



# **Framing the Economic Benefits of Investments in Early Childhood Development**

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## INTRODUCTION

The early childhood development (ECD) field has been energized by a chorus of new voices from outside its ranks: economists. Through fresh analyses and close examinations of existing data, several renowned economists—including Nobel Laureate James Heckman—have determined that public entities will find excellent returns on their investments in quality ECD programs. The economic benefits case is gathering steam as the data are analyzed from long-term studies and new research is conducted.

The economists' arguments reinforce what those in the ECD field have known for some time: that benefits from quality ECD programs accrue not only to individual children and families, but also to society as a whole. But explaining that fact to those outside the field, however, has not been easy. The purpose of this working paper is to make that job easier by explaining how to frame the exciting findings from economists so non-economists, including policy makers, advocates of ECD programs, and the public, will more easily see their value.

There are at least two reasons that we need to think through how best to communicate what the economists have concluded about investments in quality ECD programs. First, the jargon in the field is shorthand for broader concepts that may not be well understood. The concepts need clear, simple explication. Second, the language we use to express ourselves—jargon or not—triggers specific interpretations in audiences, sometimes interpretations that we don't intend or support. We need to be sure that the language we use logically leads to the policy outcome we seek, in this case, substantial investments in ECD programs that produce successful results. The language we use is generated from the underlying framework we have operating in our minds that we use to understand what ECD is and how it fits into the world around us.

After summarizing the messages that these compelling analyses suggest, the paper delves into what “frames” are and why they matter. It then suggests two frames that will help audiences recognize the benefits of ECD. It concludes with specific examples of how advocates for ECD programs can use the frames when making presentations or answering questions.

## Message Summary

The beauty of the economic arguments overall, and why the ECD field is abuzz, is that they are simple, compelling, upheld by research, and being touted by those without a preexisting interest in children. Leading economists have simply done the math and confirmed what every parent and first grade teacher knows: investing in kids pays off. Benefits accrue for children themselves, their siblings, their families, the neighborhoods where they live, and society at large.

To take full advantage of the power of their analyses and their novelty as champions for investments in ECD, economists and those trumpeting their arguments should frame the benefits of investing in ECD as a social good:

- **Explain that what we give to children we get back many times over.** We get a huge return on our investment because quality ECD goes further than simply preparing individual children for their personal success. Quality settings prepare children together, in groups, so they learn how to interact, solve problems, work through frustration, and form community. The investment in quality ECD matures and multiplies, resulting in a population that knows the value of working together.
- **Say clearly that not only our economy but our democracy depends on what we provide for our youngest citizens.** The children benefit from quality ECD as individuals because they do better in school and better in life. Families benefit because their children do better, so family life is better. The economy benefits because schools improve, crime goes down, and the workforce is better prepared. But most important, our society benefits because children who participate in quality ECD are better prepared to be citizens in democracy.
- **Emphasize the implications of the economic findings not just for individual children and families, but for society as a whole.** The benefits of quality ECD translate to the next generation; the investment in a child now is realized immediately and realized once again much later when that child has children. The benefits spread across time and across communities.

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- **Repeat the values frame as often as possible.**

Facts are important, but alone will not sway audiences. Policy makers will choose to support investments in quality ECD because of why it matters to them and their constituents. Remind them that tomorrow's democracy is dependent upon what we provide for children today.

- **Acknowledge the role of personal responsibility but help people see what enables it.**

Parents are, of course, responsible for their children, but the economists' findings tell us that there are other important determinants of children's success in addition to what parents are doing. No one

needs to be reminded of parents' role, but most everyone needs help understanding the difference quality ECD environments make.

- **Avoid economic jargon that is hard to understand or frames children as "commodities" or "inputs" into the economy.**

Economic terms like "private returns" or "public returns" might be better expressed simply as benefits to children and families or benefits to the community at large. Be careful not to say that quality ECD will produce "better children" when you mean "better equipped children."

### WHAT FRAMES ARE

Frames are structures our minds bring to text in order to make sense of it. Scholars like cognitive linguist George Lakoff<sup>1</sup> and sociologist Stuart Hall<sup>2</sup> teach us that frames are the conceptual bedrock for understanding anything. People are only able to interpret words, images, actions, or text of any kind because their brains fit those texts into a conceptual system that gives them order and meaning. Just a few cues—a word, an image—trigger whole frames that determine how we understand the matter at hand.

For example, in the image below, your brain fills in the bottom of the letters for you, telling you that if you remove the blue box the words "ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT" would appear. That's how frames work: they fill in the blanks, giving meaning to what you see.

ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT



Our minds are so efficient at "filling in the blanks" that the process is unconscious and unquestioned, which can be a problem when it's wrong, as it was in this case:

FCQNQMIC DFVFIQRMFNT

The frames we create when we speak about early childhood development do the same thing: they trigger concepts and our brains fill in the blanks. That's why the choice of words becomes important. The words trigger sets of ideas in the minds of audiences, who fill in the rest of the story.

<sup>1</sup> Lakoff, George. *Moral Politics: What Conservatives Know that Liberals Don't*. Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1996.

<sup>2</sup> Hall, Stuart. *Representation: Cultural Representations and Signifying Practices* (Culture, Media and Identities). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, 1997.

## THE IMPORTANCE OF FRAMING

### Frames Transmit Meaning...

Different frames will evoke different meanings about ECD. When economists talk about “inputs,” they evoke a mechanical frame that implies a system with a logical progression and expected outcomes. But inputs only have meaning if you understand that a process will ensue, ultimately transforming the inputs into the output. The word “input” alone is enough to conjure the frame—the speaker needn’t remind the audience about the output.

Thus simple words, or messages, can evoke interrelated systems of ideas; those are the frameworks on which meaning is built. In the case of policy discussions, the frames determine the parameters of debate.

The FrameWorks Institute calls this a process of “mental shortcuts...a small set of internalized concepts and values that allow us to accord meaning to unfolding events and new information.”<sup>3</sup>

It takes very few triggers to evoke widely shared frames like Equal Opportunity, Parental Responsibility, Rugged Individualism—these concepts are “ready made” in the minds of most Americans. Rugged Individualism, in particular, is a dominant frame in much American public discourse—the idea is that if you are left to your own devices and work hard, you will succeed. In this frame, the sum of individual success equals societal success, so the implication of the Rugged Individualism frame is that society, or government as its agent, should not interfere in the lives of individuals or hamper their individualism in any way. The Rugged Individualism frame has certainly motivated great success in our society, but it also masks the other frames and values at work, including communitarian values that maintain that individuals succeed in a benevolent society whose members work together to help one another. When these two sets of values compete, Rugged Individualism usually wins.

Frames beyond Personal Responsibility and Rugged Individualism are therefore harder to trigger in the minds of audiences in part because they are less frequently articulated and so less familiar. The idea of early childhood development as a social good, for example, isn’t instantly understood. It needs explanation, examples, and justification. The economic benefits arguments are appealing precisely because they provide a clear and compelling articulation of that value.

When new facts are submitted that do not resonate with the frames people hold in their heads, it is the facts that are rejected, not the frames. If someone believes that being poor is due to personal failure, for example, facts that contradict that belief are likely to be dismissed before the belief itself is changed. The challenge of communications becomes reframing—providing a different lens for processing new information so that the new information is accepted.

### ...and Frames Transmit Values

According to Lakoff, people connect to frames through their values. Lakoff describes three conceptual levels for framing messages that differentiate among the values component and other aspects of messages<sup>4</sup>:

- Level 1 is the expression of overarching values like fairness, responsibility, equality, equity, etc.—the core values that motivate us to change the world, or not change it.
- Level 2 is the general issue being addressed, like early education, housing, the economy, or the environment.
- Level 3 is about the nitty-gritty of those issues, including the policy detail or strategy and tactics for achieving change. One scholar has called this the “policy plumbing.”

<sup>3</sup> FrameWorks Institute. Talking School Readiness and Early Child Development: A FrameWorks Message Memo. Available from <http://www.frameworksinstitute.org/products/ecdreports.shtml>.

<sup>4</sup> Patent, Jason, and Lakoff, George. Conceptual Levels: Bringing it Home to Values. Available from <http://www.rockridgeinstitute.org/projects/strategic/conceptlevels/>.

Messages can be generated from any Level, but Level 1 is most important, since it is at Level 1 that people connect to the frame in the deepest way. According to Lakoff, people's support or rejection of an issue will be largely determined by whether they can identify and connect with the Level 1 value. Values are motivators, and messages for social change should reinforce and activate values.

Messages, therefore, should articulate Level 1 values and not get mired in Level 3 "policy wonk" minutiae. Early education advocates must know the Level 3 details—what needs changing and how the change will occur—but those details needn't be prominent in the message. In fact, if Level 3 details about how to finance ECD programs crowd out Level 1 values about why they are essential, the message will almost definitely be less effective. A Level 1 frame for the economic development findings would resonate with deeply held values across a large cross-section of policy makers and the public.

### Jargon Distracts from the Frame

When professionals are speaking with each other, jargon is a useful shorthand for expressing complicated ideas. Outside their realm, however, there is a danger that the jargon will alienate or go over the heads of key audiences, or worse, evoke a frame that distracts from their values.

For example, referring to children's skills and abilities as "inputs" into the broader social and economic framework may be technically correct from an economist's point of view, but from a lay point of view reduces the value of children to a commodity. The lay-interpretation of the jargon narrows the value of children. And, focusing on a child as an "input" individualizes the issue, taking attention away from the environmental factors shaping that child's development. Terms like "inputs" and other individualizing language obscures the importance of enriched environments.

Advocates supporting ECD programs will be successful if they can bridge the technicalities in their language to the frames that trigger broader understandings of ECD programs as a social good. The recommended frames that follow aim to help them do just that.

## FRAMES TO EMPHASIZE EARLY CHILDHOOD DEVELOPMENT AS A SOCIAL GOOD

A successful frame for emphasizing the economic contribution of quality ECD will do two things. First, it will evoke an understanding of how early childhood development works. It will bring to mind a mechanism that illustrates the process. Second, it will evoke a widely-shared Level 1 value. The strongest Level 1 values will be evoked when the benefits to society overall are emphasized, answering the question: how do public investments in quality ECD programs benefit people without children?

Two frames can do this: **Reciprocity** and **Democracy**. The Reciprocity frame helps audiences understand how quality early care improves childhood development. The Democracy frame says why that matters.

### The explanatory frame: Reciprocity

**The message: What we give to children we get back in spades.**

Reciprocity explains how child development works. It needs explanation because, as researchers Axel Aubrun and Joe Grady have shown, most people don't understand it<sup>5</sup>. If people believe children develop as a result of some natural, mysterious process, then they will have no reason to support hefty investments in quality ECD programs. Without another frame to take its place, people will default to individualism, in this case, the idea that children will become who they are out of their personal initiative or genetics.

<sup>5</sup> Auburn, Axel, and Grady, Joseph. Simplifying Early Childhood Development: Findings from Cognitive Analysis and Phone Interviews. Washington DC: Cultural Logic, LLC. Available from <http://www.frameworksinstitute.org/products/ecdreports.shtml>.

Reciprocity names an alternative process that people can understand and accept.

Reciprocity is the idea that children develop as a consequence of what adults give them. When adults give them secure and stimulating environments, they develop much more than basic skills like knowing their ABCs. Enriched environments include skilled teachers who create situations for children to grow socially and emotionally, so they learn to interact with others productively. When we give them this, we get back well-developed children who know how to apply what they learn and are ready to take their place in the world.

Reciprocity is a frame that is based on exchange but also on mutuality. What we provide for children—or don't provide—affects not only whether they will succeed personally, but also the society we share with them. The economic payback is a logical conclusion, but so are the non-monetary and symbolic returns, including “smiles and hugs,” as Aubrun and Grady put it.

Because it implies interconnection, Reciprocity is a counterpoint to the Rugged Individualism frame that dominates much of our political discourse. It provides the rationale for why we need to invest in quality care for all children.

Note that we don't have to use the word “Reciprocity” to express the frame. The examples of messages below avoid that term but still evoke its meaning.

### **The values frame: Democracy**

#### **The message: Support our youngest citizens.**

Individuals reap terrific benefits from quality ECD programs: the ability to support a family, being a contributing member of society, maybe even personal wealth. Those findings are important, of course, but the stakes are much higher than the benefits to any individual child or single family. The real power of the economic findings is what they mean for our society at large.

In this frame, descriptions of ECD's benefits to individual children, families, schools, and communities (in the form of crime reduction and workforce development) are connected to the larger Level 1 value of democracy. After all, we don't want strong schools and a productive workforce simply so people can consume more—we want strong schools and a well-prepared workforce because they contribute to civic life.

The Democracy frame locates the child—and support for ECD programs—in the context of the community at large. The Democracy frame connects what happens to children now to the society we are creating for the future. This frame appeals to our highest moral sense in which the health and well-being of all our future citizens are connected to the health of families, schools, neighborhoods, and the economy. As Art Rolnick put it when he connected preschool to education: “An education prepares people to be productive and to be good citizens. It is essential to not only the economy, but also to democracy.”<sup>6</sup>

## **USING THE FRAMES IN PRESENTATIONS AND IN ANSWERS TO QUESTIONS**

Economists have been making a range of statements in support of public investments in ECD programs, from how it benefits individuals to its impact on society. When economists James Heckman and Dimitry Masterov say “Skill begets skill; learning begets learning,” they are talking of the benefits to

children immediately and as the individual adults they will become. When they say, “The best way to improve the schools is to improve the early environments of the children sent to them,” they are expanding the frame from the benefits to the individual child to the impact on the settings in which children learn and play.<sup>7</sup>

<sup>6</sup> Federal Reserve Economist Urges Much Wider Public Investment in Preschool. NIEER Special Report, Preschool Matters, December 2003.

<sup>7</sup> Heckman, James J., and Masterov, Dimitry V. The Productivity Argument for Investing in Young Children. Working Paper 5, Invest in Kids Working Group, Committee for Economic Development, September 30, 2004. Available from <http://jenni.uchicago.edu/Invest/>.



But if advocates stop there, at the individual level, they will not help audiences understand why additional and substantial investments are necessary. Advocates need to connect their statements to larger Level 1 values like Democracy if audiences are to grasp quality ECD's larger benefits to communities. William Schweke approaches this when he says, "The most forward-thinking approach solving these problems and increasing U.S. competitiveness is to equip today's and tomorrow's citizens with the skills and attitudes for economic and civic success in an increasingly knowledge-based economy."<sup>8</sup> Robert Dugger also expands the frame when he explains that with investments in ECD programs, "Our future labor force would be better educated, team-oriented, and more competitive. Crime rates would be lower. Employees would be more productive and the outlook for U.S. growth, job creation, and fiscal sustainability would be significantly more positive."<sup>9</sup>

Economists are already saying they want ECD programs to be improved not just for their own sake but because of what they mean to our society and our future. If advocates can articulate this frame more clearly, they will definitely strengthen the power of the argument by explaining why quality ECD programs matter to people without children.

### Sample Messages for Evoking Democracy & Reciprocity Frames for ECD

Overall, messages should *link the benefits of quality ECD for children to the benefits to society*. To do this, speakers should:

- **Anchor speeches and presentations with the Reciprocity and Democracy frames.** Begin and end presentations with a clear statement about why these findings matter: "What I'm going to tell you today is about more than data, it is about what these data mean for the future of our economy, and even more important, for our democracy."

Explanations about how ECD works in the preschool setting can then be used as supporting arguments. Though it may seem obvious, it is important to connect the dots. Whenever possible, remind audiences that benefits to individual children translate into broad gains for society as a whole.

- **Repeat the Reciprocity and Democracy frames in answers to questions.** Of course, advocates will not always have the luxury of setting the frame. Often, they will be responding to questions from journalists, policy makers, or business leaders. In that case, speakers should imbed the frames in answers to questions. Each answer is an opportunity to explain reciprocity and/or evoke broader values like democracy.

Frames are powerful because they can set the terms of debate and make some opposing views harder to sustain. But frames, however resonant, are not magic words that silence the opposition. The frame simply helps advocates determine what to say next in specific situations.

The examples below illustrate how either frame might generate a different, but correct, answer to the same question. Though they are presented here as possible answers to specific questions, the messages could be used in other contexts.

*These findings are based on very few children. What makes you think they apply to larger numbers of children who will be in different settings than the ones that were measured here?*

**[democracy]** "Our careful analysis is robust. It shows that if we invest in quality programs for young children, it pays off for them as adults. But the investment is about more than reducing crime and improving schools. The investment in quality means that we will prepare our youngest citizens to be participants in democracy. So the investment accrues to more than to individual children. It benefits society as a whole."

<sup>8</sup> Schweke, William. *Smart Money: Education and Economic Development*. Economic Policy Institute, July 2004.

<sup>9</sup> Dugger, Robert H. *American Kids, Workforce Quality and Fiscal Sustainability: A Ten-Year Plan for the Invest in Kids Working Group*. Working Paper 4, Invest in Kids Working Group, Committee for Economic Development, September 24, 2004. Available from <http://www.ced.org/projects/kids.shtml#working>.



**[reciprocity]** “Our careful analysis is robust. It shows that if we invest in quality programs for young children, it pays off for them as adults. It’s not surprising when you realize that what we give children is what we get back from them as adults. If we provide quality environments that properly stimulate their young minds, they learn more than letters and numbers. They learn how to be productive team players; they learn how to interact with others and contribute to society.”

***What if a city makes the investment in early childhood that you’re suggesting, but then the children move away. How would the community reap the benefits then?***

**[democracy]** “The beauty of investing in quality education and care for young children is that the benefits accrue broadly, across all of society. Wherever these children end up, they will be contributing members of their communities, participants in civic life. This benefits all of us—immediately and into the future. It’s why we have the imperative to see that every American child has access to quality education and care.”

**[reciprocity]** “The beauty of investing in quality education and care for young children is that the benefits accrue broadly, across all of society. It makes sense when you realize that what we provide for children when they’re young is what society sees when they become adults. We reap what we sow—investing in young children now means we’ll have a stronger society later.”

***Some of the findings you’re basing your recommendations on are pretty old and done on very small populations. Yet you want huge investments of tax dollars. How can you be so sure it will be money well spent?***

**[democracy]** “Economists with no special interest in children, including one Nobel Laureate, have examined these data very carefully and have come back with a clear mandate: there is no better way to ensure America maintains a robust economy and a strong democracy. We have a responsibility to help policy makers understand that they should be investing adequately in quality early education programs.”

**[reciprocity]** “Economists with no special interest in children, including one Nobel Laureate, have examined these data very carefully and shown that investing in quality early care is wise indeed. It makes sense: what we invest when children are young is what we get back when they are grown. In quality settings children learn more than their letters and numbers—they learn how to learn, with other children, in ways that prepare them for productive futures. The economists have shown us that it’s a smart investment because it pays off like no other.”

***How can babysitting for toddlers now determine future crime rates?***

**[reciprocity + democracy]** “Quality care for children and reducing crime rates might seem like an odd pairing until you remember that when we give children quality care, we give them more than their ABCs. Quality means children are in settings where they learn with other children how to solve problems, work together, overcome frustration, and be creative. They learn to learn. The evidence on this is clear. And reducing crime is but one effect, though a strong one. There are many benefits from investing in quality child development, everything from a robust economic future to a strong democracy.”

***Isn’t this program you’re advocating an inappropriate intrusion of government into the sanctity of family life? Shouldn’t how children are raised be left up to parents?***

**[democracy]** “Our responsibility as public servants is to be sure we give parents the supports they need to raise healthy families. It would be irresponsible of us to withhold something that we know will not only benefit their own families but will strengthen our economy and prepare our youngest citizens for carrying forward our democracy. It is exactly government’s role to ensure that every child has access to quality early childhood education.”

***Aren't there other investments communities could make that would also show good returns, but sooner?***

**An economist might say:** [fiscal responsibility + reciprocity + democracy] “My responsibility as an economist is to recommend to the citizens of this state how they can most wisely invest for the long term. Investing in quality early childhood programs outperforms every other investment the state could make. I was surprised by that too, but it makes sense. What we give to our youngest citizens comes back to us many times over in the form of safer cities, a well-prepared workforce, and a stronger democracy.”

**An advocate might say:** [fiscal responsibility + reciprocity + democracy] “An economist’s responsibility is to recommend to the citizens of our state how they can most wisely invest for the long term. They are telling us loud and clear: investing in quality early childhood programs outperforms every other investment the state could make. It makes sense. What we give to our youngest citizens comes back to us many times over in the form of safer cities, a well-prepared workforce, and a stronger democracy.”

## CONCLUSION

The economic analyses are exciting because they allow advocates to begin a conversation with a new constituency and potential ally, the business community, on its own terms. Some policy makers and business leaders might already appreciate the value of quality ECD, especially if they have children or grandchildren of their own. And they may understand the importance of high quality, accessible, and affordable preschool to keeping their workforce happy and productive. But few have considered the value quality ECD programs provide to the community at large or democracy in the long term.

Placing ECD in the realm of business and the economy cracks open new ways to make the case for ECD as a social issue. The evidence about ECD’s economic contributions and links to vibrant communities can be the segue to discussion of specific policies that support ECD. Advocates can press for local investment in

## The Power of Economists as Messengers

To encourage support for substantial investments in ECD, economic benefits should be framed in terms of how they accrue to society as a whole. The views of economists are especially compelling in conveying this message because of their ability to evaluate objectively the cost-effectiveness of policies and to analyze the economic impact of policies. As such, they can easily speak from two frames, neither of which are specific to ECD:

- **Fiscal Responsibility:** This frame emphasizes the economist’s role in assessing data and making recommendations about how to wisely spend tax dollars or other resources. Economists are not inherently sentimental about children; their task is to identify the most efficient use of scarce public funds based on the available data.
- **Stewardship:** This frame goes beyond simply advocating fiscal responsibility. This frame emphasizes the economist’s role in advancing sound policies that provide long-term benefits to the public in general, by ensuring that today’s investments reap benefits for tomorrow’s society.

Stewardship takes the fiscal responsibility frame to a higher level since it evokes the future. Tying either of these frames to Democracy in the context of ECD will enhance their power.

ECD with the understanding that it will be good for an entire jurisdiction on a variety of levels.

In this way, the economic benefits discussion is a starting point, not an end in itself. It invites a new audience, business leaders and policy makers, into the discussion about why quality ECD is a worthy investment. With persistence, the social value of ECD programs to families and the community at large will dominate the discussion.

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