ADDING PRENATAL DEVELOPMENT TO THE CORE STORY OF EARLY DEVELOPMENT

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This brief works alongside *Moving Early Childhood Up the Agenda*, which lays out a Core Story of Early Childhood Development in Australia.

Making early childhood a priority policy issue means bringing all aspects of early childhood into the Core Story. This brief explains how to talk about **prenatal development** as a part of the overall story.

The prenatal period is largely a mystery for the Australian public. While people understand that what pregnant women ingest matters, they tend not to understand that pregnant women's experiences more generally shape development before birth.

There is much work to do to build understanding of this period and increase support for the policies needed in this area.

The recommendations below serve as an initial step towards a more robust and comprehensive strategy for navigating public understanding on this issue and communicating key ideas about prenatal development to a public audience. While further research is necessary, these recommendations can help communicators move the messages in the right direction.

RECOMMENDATION #1. LEAD WITH A BRIEF VERSION OF THE CORE STORY OF *HEALTH AND FAIRNESS.*

What to do

Begin your communications with the Core Story of *Health and Fairness* – the common frame that all parts of the early childhood sector can use to shift the conversation around early childhood in Australia. You can tell this Core Story quickly before pivoting to prenatal development by doing the following:

- Show how supporting early childhood development and learning support children's health and wellbeing now and in the future.

- Define the problem – some children don't have what they need to develop well – and appeal to the value of fairness.

Leading with the Core Story helps shift the broader public conversation around early childhood while helping to link the prenatal period to the rest of early development.

Here's an example of a brief statement of the Core Story that could be used to start off communications about prenatal development:

> **"When children have what they need to develop well in the early years, they can thrive and be healthy now and throughout their lives. But not every family has what they need for positive development. To create a healthier, fairer Australia for all children, we need to support every child, family and community according to their needs."**

RECOMMENDATION #2. PIVOT TO PRENATAL DEVELOPMENT: MAKE IT CLEAR THAT PRENATAL DEVELOPMENT SETS KIDS UP TO THRIVE.

What to do

Draw a parallel between what happens before birth and what happens in the early years: make it clear that prenatal development also shapes children's health and development in important ways.

Focus on how supporting pregnant women leads to positive development and serves as the foundation for health.

BEFORE

"The prenatal period is critical for lifelong development. Providing adequate support during this period helps prevent poor outcomes for children."

AFTER

> **"What happens before birth shapes children's development in the early years and their health and wellbeing throughout life. By supporting pregnant women, we do a lot to help our children have a healthy start to life."**

Why it works

The public thinks that early development is all about learning and skills building. This means they struggle to see the prenatal period (where they can't see learning and skills building taking place) as part of early development.

From their understanding that development is about learning, discussions about the importance of development before birth are confusing. People wonder: what can you actually learn in utero?

When the public sees the importance of the prenatal period, their view is narrowly focused on children's intense vulnerability to harmful substances like drugs, alcohol and tobacco before birth. This is a completely negative focus – on the bad things that can happen. People don't see the prenatal period as a key window of opportunity for *positive* development.

By focusing on health and wellbeing and positioning prenatal development as a foundation of these issues, we can help people see that the prenatal period is a part of early development. We allow people to see that what happens during pregnancy paves the way for good development and health throughout life. By emphasising the *potential to promote positive development* by supporting families during this period, we can counter the tendency to focus only on the role of harmful substances.

Why talking about "the first thousand days of life" backfires

Talking about "the first thousand days of life" does not help people see that development starts before birth. People most frequently think that the phrase refers to the first years of life *after* birth.

Additionally, focusing on the importance of the "first thousand days" can lead to fatalistic thinking about what can be done when this period is over. The specificity of the first thousand days can lead people to think that, once these days are over, nothing can be done to address adverse experiences.

To navigate these issues, we recommend avoiding this phrase and talking instead about "development during pregnancy" or how "children's development begins during pregnancy". People need help in understanding the importance of development before birth.

Why an over-reliance on medical language backfires

People think and talk about the prenatal period and pregnancy as *medical* issues. This is partly because people associate the word "prenatal" with "prenatal care" – something they place squarely in a medical context.

Medical language reinforces this view and restricts understanding of what it means to support healthy prenatal development. When primed to think about pregnancy only as a medical issue, people reason that pregnant women already have access to a lot of the support they need and that additional support is not required until after birth.

To help people understand health broadly, rather than in a strictly medical sense, we recommend talking about "health and wellbeing before birth" or "health and wellbeing during pregnancy" and, when possible, avoiding over-reliance on terms like "prenatal", "care", and "medicine".

RECOMMENDATION #3. EMPHASISE SOCIETY'S RESPONSIBILITY FOR PRENATAL DEVELOPMENT TO BROADEN THINKING.

What to do

Be explicit about society's responsibility for prenatal development:

- Talk about support for pregnant women *and* their families as a way to ensure that prenatal development goes well. Don't position society's responsibility as being towards pregnant women only.

- Don't start with the myth you're trying to debunk – the misperception that pregnant women are the ones responsible for what happens during pregnancy. Leading with this way of thinking can inadvertently reinforce it in people's minds.[1]

- Lead with society's responsibility but leave room for pregnant women's role. Talk about society's responsibility to work with and alongside pregnant women to support children's healthy development.

BEFORE

"The prenatal period is incredibly important. When pregnant women take care of themselves, they create a positive environment for their growing baby. Women need good access to information and support to give their baby a strong start."

AFTER

"Our society has a responsibility to support pregnant women and their babies. By working together with women and their families and providing what they need, we can help get all kids off to a healthy start."

Adding Prenatal Development to the Core Story of Early Development

Why it works

People currently view expecting mothers as primarily responsible for prenatal development. By emphasising society's responsibility, we expand people's thinking about prenatal development and how to best support it in Australia. This way of framing the issue creates a clear role for public programs and policies and increases people's support for providing more services that support prenatal development.

And by combining an emphasis on society's responsibility with an acknowledgment of the role played by pregnant women, we ensure that our messages don't completely violate people's understandings and don't lead them to reject our messages altogether.

RECOMMENDATION #4. OFFER CONCRETE SOLUTIONS THAT REINFORCE SOCIETY'S ROLE.

What to do

Be specific about what can be done to better support prenatal development. Emphasise solutions that have a clear role for communities and government and aren't just about changing pregnant women's behaviour.

- Don't focus solely on the need for more education and awareness for future parents. This is likely to reinforce the idea that responsibility lies only with pregnant women. Instead, focus on examples like the need to provide culturally sensitive care (e.g. by conducting unconscious bias training with practitioners) or the need to build a better transport system.

- Don't focus solely on medical care, which is likely to reinforce a narrow understanding of prenatal development. For example, solutions like creating social support networks for expecting parents and parents of young children by integrating family, child care, early education and community centres into single locations can help people see what is needed and can be done without reinforcing the narrow medical understanding of prenatal development.

- Explain how specific policies or programs support prenatal development; don't just assert that they can.

BEFORE

"The first thousand days of life are crucially important. There are many factors that affect a child's development, even while in utero. These include substance use and smoking, poor nutrition, poor mental health, domestic abuse and poor living conditions. We need to provide better information to prospective mothers and all women of child-bearing age."

> **"As a society, we all have a responsibility to support pregnant women and their families. This means working alongside pregnant women to give them the support they need and to address significant challenges they are up against. For example, we need to make sure that all families across Australia have access to nutritious foods, healthy housing and strong networks of support in their communities."**

Why it works

When we show a range of solutions that better support prenatal development in Australia, we unlock the public's imagination. We help people see how the prenatal period is every Australian's responsibility. We give people a sense that change is possible, and we motivate them to get involved and engage with the issue.

By giving examples that go beyond informing pregnant women's choices, we create space for people to see a role for government in addressing this issue. We combat the tendency to hold pregnant women narrowly and exclusively responsible. We give people a concrete sense of what society can do. We move public thinking beyond the vague idea that "it takes a village" to raise a child and reinforce the belief that society not only *can* but *should* take action.

Recommendations

Putting It All Together

This brief provides recommendations on how advocates can effectively communicate about prenatal development. This begins with raising the salience of early childhood as a whole – and that means starting with the Core Story of *Health and Fairness*. It is critical that, along with other parts of the early childhood sector, those focused on prenatal development turn up the volume on the Core Story and make sure that it gets stuck on repeat.

For this reason, we recommend that communicators always start with the Core Story and then turn to the specific strategies outlined above for messaging about prenatal development.

Figure 1: How to communicate about prenatal development within the Core Story of *Health and Fairness*

STEP 1	STEP 2
Lead with the Core Story of *Health and Fairness*	Pivot to Prenatal Development
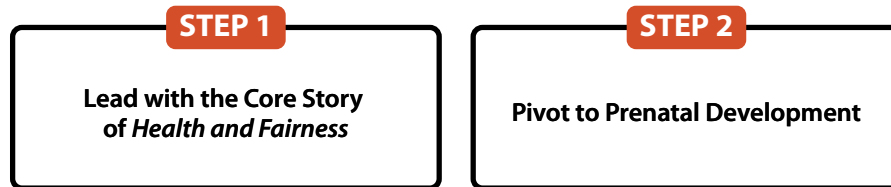
Here is one example of how to pivot from the Core Story of *Health and Fairness* to prenatal development:

> "When children have what they need to develop well in the early years, they can thrive and be healthy now and throughout their lives. But not every family has what they need for positive development. To create a healthier, fairer Australia for all children, we need to support every child, family and community according to their needs.
>
> "In the same way, what happens before birth shapes children's development in the early years and their health and wellbeing throughout life.
>
> "This is why, as a society, we all have a responsibility to support pregnant women and their families. For example, we need to make sure that all families across Australia have access to nutritious foods, healthy housing and strong networks of support in their communities. By supporting women during pregnancy, we do a lot to help our children have a healthy start to life."

Adding Prenatal Development to the Core Story of Early Development

Final Note

This brief is the first step towards building better understanding and support for change around prenatal development in Australia. These recommendations need to be supplemented with future research that generates additional strategies to help people see how environments and experiences shape development *before* birth, and to generate public backing for policies that improve lives and outcomes.

Adding Prenatal Development to the Core Story of Early Development

Endnotes

1. On why myth-busting is not an effective communications strategy, see for instance Schwarz, N., Newman, E., & Leach, W. (2016). Making the Truth Stick & the Myths Fade: Lessons From Cognitive Psychology. *Behavioral Science & Policy*, 2(1), pp. 85–95. See also: www.frameworksinstitute.org/assets/files/framebytes/framebyte_order.pdf.

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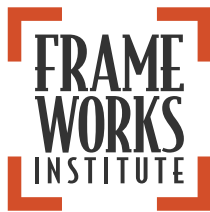
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