Talking about racism and early childhood development

Evidence-based strategies for science communication

June 2022

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Supported by the Harvard Center on the Developing Child

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Introduction

A growing body of scientific evidence is shedding light on the full toll of racism on human health and wellbeing. With that evidence comes an opportunity to promote fresh thinking about racism as part of the context in which young children learn, develop, and grow.

The science of early childhood development is poised to contribute in meaningful ways to the ongoing public conversation about racism and the need to dismantle racist systems. To be a productive voice in that conversation, it is imperative that communications are optimally framed. Fragmented framing or messaging guesswork leave too much room for misperception among decision-makers and their constituents. This is especially the case on an issue this complex.

This brief draws from previous research by the FrameWorks Institute to offer guidance grounded in empirical investigations into how Americans think about race and racism—and how to communicate in ways that shift mindsets and open thinking in productive directions. We articulate a set of predictable communications challenges, identify the cultural models that create those challenges, pinpoint communications habits that exacerbate them, and enumerate strategies that can help the science shine through.

This analysis is firmly grounded in evidence—each finding and recommendation is supported by framing research on topics that are relevant and adjacent to the topics of interest for communicators seeking to share the science of early childhood. These findings and recommendations are provisional and preliminary, in that none have been tested specifically for their effects on the specific outcomes of interest to communicators breaking new ground in the territory between early childhood development and racism.

This brief unfolds in four parts:

— A summary of key scientific points to translate, as identified by the Harvard Center on the Developing Child and the National Scientific Council on the Developing Child

— A story format that centers racism as a key influence on early childhood development

— A summary of the cultural models that people rely on when thinking and talking about race, racism, and related issues

— A set of recommendations for how to communicate more effectively on these vital topics

Key Content to Communicate

Before attempting to translate science, it's necessary to clarify the key concepts that communicators want to convey to the public and policymakers. Below, we offer a limited set of fundamental principles and points that need to be translated for the public so that they are well-informed, less susceptible to misinformation, and better equipped to engage productively in public conversations and democratic processes.

This analysis is not intended to supplant literature reviews that systematically examine the research on a topic. It does not seek to replace or subsume "Moving Upstream: Confronting Racism to Open Up Children's Potential," the Harvard Center's white paper on the intersection of racism and early childhood development. Nor is it a set of messages.

Rather, it serves to surface and organize neurobiological scientific findings about how racism affects early childhood so that these points can be effectively framed and communicated.

Key Concepts

- **All children develop in relationship to their environment.** The timing, quality, and intensity of children's early experiences and exposures influence outcomes in childhood and across the lifespan.
  - **Early matters.** Early experiences have long-lasting effects on health and wellbeing.
  - **Adversity matters.** When children experience significant adversity early in life, they are less likely to reach their full potential and more likely to experience poor health outcomes.
  - **Intensity matters.** The greater the number or severity of risk factors or adverse experiences in childhood, the greater the likelihood of poor outcomes. The greater number of protective factors or supportive experiences in childhood, the greater the likelihood of positive outcomes.
  - **Policy and program choices matter.** Through policy and programs, society can either prevent and reduce adversity, or cause and increase it. Policy and program choices can also either mitigate adversity or compound it. Timely supports can buffer the effects of adversity once it has occurred. In the absence of such supports, adversity can cause lasting harm—and increase the risk for additional adverse experiences.
- **Racism shapes the environments where children develop.** Racism contributes to and compounds the adversity experienced by families and children of color in a number of ways:
  - **Many public and institutional policies create uniquely harmful environments for people of color.** Policies that create, maintain, or perpetuate racial inequalities can be described as *racist policies*. Racist policies channel higher levels of adversity or lower levels of support and opportunity into communities of color. This interacting set of policies is often called *systemic racism*—a system that creates inequitable access to employment, housing, education, safety, health care, and more.
  - **People of color regularly experience and witness unfair, unjust, and unequal treatment based on race.** When people of color experience or perceive racial discrimination, racial animosity, or racist abuse, this is called *interpersonal racism*. Interpersonal racism is not always explicit, but it is common and harmful.
- **The effects of racism get "under the skin."** The environments and experiences created by racism can set off physical processes that hamper health and wellbeing. Studies of these physical processes have documented several pathways through which racism affects children's health and wellbeing. These pathways, which are distinct but not mutually exclusive, include:
  - *Response to excessive stress.* The constant pressure of coping with systemic racism and interpersonal racism can flood the body with stress hormones. Over time, this "toxic stress response" causes a significant wear-and-tear effect on children's brains and bodies. Public and institutional policies, both past and present, contribute to excessive stress for families of color.

- *Chronic inflammation.* An activated stress system triggers the immune system to send "fighting cells" to critical locations—a process called inflammation. When organs are flooded with high levels of these cells over persistent periods of time, it can disrupt their function and produce lasting changes. This can increase the risk of later health problems, such as obesity, diabetes, heart disease, depression, and preterm births. Public and institutional policies, past and present, contribute to chronic inflammation among families of color.

- *Unpredictability.* When children experience many unplanned, unexpected changes in spaces, people, resources, interactions, or events, it poses distinct challenges to development. Unpredictability can activate the body's stress response systems, alter the brain circuitry responsible for memory and emotion, and cause hormone imbalances that harm the heart, kidneys, and other organs and systems. Public and institutional policies, past and present, contribute to more unpredictable environments for many families of color.

- *Harm and threat.* Experiences that harm children or cause children to perceive a risk of harm cause changes in neural regions related to fear processing and emotional learning. Public and institutional policies policies, past and present, add harm and threat to the lives of children of color.

- *Lack of essential experiences and resources.* When young children do not receive the inputs needed for optimal brain development (like nutrition or stimulation) the sensory cortex can be negatively affected. Public and institutional policies, past and present, reduce access to healthy food, safe places for physical activity, and social connectedness in communities of color.

- *Harmful exposures.* Exposures to toxins are associated with a range of health problems, such as preterm birth or other poor pregnancy outcomes. Public and institutional policies, past and present, have concentrated pollution and hazardous substances in communities of color.

- **Evidence-based methods to reduce the effects of racism on children's environments and development have been identified.** There are many approaches to reducing the harmful effects of racist policies and racist interactions. Research has shown that the following three approaches offer strong benefits, specifically for young children:

  - Adopt and implement policies that enhance economic support and stability.

  - Pursue long-term initiatives that improve opportunities in a designated community.

  - Take steps to reduce interpersonal and cultural racism.

- **More research is needed to better understand how to buffer children from the effects of racism.**
  - Families and communities of color take many steps to buffer children from the effects of racism, as measured by social or academic outcomes. For example, many caregivers in families of color use strategies to prepare their children to thrive in a racially hierarchical society. Community strength and cohesion are also protective factors. More research is needed to understand whether and how these protective factors affect children's physical responses.
  - In other areas of public health, research has found that a targeted approach is necessary to eliminate disparities, rather than simply produce an overall, "average" improvement. More research is needed to identify the most effective ways to interrupt, eliminate, and mitigate the adverse effects of racism.
- **There is good reason to act—and to do so swiftly.** Systemic, cultural, and interpersonal racism impose unique and substantial stressors on the lives of families raising young children of color. Children develop rapidly, and their early experiences lay the foundation for future health and wellbeing. We must act with a sense of urgency to confront and dismantle racism.

Telling the Story of Early Childhood Development and Racism

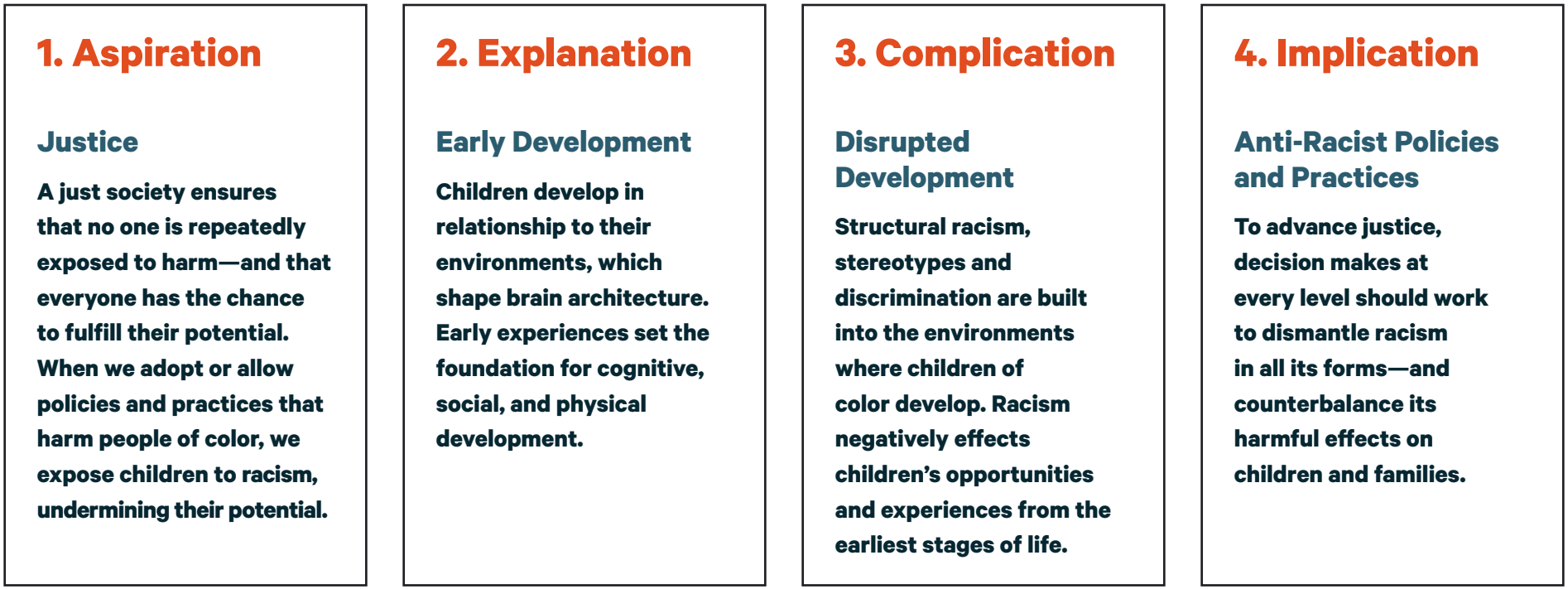
To translate the above insights, science communicators must navigate public perceptions of race, racism, and science itself.

To date, the Core Story of Early Childhood Development has proven highly effective in translating the science of early childhood to build public understanding and shape policy discussions in science-informed way. This Core Story has been crafted and expressed to resist little-picture, individual-level explanations for why some children experience adversity. These framing choices resist and erode racist thinking that inaccurately blames people of color for the unequal outcomes and conditions they experience.

To push the field further toward environments and outcomes that foster optimal development for all children, there is a need to tell a more specific story about how racism shapes early development and outcomes. Figure 1 illustrates a way to do this.

While we have provided language that can be used verbatim if desired, it is important to emphasize that we are not recommending that this specific wording be used in every case. On the contrary, an effective communications template needs to be flexible and expressed in ways tailored to specific messengers, mediums, audiences, and purposes. In addition to this flexibility, the story below offers consistency: a narrative template for organizing talks, briefs, working papers, and other communications that elevate attention to racism as an influence on children's environments.

Figure 1. A story format to directly address racism in early childhood



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Defining Racism

It is important to name racism as a powerful force shaping children's environments. It is also critical to explain what you mean by the term. Plain language—free of jargon and full of explanation—is a helpful tool for ensuring that the ideas are clear to many audiences, not just those who are already familiar with these terms.

Here is recommended language for defining different manifestations of racism:

Structural racism: When society's systems and institutions work in ways that provide an unjust advantage to some racial/ethnic groups or perpetuate an unfair disadvantage to other racial/ethnic groups, this is structural racism. Structural racism works through public policies and institutional practices. It shapes the ways political, economic, and social sectors work.

Cultural racism: When publicly available language or images suggest that whiteness is the norm, associate whiteness with positive traits, or associate people of color with negative or diminishing traits, this is cultural racism. Cultural racism is perpetuated through the media, cultural representations, social norms and other forms of public discourse.

Interpersonal racism: When individuals speak or act in biased, discriminatory ways—or when people of color experience or witness these interactions—this is interpersonal racism. Interpersonal racism takes place in everyday social interactions. It includes explicit, egregious expressions as well as subtle acts of exclusion. People can express or act on racist ideas without recognizing the assumptions and associations that are shaping their behavior.

This story has much in common with the strategies currently used by scientists and advocates, which maximizes the power of repetition and familiarity. It takes advantage of a narrative format that provides context, centers explanation, and highlights solutions. The differences from the Core Story—which are both nuanced and necessary—are as follows:

1. **Lead with an intrinsic value like justice or fairness.** When discussing racism, shift away from shared prosperity framing. Economic values do not move the public on race-related issues. Moreover, they often prompt affected communities and advocates to question the motivations of the communicator. If economic data—like return on investment—is essential to the topic, position it later in the narrative.
2. **Keep a consistently strong emphasis on the role that environments play in early brain development.** Make environments the main character in the story. Think of environments as the protagonist driving the plot, which is the overall development of the child.

3. **Frame racism—whether structural, cultural, or interpersonal—as an adverse aspect of the environments where children learn and grow.** Make racism the antagonist in the story—not race, diversity, or concentrated poverty. Emphasize the biological processes that are sparked, slowed, or otherwise shaped by the presence of racism in children's environments.

4. **Point to systems-level changes that can mitigate racism in children's environments.** Including solutions guards against little-picture or fatalistic thinking. Leaving them out allows room for people to fill in little-picture solutions (like anti-racist training) that are incommensurate with the scope of the problem, or to assume that the problem is so big that change is beyond reach.

Relevant Cultural Models/Mindsets

Because people rely on existing mental models to make sense of communications on social and scientific issues, communicators can be more effective when they are aware of existing patterns of thinking. In this section, we summarize FrameWorks' cultural models research into race-related and racialized issues. It reveals a complex array of models that Americans deploy to understand race, racism, racial disparities, and related solutions in the US.

As with all our analyses of cultural models, we seek to provide an accurate description of the predominant patterns identified in the data—the good, the bad, and the ugly. Our descriptions characterize ways of thinking from the inside, articulating the logic of models, and how using assumptions leads to specific patterns of reasoning. This descriptive analysis in no way represents an affirmation or endorsement of the models or patterns uncovered through analysis. It does, however, offer a strategic way to respond to and shape public thinking.

Some of the patterns of thinking we identify are more salient for some individuals and groups than others. For instance, many of the unproductive mindsets we describe below are more prominent and dominant among white Americans. Yet communicators should not assume that they are exclusive to whites. These ways of thinking are observable and common among people of color, although they may be less prominent and/or exist alongside other, more productive mindsets.

Put another way: Different people and groups can and do draw on these cultural mindsets in different ways. Yet the presence of variation does not imply the absence of commonality.

When communicators are equipped to anticipate and negotiate the ways of thinking they will likely encounter in any group, they can respond more strategically to the specific needs and concerns expressed in a particular setting.

Common Unproductive Mindsets

The first set of cultural models we describe are unproductive. Many are racist, in that they normalize and perpetuate unfair, unjust, and unequal social arrangements. Others are patterns in public thinking that complicate the kinds of understandings that the field wants to elevate. Communicators should avoid wording, images, examples, or other framing strategies that restate or reinforce these ways of thinking.

- *Racism = Personal Animus.* This model holds that racism is a personal belief system characterized by harsh, hostile, bigoted attitudes toward people of a different race, and that some people express these beliefs through words or actions. This model isn't "wrong," but it is problematically incomplete. It obscures the ways in which systems and institutions enact racism through unjust and unfair practices, policies, and norms. It makes it easy to diminish or dismiss subtle acts of prejudice, privilege, or exclusion as "not really racist," as people reason that to label a person or action fairly and accurately as "racist," there must be explicit evidence of hostile, bigoted beliefs. It makes it exceedingly difficult for people to understand that racism can and does shape interactions between people who share a racial identity.
- *Racists = Extremists.* This model holds that racism is an extreme, and therefore rare, belief system, and that people who act on racist beliefs are, by definition, extremists. This model has been fostered through "progress" narratives of American history, such as the version that teaches that, as desegregation laws allowed whites to encounter more Black Americans, white Americans adopted more tolerant, less prejudiced attitudes. Within this way of thinking, most contemporary white Americans do not hold racist beliefs and, therefore, it logically follows that those who do are a minority with outlier, fringe attitudes. When reasoning from this model, people also conclude that in contemporary America, people of color rarely experience expressions of racial animus. As a model that locates racism in the individual, it thereby distracts from systemic thinking.
- *Separate Fates.* Another pattern of thinking that structures opinions about race is the belief that whites and other racial/ethnic groups live in distinct worlds, shaped by different forces, and moving in divergent directions. The concerns of specific racial/ethnic groups are understood as disconnected from the shared concerns and aspirations of the broader society. Both Black and white Americans can and do reason from this model, though their lived experiences lead them to different opinions.*
  - When applying reasoning from the *Separate Fates* model, whites may easily conclude that Black concerns about public policy issues are demands for "special treatment." Additionally, Blacks applying the *Separate Fates* reasoning can easily conclude that the interests of whites are diametrically opposed to their own, that reform is a zero-sum game, and that the odds that Black people will "win" are low because the game is rigged.

* We specify Black Americans here, rather than people of color, because this data was collected among people who identify as African American or Black.

In both cases, the notion of *Separate Fates* tends to dampen dialogue about positive-sum approaches that could result in a system that is meaningfully improved for all.

  - *Separate Fates* thinking has other important consequences for the public conversation about race: It makes it easier for white people to characterize people of color as the "other" and thereby, by definition, outside of the system. It allows people to place the concerns of other communities "over there" as being disconnected from themselves. It also naturalizes differential outcomes, making it less likely that people will understand or acknowledge the connection between structural factors and opportunities and outcomes for communities of color.

- *It's Not Race, It's Class.* This model explains a variety of racial outcomes as "really" being about economic factors, such as employment, income, or education. When reasoning from this mode, people fail to look for causal mechanisms related to race or racism. This model first surfaced in FrameWorks' research on the justice system, where researchers observed that white research participants were more than willing to acknowledge that the system is biased based on class—noting that wealthy people routinely buy their way out of trouble—but went to great lengths to generate alternative explanations for statistics that suggested that the system perpetuated racial biases.

  - On the topic of education, participants answered questions about the role of race with responses that centered on class, pointing to factors like poverty, residential location, or parental ability to pay for private school to explain inequities. Likewise, in a study FrameWorks conducted on public thinking about contemporary *de facto* residential segregation, many Americans responded to questions about racial segregation with explanations that centered on class. For example, some asserted that people raised in poverty prefer to stay in "familiar" neighborhoods and may feel out of place in "rich" areas. The takeaway: communicators should anticipate that conversations about racism and racial disparities will be affected by the gravitational pull of explanations that substitute poverty or social class as the relevant mechanism.

- *Cultures of Dysfunction.* This model assumes that poor people of color, especially Black Americans, live in cultures of resignation, dependence, and crime that leave individuals ill-prepared to find success and prosperity. These cultures of dysfunction are thought to be passed from one generation to the next, producing individuals who violate American ideals of discipline, hard work, and self-reliance. When this model holds sway in people's thinking, it not only mutes attention to the ways that environments shape life trajectories, it also dampens recognition of people of color as capable, self-directed actors in persistent, organized efforts to build a more racially just, inclusive society.

— *Systemic Naturalism*. This model involves the thinking that inequality is an inevitable feature of society and that, as one research participant put it, "You're always gonna have someone who's at the top, and you're always gonna have somebody that's at the bottom." This understanding of the world and how it works includes a deep assumption that inequality is natural—that some people will always be living "at the bottom" in conditions of poverty.

— *Science Serves Nefarious Purposes*. This model involves suspicion and skepticism about the claims and motives of scientific research. (As one participant noted, "It can be used in the wrong way.") This model is informed by knowledge of how scientific and medical research has been conducted in unethical and racist ways, as well as a recognition of the ways in which scientific advances have either not benefited, or have even harmed, communities of color.

— *Fatalism*. The pessimism that accompanies many social issues also extends to racism. People assume that our nation lacks the will, the focus, and the means to effectively address the scale of the problem. When people reason from this model, they conclude that solutions are elusive, leaving racism and racial inequalities as permanent fixtures of American society. In our research, Black Americans often reason that because racism is so deeply rooted in American life, it is difficult to imagine a future where it does not exist. Among whites, fatalism also abounds, but often stems from different sources, such as the idea that group affiliation is natural (people naturally prefer people like them) or a sense that it's hard to change hearts and minds (a solution that flows from an interpersonal understanding of racism).

Common Productive Mindsets

The second set of models are more productive in that they support more deliberative, systemic thinking about the causes, consequences, and collective responses to racial injustice and racial hierarchy. These productive models exist in competition alongside the unproductive models described above, and are often "recessive" or secondary, rather than "dominant" or top-of-mind.

Communicators should elaborate and expand on these cultural models through framing.

— *Place Structures Opportunity*. This model involves the assumption that institutions and systems—especially education, health care, and transportation—provide access to opportunity and advancement in life. Reasoning from this model, people recognize that there are important differentials and inequities between places in terms of access and quality of these supports for the people who live there. People talk about this unequal access in terms of location, class, and race.

— *Structural Racism.* This model recognizes the pervasive and patterned ways in which people of color, especially Black Americans, have been subjected to discriminatory practices in law, criminal justice, housing, lending, and education, and assumes that those discriminatory practices have played a role in concentrating poverty in communities of color. While this pattern of thinking is emerging—meaning, it is neither consistently available nor deeply embedded in culture—it is highly productive and calls attention to systemic rather than individualized or cultural causality.

Common "Double-Edged" Mindsets

The third set of models have both positive and problematic implications that communicators must consider. They offer both conceptual challenges to understanding the ideas that the field wishes to elevate, as well as opportunities to build on and connect with people's existing understandings of the causes, consequences, and collective responses to racial injustice and racial hierarchy.

— *Science Solves (Some) Problems.* This model holds that science and technology drive innovation and create practical solutions to both everyday problems and significant societal challenges. Yet people also reason that science is an inappropriate approach to addressing some types of issues, particularly matters of private concern, such as family life. This way of thinking shuts down productive dialogue about how science can address the forms of adversity that pose unique and substantial burdens on families of color.

— *Land of Opportunity.* This model depicts the US as a place of boundless opportunity, where social mobility and success is available to anyone who puts in the work to make it happen. This model is double-edged in that it both problematically idealizes America and productively calls forth the highest ideals of America. The romanticized, unproductive side of the model obscures the existence and effects of racism. When people assume that opportunities abound, they readily conclude that anyone who fails to grasp success simply did not try hard enough. The values-based, productive side of the model leads people to unequivocally insist that the nation *should* offer equal opportunity to its citizens. This aspect of the model can be leveraged to argue for efforts to equalize opportunities that are widely viewed as gateways to social mobility, especially education and employment.

— *System Is Rigged.* This model—in contrast to the Land of Opportunity model—involves the assumption that American economic and political systems are rigged to benefit the wealthy. When thinking in this way, people recognize that the wealthy hold inordinate political power and that they use their power to tilt the playing field in their own direction.

  — This model involves a productive assumption that "the system" is at some level a construct and, therefore, subject to change. It can be leveraged to argue for change across a broad range of systems that have worked against the interests of children and families of color.

- However, communicators cannot assume that this double-edged model will necessarily or automatically cut through problematic thinking about race, racism, or racial justice. People's thinking about the "system" is crucially incomplete. The "system" people imagine does not typically involve the structures, policies, and practices that created and perpetuated racial hierarchy in the US.

- Thinking about the "system" is also fuzzy in that people generally struggle to explain, in specific and concrete terms, how the system is rigged. Consequently, political actors manipulate this mindset by offering different diagnoses of who is rigging the system, how they are rigging it, and to what end. Right-wing, white nationalist populists fill in the blanks by pointing the finger at immigrants, Black people, Jewish people, and socialists, suggesting that these groups influence liberal elites to benefit them at the expense of "ordinary" white Americans. Conversely, progressive activists and politicians highlight corporate power and the ways that business and political elites protect and reinforce their power to disenfranchise and exploit Black and brown communities.

— *Unskilled Inheritance.* This model of child learning and development assumes that people generally mimic what they see growing up, and that they can only know what they have personally seen and experienced. In a study of public thinking about urban poverty, this model was consistently offered by Black participants as one explanation for the intergenerational experience of poverty within and across urban families. If parents who grew up in poverty lack the skills to escape it, the thinking goes, they can't help but pass this weakness on to their children.

- This model is productive in that it focuses attention on the role of childhood in long-term outcomes and provides an opportunity to discuss interventions and policies that support children and families. It is problematic because it focuses attention on class, not race/racism, and focuses thinking on the supposed deficits, deficiencies, and dysfunctions of people experiencing poverty. That is, people reasoning from this model consistently argue that children in poverty are seeing and mimicking unwanted values and behaviors. It obscures the role of systemic factors in shaping environments and ignores the presence of positive or protective experiences in these environments.

Recommended Framing Strategies

The story provided in Figure 1 offers a structure for framing communications about the intersection of racism and early childhood development. The analysis of cultural models offers guidance about themes to emphasize and de-emphasize. While crafting communications that follow the structure and navigate public mindsets, keep these additional recommendations in mind.

Appeal to justice and fairness explicitly, but carefully.

While it is important to frame conversations about racism and anti-racism in terms of fairness, it is equally important to express fairness in ways that resonate broadly and reinforce productive understandings of fairness. See the sidebar Framing Fairness for examples of how to phrase different definitions or models of fairness.

Explicit calls for fairness or justice can activate the productive aspects of the cultural model that America is the *Land of Opportunity*. This outcome becomes more likely when communicators offer a full, clear explanation of what they mean by those values.

Fairness Framing

While it is important to frame conversations about racism and anti-racism in terms of fairness, it is equally important to express fairness in effective ways. When we offer an explicit explanation of what we mean by fairness, we can short-circuit unproductive perceptions, such as the assumption that to be fair, we must treat people uniformly, or that to be fair, we must reward good behavior and punish unwanted behavior. The type of explanation we offer may vary by context or topic.

Here are three ways to translate different conceptions of fairness in ways that resonate broadly:

To translate a "targeted universalism" conceptualization of fairness, try this: "We need to ensure that every family has access to what they need to support healthy development for children in the earliest stages of life, when the architecture of the brain is being established. This means recognizing and addressing the ways that racism shapes families' experiences and environments."

To translate an "equity" conceptualization of fairness, try this: "Every child should have a fair and just opportunity to get off to a strong start, no matter where they live, learn, or play. To achieve this, we need to address social problems, unfair practices, and unjust conditions that undermine healthy early development, when the architecture of the brain is being established."

To translate a "social justice" conceptualization of fairness, try this: "A just society ensures that no child—regardless of the color of their skin—is repeatedly exposed to things we know are harmful. To fulfill the ideal of justice for all, we have an obligation to tackle unhealthy conditions and barriers to early development that, due to our policy choices, more severely affect communities of color."

To translate a place-based conceptualization of fairness, try this: "A child's early opportunities to learn, grow, and develop shouldn't be based on where they live. Yet our current policies mean that some neighborhoods have few environmental toxins and plenty of options for safe play and quality early learning, while other neighborhoods have too much pollution and too few childcare providers. As a matter of basic fairness, we must ensure that every residential area is a safe, healthy, stimulating place to raise a child."

Consistently use language that expands the public's mental model of racism.

Explain racism as an effect of institutions that families of color interact with every day. Consistently modify the term racism by using phrases like structural, cultural, and interpersonal racism. Don't elide or glide past systemic racism with phrases like "racism in all its forms." Instead, try the phrase "the many ways racism shows up in society—in personal interactions, cultural representations, and systems." Elaborate on the definitions with examples of how institutions, social norms, systems, and policies create unequal and unjust differences in the environments where young children are developing.

Also take care to use person-first, strengths-based language when referring to people and groups that face racism. Language practices that promote the sense that every racial and ethnic group "belongs" to our communities are subtle ways to promote a more inclusive, anti-racist worldview. See the sidebar Inclusive, Respectful Language for more detail.

Take Care with the Word "Equity"

While many mission-driven communicators and progressives have adopted the term "equity" in favor of "equality," it's important to recognize that the same shift hasn't taken place for the public—and that conservative activists and commentators have politicized the term.

When FrameWorks queried members of the public in 2020, few research participants connected the word to social issues or fairness. Instead, most associated the term with financial topics such as "home equity." Even when prompted to connect it to race, some people assumed that researchers were looking for an understanding that Black Americans had fewer opportunities to establish "equity in a business." Others wondered aloud why hopes for fairness, justice, or opportunity wouldn't be better described as "equality."

Since 2021, conservative activists have homed in on the word "equity. Many have mis-characterized it as a telltale sign of efforts to indoctrinate children with a leftist, anti-white worldview. Others have suggested that it indicates paternalistic approaches to addressing the needs of people of color. This conservative backlash is, in part, a response to the intentional efforts of progressive advocates who have actively promoted a distinction between "equality" and "equity."

Science communicators should respond strategically to both realities. In written products, which make it easy for opponents or critics to quote passages out of context, it may be wise to rely on explanations of the concept rather than the word "equity" itself. In face-to-face communications with public audiences, communicators should be sure to define and explain equity, inequity, and equitable solutions early and often.

These strategies will help to counter cultural models like *Racism = Personal Animus and Racists = Extremists,* while reinforcing and expanding cultural models like *Structural Racism* and *Place Structures Opportunity.*

Expand people's mental models of what it means to support families facing racism.

Avoid the vocabulary of charity (*helping, serving*) and adopt alternatives that speak to systems and structures (*providing supports, making changes, ensuring access*). When offering examples of supports for families experiencing the effects of racism, lean toward collective solutions that operate at the level of institutional, community, state, or national levels. When clinical or other interpersonal-level solutions need to be part of the picture, pair them with collective solutions.

These strategies help to counter *Systemic Naturalism* and redirect thinking away from the assumption that parents of color have only an *Unskilled Inheritance* to offer their children.

Inclusive, Respectful Language

Inclusive language conveys respect to all people, promotes belonging, and seeks to disrupt the social norms that perpetuate inequity. Inclusive language avoids bias and steers clear of words and sayings that give offense or cause harm. Yet it is more than a glossary of euphemisms or a list of things not to say. Inclusive language is a conscious practice, a process of becoming aware of how language and symbolism affect individual experiences, group dynamics, and power relationships.

Because language is constantly changing, the terms and labels that convey respect to different social groups also change frequently. It is a good practice to adopt a style guide for terms of reference and to update it annually.

For guidance on currently preferred terms for various racial and ethnic groups in the United States—and other insights into how to build respectful language into public-facing scientific communications—see Words About People: An Inclusive Language Resource, a living document that FrameWorks updates regularly.

Craft explanations that illustrate a "cascade of consequences."

It doesn't take much to remind people of their belief that systems benefit the more powerful in society, but it also doesn't take much for people to misunderstand how this happens or to settle into a comfortable conversation about wealth and poverty instead of a less comfortable examination of racism.

This reality makes explanations exceptionally important. Craft examples and explanatory chains that connect unjust policies to environmental racial disparities and child-development outcomes. Take care to specify exactly how particular policies or institutions create disparate environments for different racial/ethnic groups. Direct attention to examples that cause unique or substantial harm to people of color, or to those that offer unique or substantial benefits to people who are white. Connect these community contexts to the relationships and environments in which young children are embedded.

It can help to compare racism or its effects to weights that are added to the loads families must bear. See the sidebar "Structural Racism Can 'Overload' Families for an example of how to do this.

These strategies will help to leverage the productive aspects of *System Is Rigged* thinking, while muting the unproductive aspects. With careful attention to wording that avoids attributing causal responsibility to parents, this environmental framing can also help to leverage the productive aspects of people's assumption that negative intergenerational outcomes accrue through *Unskilled Inheritance*.

Structural Racism Can "Overload" Families

The metaphor of an overloaded vehicle helps the public to appreciate our shared, social responsibility for conditions that affect families—and to see that a public response is required to prevent negative outcomes.

To extend this metaphor to the topic of racism, talk about specific effects of racism as additions to the weight that families of color carry. Below is an example of how to do this.

Just as a truck can only bear so much weight before it stops moving forward, challenging life circumstances can stall families' abilities to provide the supports children need to grow, develop, and thrive. The effects of racism add to the load that families of color must bear. Discrimination in employment and lending add to financial strain and housing insecurity. Racial stereotypes and outdated policies make it more likely that families of color are scrutinized and sanctioned by child protection agencies, immigration agencies, and other systems, adding the fear and stress of family separation. These are just some of the systems-level factors that shape the environments where children of color develop. We have an obligation to offload these weights and to add supports for families who are burdened by them.

Talk about science as one type of contribution to a larger, community-driven effort.

People believe that *Science Solves (Some)* Problems but also question the motives, claims, and role of science, assuming that *Science Serves Nefarious Purposes*.

To navigate away from the challenge, avoid positioning that could be interpreted as elitist or as claiming ultimate authority. Avoid generic phrasing like "according to experts" or "research shows" that can spark cynicism and invite audiences to question the source. Take care, too, to avoid suggesting that "science knows best."

To navigate toward the opportunity, be clear about the scientific process and the evidence it offers—but don't overstate its role. Position neurobiological evidence as one source of insight that communities can use to guide their efforts to tackle racism and its effects on developing children. For instance, developmental scientists can add value to a conversation by explaining the neurobiological processes triggered by racist incidents and environments, or by pointing out promising, evidence-based approaches to reducing cultural or interpersonal racism among young children. Scientists should defer to the expertise of other leaders on aspects of conversations where there is no particular scientific insight. This can be accomplished in a range of ways, from citing relevant work to designing co-led presentations or panels that include other areas of expertise.

Be conscious of the harm that ineffective framing can do—and also recognize that framing is only one part of anti-racist science.

It is one thing to strike the right notes in particular scientific messages. It is another to participate, with respect and humility, in a larger "choir" of voices working to dismantle racism. The intersection of racism and early development offers an opportunity for white-led scientific organizations and fields to model what it looks like to support community-led movements as an ally. At times, that may mean lending prestige, reach, and resources to those who live and work in closest proximity to the problem. At others, it may mean being a bolder voice in rooms where such problems are rarely discussed. Through both types of effort, science communicators can reframe not only the issue of racism as a form of childhood adversity, but also start to redefine the way that scientists collaborate with communities to advance equity and justice.

Concluding Thoughts

Public thinking and discourse about racism won't change overnight. The cultural barriers to change are deep and intractable. Americans too often take *de facto* racial segregation for granted and see hierarchy and division as part of human nature. While people typically recognize, at some level, the value of racial equality, they lack an understanding of racism as a systemic, structural construct, which leads them to fall back on fostering interpersonal goodwill as the only way forward.

The good news is that we have frames that can shift this thinking. The framing strategies described in this brief can help build a meaningful understanding of racism, counter us-versus-them thinking, and cultivate a more productive understanding of the influences on young children's development and wellbeing.

About FrameWorks

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

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Talking about racism and early childhood development

June 2022

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Sweetland, Julie and Nat Kendall-Taylor (2022). *Talking about Racism and Early Childhood Development: Evidence-Based Strategies for Science Communication*. Washington, DC: FrameWorks Institute.

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