



Perceptions of Parenting:

Mapping the Gaps between Expert and Public Understandings of Effective Parenting in Australia

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A FrameWorks Research Report

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FrameWorks Institute

Foreword

Dear Colleague,

Perceptions of parenting matter.

How we talk about parenting matters too.

But first, we need to be clear on what we mean by parenting.

In Australia today there is much research, policy and general public discussion about *parents* (i.e. mums, dads and full-time carers of children). The Parenting Research Centre believes we also need to be discussing *parenting*. Parenting refers to the task of raising children. It's the shape and style of interaction between parents and children.

The evidence says that parenting has the greatest impact on the long-term health and wellbeing of children. We also know that parenting is a skill learnt 'on the job'. But much of the public discourse about parents and parenting features commentary, views and opinions built on the assumption that 'parenting comes naturally'.

This is one example of divergence between what research says about parenting and what the public generally thinks about parenting. Therefore, the Parenting Research Centre commissioned the FrameWorks Institute to map the gaps between expert and public understanding of effective parenting.

This resulting report is provocative and insightful. Using a rigorous methodology, the FrameWorks Institute paints a picture of the shared understandings, assumptions and patterns of reasoning that Australians draw upon to think about parenting. The Parenting Research Centre believes—and this research confirms—that greater effort is needed to effectively communicate the notion of parenting as a set of skills that can be acquired and improved through experiences. Strategies and messages that inadvertently support the false notion that 'parenting comes naturally' prevent many of us from engaging with evidence-based strategies to support parents in raising children.

We sincerely hope this report helps policymakers, researchers and service delivery agencies convey messages that position parenting as a conscious, skill-based practice that can be intentionally improved.

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I. Introduction

It is not hard to get people to recognise the importance of parenting, yet people's assumptions about what effective parenting involves frequently do not align with the knowledge of those who study parenting. In recent years, drawing upon a significant body of evidence, experts in the field have developed an understanding of what effective parenting requires and how it can best be supported. Our research shows, however, that much of this knowledge remains inaccessible to the general public in Australia. While communicating this expert knowledge might seem straightforward, many of Australians' core cultural understandings and beliefs interfere with the reception and uptake of this expert knowledge.

Cultivating an understanding of effective parenting, and generating support for programs and interventions that can effectively support parenting, requires the development of a communications strategy that is cognisant of, and attuned to, these cultural understandings and beliefs. The research presented in this report, commissioned and carried out in partnership with the Parenting Research Centre,ⁱ maps both expert and public understandings of parenting—a critical first step in reframing the issue. In this report, we begin by describing the untranslated Expert Story of effective parenting. These are the messages that constitute experts' shared understanding of what effective parenting is, what shapes it, why it matters, and what policies and programs are needed to better support it. *This untranslated story represents the content to be communicated to the public through a reframing strategy.*

The core of the report is a description of the cultural modelsⁱⁱ—the implicit, shared understandings, assumptions, and patterns of reasoning—that the Australian public draw upon to think about parenting. Gaining an understanding of the public's cultural models, and how they facilitate or interfere with the reception of information about effective parenting and parenting support, is vital for effective reframing of the issue. By understanding how the public think about parenting, communicators can better predict how their messages are likely to be received, avoid triggering ways of thinking about the issue that make information hard to access and apply, and leverage productive understandings to get their message across. Moreover, identifying the places where public understandings consistently impede productive thinking about parenting lays the groundwork for future research by identifying those areas where strategies must be developed in order to successfully reframe the issue.

The report explains how Australian cultural models of parenting are woven from different strands of public thinking on topics including human nature, learning, social relationships, gender, modern life and government. While the Australian public have available to them several productive ways of thinking about parenting, we find that people's most dominant models limit their ability to understand the value of parenting programs and policy initiatives. Most notably, our research shows that Australians' cultural models of parenting make them resistant to thinking about parenting as a conscious, skill-based practice that can be intentionally improved.

The final section of the report ‘maps the gaps’ between expert and public views of effective parenting, identifying where these understandings overlap as well as where they diverge. This analysis identifies both the opportunities and primary challenges in effectively communicating with the public about parenting. We conclude the report by offering a set of initial recommendations for those communicating about parenting, as well as an outline for future research needed to develop a comprehensive strategy for communicating about effective parenting in Australia.

II. Executive Summary

I. The Expert View of Effective Parenting

The following points comprise the content that experts on effective parenting wish to communicate to members of the public. Together, these points represent the untranslated Expert Story of effective parenting. This distillation of the expert view was generated through:

1. The analysis of 10 one-on-one, one-hour phone interviews with researchers, practitioners and policy experts working on the issue.
2. A review of materials from relevant academic literatures, as well as from the field of organisations in Australia working on parenting issues.
3. A set of in-person feedback sessions conducted with parenting experts in Australia to verify and refine the elements of the story.

What Is Effective Parenting?

Experts explain that, within a set of general parameters, there are diverse ways to be an effective parent. Effective parents strive to meet their children's biological, cognitive and emotional needs, and to nurture and stimulate their children so that they develop into skilled, self-reliant and empathetic individuals who can relate well to others. Experts emphasise that this requires skills and capacities on the part of parents to guide children and scaffold children's activities, to respond to children's individual and changing needs and to set predictable and secure boundaries on, and expectations for, children's behaviour.

What Factors Shape Parenting?

According to experts, parenting practices are influenced by a complex interplay of factors, including the models of parenting that individuals acquire primarily, but not exclusively, from their own parents; the mental, emotional and physical wellbeing of parents; the characteristics and identity of the child; parents' connections to social support networks and their access to public infrastructure and support services; modern workplace demands on parents' time; social expectations about parenting; and government policies and historical trends.

Why Does Effective Parenting Matter?

Experts argue that parenting matters because it powerfully affects children's lifelong development and wellbeing. Experts also stress the social impacts of parenting; parental effectiveness has critical social, economic and public health implications. By extension, finding more effective ways to support parents is a critical means of reducing social disparities and promoting the quality of family, civic and community life in Australia.

What Can Be Done to Better Support Parenting?

Experts identify a set of specific solutions that can promote effective parenting throughout Australia:

- Reduce sources of chronic stress in parents' lives.
- Recognise and engage parents as key *partners* in designing initiatives to improve childhood outcomes.
- Provide reliable access to general, specialised and intensive direct parenting support services that are informed by evidence.
- Legislate strong paid parental leave and flexible work policies to allow new parents, both mothers and fathers, sufficient high-quality time with their newborns and young children.
- Provide universal and targeted services through approaches that are responsive and particularly attentive to those parents who most need and can benefit from support services.
- Subsidise high-quality and affordable child care and early education to ensure it is available to all Australian parents.
- Integrate family, child care, early education and community centres into single locations where parents, children and youth can make contact with professionals who can provide support.
- Build and sustain a widely accessible physical environment—of parks, paths, benches, roads, playgrounds, libraries and the like—that facilitates parent socialisation and mutual learning.
- Provide better training for professionals who come into regular contact with children and parents, including educators, health workers and community leaders.
- Support and expand ongoing communications efforts to build a consensus within Australian society around the importance of early childhood development.

II. The Public View of Effective Parenting

The Australian public draw on a complex set of cultural models to make sense of parenting. To identify these models, FrameWorks researchers analysed transcripts from 50 in-depth, two-hour interviews with members of the public in three Australian locations. This analysis revealed the following implicit understandings and assumptions:

Happiness is the Linchpin

Happiness figures centrally in public thinking about parenting. Raising a happy child is assumed to be the *goal* of parenting, and the happiness of the parent is assumed to be a vital *means* of achieving good parenting, as happy, 'normal' people are thought to have a natural capacity to care for children.

Natural Parenting

The public equate good parenting with ‘just caring about your child’, and assume that this naturally and automatically flows from being a normal and moral individual. Parenting is not thought to require intentional or conscious effort, but rather happens ‘naturally’ and unconsciously.

Experience Filter v. Protection Wall

Beyond simple ‘caring’, the public have two competing ways of understanding what good parenting looks like. One way of understanding parenting foregrounds the provision of opportunities for learning and growth, while the other foregrounds threats to the child. The former understands the parent’s role to involve *filtering* experiences from the child’s environment, while the other figures parenting as *walling off* or protecting children from threats.

Determinism

There is a strong public assumption that people parent as they were parented. The strength of this assumption leads to strongly deterministic thinking. If we are destined to parent how we were parented, cycles of parenting are virtually impossible to disrupt. This determinism is even more pronounced when combined with stereotypes of low-income and Aboriginal communities, which are assumed, because of poor parenting practices, to be ‘beyond help’.

Social Context Contains Sources of Stress and Support

While the public tend to focus on how people were parented as the main influence on parenting, people can recognise, although much less easily, that immediate social context influences parenting. Furthermore, they can understand these contexts as sources of both stress and support. People assume that external stressors, such as work pressures and financial stress, can strain people’s ‘bandwidth’ and undermine their capacity to parent well. In thinking about sources of support, public thinking consistently remains on the interpersonal level and excludes attention to societal-level systems of support.

Threat of Modernity

The public see parenting today as both harder and generally worse in quality than in the past, due to fundamental changes to society. Modern life challenges parents in specific ways, through the proliferation of technology, the influence of the Internet and social media, a tendency to coddle children, competition among parents and the breakdown of community supports. The public are both nostalgic towards the past and fatalistic about the possibility of reversing these changes.

One-Way Parenting

The public see parenting as a one-way activity, as something that parents *do* and children *receive*.

Men Are Important but Women Are Responsible

While public talk about parenting is generally gender neutral, talk about parenting *problems* reveals a deep assumption that women are ultimately responsible for the outcomes of parenting.

Ageing Up

The public consistently ‘age up’ when thinking about children in the context of parenting, defaulting to examples involving older children. Infants and younger children remain largely out of mind.

Three Models of Government

When thinking about the government’s role in parenting, the public alternately conceive of government as a *supervisor* trying to impose particular behaviours and practices; as an *incompetent instructor* who tries to but can’t educate people about how to parent; or as a *resource and partner* that parents can engage for support as they work on parenting challenges.

III. Gaps in Understanding

Analysis revealed a number of major gaps between expert and public understandings of effective parenting.

- 1. Effective Parenting: Skills and Practices v. Natural Caring.** Experts emphasise that effective parenting requires specific skills and involves particular practices, whereas the public assume that good parenting flows naturally and automatically from simply having a concern for children.
- 2. Goal of Parenting: Capacity Building v. Happiness.** Experts emphasise the goal of cultivating in children a range of physical, emotional, mental, linguistic and social capacities, while the public equate parenting success with raising a happy child.
- 3. Early Years: Critical Focus v. Out of Mind.** While experts stress the vital importance of parenting in the early years of childhood, the public consistently age up when thinking about parenting, disregarding the earliest years of child development.
- 4. Influences: Interplay of Factors v. Parenting History.** Both experts and the public recognise that how people parent is influenced by how they were parented, but this factor dominates public thinking while, for experts, it is merely one factor alongside many others.
- 5. Characteristics of the Child: Part of the Story v. Off the Radar.** Experts note that the characteristics of children can influence parenting behaviour, but this possibility is not part of people’s default understandings or thinking about parenting.

6. **Outcomes: Collective v. Individual.** Experts emphasise that parenting has impacts on society as a whole, yet the public think about parenting outcomes almost exclusively in terms of outcomes for individual children.
7. **Support for Parents: Systemic v. Interpersonal.** Both experts and the public recognise the need for supports for parents, but experts think of support in systemic terms, such as the need for better community services and more supportive public policies, while the public think of support almost exclusively in interpersonal terms, as individuals supporting one another.
8. **Improving Parenting: Possible v. Impossible.** While experts outline specific steps that can be taken to improve parenting, both within Australian society generally and within disadvantaged populations in particular, the public are fatalistic and assume that, in many cases, nothing can be done to improve parenting. This fatalism is especially pronounced in public thinking about disadvantaged communities.
9. **Policy Solutions: Central v. Absent.** Public policies play a central role in expert thinking about solutions, while they are largely absent from public thinking.

IV. Initial Recommendations and Communications Tasks

The report yields a number of immediate recommendations for communications:

Avoid:

- Discussions of the ‘modern’ challenges of parenting in ‘Australia today’.
- The idea that parenting is ‘natural’.
- Focusing on problems and loading adversity on to communities without advancing concrete solutions.
- Calls for the importance of educating parents.
- Cues for government as authoritative, intrusive or ineffective.
- Individualising the argument.

Advance:

- The idea of parenting as a set of *skills* that can be acquired and improved through experiences.
- Examples that show *how* effective support can improve key parenting skills.
- People’s existing idea that one important goal of effective parenting is social functioning.

- Thinking about contextual influences on parenting, and expand these understandings beyond work pressures and financial stress.
- The *Experience Filter* model of parenting, to highlight the role of parents as scaffolding skill-building experiences.
- The existing idea that good parenting is about modelling behaviours.
- Discussions of the importance of parenting for early childhood development (be explicit about children’s ages to prevent people from ageing up).
- Thinking about the support that all parents need.
- Existing concern about work pressures and financial stress to increase support for relevant policies.
- Ideas of government as a *partner*.

Gaps between expert and public understandings suggest a set of specific tasks for communications—tasks that must be addressed in order to improve the accessibility of expert information about parenting to members of the Australian public. The following tasks comprise a ‘to-do’ list for future research:

1. **Generate understanding of the importance of skills and capacities—for both parents and children.** Communications strategies are needed to help the public recognise that effective parenting both requires and is directed towards cultivating specific skills.
2. **Create a more well-rounded model of the two-way nature of parenting.** Explanatory work is required to help people understand that both causes and effects of parenting stem from the dynamic relationship between children and parents. Tools must help people think beyond their one-way model of parenting, towards a more interactional model of what it means to parent and how various strategies can support this practice.
3. **Expand thinking about social-contextual influences on parenting.** Future research should explore how to broaden and fill out thinking about contextual influences.
4. **Focus attention on and increase understanding of social impacts.** Explanatory tools are needed to generate understanding of the effects of parenting on society as a whole.
5. **Broaden thinking about supports from the interpersonal to the systemic level.** Communicators need strategies to broaden people’s thinking beyond private networks of support to bring public systems of support more clearly into view.
6. **Cultivate a sense of *equal* responsibility of men and women.** Research can develop and test strategies for countering the Australian public’s subtle but problematic assumptions about gender in relation to parenting.

7. **Increase the public's sense of collective efficacy.** Communicators will need tools to help people understand how programs and policies can actually improve parenting, both within disadvantaged communities and across Australian society more generally.

III. Research Methods

I. Expert Interviews

To explore and distil expert messages on effective parenting in Australia, FrameWorks researchers conducted 10 one-on-one, one-hour phone interviews with researchers, practitioners and policy experts working on the issue. These interviews were conducted from September to November 2015 and, with participants' permission, were recorded and subsequently transcribed for analysis. FrameWorks compiled the list of interviewees in collaboration with project partners at the Parenting Research Centre. The final list was designed to reflect the diversity of disciplines and perspectives involved in work on effective parenting. Analysis of interviews was supplemented by a review of materials from relevant academic literatures and from organisations working on parenting issues in Australia.ⁱⁱⁱ A penultimate draft of the Expert Story was revised in response to a set of in-person feedback sessions conducted with parenting experts in Australia in December 2015, and a subsequent session in March 2016 was conducted in New South Wales with experts and policymakers working on issues related to parenting and child development.

Expert interviews consisted of a series of probing questions designed to capture expert understandings about effective parenting. Interviews covered definitional issues, influences on parenting, effects and needed supports. In each interview, the interviewer went through a series of prompts and hypothetical scenarios designed to challenge expert participants to explain their understandings of and perspectives on the issue, break down complicated relationships and simplify concepts and findings from the field. Interviews were semi-structured in the sense that, in addition to preset questions, interviewers repeatedly asked for elaboration and clarification, and encouraged experts to expand upon those concepts that they identified as particularly important.

Analysis employed a basic grounded theory approach. Common themes were pulled from each interview and categorised, and negative cases were incorporated into the overall findings within each category, resulting in a refined set of themes that synthesised the substance of the interview data. The analysis of this set of interviews—contextualised by the review of literature and refined through the expert feedback sessions—resulted in the distillation of the expert perspective on effective parenting presented below.

II. Cultural Models Interviews

The cultural models findings presented below are based on analysis of 10 in-depth interviews on parenting conducted in December 2015 in two locations—Sydney and Melbourne. Analysis of these interviews was supplemented by data from 40 additional interviews on child development that were conducted in July 2012.^{iv}

Cultural models interviews—one-on-one, semi-structured interviews lasting between two and two-and-a-half hours—allow researchers to capture the broad sets of assumptions, or ‘cultural models’, that participants use to make sense of a concept or topic area. These interviews are designed to elicit ways of thinking and talking about issues—in this case, ways of thinking about parents, parenting and children. The most recent set of interviews covered initial top-of-mind associations with parenting, as well as thinking about influences on parenting, challenges, effects and ways parenting can be improved.^v As the goal of these interviews was to examine the cultural models that participants use to make sense of these issues, it was important to give them the freedom to follow topics in the directions they deemed relevant. Therefore, the researchers approached each interview with a set of areas to be covered, but left the order in which these topics were addressed largely to the participant. All interviews were recorded and transcribed with written consent from participants.

Recruiting a wide range of people, and facilitating talk about concepts introduced by both the interviewer and the interviewee, allows researchers to identify cultural models that represent shared patterns of thinking. Participants were recruited by a professional marketing firm and were selected to represent variation along the domains of ethnicity, gender, age, residential location (inner city, outer city, and regional/rural areas up to three hours from the city centre), educational background (as a proxy for class), political views (as self-reported during the screening process), religious involvement and parental status (with children, without children, age of children). The total sample consisted of 30 women and 20 men. Thirty-four participants self-identified as ‘White/Caucasian’, 10 as ‘Asian’, and six as ‘Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander’. Seventeen participants described their political views as ‘Centre-Right/Liberal’, 13 participants identified as ‘Centre-Left/Labor’, nine identified as ‘Other’ (Green, National, etc.), and 11 as ‘Undecided Voters’. The mean age of the sample was 40 years old, with an age range from 20 to 68. One participant had not completed high school, 12 were high school graduates, 17 had completed vocational diploma programs (e.g., TAFE), 15 were university graduates and five had post-graduate degrees. Thirty-two participants were the parent of at least one child, and 18 had no children.

Although we are not concerned with the particular nuances or differences in the use of cultural models between different demographic groups at this level of the analysis (an inappropriate use of this method and its sampling frame), we hope to consider such nuances through the use of other methods in subsequent research phases.

To analyse the interviews, FrameWorks researchers adapted analytical techniques employed in cognitive and linguistic anthropology to examine how informants understand issues related to effective parenting.^{vi} First, researchers identified common, standardised ways of talking across the sample to reveal organisational assumptions, relationships, logical steps and connections that were commonly made, but taken for granted, throughout an individual’s talk and across the set of interviews. In short, the analysis concerns patterns discerned from both what was said (how things were related, explained and understood) and what was not said (assumptions and implied relationships). In many cases, analysis revealed conflicting models that people brought to bear on the same issue. In such cases, one of the

conflicting ways of understanding was typically found to be dominant over the other, in the sense that it more consistently and deeply shapes people's thinking.

Below, we first present the expert understandings that comprise an untranslated expert account of effective parenting in Australia. This is followed by an analysis of the cultural models that members of the public bring to understanding the issue. We then compare these expert and public understandings and identify key overlaps and gaps, and conclude with recommendations and areas of future research.

IV. Research Findings

I. The Expert View

Below, we present a distillation of the themes that emerged from the analysis of data from expert interviews.

What is Effective Parenting?

- Effective parenting consistently **strives to meet children's biological needs** to experience safety, protection, love, interaction, learning and exploration as part of a healthy developmental process.
- It **nurtures and stimulates** a child's physical, emotional, mental, linguistic and social development, with the goal of helping him or her become a skilled, self-reliant and empathetic person who has a positive sense of identity and can relate well to others.
- It seeks to **optimise a child's potential abilities and build his or her sense of confidence, efficacy and resilience**. This involves guiding a child in learning about the world and scaffolding his or her explorations and problem solving.
- It is **responsive to a child's individuality and to changing needs, temperament and maturity**. This involves tuning in to a child's interests, perspective and experiences, and interacting with him or her both to address challenges (discomfort, anxiety, confusion, etc.) and to build on strengths (insights, talents, ambitions, etc.).
- It sets **predictable and secure boundaries on and expectations for behaviour** that help a child learn to act in ways that are safe, healthful, socially appropriate and respectful to others while giving room for exploration, learning and adventure. This requires **discernment and flexibility** in the application of rules, and adjustments for circumstances and changes in the child's maturation.
- It looks different from parent to parent and child to child, but meets a **threshold level of care and responsiveness** that is sufficient to enable positive development. There is no perfect parent, and there are diverse ways to be an effective parent within a set of general principles and behaviours.

What Factors Shape Parenting?

- **Models of parenting.** People's internal models of appropriate parenting behaviour are often learnt from their own parents, so there is a strong pattern of intergenerational continuity in parenting models and styles. There are other sources, however, that can be strong in shaping parenting models, including relatives, siblings, friends, neighbours and popular culture.

- **Parents’ mental, emotional and physical wellbeing, which is shaped by their own development and current circumstances.** Parental confidence and the degree to which their capacities for self-awareness and self-regulation have been developed play a key role. In addition, the mental, emotional and physical wellbeing of parents, shaped by their current context, fundamentally shapes their capacity to parent effectively. Chronic stress, in particular, can undermine effective parenting, and can stem from a variety of factors, including financial or employment insecurity, spousal or inter-parental conflict, exposure to violence, substance abuse, discrimination or racism and physical or mental illness, among others.
- **Characteristics of the child.** Children are born with and develop their own unique characteristics. Different children raise different opportunities and challenges for parents, which influences how parents engage with their children and the strategies needed for effective parenting.
- **Connections to family and social/cultural support networks.** Parenting benefits when parents are connected to networks of family and social support. Public infrastructure—including parks, community centres, walking paths and other safe areas for meeting and gathering with others—plays a key role in facilitating these networks and the feeling of being connected to others. Public infrastructure also provides settings and opportunities for parents to observe and learn from other parents.
- **Access to support services.** Parenting is strengthened when parents have safe, easy and affordable access to a broad spectrum of support services, including child care, early education and counselling services and mental health and substance abuse services for those in need. For financially disadvantaged parents, income supports for housing, food and other household costs can critically strengthen a parent’s capacity to provide a safe and nurturing environment.
- **Time.** In the context of modern workplace demands, time is an essential factor that shapes parenting quality. For single parents, and in families where both parents work, it can be difficult to find sufficient time for children and parents to be together and for parents to be as attentive and responsive as they want to be. Experts were careful to note that it is not merely the *quantity* or availability of time that shapes effective parenting, but also that the *quality* of this time—or the context and way in which parents are able to spend time with children—is important to consider.
- **Expectations.** Expectations from family, friends, community and the media shape how people understand the role of parent and what they consider to be positive or negative parenting practices and behaviours. Expectations can be structured in a variety of ways, including by being set *too low* (with insufficient attention to the levels of care and responsiveness that children require), or *too high* (as with so-called ‘helicopter’ parenting).
- **Social conditions, culture and historical trends.** Patterns of employment, education and social programs and infrastructure shape the environment of parenting. Furthermore, broad-scale trends and historical events—such as colonisation, urbanisation, population displacement and trauma,

internal and international migration and conflict—have created concentrated challenges within certain populations, which challenge many people’s capacity to parent effectively. In the Australian context, these at-risk populations include members of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities, people living in isolated rural areas, recent immigrants and populations experiencing pervasive poverty.

Why Does Effective Parenting Matter?

- **Parenting influences wellbeing and shapes development.** Parents are typically the primary shapers of a broad range of developmental outcomes for children. These include children’s confidence, resilience and physical and mental health; their capacity for self-regulation and empathy towards others; their academic and eventual employment outcomes; and their subsequent behaviour and effectiveness as parents themselves. In short, parenting matters because it powerfully affects children’s identity, lifelong behaviour and all-around wellbeing.
- **Parenting influences social, economic and health outcomes at individual and social levels.** Parental effectiveness has important social, economic and public health implications for Australia across a broad range of indicators. Poor parenting can contribute to substance abuse, involvement with the criminal justice system, mental and physical health challenges and welfare dependence, all of which have substantial personal costs as well as shared costs for communities, states and the nation. When people struggle as parents to a degree that compromises a child’s healthy development, all Australians bear the cost.
- **Parenting affects family, civic and community life.** The quality of family, civic and community life now and in the future depends on the capabilities and wellbeing of families and forthcoming generations of Australians. In that vein, helping parents raise their children to become sound, productive and civic-minded people who engage and participate is an investment in Australian civil society.
- **Parenting influences disparities.** In light of pervasive achievement and health disparities between disadvantaged and affluent families, it is important to provide supports to those parents most in need of help. Supporting these parents—in health, education, counselling, finances, housing and other areas—is a critical tool for elevating outcomes of currently disadvantaged children and populations in areas including health, learning, community engagement and future employment.

What Can Be Done to Better Support Parenting in Australia?

- **Reduce sources of chronic stress in parents’ lives.** Severe and persistent stress, due to poverty, community and domestic violence, unemployment, housing instability and lack of child care, undermines parents’ capacity to manage their own wellbeing and to focus attention on their children and parenting practices. Addressing these sources of stress can improve parental

capacities and support more effective parenting. Financial supports for low-income parents are especially critical in helping parents have the time and resources to parent effectively.

- **Recognise and engage parents as key *partners* in designing initiatives to improve childhood outcomes.** Professionals should partner with parents and communities to co-design programs and embed them in local community life. External agencies—such as government and nonprofit groups—should help communities organise themselves to better support parents rather than import ‘off-the-shelf’ programs to implement.
- **Provide reliable access to general, specialised and intensive direct parenting support services that are informed by evidence.** Support services should be provided throughout the course of parenting, including the critical antenatal period. These include confidential counselling supports, services directed at the resolution of parental conflict and services that help parents address substance abuse, depression and other mental health challenges.
- **Legislate stronger paid parental leave and flexible work policies** to allow new parents, both mothers and fathers, sufficient high-quality time with their newborns and young children. Work practices and family policies need to recognise and honour the fact that many employees are or will be parents.
- **Provide universal *and* targeted services through an early intervention and prevention approach** based on engagement and conversation with parents. This should include a focus on early interventions, especially for new couples and new parents. Attention should also be paid to the provision of intensive support and therapeutic responses to address issues that impact the ability to parent, including drug and alcohol misuse, mental health problems and domestic violence. Services should also attend to the needs of parents with adolescents, who are often under-attended to in child and family support services.
- **Subsidise high-quality and affordable child care and early education** to ensure it is available to all parents in Australia. This would support working parents, especially working mothers, who may struggle to provide quality care to their children while supporting their families, and would ensure better long-term outcomes for children across all income levels.
- **Integrate family, child care, early education and community centres into single locations** where parents, children and youth can make contact with professionals who can provide support to them. Co-locating and integrating services can also help parents network, observe, support and learn from each other. This can help make parenting an ‘everyday’ topic of conversation.
- **Build and sustain a physical environment**—of parks, paths, benches, roads, playgrounds, libraries and similar features—that facilitates parent socialisation and mutual learning, and ensure that this community and municipal infrastructure is safe and readily accessible for parents from all walks of life.

- **Provide better training and capacity building** for the range of professionals who come into regular contact with children and parents, including educators, health workers and community leaders, so they can identify risk factors and early signs of stress, and provide referrals to the people or places who can best provide parenting support.
- **Support and expand ongoing communications efforts** to further build a consensus around the importance of early childhood development and parenting so that all members of Australian society—parents, policymakers, teachers, health workers and others—understand how critical the earliest years in a child’s life are. At the community level, this effort should target local influentials—key members of community networks—to help ensure that messages about effective parenting and the developmental needs of children are positive and accurate.

Untranslated Expert Story of Effective Parenting

What is effective parenting?

- Strives to meet child's need for safety, protection, love, interaction, learning and exploration.
- Nurtures positive development (physical, emotional, mental, linguistic and social).
- Responds to child's individuality and changing needs and maturity.
- Seeks to build confidence, efficacy and resilience.
- Sets predictable boundaries while giving room for exploration.

What factors shape parenting?

- Parents' own development, and mental, emotional and physical wellbeing, including self-awareness and self-regulation. Chronic stress undermines these.
- Characteristics of the child. Different children raise different challenges.
- Modelling by other parents, especially one's own parents.
- Networks of family and social support and public infrastructure (parks, community centres, etc.) that support them.
- Access to spectrum of services, including child care, early education, counselling, and income support services.
- Sufficient amount of quality time, especially with modern workplace demands.
- Historical/cultural trends (urbanisation, trauma, migration, conflict, poverty) and expectations (family, friends, media).

Why does effective parenting matter?

- Shapes wellbeing and range of developmental outcomes for children.
- Has social, economic and public health implications.
- Is investment in quality of family, civic and democratic life.
- Is critical tool to reduce achievement and health disparities between disadvantaged and affluent families.

What can be done to better support parenting?

- Address sources of chronic stress in parents' lives (poverty, community violence, unemployment, housing instability and lack of quality child care).
- Recognise and engage parents as key partners in any initiative designed to improve childhood outcomes.
- Provide reliable access to general, specialised and intensive direct parenting support services that are informed by evidence.
- Expand income supports, paid parental leave and flexible work policies.
- Direct resources to at-risk populations.
- Subsidise quality/affordable child care and early education.
- Integrate family, child care, early education and community centres.
- Build infrastructure to facilitate parent socialisation and co-learning.
- Partner with communities to co-design programs.
- Better training for professionals to identify stress/provide referrals.
- Expand communications on early childhood development and target community influencers.

II. The Public View

Below, we present the dominant cultural models—shared assumptions and patterns of thinking—that are most powerful in orienting and organising the Australian public’s view of parenting and that guide public thinking about the issue.

The cultural models that people draw upon to think about parenting include different, and sometimes conflicting, ways of thinking about the same issues. These cultural models represent ways of thinking that are available to the public, although different models are activated at different times. Some models are dominant, consistently shaping public thinking, while others are recessive, playing a less prominent role.

A. *Models of Human Nature*

The Australian public’s thinking about parenting is structured at a fundamental level by deep assumptions about human nature and the goals of human life. The two models of human nature outlined here undergird the more specific models of parenting discussed in subsequent sections.

The *Happiness Linchpin* Cultural Model

Throughout discussions about both parents and children, participants consistently assumed that the goal of successful human development is happiness. There is a growing body of research on happiness, and happiness more generally is a dominant part of the public discourse. It is, therefore, not surprising that happiness figured so prominently in people’s thinking. Happiness is understood as the linchpin of a good life. Participants understood happiness in fundamentally *social* terms: Happiness both requires and results in social integration. Happiness, as participant discussions evidenced, is understood as being connected to others and having positive and rewarding relationships. Participants assumed that people cannot be happy in isolation from others and that people who are happy will get along with others.

The *Happiness Linchpin* model consistently shapes people’s thinking about parenting. Happiness is treated as both a *goal* of parenting—the thing that people want to see in children as a result of good parenting—and a necessary *means* to good parenting—the thing that parents need in order to provide good parenting.^{vii}

Participant: You want that child to be happy, to have a nice network of friends, to realise the importance of family, and to have a good outlook on life and the world around them—not to be single-minded. You want them to have an open mind about different people, religions, races. So, you want them to be a well-rounded, happy person. I think that has to be our goal.

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Participant: [A good family is] where family is cohesive, everything is happy, doing things together. Doing good things, perhaps involved in different organisations all together. A nice set of friends that you can have in your house to stay over to have meals with, etc. Have a party for a birthday you can invite them. That's all [a] good upbringing.

These ideas rest on the deep assumption that whether or not people are happy profoundly shapes their behaviour. People who are happy are assumed to have a natural capacity to care for themselves and their children. We revisit this point below (see the *Natural Parenting* model).

The *Natural Independence* Cultural Model

Participants' discussions of parenting were also structured by a deep and fundamental assumption that the drive to be independent is basic to our human nature. We all—children and adults—want to make our own decisions and do not want to be told what to do or have things forced upon us by others. Moreover, because this drive is assumed to be part of human nature, it must be respected. Throughout people's talk, *independence* was treated as something that drives behaviour (we all want to be independent) and as a fundamental value that should be advanced (independence is important).

This model undergirds Australians' thinking about both how people should parent and how parents should be supported. Cultivating children's capacity to be independent is a main goal of parenting. And being overly directive is not only wrong but also counterproductive, as it is likely to elicit resentment or disobedience.

Participant: Personal choice is huge—encouraging them to be involved in lots of activities—social and on the sporting side of things in particular. Again, you don't want it to have to be something they're forced into.

Also thinking from this model, participants objected to anything they saw as an infringement on *parents'* independence. As we discuss below, participants were positively inclined towards the idea of *supporting* parents but were very resistant to the idea of *instructing* parents. Analysis revealed that this resistance stemmed from people's feeling that instruction or education is overly directive and fails to respect parents' independence. And, as with children, violating independence is assumed to be counterproductive.

Participant: If you want somebody to change behaviour, you don't tell them to change behaviour. They'll say, 'I'm gonna stay the same'.

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Participant: Many people have tried, and I don't know whether lecturing people works or not. Perhaps they could be forced by the court, but people are not going to want to do something when they have been forced by the court. People don't like to be directed or told what to do.

Implications

- **The *Happiness Linchpin* cultural model obscures the importance of skill development.** While happiness is certainly a worthy end, the *Happiness Linchpin* flattens out the range of skills and capacities that are required—for both parents and children—to succeed. In focusing attention so strongly on emotional wellbeing, the model makes it hard to recognise that parenting requires cultivating a range of social, emotional and mental skills and capacities in children. Similarly, this way of thinking backgrounds the skills that parents need in order to accomplish this task and manage the day-to-day challenges of parenting. Communicators trying to increase understanding of the wide range of skills and capacities that children acquire from parenting, and to increase understanding about the skills and abilities that parents themselves need to parent effectively, should avoid focusing on ‘happy children’ as the goal of effective parenting. This model narrows thinking and excludes important dimensions of parenting. Instead, communicators will need tools and strategies that can be used to introduce skills and capacities into the parenting discussion and bring these ideas to the fore of people’s thinking.
- **The *Natural Independence* cultural model must be carefully navigated.** The idea that children’s independence must be respected is compatible with experts’ emphasis on responsiveness to and respect for children, but the emphasis on parental independence can produce resistance to several of the solutions that experts advocate. The model leads people to conclude that parenting interventions aimed at skill development are wrong, ineffective and even counterproductive, because ‘no one likes being told what to do’. As we discuss below, there are ways of communicating about such interventions that avoid triggering this type of unproductive thinking—namely, framing these interventions as ‘supports *for* parents’ rather than as ‘education *of* parents’. These are subtle but highly important distinctions in framing.

B. Models of Good Parenting

Australians have several well-developed ways of thinking about what good parenting involves. Below, we outline three models of good parenting—one dominant, two much more recessive—that have varied implications for those communicating about parenting issues.

The *Natural Parenting* Cultural Model

Participants widely assumed that good parenting ‘comes naturally’ without conscious concerted effort. In this way, good parenting is seen as a natural extension of being a normal and caring person. This model is *highly* dominant. Analysis showed that it consists of three more specific intertwined assumptions.

- **Good parenting = caring.** When asked what good parenting involves, participants frequently stressed that parents simply need to *care* about the wellbeing of their children. Caring in this sense involves

spending time with children, paying attention to their feelings and interests and, importantly, being aware of what they are doing. When discussing care and concern for children, participants did *not* talk about skills and knowledge required to parent well. In other words, when thinking with this model, Australians reduce being a good parent to having a requisite level of concern for a child—to care enough.^{viii}

Researcher: When you think about ‘good parenting’, what are some things that come to mind?

Participant: Naturally caring. Not artificial type things. Some parents with lots of money say, ‘Okay, I’m gonna send little Johnny off to this [school], it’s the best in Sydney and that will be from 12 to 2 ...’ But [that’s] just being a sergeant major organising things. As opposed to being mummy or daddy.

—

Researcher: What kinds of things explain bad parenting?

Participant: Neglecting, not being responsible, not caring. That pretty much sums all that up because if you care you wouldn’t do all that. Not caring, not being responsible.

- **Good parenting is natural and automatic.** Participants assumed that if people are morally good, happy people, they will be caring (i.e., good) parents just by being themselves. In other words, parents are assumed to *naturally* care for their children, and a lack of concern is assumed to be a deviation from the default state of parents and as evidence that a parent is not a normal caring individual. In line with the *Happiness Linchpin* model described above, good, happy people naturally care about children and want to spend quality time with them. Being a good parent thus does not require *doing* anything in particular, but rather flows naturally from simply *being* a normal, morally sound and generally happy person.

Researcher: Are there particular types of people who tend to parent well?

Participant: I think people who are happy in themselves tend to be able to parent well.

Researcher: How about people who don’t parent well?

Participant: People who are sad. Just the polar opposite.

—

Participant: A parent needs to have a fulfilled life to provide that framework [for a child].

- **Parenting happens through unconscious modelling.** Participants consistently emphasised the idea that children learn how to be good, happy people simply by being around their parents—that development happens via osmosis. Participants explained that children learn through repeated ‘exposure’ to their parents and how they behave. Participants frequently used the metaphors of ‘soaking up’, ‘rubbing off’ and ‘picking up’ to describe the transmission of behavioural norms and values from parent to child. Parents are understood as ‘models’ whom children instinctively copy and learn from via mimicry. This assumption about unconscious modelling helps to explain why good

parenting is assumed to flow naturally from caring parents; children pick up what they need simply by being around the right kinds of parents.

Participant: [As a parent] one always says, ‘You must be polite to people and shake hands and ask how you are’, and that sort of thing. That’s sort of learning. But then they see how it works in real life, when people come around the apartment and people come in and I’m gonna shake their hand. It’s a natural way the game works.

Participant: I think it’s just natural osmosis. It’s there, you’re surrounded by it all the time. If the kids see that you’re always laughing and you’re always having a good time, and you always have friends come around, they pick it up just because it’s there. It’s in the air they breathe.

The *Natural Parenting* model structured participants’ thinking about what parenting ideally should involve. Parenting *should* be something we do without concerted self-examination, deliberation, debate or study. The strength of the model is evident in the frequency of participants’ criticisms of parenting books and blogs, which violate the assumption that parenting should come naturally. The perception that parenting advice has increased and is now rampant in the ‘world today’ also undergirds this resistance to advice. As will be discussed below, people see that one of the problems with parenting today is that technology and the Internet are inundating parents with information such that someone is always trying to tell them what to do. It is also evident how this resistance to external advice is supported by the *Natural Independence* model discussed above. The fact that it is supported by multiple deep patterns of thinking helps to explain why this resistance to advice in general, and parenting books and blogs in particular, was so frequent and dominant in the interview data.

Participant: Parenting shouldn’t be that hard ... It’s natural for you to do it and your child will be swept along with it. And you shouldn’t have to wake up in the morning and get out your cheat sheet and say, ‘Right, today I must make sure that I communicate [something] to my son’.

Participant: Don’t listen to people around you and throw in the books. You’re the parent, you do your job. You know what’s best.

The *Experience Filter* Cultural Model

As discussed above, participants’ default position was to avoid focusing extensively on specific practices of effective parenting (if parenting is natural, what else do you need to say?). However, when prompted, participants were able to think beyond the *Natural Parenting* model and talk more specifically about what good parenting looks like. Participants drew on two similar but distinct cultural models, both of which focus on parents’ role in managing children’s environments.

The *Experience Filter* model foregrounds the opportunities for learning and growth provided by children's environments. The model shares the fundamental assumption of the *Natural Independence* model that children naturally want to and should try things out for themselves. According to the *Experience Filter* model, good parents act as a filter, providing children with opportunities for activity and growth while screening out negative aspects of the environment. Some participants stressed in particular that the parent's role is not to dictate the child's activities, but to allow the child to discover his or her own interests and then provide the resources and support for the child to pursue them. As children get older, parents should gradually increase the degree of exposure (to information or social situations) and of the challenge (in activity).^{ix} In metaphorical terms, this involves adjusting the filter as the child becomes more capable.

Participant: Do I talk to my kids about Islamic extremists, or mass shootings or methamphetamine? We're always filtering stuff, but I think as a parent you want your child to be aware of so much. At the same time, we're trying to protect them half the time. But I think, as they get older, you modify the filters. You adjust the filters.

Participant: Well, I think [good parents] set boundaries for the children. So, you let children explore within a certain boundary, but you don't let them go outside of those boundaries, allowing children to grow and explore and have choices. Because when they're little babies, obviously, their choices are very limited. But as they grow older, it's giving them a bit more space.

The *Protection Wall* Cultural Model

In contrast to the *Experience Filter* model's depiction of the environment outside the home as a source of both positive opportunities and negative influences, the *Protection Wall* cultural model figures this environment almost solely as a threat to the child's physical and emotional safety. When thinking with this model, participants described the parent's role as impenetrably walling off threats by keeping the child in the home or under immediate parental supervision. Participants applied the *Protection Wall* model primarily to urban environments, which were assumed to be inherently more dangerous than rural areas.

Participant: Some kids would rather go out and play, but I think unless it's local or there is a parent around, parents are a bit hesitant to let their kids go too far because I think there's a lot more danger out there.

Participant: In the country, kids probably get a bit more freedom to roam around and all that. You are not hovering over them all the time; you are not worrying about them so much because there is probably not as much danger out there.

Implications

- **The *Natural Parenting* cultural model makes it hard for the public to see the value of parenting programs or interventions.** The assumption that good parenting should come naturally leads to the conclusion that intentional, structured attempts to improve parenting are misguided at best, and may actually interfere with parents' natural instincts and ability to be a good parent. Communicators must be careful not to cue this model, and will need strategies for cultivating an understanding of good parenting as something that people actively do.
- **The *Natural Parenting* model makes it hard to think about how parenting can be intentionally improved.** While the emphasis on parental modelling is partially aligned with the Expert Story and does generate a recognition of the importance of parental presence, the public's understanding of parenting as an automatic and unconscious process leaves little room for thinking about parenting as an activity that can be intentionally practised and improved. Moreover, the sole focus on caring and concern leaves little room for thinking about the cultivation of the skills and capacities needed for effective parenting. Communications strategies are needed to open up thinking about parenting as a conscious practice that requires specific skills and cultivated discernment.
- **The *Natural Parenting* model explains stigma around ineffective parenting.** A third and very important implication of the way that people use the *Natural Parenting* model is the way that it can lead people to demonise, ostracise and other-ise parents who struggle to meet the challenges of parenting. If good parenting is simply about caring, and caring is something that good and normal people do naturally, then struggling as a parent means you are immoral and abnormal. The model structures the sense that *bad parents are bad people* and can be seen to underlie and explain much of the stigma that exists around struggling parents.
- **The *Experience Filter* cultural model facilitates thinking about scaffolding learning.** The model gives people the ability to think productively about balancing boundaries and providing activities that promote growth in ways that are responsive to a child's individuality. Communicators should leverage and build on this model as they explain the types of discernment and modes of engagement that are central to effective parenting. In other words, they can use the model to help people understand what parents should actively try to do and, in turn, the skills that undergird effective parenting.
- **The *Protection Wall* cultural model makes it hard for the public to think about enrichment activities for children.** The *Protection Wall* model leads people to focus on dangers in the environment to the exclusion of opportunities. When using this model, people have difficulty recognising the importance of enrichment activities. Communicators should avoid an overemphasis on threats and dangers in the environment, as this is likely to trigger the *Protection Wall* model and impede balanced thinking about management of children's environments.

C. Models of Influences on Parenting

The *Parenting Determines Parenting* Cultural Model

Participants widely assumed that how people parent is determined by how they were parented. Just as people are assumed to learn how to be and act in the world more generally by modelling after their parents, people are assumed to learn how to parent by modelling after their parents. It follows from this way of thinking that parenting quality is cyclical, repeating itself across generations: Good parenting produces good parenting, and bad parenting produces bad parenting. The model is highly deterministic; the quality of people's parenting has, according to the model, already been determined long before they became parents. Key patterns are established in people's own childhoods, and little can be done to alter outcomes once these patterns have been set.

Researcher: What shapes your parenting style?

Participant: My parents.

Researcher: Your parents. You think that's the—

Participant: 101 per cent.

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Participant: You probably learn from how your parents brought you up, you pass that on to your children.

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Participant: It's almost hereditary, isn't it? If you had a bad childhood experience, your parents were shitty to you, then I would assume that's likely to be carried on.

The *Choice Point* Cultural Model

When asked about how people who had been parented badly will behave when they themselves become parents, participants evoked a highly individualised model that attributes outcomes to personal choice. There was a consistent desire to insist that, if they want, individuals can *choose* to be different from their parents. This choice was typically assumed to depend solely on individual effort: If you decide you want to, you can 'do a 180' (in the words of some participants) and reverse the effects of the bad parenting that you experienced in order to be a good parent. The model completely backgrounds contextual factors that support or influence choices, reducing choice to a question of will. The model is recessive in comparison to the more deterministic *Parenting Determines Parenting* model, but available as a way of thinking about how people parent that appeared when participants were confronted with the question of whether the deterministic cycle of parenting can be broken.

Participant: They may have been bad parents in a sense, but you've decided, 'No, I don't want to be like that', and you go another way. So, the hope you see is, 'Yes, I can do things different. If I want to change things I've got to change the direction I'm going.'

Participant: I think a lot of people's parenting styles are influenced by the way they were raised. And sometimes I think ... if you had a really bad experience when you were growing up, like, you really had a horrible time, then you'll try and completely do a 180 on that when you have your own children.

Participant: They could go the complete opposite and become wonderful parents, because they are seeing how bad their parents were, and they vow ... to never ... be like that when [they] have children, so they can just do the complete opposite. You got to decide, 'Do I want to be a good parent or a bad parent? How involved am I going to be in my child's life?' It's an individual responsibility. No matter what outside influence you have, I think it's up to yourself personally to decide what sort of parent you are going to be.

The *Context Contains Sources of Stress and Support* Cultural Model

While participants tended to focus on individual parent-child relationships in their talk about parenting, they were, in some cases, able to bring wider social contexts into the conversation when talking about the *challenges* that make it hard to be a good parent. Social context was figured as a source of both stress and support for parents. Work was predominantly discussed as a source of stress, due to low pay, unemployment or demands on parents' time. While family, friends and other parents were sometimes seen as sources of stress (e.g., when parents have their parenting criticised by friends or family), they were more often cited as sources of support. When participants thought about 'what parents need' beyond individual capacities, they focused overwhelmingly on interpersonal supports (such as mums' groups) that function both as practical relief (e.g., child care) and as emotional stress relief.

Researcher: What kinds of things would challenge good parenting?

Participant: I think it's all the external factors, such as work. I think parents have got to balance a lot these days, because everything is so expensive. To provide a roof over your child's head and food and warmth, that's expensive. So, as a result of having to do that, parents generally have to go to work and earn money. And I think workplaces are demanding a lot more.

Researcher: What do you feel like parents need in order to parent well?

Participant: A good support system, family, if you've got family around you, that's always handy. If you need help with the kids or you need someone else to look after the kids, it's good to have family

and a good, close circle of friends. I think a lot of people struggle when they don't have that. I honestly don't know how they cope if they don't have family or just a couple of close friends they can turn to.

Participants often explained the effects of context by appealing to the idea that people have a limited bandwidth of energy and attention. When parents' bandwidth is strained, it harms their capacity to provide effective care. This assumption was used to explain how a good, happy person might nevertheless struggle to be a good parent. This concept was primarily applied in talk about financial problems and challenging working conditions.

Participant: If you're working a job where you're stressed out and having to work long hours, when you get home from work you don't want to play for two hours, you want to lie down.

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Participant: If you're totally preoccupied with having to pay the bills and know you might [not] have the money for two weeks, then you're gonna be totally preoccupied and you'll be snappy—'Don't bother me I'm too busy!'—and that filters through quite easily.

The *Threat of Modernity* Cultural Model

Many participants expressed the view that parenting is harder, and less effective, today than it was in the past. The assumption underlying this talk is that life in Australia has changed in fundamental ways that threaten social wellbeing generally and that undermine effective parenting.^x This model structured a preoccupation with a specific set of problems:

- **Technology and social media.** Technology is thought to undermine face-to-face relationships and to make children less active. In addition, the Internet is seen as a source of stress for parents, causing information overload, pressure from conflicting advice and judgements and an impingement on independence.
- **Coddling.** In the world today, children are assumed to be too sheltered and 'over-parented'. In contrast to the past, children have few responsibilities and very limited opportunities to learn life's hard lessons.
- **Rules.** Participants complained that rules and laws imposed by government and schools interfere with and restrict people's choices and activities in burdensome ways that, it is assumed, prevent people from being 'natural' in their parenting and directly infringe on their independence.
- **Parental competition.** Some participants raised the problem of a new kind of 'professional uptight parent' who looks down on and competes with other parents, making parenting more stressful for everybody (e.g., competing over the quality of children's birthday parties or over the number of activities a child is involved in).

- **Increased work pressure.** Participants frequently suggested that work has become more stressful than in the past, placing greater strains on parenting and family life.
- **Breakdown of community.** Communities are assumed to be less safe and less neighbourly than in the past, providing parents with less support.

The *Threat of Modernity* model is simultaneously nostalgic and fatalistic. When thinking with this model, participants were wistful for a simpler and better time but assumed that changes to Australian society cannot be reversed.

Participant: These mothers today go by the book, whereas, in the old days, ours was all very natural, word of mouth. Whereas today, people pick up a book or go on the Internet. People can just Google, ‘Oh, my baby won’t sleep, what will I do?’ And you will get all of these modern ideas. I think technology is just too advanced sometimes.

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Participant: Everything is done *for* our children these days. They’re becoming so protected and cocooned, whereas I guess I’ve always wanted to get kids doing everything—helping, doing stuff around the house, walking to school, not getting driven to school—and just taking that over-mothering away.

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Participant: When I was a kid, you just had a few party favours and sausage rolls around the kitchen table with a couple of friends and played Pass the Parcel. These days, it’s not like that. They’ve got animal farms and the circus; Cirque du Soleil is turning up to the house. So there’s a lot of stress in parenting from a competitive point of view, and also people telling you what to do. People are always offering me advice on parenting.

Implications

- **The Parenting Determines Parenting model is heavily fatalistic.** The model’s determinism makes it hard to think about how programs to support parents might actually make a difference and improve outcomes. Equating childhood experiences with parenting destiny leaves no room for parenting interventions or improvements. Communicators should avoid cuing this model. Instead, they should leverage some of the more productive, but recessive, models that people use as ways of thinking about parenting quality and how negative childhood experiences can be overcome with proper supports.
- **The Choice Point model occludes social context.** By attributing outcomes entirely to individual choice, the model makes it hard to see how social environments contextualise and support choice. Strategies that foreground and explain the role of environments and supports are critical.

- **The *Context Contains Sources of Stress and Support* cultural model can be leveraged to explain environmental factors and the need for supports.** The model opens up highly productive ways of thinking about the relationship between social context and parenting. The model was often activated by terms such as ‘challenges’, ‘support’ and ‘pressure’. Communicators should be able to use this language to cue this productive model. We anticipate that the productive aspects of this model can be built upon using the *Overloaded Explanatory Metaphor*, which has proven in other research to be a productive way to explain the harmful effects of social stressors on parenting.^{xi} The *Context* model can also be used to explain the value of parenting supports. Because public thinking about supports is often limited to interpersonal relationships, it is important for communicators to emphasise programs and infrastructure to broaden people’s connections between contexts and parenting.
- **The *Threat of Modernity* model forecloses productive thinking about solutions.** Like the *Parenting Determines Parenting* model, the *Threat of Modernity* model locates causes of problems that parents face in factors that people do not see as changeable, which produces strong senses of fatalism and disengagement from the issue. To avoid cuing this model, communicators should avoid talking nostalgically about the past and referring to the problems of ‘society today’.

D. Models of Parents and Children

The *One-Way Parenting* Cultural Model

When thinking about parenting, the dominant response was to put a spotlight on *parents alone* and see parenting as a one-way process. Thinking from this model, parenting is something that parents *do* and children *receive*. For participants, the *influence* within the parent-child relationship is assumed to be unidirectional: The parent influences the child, but the child does not influence the parent.

Participant: I’ve got a strong belief, and we’ll circle back to the start, and that’s the early development 0-to-5, and that’s the parent’s skills. I blame the parents, but I also say, ‘Well, if they don’t have the skills, how are they supposed to pass on the skills?’ If you don’t have a good relationship with your parents, they can’t pass on their skills to you.

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Participant: Things that have happened to you that you learn from—those are the things that you pass on to your children. I mean life experiences. You pass those on.

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Participant: No one knows unless your parents tell you, and if your parents were lost growing up, they’re gonna pass on the same misdirections to you.

The *Men Are Important but Women Are Responsible* Cultural Model

Participants were remarkably gender-neutral when talking about parenting, *except* when talking about problems or challenges. Gender distinctions were made in two contexts. First, on the topic of bad parenting, there is a common image of a poor single mother who makes bad choices in her relationships. The father's absence is noted as a problem for the children, and the mother's new boyfriends are mentioned as bad influences on the children. Here, the father is seen to be important, but it is primarily the mother who is held responsible for her bad choices in men and, in turn, poor parenting outcomes. Second, when thinking about parenting *supports*, participants focused on supports *for women*—often the mums' group. These patterns reveal an underlying assumption that, although men are seen as having important roles to play in parenting, it is women who are naturally responsible for causing and fixing any problems that arise.

Participant: This couple were having a bit of a rough time, and you could see the child was not being neglected, but it just wasn't right. A couple of the mothers who were mates took [the child's mother] out for coffee without the child and basically had a heart-to-heart—'Girls, what's going on?'—you know?

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Researcher: What is bad parenting? What does it look like?

Participant: It looks like a child is neglected because the parents don't want to know. They send them out, they get drunk, into drugs and this kind of stuff. The mother is getting a boyfriend; they leave the kid in charge of the boyfriend. The boyfriend doesn't want to know, and he ends up killing the child, the mother couldn't care less, this sort of thing happens so often. By even having some of those blokes around, knowing what they are like—that's not good parenting on the mother's part.

The *Ageing Up* Cultural Model

When answering open-ended questions about parenting, participants consistently talked about older children or adolescents, and remained notably silent about infants and young children. While ages were rarely specified, participants' stories and examples focused on children capable of higher-order reasoning, independent activity and having a wide-ranging social life. This pattern of ageing up in talk about children is something that FrameWorks has also found in our research in the United States and Canada.^{xii}

Researcher: A lot of the parenting stuff that you're talking about is ... probably what could be defined as during the adolescent period, right?

Participant: Yeah.

Researcher: So you've been talking a lot about ...

Participant: I think that's because I don't really clearly remember my childhood that well, and I start to remember things more clearly once I turned about 12.

—

Researcher: So what's the difference between the *laissez-faire* style [of parenting], which is what you're talking about now, and the democratic style?

Participant: Well, talk about alcohol, because that's something I think every kid, when they turn about 15, starts to want to do, is get drunk, because it's grown up, and, 'I'm grown up, and I'm independent now'.

The *Infinite and Absolute Variation* Cultural Model

Participants often emphasised that all individuals—parents and children—are unique. Because of this, they reasoned that generalisations cannot be made about parenting because 'everyone is different'. When drawing on this model, participants reasoned that attempts to provide generally applicable advice about parenting are either foolish or arrogant and destined to be ineffective. The strength of the model is revealed in the frequency with which participants spoke about parenting advice—whether from books or the Internet—in a consistently negative and dismissive manner.^{xiii}

Participant: I know it sounds like a cliché, but everybody is different, every baby is different, every human is different. So how can [parenting books]—they can't cover everything.

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Researcher: What other kinds of things would help improve parenting overall?

Participant: I don't know. I think it's so individual. I think it's really hard to say. Parenting's not a textbook.

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Participant: There is no answer to the right way to parent a child, in my opinion. As I said before, you get half a dozen people together, all who are so-called 'good parents', and what they have done with each of their kids. It's totally different from one another. So to me, there are just too many factors to be variables to turn around and say, 'Well, that makes good parenting'.

The *Natural State of Youth Is Trouble* Cultural Model

Participants emphasised that it is important for parents to keep their children busy with appropriate activities. This concern is grounded in an assumption that children are naturally active and that this natural inclination will lead them into trouble if it is not channelled in the right direction. If left to their own devices, people reasoned, children will run feral and find their way into criminal or other socially disruptive activities. Parents must keep their children busy so that there is no time or space for their natural inclinations to lead them into trouble.^{xiv}

Participant: I think if you don't keep them busy by doing sport or keeping their mind active, kids like my little son could get into trouble. I've got to keep him busy with sport and out of trouble, keep him active, keep him around people that are positive influences in his life, and keep him on the straight and narrow. Keeping kids busy keeps them out of mischief.

Participant: It [effective parenting] means that you are involved in what they are doing, you are not letting them go out and do whatever they want. At least you know where they are and what they are up to, and they are not stuck inside in front of a computer all day or hanging out where they shouldn't be. So you know that they are doing something that's keeping them engaged, active and out of trouble.

Implications

- **The *One-Way Parenting* cultural model constrains thinking about influences on parents.** The model makes it hard for the public to recognise how children's unique characteristics can raise distinctive challenges that affect parenting. Communicators will need strategies to broaden people's view of influences on parenting.
- **The *Men Are Important but Women Are Responsible* cultural model undermines men's role in parenting, puts exclusive blame on women for problems and assigns women responsibility for solutions.** By treating men as secondary, the model undermines men's responsibilities and leads to the unfair disparagement of women. Addressing these entrenched gender assumptions will require more than stressing the importance of men in parenting—an idea that people can accede to *within* the model. This represents a major challenge for those communicating about parenting and suggests that communicators will need dedicated strategies for cultivating the understanding that women and men have *equal roles in and responsibilities for* parenting outcomes and for addressing problems when they arise. Research is needed to identify and test possible strategies for doing this, as this is a deep model that poses a formidable challenge.
- **The *Ageing Up* cultural model puts early childhood out of mind.** Due to the tendency to age up in thinking about childhood, the public can easily misunderstand communications about young children to be about older children. When the message is intended to include young children or is focused on young children, this age category needs to be stated explicitly.
- **The *Infinite and Absolute Variation* cultural model is a barrier to productive thinking about widely applicable supports for parenting.** The model makes it hard to see how common supports might be useful across varying situations involving different individuals. Addressing this problem requires communications strategies that help people understand how common parenting practices and supports can help different kinds of people in different situations *without* flattening out or ignoring these differences.

- **The *Natural State of Youth Is Trouble* cultural model oversimplifies the task of parenting and mutes attention to the quality of environments.** The model leads people to think that parents just need to keep their children busy and active. When discussing children’s activities, communicators should foreground the *quality* of these activities and of the environments in which they take place and explain *how* these environments enrich children’s development beyond the custodial perspective of keeping them busy.

E. Models of Solutions

The role of government figured prominently in participants’ thinking about how to support more effective parenting. Three models in particular were evident in how people thought about the roles and responsibilities of government in addressing parenting issues: *Government as Supervisor*, *Government as Incompetent Instructor*, and *Government as Partner/Resource*. In addition to these ways of thinking about government, participants used two other shared understandings to reason about what can be done to support more effective parenting.

The *Government as Supervisor* Cultural Model

Some participants bristled at the idea of government involvement in improving parenting, assuming that this would involve government supervision of parenting or imposition of parenting practice, which violates people’s freedom (see the *Natural Independence* model above). When people had this understanding of government in mind, they resisted government involvement in parenting, reasoning that government must *not* give directions on how to parent (aside from cases of child abuse, where government has an overriding duty to protect the child from harm).

This model was often applied in discussions of politics and political parties. Thinking about the ideological intent of government action leads people to think of the government’s role in imposing ideas and ways of life with which they might not agree.

Participant: Leave the parents alone. Let them do their bloody thing. I think one of the big problems is governments are getting too involved. And they want to control everything you do. They’re now trying to control what people eat ... They’re turning it into a nanny state.

The *Government as Incompetent Instructor* Cultural Model

Participants also sometimes assumed that government is incompetent and untrustworthy. Whereas the *Government as Supervisor* model assumes that government should not provide parenting instruction because this violates people’s freedom, the *Government as Incompetent Instructor* model assumes that government efforts to provide instruction are ill-advised because the government lacks the competence and capacity to do this well.

Participant: But the last thing you do is set up a big government department to [improve parenting]. Absolutely. Want to spend the money and try and get votes? Sure, it would be a terrific success. And it won't actually make a difference.

Researcher: Won't actually do anything for parenting?

Participant: Right.

The *Government as Partner/Resource* Cultural Model

Australians also have a more favourable way of thinking about government: as a provider of resources. When drawing on this model, participants thought of the government as a partner to, not a supervisor of, parents and local community agencies. The assumption here is that parents and local agencies decide what they need in the way of support, and the government's role is to provide the resources (mainly financial) for them to create those supports. This model gives government a critical role in supporting parents, figuring this support as *assistance* rather than as imposition or instruction.

Participant: I'd like to see local parents [run the parenting support centres] and just be responsible by getting someone on board that has medical training.

Researcher: What about the government?

Participant: And support from the government of course.

Researcher: Like funding support or actual help running it?

Participant: Funding support.

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Researcher: So when you're thinking about doing these things to improve the quality of parenting, who are you thinking in your mind would be responsible for doing these things?

Participant: The government. State and local government, federal government.

The *Communities Beyond Help* Cultural Model

Participants frequently mentioned specific social groups in Australia as communities where parenting tends to be bad—namely, people experiencing poverty, with an especially strong focus on Aboriginal communities. These views are particularly concerning because of the way in which they combine deeply problematic assumptions about the essential characteristics of these communities with the more general determinism of the *Parenting Determines Parenting* model described above. Highly unproductive, seriously problematic stereotypes of the poor, and particularly of Aboriginal communities, combine with the assumption of collectivised cycles of poor parenting lead people to conclude that 'those' communities are beyond help. There is a perception that many efforts have already been made to improve these communities, and that these efforts have failed due to the innate characteristics of the group and the way in which poor parenting makes it nearly impossible to break the cycle.^{xv} This model represents a major communications challenge, as it is powerful in shutting down and closing space for productive

conversations around parenting support and the ability of such approaches to improve outcomes in disadvantaged communities.

Participant: That's all they [people in poor communities] know. That's their mentality. That's the way it is, you know. They're brought up. Usually, they've got no money. They're poverty stricken. The parents smoke. The parents drink. The parents' relatives come around. They're probably all the same. There's just no other experiences that the child can draw on. So, the cycle continues.

Participant: I genuinely believe you're kidding yourself, governments are kidding themselves, if they think they can really lift a significant number of people out of that vicious circle of poverty and deprivation.

Responses to the Idea of *Comprehensive Support Services for Parents*

At the end of interviews, participants were asked to imagine a hypothetical 'parenting support centre' and to speculate about its characteristics and functions. The response was overwhelmingly positive. The majority of participants assumed that the centres would be multi-use community centres that would provide: (1) a social space for parents (primarily mothers) to meet other parents and talk in an informal therapeutic manner, like in a support group; (2) a daycare centre that would provide activities for children, primarily so that parents would be free to talk to other parents; and (3) a professional staff of nurses and/or social workers who would be available to provide counselling and advice to parents, but only if asked (i.e., there would be no pressure on parents to seek or follow advice). Participants tended to focus on mothers when thinking about these centres, consistent with the *Men Are Important but Women Are Responsible* model described above.

Participant: They'd have toys for kids, and the parents would have a cup of tea and a chat.

Researcher: So who do you think is running that [parenting] centre?

Participant: I guess, by rights, if it's a paid position, then probably social workers that have done courses at university enough to become social workers under a government department.

Participant: I think some people, at first when they get there, they might not feel comfortable about talking to strangers, and so if there was tables and chairs that they could sit down, if they had tea and coffee and stuff like that, and maybe one of the counsellors could maybe come up and start a conversation, or if the parents know what sort of services are available, they might go up and start a conversation.

Participant: If this parenting centre happens ..., I think that's the best thing about everything we've talked about [in this interview].

Participants' overwhelming support for the idea of parenting support centres, and the characterisation of what they might be like, follows from many of the cultural models that have been described above. Specifically, the *Natural Independence* and *Government as Partner/Resource* models explain why participants were receptive to the idea of parenting *support* centres provided by the government. These centres are imagined to be resources that parents can use at their discretion, and that do not intrude on parenting or impose specific parenting practices (avoiding the *Government as Supervisor* and *Government as Incompetent Instructor* models). Moreover, the *Context Contains Sources of Stress and Support* model supports the idea that even good people/parents need support sometimes to alleviate stress, thus helping people see the value of support centres.

Implications

- **The *Government as Supervisor* and *Government as Incompetent Instructor* cultural models block receptivity to policy solutions.** The strength of these models is one reason (among several) why the public do not default to policy solutions when thinking about how to promote effective parenting. Communicators should be careful not to characterise the government as telling or instructing people how to parent, as this is likely to cue these negative models of government.
- **The *Government as Partner/Resource* cultural model facilitates thinking about how public programs and infrastructure can support parenting.** Communicators should seek to leverage the model's productive potential by characterising the government's role as *supportive* (rather than directive or instructive). Communicators will need strategies to expand public thinking beyond top-of-mind supports (such as counselling and support groups) to include other policies and programs recommended by experts.
- **The *Communities Beyond Help* cultural model is extremely unproductive.** The model not only reinforces fatalism generally, but also specifically undermines support for low-income and Aboriginal communities. Given the depth of this model and its linkages with complex, unproductive ways of thinking about ethnicity, race and poverty, more research is needed into ways to inoculate against this model.
- **Parenting support centres are a useful example to use in communications.** Introducing parenting support centres into the conversation between interviewers and participants simultaneously cued productive cultural models and helped people imagine more concretely what support for parents would involve. Communicators can give parenting support centres as an example of the type of supports that are needed, using this example to illustrate general points about how effective parenting can best be promoted.

V. Mapping the Gaps and Overlaps in Understanding

The goals of this analysis have been to: (1) document the way experts talk about and explain effective parenting in Australia; (2) establish the ways that the Australian public understand this same issue; and (3) compare and ‘map’ these explanations and understandings to reveal the gaps and overlaps between the perspectives of these two groups. We now turn to this third task.

I. Overlaps

There are important points of overlap between expert and public understandings of effective parenting.

- Although experts and the public express these ideas in slightly different idioms, both groups recognise the need to **nurture and stimulate** a child with varied experience, provide stable boundaries while **scaffolding the child’s explorations** and be **responsive** to the child’s individuality.
- Both experts and the public reject the idea that people should strive to be ‘perfect parents’. Both groups recognise there are **different ways to be an effective parent** and that the key is meeting the **threshold** of being ‘good enough’.
- The public agree with experts that parents need **social support networks**, although, as noted below, experts emphasise the infrastructure that facilitates support, while this is absent from public thinking.
- Experts emphasise the value of **direct parenting support services** and, while these services are not top-of-mind for the public, once introduced, the public are immediately receptive to them.
- The public share with experts the conviction that professionals (and government) should **partner** with parents and local communities in developing parenting services, as opposed to adopting an ‘off-the-shelf’ or ‘top-down’ approach.

II. Gaps

Analysis also revealed a number of major gaps between expert and public understandings of effective parenting.

1. **Effective Parenting: Skills and Practices v. Natural Caring.** Experts emphasise that effective parenting requires a set of specific skills and involves particular practices, whereas this know-how is excluded from public thinking by the assumption that good parenting flows naturally and automatically from simply having a concern for one's children.
2. **Goal of Parenting: Capacity Building v. Happiness.** Experts view the goal of parenting to be the cultivation of a broad set of developmental outcomes, with an emphasis on the wide range of skills and capacities needed to succeed in life—physical, emotional, mental, linguistic and social. The public, by contrast, equate parenting success with raising a happy, socially integrated child. This gap, like the first, centres on public inattention to the importance of skills and capacities—in the first case, the skills of parents, and in this case, the capacities of children.
3. **Early Years: Critical Focus v. Out of Mind.** While experts stress the vital importance of parenting in the early years of childhood, the public consistently age up when thinking about parenting, focusing instead on older children. This tendency leads the public to disregard the earliest years of child development.
4. **Influences on Parenting: Interplay of Factors v. Parenting History.** Experts and the public commonly recognise that how people parent is influenced by how they were parented but, for experts, this factor is merely one alongside many others, including the presence or absence of social stressors and contextual supports. By contrast, the public focus largely on parenting history, which leads to deterministic thinking about intergenerational cycles of parenting.
5. **Characteristics of the Child: Part of the Story v. Off the Radar.** Experts suggest that the unique characteristics of children can influence parenting behaviour, since different challenges provoke different responses. This possibility is not part of people's default understandings of, or thinking about, parenting. The public's assumption that influences between parent and child are unidirectional prevents recognition that characteristics of the child can affect parenting.
6. **Outcomes: Collective v. Individual.** Experts highlight collective outcomes of parenting, including social, economic and public health implications, while the public think about parenting outcomes almost exclusively in individual terms, as outcomes for the child. The effects of parenting on society are not on the public's radar.
7. **Support for Parents: Systemic v. Interpersonal.** Experts consistently stress the importance of systemic supports for parents, such as the need for better community services and more supportive public policies. Although the public devote considerably less attention to supports for parents, the public do, at times, recognise the need for them, but think of support almost exclusively in strongly interpersonal terms, as individual people supporting other people. Expert and public understandings of support thus strongly diverge, as experts emphasise the need for

society-wide *systems* to support parents, while the public view support in terms of personal relationships.

8. **Improving Parenting: Possible v. Impossible.** When thinking about the possibility of improving parenting, experts are optimistic, outlining specific steps that can make a difference in individual cases, in Australian society generally, and within disadvantaged populations that face particular challenges. While the public recognise, at times, that supports can make a difference, the public tend towards fatalism, assuming that, in many cases, nothing can be done to improve parenting. This fatalism is pronounced in thinking about people who were parented badly themselves. The public view of poor and marginalised populations is highly fatalistic—not always unsympathetic, but generally tragic in the sense that past efforts have failed to help and ‘nothing can be done’.

9. **Policy Solutions: Central v. Absent.** Experts suggest specific policy solutions to address the underlying social conditions that affect parenting. These recommendations range from investing in parent skill development to legislating parental leave policies, and from creating stronger unemployment assistance to increasing public support for quality child care. While the public recognise, at points, how social conditions can impact parenting, policy solutions are largely absent from public thinking. This gap is consistent with the general tendency of the public to think of supports and solutions in interpersonal rather than systemic terms.

VI. Conclusion

The Australian public do not need to be convinced that parenting matters. Yet, public assumptions about parenting conflict with expert understandings in important ways. In particular, they impede a full understanding of what effective parenting involves; they prevent a full recognition of the various ways in which contextual and systemic factors influence parenting; and they fail to generate full understanding of—much less support for—the interventions and programs that experts recommend. Even the public’s thinking about *why* parenting matters diverges from expert thinking, as the public fail to recognise societal-level impacts. Yet the public’s cultural models are not all unproductive; there are productive, if sometimes thin or recessive, ways of thinking that can be leveraged and expanded to cultivate deeper understanding of effective parenting and to increase support for recommended programs and policies.

More research is needed to identify optimal strategies for navigating this cultural landscape, but understanding the contours of this landscape is itself a critical communications tool. By providing a map of the cultural landscape, this report can help communicators navigate around pitfalls and steer communications towards more productive pathways. The report thus generates a number of immediate recommendations for communications:

Avoid:

- **Discussions of the ‘modern’ challenges of parenting in ‘Australia today’.** This is likely to evoke nostalgia and fatalism, which will make it hard to think about how parenting can be improved in Australia today.
- **Ideas that parenting is ‘natural’.** Thinking about parenting as *natural* makes it hard to recognise that parenting is skill-based and that parenting skills can be improved, and it is likely to reinforce stigma against ‘bad parents’.
- **Focusing on problems and loading adversity onto communities without advancing concrete solutions.** Crisis messages are highly likely to trigger fatalism, and stressing adversity faced by particular communities without focusing on solutions may reinforce unproductive stereotypes.
- **Calls for the importance of educating parents.** This characterisation of programs and policies is likely to backfire and provoke resistance.
- **Cues for government as authoritative, or intrusive, and references to political or ideological debates when discussing government support for parenting.** This language is associated with the *Government as Supervisor* model and is likely to trigger negative thinking about government.

Advance:

- **The idea of parenting as a set of *skills* that can be acquired and improved through experiences.** Spotlighting skills is a necessary corrective to the public's default to simple caring. Putting attention on skills is necessary to cultivate a deeper understanding of effective parenting and how it might be supported.
- **Examples that show *how* effective support can improve key parenting skills.** Helping people understand how effective programs and policies work should help cultivate support for them.
- **People's existing idea that one important goal of effective parenting is social functioning.** Communicators should build upon this productive default understanding to generate a fuller sense of the goals of parenting. Connecting social functioning with a range of concrete outcomes that people can recognise as important is a potentially effective way of doing this.
- **Thinking about contextual influences on parenting, and expand these understandings beyond work pressures and financial stress.** Developing examples that highlight other contextual factors is necessary to expand the public's understanding of social environmental influences on parenting.
- **The *Experience Filter* model of parenting to highlight the role of parents as scaffolding skill-building experiences.** Communicators can leverage this model to help people understand how effective parenting works and how parents can enable growth and learning.
- **The idea that good parenting is about modelling behaviours.** Communicators should make sure to explain how modelling works and connect modelling to other aspects of good parenting.
- **Discussions of the importance of parenting for *early* childhood development.** To counteract the tendency to age up, communicators should be clear about children's ages, especially when discussing young children.
- **Thinking about the support that all parents need.** Direct service parenting programs should be framed as a resource for parents to use, rather than as instruction of parents, to avoid triggering resistance to supports. Avoid language that implies instruction (e.g., 'classes', 'teachers').
- **Existing concerns about work pressures and financial stress to increase support for relevant policies.** Communicators should explain how policies can alleviate these sources of stress and, in turn, promote good parenting.
- **Ideas of government as a *partner*.** Characterising government as a partner can cue productive thinking about government while muting negative models of government.

- **Examples of parenting support centres as concrete illustrations of what supporting parents looks like.** The example seems to cue productive models and can be used to promote positive thinking about government support for parenting.

While these recommendations should help considerably, a comprehensive strategy for reframing effective parenting is ultimately needed to fully address key gaps between experts and the public. Specific tools must be developed and tested to accomplish the following tasks, which comprise a prospective ‘to-do’ list for future research:

- **Generate understanding of the importance of skills and capacities for both parents and children.** Communications strategies are needed to help the public recognise that parenting requires specific skills, and that the goal of parenting is, in significant part, the cultivation of a wide range of skills and capacities in children. Generating this understanding is a crucial precondition of support for parenting programs designed to *develop* parenting skills.
- **Create a more well-rounded understanding of the two-way nature of parenting.** Communicators will need ways of explaining and showing that both the factors that shape parenting and the outcomes of this process emerge from the dynamic relationship between children and parents. Future communications work will need to find ways of moving the public past a one-way and parent-focused model of parenting to an understanding in which parenting and parenting outcomes are the undeniable product of interactions between parents, children and contexts. Expanding this core piece of understanding should be highly effective in helping people see the importance of a wider set of actions to support parenting.
- **Expand thinking about social-contextual influences on parenting.** The public’s existing ways of thinking about contextual influences are relatively thin and must be filled out and broadened. An existing FrameWorks Explanatory Metaphor—*Overloaded*—holds promise as one strategy for accomplishing this task and should be tested.
- **Focus attention on and increase understanding of collective impacts.** The public are largely not attuned to outcomes of parenting at the societal level. Explanatory tools are needed to generate understanding of societal-level outcomes.
- **Broaden thinking about supports from the interpersonal to the systemic level.** Shifting people’s thinking from private social networks to public systems is necessary to boost support for recommended policies and programs.
- **Cultivate a sense of *equal* responsibility between men and women.** Careful testing is needed to identify an effective strategy for counteracting the Australian public’s subtle but deep assumptions about gender. Overcoming these assumptions is necessary to generate an accurate understanding of *whom* parenting programs and policies should serve.

- **Increase the public's sense of collective efficacy.** Communicators need strategies to combat the fatalism that results from dominant cultural models. Boosting efficacy will require identifying strategies to inoculate against the *Parenting Determines Parenting* and *Communities Beyond Help* models. Communicators will need tools that help people understand how programs and policies can, in fact, disrupt cycles of ineffective parenting and improve outcomes.

Accomplishing these tasks will require communications tools of varying types. *Values* are likely needed to shift attributions of responsibility and to boost efficacy. Explanatory tools such as *Explanatory Metaphors* and *Explanatory Chains* are needed to generate better understanding of the collective impacts of parenting, of how social context influences parenting, and, in turn, of how systems and institutions can help. *Exemplars* may be useful in shifting people's perceptions of *what* effective parenting involves and of *whom* it involves (i.e., they may help to combat gendered assumptions). Further research is needed to identify and test the effectiveness of these types of communications tools.



About the FrameWorks Institute

The FrameWorks Institute is an independent nonprofit organisation founded in 1999 to advance science-based communications research and practice. The Institute conducts original, multi-method research to identify the communications strategies that will advance public understanding of social problems and improve public support for remedial policies. The Institute's work also includes teaching the nonprofit sector how to apply these science-based communications strategies in their work for social change. The Institute publishes its research and recommendations, as well as toolkits and other products for the nonprofit sector, at www.frameworksinstitute.org.

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Endnotes

ⁱ For more information on the Parenting Research Centre, see the following URL: <http://www.parentingrc.org.au/>

ⁱⁱ On cultural models, see Quinn, N., & Holland, D. (1987). Culture and cognition. In D. Holland & N. Quinn (Eds.). *Cultural models in language and thought* (pp. 3-40). Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press.

ⁱⁱⁱ The following are examples of the types of sources reviewed:

Organisations:

- [National Scientific Council on the Developing Child](#)
- [Harvard Family Research Project](#)
- [Zero to Three](#)
- [Parenting Research Centre](#)
- [Center for Effective Parenting](#)
- [Raising Children Network](#)
- [PBS Parents](#)
- [Parenting and Family Support Centre](#)
- [HeadStart](#)
- [Talaris Institute](#)

Literature Reviews:

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Articles:

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^{iv} See Kendall-Taylor, N., & Lindland, E. (2013). *Modernity, morals and more information: Mapping the gaps between expert and public understandings of early child development in Australia*. Washington, DC: FrameWorks Institute.

^v For a description of the content of the earlier set of interviews conducted on child development, see Kendall-Taylor, N., & Lindland, E. (2013). *Modernity, morals and more information: Mapping the gaps between expert and public understandings of early child development in Australia*. Washington, DC: FrameWorks Institute, p. 14.

^{vi} See Quinn, N. (Ed.). (2005). *Finding culture in talk: A collection of methods*. New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillan.

^{vii} This finding is consistent with the *Success = Happiness* cultural model identified in past research in Australia on public understandings of child development; see Kendall-Taylor, N., & Lindland, E. (2013). *Modernity, morals and more information: Mapping the gaps between expert and public understandings of early child development in Australia*. Washington, DC: FrameWorks Institute, p. 27.

^{viii} FrameWorks has observed a similar model of teachers in our work on education in the United States. See Bales, S.N., & O'Neil, M. (Eds.). (2014). *Putting it back together again: Reframing education using a core story approach: A FrameWorks MessageMemo*. Washington, DC: FrameWorks Institute.

^{ix} This model is consistent with the *Stretch but not Break* model of child development identified in our previous research. See Kendall-Taylor, N., & Lindland, E. (2013). *Modernity, morals and more information: Mapping the gaps between expert and public understandings of early child development in Australia*. Washington, DC: FrameWorks Institute, p. 31.

^x The same model appeared in our research on child development in Australia. See Kendall-Taylor, N., & Lindland, E. (2013). *Modernity, morals and more information: Mapping the gaps between expert and public understandings of early child development in Australia*. Washington, DC: FrameWorks Institute.

^{xi} See Fond, M., Haydon, A., & Kendall-Taylor, N. (2015). *Communicating connections: Framing the relationship between social drivers, early adversity, and child neglect*. A FrameWorks Message Brief. Washington, DC: FrameWorks Institute.

^{xii} The *Ageing Up* cultural model may be informed by an assumption that young children do not have mental states (an assumption that we have found in prior research in Australia). See Kendall-Taylor, N., & Lindland, E. [2013]. *Modernity, morals and more information: Mapping the gaps between expert and public understandings of early child development in Australia*. Washington, DC: FrameWorks Institute, p. 20.

^{xiii} As noted elsewhere, other models, such as the *Natural Parenting* model, also conspire to generate resistance to parenting books.

^{xiv} FrameWorks' research on education and youth in the United States has found similar ways of thinking. See the following sources for more on how this model shapes thinking on similar issues in the United States:

<http://www.frameworksinstitute.org/k-12-education.html>

<http://www.frameworksinstitute.org/adolescence1.html>

^{xv} FrameWorks has observed fatalistic cultural models pertaining to similar groups in our research in the United States and Canada. See, e.g., Volmert, A., Fond, M., & O'Neil, M. (2015). *'It's hard to wrap your head around': Mapping the gaps between expert and public understandings of child maltreatment and child sexual abuse in Alberta*. Washington, DC: FrameWorks Institute; and Lindland, E., & Kendall-Taylor, N. (2013). *'If You've Got a Good Harness on Your Kids...': Models of Child Wellbeing and Learning Among Jacksonville Residents*. Washington, DC: FrameWorks Institute.

Perceptions of Parenting:
Mapping the Gaps between Expert and Public
Understandings of Effective Parenting in Australia