Place Matters

Communicating the Relationship between Place, Racism, and Early Childhood Development

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In partnership with the Center on the
Developing Child at Harvard University

SEPTEMBER 2025

FRAME WORKS

Center on the Developing Child
HARVARD UNIVERSITY

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Preface

What surrounds us shapes us. We have long known that the relationships that young children have with caring adults in their lives are critically important to early childhood development. These relationships are a key ingredient in building healthy brains and bodies, and they act as important protective factors against stress and adversity.

Now, a growing body of science makes it increasingly clear that beyond a child's relationships, the places where they live, learn, play, and grow are also very powerful in shaping their development, beginning well before birth. When we ensure that children have positive influences like clean air to breathe, safe green space to play in, and access to nutritious foods—while also limiting their exposure to negative influences like extreme heat, toxicants in their water, or unreliable transportation—we dramatically increase the chances that they can start out life on a healthy track, with potential lifelong benefits for their health and wellbeing.

As we think about how positive and negative influences show up across children's developmental environments, it is critical to acknowledge that those influences are not fairly or equally distributed. This is not by chance. In the United States, the places where caregivers are raising young children have been designed based on decisions made over time, shaped by structural racism embedded in historic and current policies. As a result, many children of color and children living in poverty experience more exposure to adversity, without significant access to opportunity in their communities. As just one example, the dramatic disparities in diseases like asthma, which occur at significantly higher rates in Black children compared with their white peers, are not due to underlying genetic differences. They are due to differences in exposures to things like mold, dust mites, and air pollution in children's environments—and the decisions that have shaped those environments in unequal ways. The good news is that, just as neighborhoods have been designed by decisions made over time, they can be redesigned to support healthy development. This provides a powerful opportunity to decrease disparities and promote healthy development for all children.

To make the most of this opportunity, we need to shift the narrative on child development and reach decision-makers and stakeholders across an array of policy domains—from urban planning to environmental protection to housing. With this goal in mind—and building upon nearly two decades of partnership between the Harvard Center on the Developing Child and the FrameWorks Institute—we collaborated with the team at FrameWorks to research the best framing strategies for a new, expanded story of early childhood development. The resulting findings offer a wealth of evidence-based approaches that communicators can use to build understanding and awareness of these interconnected issues across an increasingly complex landscape.

As Chief Science Officer at the Harvard Center on the Developing Child, and also as a pediatrician and a parent, I am energized by the opportunity these new strategies offer us to shift the narrative toward a vision of collective responsibility—and collective care—for our children. We must consider children in every decision we make. And, as it turns out, when we shape our communities by prioritizing what's good for our children, it benefits us all. Together, we can draw on these strategies—along with the knowledge that science, lived experience, and community wisdom have to offer—as we work to ensure that the places that surround our children are free of hazards and rich with opportunities that support their healthy development.

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Introduction

Early childhood development is shaped in powerful ways by the places where children live. Structural racism shapes how those places are designed. This brief was developed to help advocates, scholars, and other experts communicate about the relationship between place, racism, and early childhood development in ways that help build a greater understanding of those connections among the American public, as well as key stakeholders with decision-making power to redesign those places to support healthy development. This shared understanding can help build demand and advance action toward systems and policy changes that can help us move toward fairness of place.

Over the past 20 years, there have been remarkable changes in public understanding of early childhood development. Through strategic and disciplined framing around key science-based concepts, actors across the early childhood field have increased public understanding of the importance of *early* development, the impacts of significant adversity, and the power of supportive relationships between caregivers and children in building and protecting the developing brain. Indeed, this body of science has broken out of the ivory tower and into the public square in ways that are widely accessible. From parenting apps to legislative testimony to national campaigns, policymakers and members of the public now make use of this science, along with related framing strategies, to make the case for more extensive, focused early supports for children and caregivers, from high-quality early learning programs to policies that reduce child poverty. But science does not stand still. As it continues to evolve, the picture of what shapes early development is expanding. What we understand today builds on the foundational concepts that originally galvanized public attention—like brain architecture and serve-and-return—and extends them to include a broader set of influences.

Today's science makes it clear that early development is shaped not only by responsive caregiver relationships, but also by the larger social, environmental, and policy contexts in which children and families live. This expanded understanding calls for an updated and expanded core story of early childhood development—one that continues to communicate the importance of early experiences and relationships, while more fully accounting for the systems and conditions that shape the **broader environments that affect children's development as well as their lifelong health and wellbeing.**

By broadening the frame, we can align public understanding with the current state of the science, along with what community expertise and the lived experience of caregivers so clearly tell us. We can open up opportunity to increase understanding of how *places*—including influences from our built and natural environments—affect child development, and how structural racism shapes those places. We can deepen understanding of the connections between place, racism, and early childhood development—where a current gap in understanding among the American public

leaves space for harmful narratives to take root—and build support for policies that better support children and their caregivers. And we can acknowledge, support, and learn from long-standing work by many scholars of color, who continue to illuminate myriad ways that racism affects children's development and advocate for approaches that address the structural conditions shaping early life outcomes.

With the need for this expanded narrative in mind, the FrameWorks Institute has completed new research in partnership with the Harvard Center on the Developing Child to identify an effective strategy for talking about the connections between place, racism, and early childhood development. In this strategic brief, we lay out a set of recommendations that communicators can use to advance this strategy in their own work. These recommendations can be integrated with existing frames and strategies to create a broader picture of developmental environments—or the full scope of experiences and exposures that children encounter as they grow—while continuing to build understanding of the developing brain and biological systems.

This brief is organized into three sections:

1. **Core Ideas:** We begin with a description of the ideas the new framing strategy is designed to communicate. These are ideas about early childhood development, place, and racism.

2. **Key Mindsets to Consider:** This section outlines the cultural mindsets—the implicit assumptions and taken-for-granted ways of thinking—that people use to think about child development, place, and racism. We highlight how these mindsets structure public thinking about these issues. A greater awareness and understanding of these mindsets can help communicators create messaging that activates productive ways of thinking.

3. **The Framing Strategy:** In this section, we recommend a framing strategy that consists of four types of frames—values, narratives, explanatory examples, and metonyms. We offer guidance on how to apply them using sample messages. We also explain how this new strategy can be integrated with the core story of early childhood development.

THE CORE STORY OF EARLY CHILDHOOD DEVELOPMENT

The original core story of early childhood development was created through a longstanding partnership between the National Scientific Council on the Developing Child, the Center on the Developing Child at Harvard University, and communication scientists at the FrameWorks Institute. Over more than two decades, this collaborative endeavor has advanced efforts to synthesize and communicate about key science concepts related to early childhood development, including concepts like brain architecture, toxic stress, and serve-and-return interactions. These concepts and the narrative this group helped build around them have been broadly adopted among public, academic, and policymaking audiences, helping to shape how decisions are made to support healthy development across a broad range of domains, from early care and education to child welfare to public health to family support.

The original core story explained how, for a young child, responsive serve-and-return interactions with caregivers provide critical support for the development of healthy brain architecture and a buffer against toxic stress and adversity. When these foundational relationships are not present, or when caregivers are unable to engage in responsive interactions, it can disrupt development and potentially lead to challenges in learning, behavior, and health across the life span. The science that supports this narrative still holds true today, and these concepts remain critical to our understanding of early childhood development and the types of policies and decision-making required to support healthy development. And, with the framing strategies outlined in this report, communicators can situate these concepts within an expanded narrative of development that broadens the frame to consider the full constellation of influences in a child's developmental environment, as well as the structural and systemic factors that shape those environments.

Read a more detailed overview of the core story here.

This brief is accompanied by a research supplement and a toolkit. The supplement contains a more detailed description of the evidence behind the recommendations and methods we used to conduct the research. The toolkit provides practical support for applying the framing insights included in this brief.

I. Core Ideas

At the beginning of this project, we worked closely with the team at the Center on the Developing Child to identify three core ideas that needed to be communicated to members of the public as a part of an expanded core story. In the research that followed, we assessed whether or not frames "worked" based on their success in improving the understanding, accessibility, and applicability of these ideas.

1. ***Place shapes early childhood development.*** Children's development, beginning before birth, is affected by the places they live, grow, play, and learn. Young children are highly sensitive to influences from their built and natural environments. The conditions of these places can have both positive and negative effects on early childhood development, along with lifelong health and wellbeing.

2. ***Places are designed.*** The conditions in the places where children develop are deeply impacted by public policies. Places have been designed by policy decisions made over time, and they can be redesigned to support healthy development and create neighborhoods free of hazards and rich with opportunity for all children.

3. ***Racism affects how we design places and creates unequal impacts on children.*** Levels of exposure to risk and access to opportunity are not distributed equally across the communities where caregivers are raising young children. This creates places where many children of color and children living in poverty experience significant adversity without significant opportunity, which affects development.

II. Key Mindsets to Consider

Building on a large body of existing research on public thinking about children, place, racism, and related issues, we identified key cultural mindsets that people use to think about the role of racism and place in child development.

WHAT ARE CULTURAL MINDSETS? HOW DO MINDSETS DIFFER FROM PUBLIC OPINION?

Cultural mindsets (or mindsets, for short) are deep, assumed patterns of thinking that shape how we understand the world and how we make decisions. In shaping how we think, mindsets give rise to our beliefs, attitudes, and opinions and inform our decisions and behaviors.

In contrast to public opinion research, which tells us *what* people think about specific issues or policies, cultural mindsets research tells us *how* people think about an issue—the ways in which our tacit assumptions about the world shape how we make sense of issues, how we draw (or don't draw) connections between issues, and how we reason about needed solutions.

We found several key patterns, outlined below. These patterns present challenges for the field, but they also offer important openings that we can step into with the right frames:

- **Families alone influence development.** The *Family Bubble* mindset is the assumption that how children develop is solely determined by what happens within the family, and that family caregiving is not affected by broader contexts and circumstances. Using this mindset, people reason that parents' decisions to be "good" or "bad" parents determine how well children "turn out." This mindset is particularly unproductive because it constrains people's ability to see how broader contexts and systems, including structural racism and aspects of place, affect children and caregivers. Broadening people's view beyond the *Family Bubble* is critical to bringing the importance of place—and the factors that shape place—clearly into view.

- **Development just happens.** In past research, we identified several mindsets that structure people's understanding of *how* development happens. One of the more dominant mindsets that we have identified that structure people's understanding of *how* development happens is *Naturalism*. This is the assumption that children just "naturally" grow up and, for better or for worse, environmental inputs do not matter. This mindset makes it very difficult for people to connect the impact of racism and place to children's developmental outcomes. When we provide a more dynamic and interactive understanding of development, people will be more likely to think about the impact of place and racism on these processes.

- **The world is dangerous.** People often see the world as fundamentally dangerous for children. Using a mindset of *Inherent Risk*, people focus on protection as the most important factor in children's development and argue that parents are responsible for keeping children safe from

the world. This familiar pattern of thinking can easily be triggered when we focus on the way that environments pose risks to childhood development. The mindset leads people to want to insulate children *from* the world rather than improving children's environments so that they create the conditions children need for healthy development.

- **Lack of connection between race and place.** As we've seen in past research, people don't immediately or easily grasp the relationship between place and racial inequities. People have established ways of thinking about both race and place, but the relationship between the two— *how racism affects place*—is not well elaborated. As a result, people tend to focus on inequities of place *or* race and, at best, toggle between the two. The lack of well-developed ways of thinking about the intersection of racism and place means that communications must explain this connection and offer concrete examples that help people connect the dots.

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- **Colorblindness.** While there are structural understandings of structural racism, there is a strong tendency for people to attribute inequities in outcomes to factors other than racism. People fall back on ideas of "colorblindness" or blame "culture" (specifically, a racist imagining of Black culture) as a way of rationalizing differences in outcomes between groups of people. The challenge for communicators is to strengthen systemic thinking about structural racism while inoculating against the mindsets that help perpetuate racism.

- **Class matters, not racism.** People draw on the *Class Not Race* mindset to minimize the effects of racism on children's opportunities and exposure to adversity. When relying on this mindset, people insist that income or wealth, rather than race, accounts for differences in how children develop. While other research shows that people *can* sometimes understand how wealth is a mechanism through which racism works, communicators must be careful not to activate the *Class Not Race* mindset, which serves to deny the impact of racism.

YOU SAY, THEY THINK

To understand how people make sense of phrases that are often used in the early childhood field, we presented focus group participants with these phrases and analyzed their reactions. These reactions illuminate the need to provide grounded, concrete explanations that bring to mind clear images of how structural racism and place shape child development.

- **"Highly sensitive" periods of development.** While focus group participants showed some understanding that the prenatal period has a significant impact on long-term development, many associated "sensitivity" with emotional sensitivity when the phrase was used to talk about childhood. This then led people to talk about how children can be "hypersensitive" and overly emotional. This means that communicators cannot rely on this term alone. Using a short definition of sensitivity and providing specific examples of how environments and experiences influence development during critical periods can help prevent people from misinterpreting the term. For guidance on ways to communicate sensitivity, see the communications toolkit.

- **"Built and natural environments."** Focus group participants frequently understood "built" to refer to social or familial environments (in the sense of "building community") rather than infrastructure or the designed features of environments. Meanwhile, "natural" environments were associated with children being outside and healthy eating. Participants also understood "natural environments" as the opposite of virtual or online media environments. These interpretations again show the importance of offering examples to clarify the intended meaning of these terms.

- **"Exposure to risk and access to opportunity."** While this phrasing was easily understood by participants, conversations quickly focused on risk, and opportunity slipped out of view. Simply naming both risk and opportunity was not sufficient to keep both in mind, as focus group participants struggled to talk and think about the opportunities an environment might provide. This illustrates the dominance of the *Inherent Risk* mindset discussed above.

- **"Place is designed."** Participants understood and accepted the idea that place is designed, as we've seen in past research. They were able to talk about the ways places are designed and offered examples of what this looked like. Yet conversations focused on the designed nature of current places rather than envisioning how places can be *redesigned* to promote more equitable outcomes for children. While cuing the idea that place is designed is a good start, be sure to include language and examples that will help people envision the possibility of redesigning places.

Together, these mindsets show us the cognitive landscape that the framing strategy needs to navigate. We were looking for frames that:

1. Background the *Family Bubble* and *Naturalism* mindsets to broaden people's thinking about what influences childhood development.

2. Activate people's recognition that places are designed *and* extend this thinking to include an understanding and vision of *how places can be redesigned.*

3. Activate structural thinking about racism and background mindsets that deny or perpetuate its influence.

4. Explain the *links* between racism and place to clarify the ways that racism affects place. Connect the dots all the way through—from childhood development to place to racism.

We developed a variety of potential frames and, through qualitative and quantitative research, identified a coherent framing strategy that deepens public understanding of the relationship between racism, place, and early childhood development.

III. The Framing Strategy: Making the Connections Clear

To get across the core ideas described above, we found that frames need to be both concrete and specific. Effective frames move past abstract characterizations of how structural racism and place affect childhood development by offering concrete illustrations of *how this happens*. Effective frames bring to mind real people in real communities dealing with particular issues. **Framing messages in a concrete and specific way helps people connect children's experiences to developmental environments and the effects of these experiences on children's development.**

This strategy builds on the existing frames developed for the original core story of development, which were created to translate key science related to early childhood development. Explanatory metaphors like *Brain Architecture*—and the underlying science—remain essential to the core story of early childhood development, but we found that narratives and examples are more effective in communicating concepts related to the broader environment, including how development is impacted by place and how structural racism shapes how places are designed. As we discuss later in the brief, these existing and new frames can be integrated to tell an expanded story that situates early brain and biological development in a broader context.

Below, we lay out four types of frames for effectively communicating about place, racism, and early childhood development. The power of explanation is at the heart of this strategy. These framing strategies help communicators get more specific and concrete, explain how place shapes development and how structural racism affects place, and point to the possibility of real and meaningful change. Knowing many researchers, advocates, and other experts have been working at this intersection for many years and that they all bring unique expertise and areas of focus, our aim is to offer a set of strategies that people can use and customize in their contexts.

We developed different explanatory tools with the recognition that science translation happens across many different contexts, mediums, and channels. And not all explanatory tools are appropriate for every type of communication. Narratives are incredibly effective, but social media, for example, may not always allow the space for an elaborated narrative. Specific examples can be a better fit for other contexts, such as policy campaigns focused on a specific place. Metonyms provide a non-story-based strategy when a more generalized explanation is more appropriate. The multifaceted strategy outlined below is designed to give communicators options to leverage the effectiveness of explanation creatively and flexibly across a wide array of audiences and settings.

#1: Values

RECOMMENDATION

Use the value of *Fairness across Places* to cue the importance of *place* and to bring into view inequities between places.

What to do

Appeal to the value of *Fairness* in relation to place. Rather than talking abstractly about fairness, our research showed that it is critical to talk about fairness between or across places. This value should be used to highlight how the current distribution of risks and opportunities across the places where children grow up is *unfair*—and we can and must make changes to create *fairness* across places.

Communicators can strengthen their messages by explicitly talking about racism, highlighting how places where Black, Latine, and other families of color live often have fewer opportunities and more risks; how this uneven distribution is unfair; and how solutions are needed to achieve fairness.

What this value accomplishes

We found that appealing to the value of *Fairness across Places:*

- Increases understanding that place impacts how children develop. More specifically, the value helps people see that community access to resources and opportunities is critical for healthy development.

- Promotes understanding that laws, policies, and institutions shape the opportunities and adversities embedded in communities.

- Fosters understanding that policies and institutions, past and present, build racism into place and perpetuate racial inequities through place.

- Increases understanding that racism shapes child development.

- Builds understanding that the choices that shape places contribute to racial and ethnic differences in how children develop.

- Reduces endorsement of racist cultural mindsets that pathologize Black culture and blame Black communities for disparities between Black and white children.

- Builds collective efficacy—the sense that we, as a society, can take steps that will address past and ongoing harms and ensure all children have what they need to thrive.

Why it works

The value taps into a strong cultural belief in fairness while pointing this belief in a very specific direction—toward a focus on *place.* While fairness is a powerful value, it can mean many different things, depending on context and how we talk about it. For example, by talking about fairness between *groups*, we can inadvertently activate zero-sum thinking—or the idea that addressing challenges for one group necessarily means taking resources away from another group—and actually depress support for solutions designed to advance equity. By talking specifically about fairness *across places*, we do two critical things: we collectivize thinking, and we locate thinking in geographical space.

Place is inherently collective. By talking about fairness across places, we move people away from understandings of fairness that focus attention on who gets what, and shift thinking up to the level of how we, as a society, treat communities.

This focus on place also cues the idea that *place is designed*, which helps people focus on the collective decisions and policy choices that shape the resources and opportunities available in different places. By talking about racial inequities between places in terms of fairness across places, we help people see these inequities as features of *places* rather than as features of people or groups and avoid essentializing and activating "othering" mindsets.

How to use this frame
To use the value of *Fairness across Places*, communicators can:

- Link fairness with place. Tying fairness to place can be remarkably effective for collectivizing thinking and keeping the focus on geography.

- Be explicit and consistent when communicating about the intersection of place-based and racial inequities. Repeating the effects of racism on places as often as possible can help build understanding.

- Get concrete about what is unfair when it comes to place. Pairing this value with the narratives and examples described in this report can help do this.

- Talk about zip codes provides a quick shorthand for what we mean by "place" and locates thinking about place at the right level. Because the "zip code" formulation of this value is relatively common, people process it easily and it makes immediate sense.

Sample message:

> In our city, we are working to make sure that all children have opportunities for healthy development, no matter where they live. But right now, our zip code determines the opportunities we have access to, which means that too many children don't have what they need to thrive. This isn't fair, and we have the power to change it.
>
> Opportunities and risks are unfairly distributed across our city due to structural racism. Because of policy choices made over time, some neighborhoods in our city have parks and green space to play, grocery stores that offer nutritious foods, and safe, affordable housing where children can live. But in other neighborhoods with fewer public investments where Black and Latine families most often live, there are more fast food restaurants than grocery stores and parks. Homes in these areas are also more likely to be contaminated with lead, which can have negative impacts on development and health. Children in these neighborhoods have fewer opportunities for good health and face more risks to their development.
>
> Zip code shouldn't determine the risks children face or the opportunities they have. Fruits and vegetables, green space, and safe and stable housing should be available to each and every child, no matter their neighborhood. We can work together to make sure children in our city have everything they need for healthy development.

#2: Narrative

Narratives are powerful ways to build understanding of the relationship between childhood development, place, and structural racism. Narratives, expressed through stories, transport and connect people to an issue experientially, creating new ways of understanding and acting on issues. This transportation and experiential grounding can add a powerful strategy when communicating about this issue, making narratives a well-suited tool for the task at hand.

WHAT ARE NARRATIVES, AND WHY ARE THEY IMPORTANT?

While "narrative" can have many different meanings, in the context of social change efforts, it takes on a particular meaning:

> Narratives are patterns of meaning that cut across and tie together specific stories (tales about particular events and people). Narratives are common patterns that both emerge *from* a set of stories and provide templates *for* specific stories.

Narratives shape how we think about our social world because they are everywhere; they provide common ways of organizing and making meaning across the different ways we communicate with one another through words and images.

A good example of a widespread narrative in American culture and discourse is the familiar *bootstraps* narrative, which can be boiled down to a core pattern:

> An individual, down on his luck (could be her, but prototypically his), struggles to overcome obstacles, and succeeds, against all odds, through force of will and determination.

The *bootstraps* narrative can be found in all sorts of specific stories. Bootstraps *stories* are about particular people facing particular obstacles who succeed in particular ways. The fact that these specific stories share a pattern with other stories is what makes them part of a broader narrative.

Like other frames, narratives both *reflect* and *shape* how we think about the world—the cultural mindsets discussed above. Just as with other aspects of framing, by changing the *narratives* we tell, we can cultivate new patterns in thinking, fostering new understandings and perspectives.

The distinctive value of narratives lies in the power of the stories that mobilize them to resonate emotionally, engage attention, motivate action, and facilitate memory of complex ideas.

For more information on narratives, see FrameWorks' foundational report on narrative, *The Features of Narratives*.

Our research identified two distinct narratives that effectively build understanding of the relationship between childhood development, place, and racism. Below, we describe the features of each narrative, focusing on the characters, plot, and setting that each of these narratives must include.

Use the *Redressing History* narrative to illustrate the effects of racism on place and childhood development and highlight the potential to address harm.

Summary of the narrative

A community confronts the history of a particular racist event, action, or policy that harmed children and families, with enduring effects today. Calls from families, other caregivers, and the community as a whole bring attention to the issue and spark a discussion about how to redress this harm. The story resolves with city officials, guided by community insights and expertise, deciding what should be done to redress the harm.

Feature of Narrative	*Redressing History*
Characters	Families and caregivers in the community, government officials
Plot	**Beginning (Setting the Scene)** → A community confronts the history of a particular racist event or action that harmed the community and children in it. **Middle (Conflict, Something Happens)** → Community members spark a citywide grappling with this history, including its effects on children and families today, and a discussion about how to redress it. **End (Resolution)** → In response to community action, the city takes steps to redress the harm, guided by community insights about what form redress should take. This results in positive child development and outcomes.
Setting	A community where children have been harmed by racist policies, and the city where it is located

What this narrative accomplishes

We found that the *Redressing History* narrative is one of the most effective frames we've seen in recent research across issues. It moves thinking across a wide range of outcomes. The narrative:

- Reduces belief in the idea that parents are solely responsible for children's wellbeing.

- Promotes a structural view of racism and builds understanding of how policies and institutions, past and present, build racism into place.

- Increases understanding that policies and government decisions shape the resources and opportunities available in places.

- Builds recognition that racial disparities in child development are a result of differences in resources between places.

- Fosters insight into how racism directly affects child development.

- Reduces endorsement of mindsets that blame Black communities for hardships they face.

- Helps people see how environmental factors like nutrition, water quality, housing, climate change, and green spaces affect children's long-term health.

- Increases support for policies needed to redress inequity and create equitable opportunities and resources for children across places.

Why it works

This narrative helps people make sense of the relationship between childhood development, place, and structural racism by pulling these connections out of abstraction and into reality. The narrative helps situate the effects of racism on the lives of particular people, in particular places, and at particular times.

Highlighting specific government actions and public policies brings structural racism out of the 10,000-foot conceptual stratosphere and helps people see and grasp it as a concrete reality. Tracing how these actions or policies shaped real places illuminates how racism shapes places.

By talking about *government* actions in the past and tracing these effects to the present, this narrative leverages the widespread recognition of past racism and uses it to deepen understanding of racism in the present. This tracing *over time* helps to ward off racism denial, making it clear that racism—and its effects—do not just lie in the past.

By emphasizing community action and agency, we avoid inadvertently cuing paternalistic reactions or saviorism—the idea that *others* need to come in and fix things for people who don't have agency. Instead, the narrative helps people recognize that society needs to be responsive to people's demands.

How to use this narrative

To use the *Redressing History* narrative most effectively, communicators can:

- Tell stories about real events from history. Getting into details is critical—don't just talk about structural racism in abstract terms.

- Tell stories about policies beyond redlining. Redlining is a great example, and due to the efforts of racial justice advocates, we found that many people know of it. Because people are less aware of other policies (e.g., "urban renewal" efforts and highway construction), stories about these policies help people see this structural racism as a broader issue rather than as an isolated example of redlining.

- Trace the effects of specific policies to child development and health, making clear how past policies have harmed children and families and how changing them can help. Connect the dots between racist policies and children's developmental outcomes. Don't assume that people will make these connections themselves, or that outlining how policies affect caregivers will make effects on children clear.

- Emphasize the agency and demands of community members while highlighting the need for and role of government to act.

- When possible, choose stories where the government has already taken action to redress harm. This can cultivate hope and expectation that governments can and should do better. When talking about stories where the government hasn't yet been responsive, emphasize what government officials can and should do now to cultivate an expectation of responsiveness.

Sample story that uses the *Redressing History* narrative:

> **City Expands Access to Nutritious Food after Grappling with History of Discriminatory Policies That Harmed Children's Health**
>
> For decades, Washington, DC, adopted policies that prioritized investment in higher-income, mostly white neighborhoods while failing to invest in neighborhoods that are home to mostly lower-income and Black and Latine residents.
>
> The city's failure to fund new development left these neighborhoods without grocery stores, so families and children couldn't get healthy food close to home. Poor nutrition can be particularly harmful for young children, increasing risk for short-term and lifelong health effects, including asthma, anemia, depression, and chronic illnesses. Residents had long advocated for greater investments in their neighborhoods, but the city ignored them.
>
> With pressure from community leaders and residents, the city is now working to revitalize these neighborhoods and bring in new grocery stores. These plans have the potential to address decades of discriminatory policies in low-income and Black and Latine neighborhoods. Providing all families with access to nutritious food will have a lasting impact on children's healthy development and wellbeing.

RECOMMENDATION

Use the *Accountable Policymakers* narrative to foster a sense of government's accountability to communities and its capacity to promote fairness across places where children live.

Summary of the narrative

Local policymakers identify a policy that is harming childhood development, with disproportionate effects on children of color. After listening to the community and other people with lived expertise, they propose solutions. The community shapes the plan for action, and policymakers make changes to improve resources and infrastructure to promote children's health and development.

Feature of Narrative	*Accountable Policymakers*
Characters	Policymakers, community members, people with other kinds of expertise
Plot	**Beginning (Setting the Scene)** → A policy enacted by a local government is negatively affecting child development, disproportionately harming children of color. **Middle (Conflict, Something Happens)** → Policymakers in local government recognize the problem. They convene the community and others with knowledge of the issue to better understand the problem. They propose solutions. **End (Resolution)** → Policymakers take action to fix the problem and ensure the community has more resources and infrastructure to support children's health and development, including measures to address inequitable distribution of resources. The positive effects on children are described in detail.
Setting	A town, city, or municipality

What this narrative accomplishes

Like the *Redressing History* narrative, the *Accountable Policymakers* narrative helps people understand the links between child development, place, and racism in a range of ways. While it was less effective than the *Redressing History* narrative in fostering a structural understanding of racism and increasing support for relevant policies, it otherwise moved all the same outcomes.

This narrative has two key benefits in relation to the *Redressing History* narrative:

1. Focusing on policymakers along with community actors as central characters and *initiators* of change can be helpful for communicators looking to directly engage policymakers.

2. Because this narrative is not tied to a specific historical event, it gives communicators effective ways of talking about a wider range of cases.

Why it works

Like the *Redressing History* narrative, the *Accountable Policymakers* narrative helps people grasp the connections between child development, place, and structural racism through concrete illustrations that make otherwise abstract ideas real.

This narrative fosters a sense that government can and should be accountable and responsive by giving people a model of what this looks like—an illustration of specific policymakers who are engaging with communities in positive and productive ways. By depicting policymakers as soliciting the views of and listening to caregivers and other community members, this narrative cultivates a sense of policymaker responsibility without creating paternalistic and disempowered images of communities. As we have seen in other research, depicting caregivers as participants in the decision-making process and parties to whom policymakers are accountable is critical to allaying worries about the government *imposing* decisions *on* families. This can lead to wariness about an active role for government and undercut support for needed policies.

Like the *Redressing History* narrative, the *Accountable Policymakers* narrative builds an understanding of how structural racism and place affect child development by tracing the effects of specific policies—illustrating how a problematic policy has led to harm and disparate developmental outcomes, and how specific solutions can promote equity and positive outcomes for children.

How to use this narrative

To use the *Accountable Policymakers* narrative, communicators can:

- Emphasize policymaker initiative to help people envision what policymakers *could and should* do—so they can hold *their* policymakers accountable for creating places that advance equity and support children's healthy development.

- Talk about policy change as a response to the needs and demands of the community. Don't make parents and caregivers passive, as this can reinforce paternalism. This is particularly important when talking about communities of color, as it can lead to white saviorism.

- Trace the impacts of the policies discussed on children's health and development. Be explicit about how policies impact children both negatively *and* positively.

- Be explicit about racial disparities in outcomes and the ways in which policy creates these disparities and can be changed to address them.

Sample story that uses the *Accountable Policymakers* narrative:

City Council Takes Action to Address Water Supply Problem That Harms Children's Health

A couple of years ago, the city of Franklin, which is home to mostly lower-income and Black and Latine residents, changed its water source from a lake to a nearby river to save money. The water from the river was corrosive, so lead seeped from the city's pipes into the drinking water, creating health problems for kids.

The problem quickly showed up in the city's standard water testing, and city council members in Franklin called a public meeting to hear from the community, experts in public health, and County Water Authority staff. Parents expressed concern and demanded that action be taken to address this problem now. The public health experts explained how high levels of lead in the body harm people's physical and mental wellbeing. They pointed out that lead exposure is particularly harmful for young children and can cause short-term and lifelong health effects, including brain and nervous system damage, slowed development and learning, behavior problems, and hearing and speech problems. The County Water Authority staff noted that this change in water supply created much greater health risks for children in Franklin than in higher-income, mostly white neighboring towns that had a safe water source.

In response to the public meeting, the city changed back to its original water source and has begun replacing lead pipes throughout the city. This has brought lead levels down, a critical step in ensuring children's healthy development and wellbeing across all of Franklin's communities.

BEST PRACTICES WHEN FRAMING ISSUES RELATED TO STRUCTURAL RACISM

There are several important guidelines that communicators can keep in mind when they are focusing on structural racism:

- Be careful not to accidentally reinforce the conflation of Blackness and poverty. Talk about race *and* class, but don't use wording that could imply they overlap perfectly (e.g., talk about "neighborhoods that are home to mostly lower-income and Black residents" rather than "lower-income, Black neighborhoods").

- Be explicit about racial discrimination when describing the effects of policies. Countering racism denial requires tackling racism head-on. Tracing the effects of specific racially discriminatory policies on children makes it harder to deny the reality of racism.

- Avoid talking about structural racism without talking about how it can be and has been addressed through collective action. If framing suggests that structural racism seals children's fate, people may think it is too late to act. More importantly, without careful framing, communications can cause more distress in communities directly harmed by structural racism.

- Be careful when talking about "all children." Without explicit discussion of racial inequities, talking about "all children" can be interpreted as the early childhood version of "all lives matter"—a deliberate effort to deny the existence of structural racism. "All children" can be powerful in communications that explicitly address racial inequities and their impacts on child development. Communicators can posit that no child should be exposed to risks and harm that impact healthy development. But this must be paired with clear assertions that this is not the reality in societies characterized by unacceptable and harmful degrees of racial inequity.

- Avoid vulnerability framing. Our research has consistently shown that this framing can backfire for several reasons, especially when used in the context of racial inequity. First, vulnerability can be understood as discounting people's resilience. Second, vulnerability can set up an "us versus them" dynamic that can be interpreted as a form of saviorism ("we are here to protect those vulnerable people"). Finally, vulnerability framing often does not assign responsibility for the causes of vulnerability, leaving audiences room to blame and stigmatize groups impacted by social inequities.

#3: Explanatory Examples

RECOMMENDATION

Use explanatory examples of how *particular* communities have taken effective action on *particular* issues to cultivate a sense that we <u>can</u>, collectively, take steps to address inequities and foster healthy developmental environments for all children.

What to do

Ground your explanations of the links between child development, place, and racism in real-world examples about specific towns, cities, or communities. In each example, focus on a specific issue, like water contamination or access to green space, and explain what the place has done to promote healthy, equitable development.

Examples do similar work to the narratives discussed above but are more flexible. While explanatory examples, like the narratives, require specific cases, they don't require finding cases where people fit the specific roles or the particular plot trajectory the narrative envisions. We can think of examples as a way of grounding the science in place and social context that doesn't require as much attention to narrative arc and form.

What examples accomplish

We found that examples are highly effective in increasing **collective efficacy**—the sense that together, we can address disparities across places and take steps to ensure all children have what they need for healthy development. Given the widespread tendency for Americans to be fatalistic about our ability to solve social problems, strategies that move this outcome can have a powerful impact.

Examples also move other key outcomes. They:

- Strengthen endorsement of a structural understanding of racism.

- Cultivate an understanding that place is designed through our collective choices and that how places are designed affects children's development, health, and wellbeing.

- Increase understanding that our laws and policies discriminate against Black neighborhoods.

- Build understanding that racial disparities in child development are a result of differences in resources between places.

Why they work

Examples' ability to foster collective efficacy stems from their focus on successful, real-world solutions. Making progress on issues as big and abstract as racism, place, and child development can seem daunting or even impossible. By telling people about what real communities have done to create healthy developmental environments, we make it possible for people to envision progress and change. Focusing on a particular issue, like nutrition or housing, makes it possible for examples to illustrate the trajectory from problem to solution in a clear way.

How to use examples

To use explanatory examples most effectively, communicators can:

- Use a variety of examples that cover different issues, touch on *both built and natural environments*, and focus on urban and rural settings to build a broader understanding of how child development, place, and racism are connected. Using a range of examples is critical to making sure that the connections people draw generalize and aren't seen as isolated instances.

- Use real-life examples that include successful collective action. It's critical to choose examples where communities and local governments have taken steps that have promoted equitable child development. Examples should avoid characterizing changes in outcomes as the result of the effort and drive of a particular person.

- Explain the problem *and* how the solution helped. Show people how the lack of resources and opportunities was harming children in the community and how the solution led to better outcomes. Don't just describe the improved outcomes, explain *how* the action led to improved outcomes.

Sample message:

> **Akron Supports Children's Health and Development by Creating More Safe Green Spaces**
>
> Access to safe green space during the prenatal period and early childhood is critical for health and development, yet not all communities have access to the green spaces children need.
>
> In Akron, Ohio, some neighborhoods in the city—ones with mostly higher-income and white residents—have been designed with many green spaces and lots of trees. In other parts of the city—especially neighborhoods that, because of historic and present-day policies, are home to mostly lower-income and Black and Latine residents—the city has created fewer green spaces and planted fewer trees.
>
> During pregnancy, access to safe parks and green spaces is critical—when such spaces are not available, the risk of a baby being born with a low birth weight increases. When expectant parents and children's caregivers have access to green spaces, their own health and mental health benefit, reducing their stress levels, which helps them better support children. Babies and young children need safe green spaces, or they can't play as freely or be as physically active, which harms their long-term physical and mental health. And because green spaces and trees reduce heat and air pollution, when they don't exist, children's health suffers.

Recognizing the importance of green spaces for early childhood development and health, along with the related disparities among neighborhoods across Akron, city policymakers created the Tree Canopy Report, which offers a blueprint for the city to plant trees in neighborhoods that can benefit the most from increasing the tree canopy. To put this plan into action, the city has begun planting trees in historically under-resourced neighborhoods with low canopy coverage, directly addressing environmental disparities and creating healthier spaces for young children to grow and play.

#4: Part-to-Whole Framing

RECOMMENDATION

To build understanding of how places are designed, zoom in and explain the design of a particular feature of place, and then zoom out to extend this explanation.

What to do

Start with a specific aspect of place that people might not automatically recognize as being shaped by policy choices, like urban landscapes or water quality. Explain that these features of the environment are the result of collective decisions and policy choices. Then zoom out and explain how, just like this particular feature of places, *many* features of places are designed, and that these design choices have a big impact on children's development. Stress that because places are designed, they can also be redesigned in ways that better promote children's health and wellbeing.

Specific examples and narratives might not always be appropriate to use or might be hard to find. Part-to-whole framing offers another way for communicators to help people understand the relationships between child development, place, and racism.

Here's an example of how to use part-to-whole framing to explain how places are designed:

The quality of the water we get from our taps depends on the choice of water source, the service lines that bring water into our homes, and the pipes in our homes themselves. Water quality is the result of planning choices made by cities, even though the water we drink seems like a resource that's just naturally available. This is actually true of *many* features of places—they're the product of design.

Our collective choices shape places. The fact that some places have fewer resources, like playgrounds and grocery stores with fruits and vegetables, and more risks, like air pollution or water contamination, is the result of choices and planning. Cities and states tend to put fewer resources in the places where Black and Latine people live and expose them to greater risks. This has a big impact on everyone there, and especially children, whose lifelong health and development is affected by these choices.

Just like we can choose to replace old and contaminated water lines and bring in drinking water from healthier sources, we can choose to redesign other aspects of neighborhoods in ways that promote children's wellbeing.

What part-to-whole framing accomplishes

Research found that this type of framing cues and expands the understanding that place is designed and helps people recognize that places have a profound impact on children's development. This type of frame also leads to greater recognition that racial disparities in child development result from differences in resources between places.

Why it works

Part-to-whole framing gives people an entry point for thinking about how places are designed and can be redesigned. By grounding the idea in a particular aspect of place to start, this strategy gives people something specific to think about, bringing an otherwise abstract concept out of the clouds. Once the issue is grounded in this way, it becomes easier for people to think about the broader idea and to apply it to other aspects of place as well.

How to use part-to-whole framing

To use part-to-whole framing, communicators should:

- Apply the idea that place is designed more broadly, to make the point that many aspects of places are designed.
- Explain how these design choices affect child development and can lead to racial inequities among children.
- Stress the possibility of redesign—just as places are designed, we can redesign places in ways that promote children's health and development.

CENTERING JOY: CONSIDERATIONS ABOUT USING *JOY* AS A FRAME

In the field of child advocacy and progressive spaces more generally, there has been a movement recently toward using the value of *Joy* to advocate for collective action to advance equity and justice and to acknowledge the strength and resilience of communities harmed by racist policies. This is a powerful idea in organizing and motivating like-minded people and is a value that's often compelling for advocates themselves.

In conducting this research, we explored where and how *Joy* can be a productive frame for engaging broader public audiences. Our research reinforced what many communities of color have long known to be true—that *Joy* is effective in some important ways. These findings provide additional information and recommendations for communicators to consider.

Messages that combine *Joy* with a short explanation of the structural and environmental supports children need were effective in building understanding of the links between childhood development, place, and racism. We suspect that the explanation played a big role in this, but that the appeal to the need to make sure all children have opportunities to experience joy was also important. In our testing, unlike *Fairness across Places*, this message did not increase a sense of collective responsibility or collective efficacy. It was also less effective in fostering systemic thinking about racism and building understanding of how environmental factors, including racism, affect children's development and health.

Given these complexities, for communicators committed to using *Joy* as a value frame, our research suggests that the following strategies can maximize impact:

- Avoid individualizing: talk about the ways places can be designed to foster joy rather than focusing solely on the experience of the individual child, which is likely to reinforce individualistic understandings of the sources of child wellbeing.

- Pair *Joy* with clear explanations of the ways in which structural and contextual factors affect development.

- Emphasize the collective steps that we can take to foster joy for every child, across race and place.

Connecting the Science of Brain and Biological Development to the Broader Developmental Environment

The recommendations included in this report should be seen as an extension of—rather than a replacement for—the original core story of development outlined at the start of this report. The concepts—and the underlying science—of the original core story still hold true, and the strategies in this report can help support communicators in telling an expanded story that demonstrates the relationship between these long-standing concepts and the complexities of place, racism, and early childhood development.

Below are some recommendations and tips on how communicators can use the strategies outlined in this report to tell an expanded story of early childhood development that still includes key scientific concepts from the original core story:

- Continue to explain the importance and processes of early brain and biological development using the *Brain Architecture* and *Serve-and-Return* metaphors. Emphasize how our collective responsibility to support children's development during early childhood affects their lifelong health and wellbeing.

- Expand the story by connecting the development of brain and biological systems to place. Explain about how places are invested with opportunities that drive positive development as well as sources of adversity that can create *Toxic Stress* for both children and their caregivers.

- Use the *Fairness across Places* value to show how places are designed so that opportunity and adversity are not evenly distributed. Center structural racism as a central source of inequitable design.

- Talk about how we can improve the places where children grow up, centering the agency and autonomy of communities most directly impacted by structural racism to lead and inform those change efforts.

- To avoid "damage is done" thinking, don't talk about the negative effects on development (or risks) without also emphasizing possibilities for creating more opportunity. Use concrete examples of solutions that demonstrate ways to redesign communities with concrete positive outcomes.

Here is an example of how to start an expanded story that can be completed with a narrative or explanatory example:

> Early development of the brain and other biological systems is crucial, shaping the foundation for lifelong health and wellbeing. But development isn't just about what happens in the body; it's also about places where development happens. Places can be designed to offer rich opportunities for growth and health or introduce adversity that can lead to toxic stress, disrupting healthy development. Structural racism often underpins this unequal design, creating harms that disproportionately and unfairly impact Black and Latine communities.

Conclusion

This moment offers an important opportunity to update the way we communicate about early childhood development—an opportunity grounded not only in new scientific insights but also in long-standing knowledge from scholars of color who have long articulated how racism and place shape developmental outcomes. Their work has helped reveal how unequal access to resources, exposure to environmental hazards, and disinvestment in communities of color constrain the conditions in which healthy development can unfold. By integrating these insights into our public narrative, we can more accurately reflect the full range of factors that shape children's lives.

Moving forward, the challenge and the opportunity lie in translating this broader understanding into communications that galvanize support for systemic change. This means adopting frames that highlight how structural forces—not just personal choices—shape developmental environments and drawing on the work of scholars, advocates, and communities who have been calling attention to these connections for decades. With an expanded narrative that centers place and structural racism as fundamental influences on development, we can help the public and policymakers alike see what needs to change—and what is possible when we act together to create equitable environments where each and every child can thrive.

About FrameWorks

The FrameWorks Institute is a non-profit think tank that advances the mission-driven sector's capacity to frame the public discourse about social and scientific issues. The organization's signature approach, Strategic Frame Analysis®, offers empirical guidance on what to say, how to say it, and what to leave unsaid. FrameWorks designs, conducts, and publishes multi-method, multi-disciplinary framing research to prepare experts and advocates to expand their constituencies, to build public will, and to further public understanding. 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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Place
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