outcomes of children from different racial and ethnic groups result from the fact that some groups value hard work more than others.

People's experiences of the current social order differ depending on their identities, and these different experiences affect how they make sense of the world. When people's racial and ethnic identity places them on the receiving end of structural racism and systemic oppression, they are more likely to see the importance of children's issues and be attuned to the role of environmental influences and stress in child development than people who benefit from white privilege. However, some key tenets of our society's dominant ideology (e.g., individuals are responsible for what happens to them in life; government is the problem, not the solution) are embraced and taken for granted across racial and ethnic groups despite the ways this ideology is bound up with and has been used to perpetuate white supremacy.¹⁷

What does this mean for advocates and communicators?

- A common kids’ narrative should be able to reach groups across identities. Because the basic assumptions that people draw on to think about children and policy are shared by people from different demographics, albeit to different degrees, it is possible to develop a narrative that can be used across groups.
- The common narrative will need to be tailored in its application. While a common narrative can address the shared, underlying cultural obstacles that block progress on children’s issues, this doesn’t entail a one-size-fits-all strategy. The narrative will have to be flexible enough to take into account the complex but important ways that ideology, parental status, and race shape thinking. Particular uses of the narrative must be adapted according to audience, and the different starting points of different groups can inform strategic judgments about whom to target when, for what purpose, and in which way.
- The strong effect of ideology on public thinking about children’s issues suggests that children’s advocates cannot avoid political polarization. There is a temptation to think that children’s issues can stay nonpartisan and avoid polarization, but ideology and party identity will inevitably get pulled into any serious discussion of children’s policy. Advocates and communicators need strategies to respond to polarization rather than hoping to simply avoid it. This doesn’t mean developing partisan narratives, but rather finding strategies to counter effects of polarization where needed when deploying a common narrative. Research is needed to understand what kinds of strategies are most likely to be effective.

Why giving children a seat at the table is a hard sell.

In focus groups, we found that participants generally didn’t see the need for children to have a voice in decision-making and policy. This conclusion likely resulted in part from people’s tendency to understand the term “children” to refer to kids from 3 to 12 years old—people, not unreasonably, have a hard time envisioning young kids being involved in decision-making. Yet participants also appeared to rely on other, deeper beliefs and assumptions to reach this conclusion, suggesting that there are other barriers to support for involving children and young people in collective decision-making.

When thinking about children, people often assume that they live—or at the very least should live—in a world free of adult stresses and responsibilities for as long as possible. People’s ideal vision of childhood means letting kids be kids without having to bear the burden of dealing with our society’s problems until they become adults themselves. Living to this ideal means that kids shouldn’t get pulled into policymaking. This thinking is reinforced by the worry that the world is dangerous and the assumption that parents’ goal should be to protect children from these dangers and limit their exposure to the wider world. In our focus groups, these two ways of thinking combined to undermine

support for the idea that children should have a voice in collective decision-making. Participants rejected this idea as inconsistent with childhood and as an abdication of adults' responsibilities toward children.

What does this mean for advocates and communicators?

Without further research, it's difficult to know how best to build support for involving children in collective decision-making, but the research suggests a couple of strategies that may be productive:

- When talking about giving children a seat at the table, leaving the age of children or youth unspecified can create problems. If you aren't clear about age, people may default to images of younger kids, which makes the idea a harder sell.
- It may be possible to productively leverage the idea of responsive government to make the case for involving children in decision-making. This framing would cue the idea of responsiveness and argue that, in order for government to be responsive to all those affected by decisions, including children, children need a seat at the table along with everyone else.
- “Legacy” framing seems promising. This framing highlights how decisions made now will shape the world we pass on to children in the future and argues that children should therefore have a say in the decisions that will shape their world.

These and other ideas need to be systematically tested to see if they generate support for involving children and young people in decision-making.

Questions for Future Research

This brief uncovers the obstacles that prevent people from prioritizing children when they consider policies. While the findings suggest some clear directions for communications—some dos and don'ts that follow clearly from the cultural mindsets that people hold—there is much we don't yet know about how to effectively reframe children's issues that we need to explore in further research. Here are a few of the questions that emerge from this research:

1. Where should parents, other caregivers, and children fit in the narrative? Foregrounding parents and caregivers is likely to make it easier for people to see a broader set of economic issues as children's issues, but this is also likely to bring with it problematic judgments about deservingness. More work is needed to understand how to position children, parents, and other caregivers within the narrative.

2. What values can collectivize thinking about children without instrumentalizing them? The field has had some success with *Return on investment* framing, but, as noted above, there is a real danger that such frames can undermine concern about children as an end in themselves. Testing is needed to identify values frames that collectivize concern without instrumentalizing kids.
3. How can short-term progress be made as the field seeks long-term shifts in mindsets? Shifting deep mindsets about family, government, and social systems is a major undertaking that requires time and effort at scale. This brief suggests that such an effort is essential, but the field can't wait for such an effort to be successful—it needs strategies for building support for movement on children's issues in the meantime. The next stage of research must identify not only frames and narratives with the potential to shift mindsets over the longer term but also strategies the field can use in the short term to begin to catalyze change.

There are other questions to be answered as well, but this list makes clear both the size of the challenge ahead and the fact that we enter the next phase of research with a sharpened sense of the tensions to be managed and the tasks to be addressed.

Conclusion

Building a new narrative that places children at the center of our national conversations about policy will require finding effective ways of overcoming the two obstacles described above. To be effective, a new narrative must help people see children's stake in *all* policies, not just ones that focus on spaces of care, while simultaneously ensuring that policies that *do* focus on care are not sidelined or undervalued. The narrative must also find effective ways of pulling forward and expanding systemic thinking and more robust understandings of the role of government so that people can see the need and appropriateness of a strong role for policy in advancing children's wellbeing.

The task here is significant. The reasons that children are so frequently sidelined in thinking about policy are not superficial. They go deep in bedrock aspects of American culture. Thinking about children and care is bound up with deep assumptions around gender and domestic spaces. Individualism and models of limited government, which are themselves bound up with racist tropes and stereotypes, are fundamental obstacles for social change across issues.

What does this mean in practice for children's advocates? It doesn't—it can't—mean that before they can advance children's wellbeing, advocates must find ways of ensuring that Americans' thinking is fully and consistently egalitarian, fully cognizant of how social systems shape all of our lives, and expansive toward government's role. Yet it does mean that if children's advocates try to center kids in our public conversations without attention to these cultural barriers, they'll keep running into them.

The next phase of this work is to develop a new narrative around children that takes these barriers seriously. A new narrative must find ways of navigating these obstacles to move kids toward the center of our public conversations about policy.

This research indicates a clear direction for that narrative in terms of both its content and the strategy for narrative change.

- **The new narrative can't just tell a different story about kids but must tell a different story about the broader systems that affect all of us.** Pulling forward and deepening a systemic perspective on social issues will benefit the causes of all those working to advance social justice and equity.
- **Effectively shifting the narrative about these systems means partnering with advocates and activists across issues.** Children's advocates cannot, on their own, shift foundational public understandings of social causes and government. The long-term success of children's advocacy is closely tied to the success of other fields and requires strong partnerships across issues.

The next stages of this project will work on both fronts. The research will develop and test versions of this new narrative to identify a narrative capable of putting children at the center of thinking about policy. Alongside the research, project partners will work on a mobilization strategy and build the partnerships needed for effective narrative change.

The resulting strategy will have the potential to advance children's wellbeing in America in a new way while simultaneously helping to move forward the broader agendas of advocates across issues—from housing and transportation to economic policy and health equity. By building and disseminating a new narrative about the systems that matter for kids and all of us, we can advance children's wellbeing as a core part of social change.

Appendix

Descriptive survey: demographic information

The descriptive survey for this project was conducted through an online panel provider that recruited a nationally representative sample of 1,504 U.S. adults. The median response time was 13 minutes (*Median Absolute Deviation* = 7 minutes). Table 1 provides expanded demographic details on the sample.

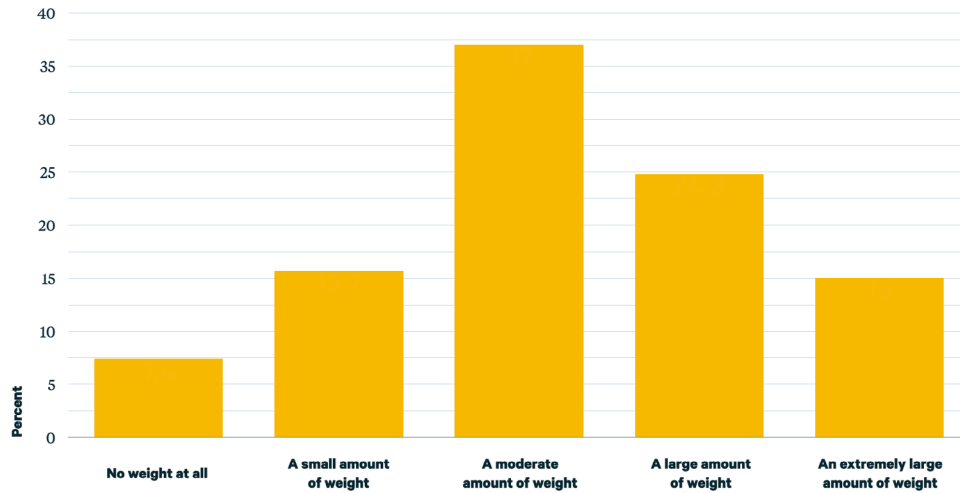
Table 1: Sample Demographics

Variable Level	Frequency	Percent
Sex		
Male	738	49
Female	761	51
Nonbinary/other	5	< 1
Income		
\$0 - \$24,999	253	17
\$25,000 - \$49,999	355	24
\$50,000 - \$99,999	510	34
\$100,000 - \$149,999	232	15
\$150,000 or more	154	10
Education		
Less than high school diploma	31	2
High school diploma	329	22
Some college or associate's degree	476	32
Bachelor's degree	463	31
Graduate degree	205	14
Race/Ethnicity		
White (non-Hispanic/Latino)	1011	67
Hispanic or Latino	192	13
Black/African American	175	12

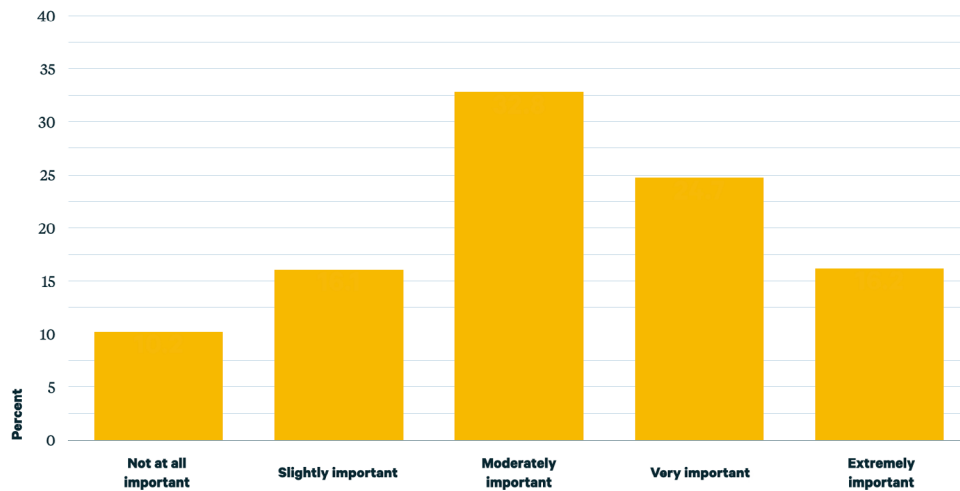
Asian	75	5
American Indian/Alaska Native	8	1
Hawaiian/Pacific Islander	5	<1
Other/Biracial or multiracial	38	3
Age (Mean = 49, SD = 17, Median = 52)		
18–29	421	28
30–44	432	29
45–59	410	27
60+	241	16
General Parental Status		
Currently are or have been a parent/parental guardian of a child	915	61
Have never been parent/parental guardian of a child	589	39
Current Parent of Child 18 or younger?		
Yes	537	41
No	378	59
Marital Status		
Single	523	35
Married	771	51
Married but separated	15	1
Divorced	142	9
Other	53	4
U.S. Region¹⁸ (4)		
Northwest	338	22
Midwest	290	19
South	598	40
West	278	18
Party Leaning		
Democrat and Democrat-leaning	697	46
Republican and Republican-leaning	595	40
Independent/other – closer to neither party	212	14
Registered to Vote?		
Yes	1440	96
No	55	4
Don't know	9	1

Salience questions: Distribution of responses

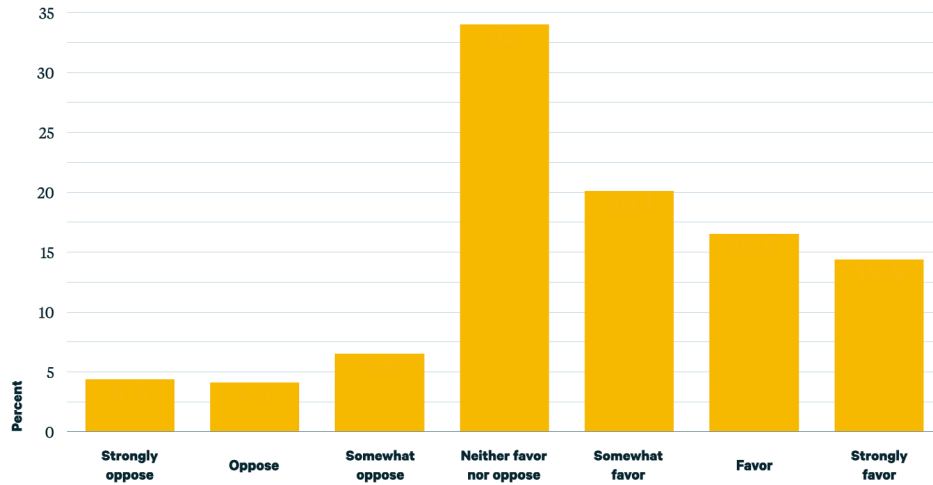
Salience question 1: When you're deciding which candidate to vote for in elections—like presidential elections or elections for members of Congress—how much weight do you give to the candidates' position on children's issues?



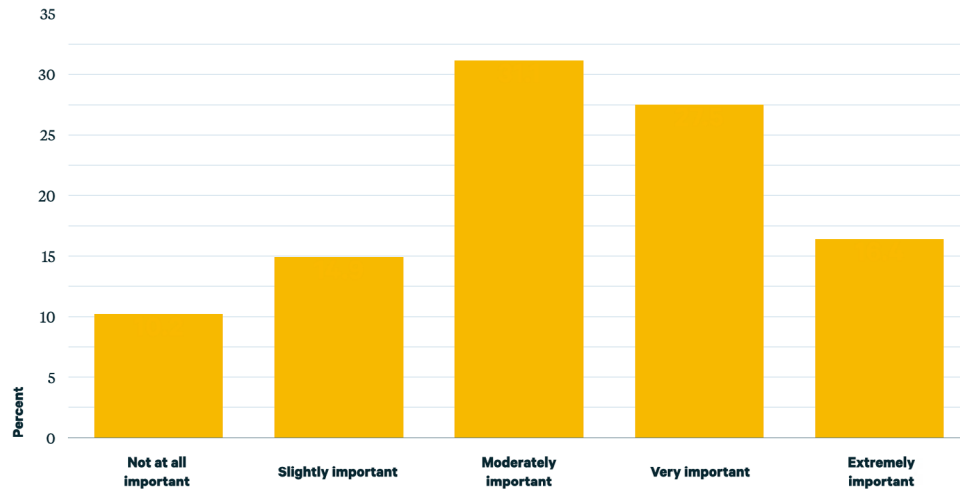
Salience question 2: How important is it to you that a candidate for political office has a dedicated “children’s platform” that lays out their plan to improve children’s wellbeing?



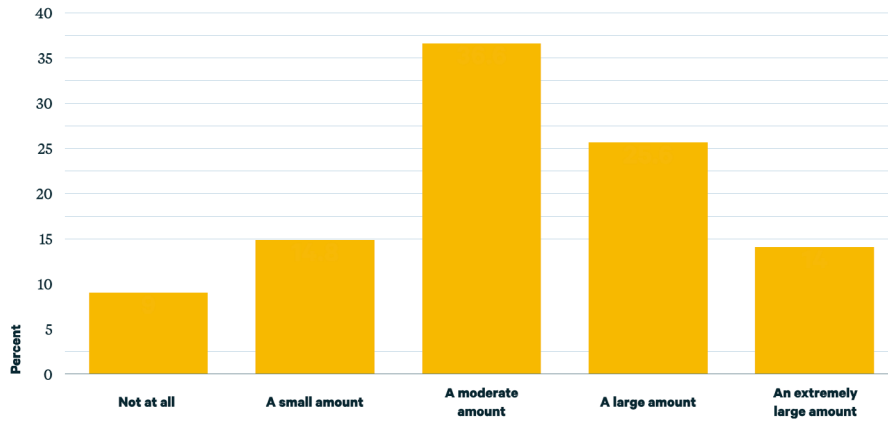
Salience question 3: Children’s advocates have argued that the federal government should do *child impact assessments* for all proposed policies and laws. In putting together these assessments, government officials would determine how the policy or law is likely to affect children and whether it would improve their wellbeing. How much do you favor or oppose requiring child impact assessments for all proposed policies and laws?



Salience question 4: How important do you think it is for new policies to include a child impact assessment?



Salience question 5: Imagine that the government had already put in place a requirement to do child impact assessments for all proposed policies. As a reminder, child impact assessments would determine the likely effects of policies on children. Now imagine that an election was taking place between two candidates—one candidate had a record of consistently supporting policies that child impact assessments had determined would have a positive effect on children, while the other did not. How much would candidates’ record of supporting or not supporting policies with a positive child impact assessment affect your vote?



Cultural mindsets about children and child development

The table below shows degree of endorsement for cultural mindsets around children and child development. In the survey, respondents were asked the extent to which they agreed or disagreed with each of a series of statements, and then responded using a nine-point Likert-type scale (*Very strongly disagree; Strongly disagree; Somewhat disagree; Slightly disagree; Neither disagree nor agree; Slightly agree; Somewhat agree; Strongly agree; Very strongly agree*). The statements articulate the core assumption or basic idea that constitutes a mindset. Statement wording for each mindset is included in the table, along with the mean response (the average response) and the median response (the response of the “middle” participant, such that 50 percent of responses lie on either side). Each response was coded numerically, as follows:

1. *Very strongly disagree*
2. *Strongly disagree*
3. *Somewhat disagree*
4. *Slightly disagree*
5. *Neither disagree nor agree*
6. *Slightly agree*
7. *Somewhat agree*
8. *Strongly agree*
9. *Very strongly agree*

The mean and median responses were generated using these values and can be interpreted using them. A mean response of 6.85, for example, means that, on average, respondents fell between “slightly agree” and “somewhat agree,” much closer to the latter. A median response of 5 means that the median respondent chose “neither disagree nor agree.”

Cultural mindset	Statement wording	Mean response	Median response
Sponge	The primary way that children learn is by absorbing what's around them.	6.85	7
Active learning	Children learn best when they actively engage in the process of learning.	7.29	8
Naturalism	How well children do is mainly determined by the natural traits and characteristics they are born with.	5.46	5
Nurture	How well children do is mainly determined by their environment.	6.09	6
Every child is different	Every child learns in their own individual and unique way.	7.13	7
Naturalism about stress	How children respond to stress depends mainly on their natural makeup.	5.66	6
Nurture about stress	How children respond to stress depends mainly on the relationships and supports they have or don't have.	6.76	7
Stress makes you stronger	When children experience a lot of stress, they become stronger adults.	4.90	5
Stress harms development	Children's development is harmed when they experience a lot of stress.	6.65	7
Damage done is damage done	When children experience trauma, it permanently damages them.	5.99	6
Resilience	If they have the right supports, children can do well after they experience trauma.	6.89	7

Endnotes

- 1 For a more detailed description of peer-discourse sessions and how they differ from standard focus groups, see Manuel, T., & Kendall-Taylor, N. (2009). From focus groups to peer discourse sessions: The evolution of a method to capture language, meaning, and negotiation. *New Directions for Youth Development*, 2009(124), 61–69. <https://doi.org/10.1002/yd.325>
- 2 See Quinnipiac University Poll, released February 3, 2021: https://poll.qu.edu/images/polling/us/us02032021_uszn68.pdf
- 3 For a more detailed discussion of how central care is to people’s thinking about parents and teachers, see notably Pineau, M. G., L’Hôte, E., Davis, C., & Volmert, A. (2019). *Beyond caring: Mapping the gaps between expert, public, practitioner, and policymaker understandings of family, school, and community engagement*. FrameWorks Institute. <https://www.frameworksinstitute.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/06/FRAJ6996-NAFSCE-Map-the-Gaps-190704.pdf>; see also Bales, S.N., & O’Neil, M. (2014). *Putting it back together again: Reframing education using a core story approach*. FrameWorks Institute. https://www.frameworksinstitute.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/06/ecs_mm_nov2014_final_low.pdf; see also Bales, S. N. (2010). *Framing education reform: A FrameWorks MessageMemo*. FrameWorks Institute. https://www.frameworksinstitute.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/03/education_message_memo.pdf
- 4 See notably Ruskin, J. (1890). *Sesame and lilies*. W. J. Gage & Company.
- 5 Cordea, D. (2013). Two approaches on the philosophy of separate spheres in mid-Victorian England: John Ruskin and John Stuart Mill. *Procedia - Social and Behavioral Sciences*, 71, 115–122. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.sbspro.2013.01.016>
- 6 For a detailed analysis of public thinking about adolescents and adolescent development, see notably Busso, D., Volmert, A., & Kendall-Taylor, N. (2018). *Building opportunity into adolescence: Mapping the gaps between expert and public understandings of adolescent development*. FrameWorks Institute. https://www.frameworksinstitute.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/03/adolescent_development_mtg_report_2018.pdf; see also

Volmert, A., Fond, M., Haydon, A., O’Neil, M., & Gerstein Pineau, M. (2016). *“It’s a rite of passage”*: Mapping the gaps between expert, practitioner, & public understandings of adolescent substance use. FrameWorks Institute. <https://www.hiltonfoundation.org/learning/its-a-rite-of-passage-mapping-the-gaps-between-expert-practitioner-public-understandings-of-adolescent-substance-use>

- 7 For more information on this, see FrameWorks’ large body of research on public thinking about child development in the United States and internationally: <https://www.frameworksinstitute.org/issues/child-and-adolescent-development>
- 8 The Pearson r correlation coefficient for the two cultural models was 0.7, indicating a strong relationship.
- 9 In the Culture Change Project, FrameWorks is conducting a mix of qualitative and quantitative research to understand whether and how cultural mindsets are shifting in response to the upheavals of the previous year. The project explores thinking about society and the country generally, as well as thinking about the economy, health, racism, and government specifically.
- 10 How people think about the influences on children is directly related to how they think about influences on people more generally. Factor analysis in the survey found that individualistic thinking about people generally and individualistic thinking about children and families is closely related. In other words, the degree to which people endorse individualism generally is closely linked to their endorsement of individualistic statements about children and families specifically (e.g., that children’s or families’ choices determine how well they do).
- 11 FrameWorks Institute. (2021). *Is culture changing in this time of social upheaval? Preliminary findings from the Culture Change Project*. Washington, DC: FrameWorks Institute.
- 12 For a similar analysis in the Australian context, see L’Hôte, E., Hawkins, N., Kendall-Taylor, N., & Volmert, A. (2020). *Moving early childhood up the agenda: A core story of early childhood development in Australia*. FrameWorks Institute. <https://www.frameworksinstitute.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/06/FRAJ8033-CoLab-Strategic-Brief-200513-WEB.pdf>
- 13 See for instance <https://thehill.com/opinion/white-house/535184-biden-must-rebrand-government-as-a-force-for-the-people>

- 14 For a more detailed discussion of these frames, see Bales, S. N. (2006). *How to talk about government*. FrameWorks Institute. https://www.frameworksinstitute.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/03/Government_Message_Memo-1.pdf
- 15 For more on this issue, see FrameWorks Institute (2020). *Mindset shifts: What are they? Why do they matter? How do they happen?* <https://www.frameworksinstitute.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/02/FRAJ8064-Mindset-Shifts-200612-WEB.pdf>; for a concrete illustration of this phenomenon, see for instance challenges 5 and 6 in Miller, T. L., L'Hôte, E., & Volmert, A. (2020). *Communicating about history: Challenges, opportunities, and emerging recommendations*. FrameWorks Institute. <https://www.frameworksinstitute.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/08/FRAJ8334-History-Strategic-Brief-200805-2-WEB.pdf>
- 16 While the number of survey participants who identified with other races and ethnicities (e.g., Native American/Alaska Native, biracial or multiracial) was too low for us to conduct reliable pair-wise comparisons with white participants, it is reasonable to assume that with a larger pool of participants, we would have been able to identify similar dynamics for these categories as well.
- 17 A similar logic applies to gender. Our survey did not identify a clear link between participants' gender identity and their views on children and children's issues; on the other hand, key tenets of a patriarchal worldview seem widely available to members of the public regardless of their gender identity: As demonstrated above, the association between children and spaces of care is imbued with sexism and assumed gender roles (see p. 2).
- 18 Data on survey participants' geographic location was collected, but given the research questions we were focusing on in this first phase of work, we decided not to analyze responses for regional differences.

About FrameWorks

The FrameWorks Institute is a nonprofit think tank that advances the mission-driven sector's capacity to frame the public discourse about social and scientific issues. The organization's signature approach, Strategic Frame Analysis®, offers empirical guidance on what to say, how to say it, and what to leave unsaid. FrameWorks designs, conducts, and publishes multi-method, multidisciplinary framing research to prepare experts and advocates to expand their constituencies, to build public will, and to further public understanding. To make sure this research drives social change, FrameWorks supports partners in reframing through strategic consultation, campaign design, FrameChecks®, toolkits, online courses, and in-depth learning engagements known as FrameLabs. In 2015, FrameWorks was named one of nine organizations worldwide to receive the MacArthur Award for Creative and Effective Institutions.

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Why aren't kids a policy priority? The cultural mindsets and attitudes that keep kids off the public agenda

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