



Collective Caregiving

A Frame for Talking About What Kids
and Families Need to Thrive

A FrameWorks Strategic Brief

Jessica Moyer, FrameWorks

Andrew Volmert, FrameWorks

Erin Lowe, FrameWorks

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Introduction

When we're prompted to consider what supports and resources children need to be healthy and develop well, most of us immediately think about the fact that, above all else, kids need love and care. Few things are as true, as undisputed, or as fundamental. A focus on the primacy of love and care consumes so much of our thinking and public discourse, however, that it can sometimes crowd out other important considerations. Specifically, our cultural preoccupation with love and care constrains public thinking in two key ways.

First of all, the concept of care is strongly associated with interpersonal relationships. Caring for children is seen as the sacred responsibility of certain designated individuals, namely professional child care providers, educators, close family members, and most of all parents. This highly individualized understanding of care makes it difficult for us to imagine a role for the broader society. It leads us to hyperfocus on the actions of individual caregivers, who are either venerated as heroes or condemned as deadbeats. Important to note here is that the harshest judgments are reserved for parents of color and propelled by racialized stereotypes. Black parents in particular face a barrage of public scrutiny and misdirected blame.

A preoccupation with care also constrains public thinking by narrowing the lens of policymaking. To the extent that government is seen to have any role at all in improving children's lives, that role is strictly limited to the domain of caregiving. Policies that pertain directly to parents or educators, or that explicitly reference child care, are understood as "kids' issues." All other spheres of public decision-making—from food and housing to energy, labor, and transportation—are deemed irrelevant to children. Worst of all, these cultural blinders allow us to ignore the glaring correlation between ample investments in public infrastructure (like well-stocked grocery stores, flexible job training programs, and reliable bus routes) and positive outcomes for children. FrameWorks' research shows that this constraint on public thinking represents a driver of persistent racial inequity.

Here's the good news: identifying the way that "care" dominates public thinking and conversations about kids points us to a productive way forward. **We can build public support for a wide range of policies that make a positive difference in the lives of children by broadening our shared understanding of what exactly constitutes care.** As laid out in our accompanying research report titled "[What Does Caring Mean?](#)", this reframing strategy—to redefine "care"—is backed by solid empirical evidence. It aims to improve outcomes for all kids and families, most of all those who have been underserved by past and present-day policies.

We can bring children into the center of our policy conversations by redefining caregiving as a social responsibility and collective endeavor—one that includes but extends far beyond interpersonal relationships and private interactions. Caregiving is something we owe not only to “our own” kids but to all kids in society. It connects to every other social issue and is therefore implicated in every aspect of our shared decision-making. As outlined in the framing strategy presented below, caregiving must be understood as *collective, inclusive, and expansive*.

The *Collective Caregiving* Frame: An Overview

Collective Caregiving effectively centers children in our consideration of public policies and other collective decisions.

The Big Idea

Taking care of children and youth is one of our society's most important responsibilities. Whether or not we're parents, we're all caregivers as citizens. Collective caregiving encompasses all the decisions we make as a society, about every social issue, and we owe care to kids and families of all races, backgrounds, and identities.

Three Recommendations

1. Frame collective action as a form of caregiving.
2. Emphasize that we owe collective care to children of every race, ethnicity, and identity, and not just “our own” kids.
3. Illustrate how collective caregiving happens everywhere and through every issue.

As quick shorthand, we can summarize these recommendations as talking about caregiving as *collective*, *inclusive*, and *expansive*.

RECOMMENDATION #1

Frame collective action as a form of caregiving.

Why this is needed: Ensuring our nation's kids have what they need to do well is a collective social responsibility and shared endeavor. Too often, though, it is narrowly conceived of as exclusively the job of individual caregivers—most of all parents. In order to cultivate a sense of collective responsibility toward children, and help people see that we *all* have a role to play, we need to broaden how we talk about care. By framing collective action as an essential form of caregiving, we can build public support for more child- and family-friendly policies.

How to do it: Follow the tips below ...

Tip #1: Talk explicitly about “collective caregiving” and explain how we care for kids in our roles as citizens.

Use words like “support,” “nurture,” and “provide for” to describe the civic and political actions we can all take to strengthen our communities and improve our society so that every kid has what they need to thrive.

For example:

Instead of this...	Try this...
<p>Raising kids is an enormous responsibility that involves a steady flow of new challenges and difficult decisions. In order to secure the best possible outcomes for their children, families depend on being able to find a good job, access healthy and affordable food without traveling far, and walk down the street without feeling unsafe, but all too often these basic assurances are out of reach.</p>	<p>Raising kids is an enormous responsibility, and we all play a role in collective caregiving. By raising our voices at town halls in support of job training programs, mobilizing neighbors to demand well-stocked grocery stores, and urging local leaders to repair sidewalks and streetlights, we can help every family secure the best possible outcomes for their children and each do our part to provide for kids.</p>

Tip #2: Connect collective caregiving to public policies.

Explicitly reference public policies in relation to care to remind people that collective caregiving requires social (not just individual) action and prevent conversations from reverting to a focus on parents or other direct providers of care.

For example:

Instead of this...	Try this...
<p>Family separation is traumatic for everyone involved—most of all kids. We need to support whole families experiencing challenges so they can stay together, and every single one of us has a part to play.</p>	<p>Family separation is traumatic for everyone involved—most of all kids. We all have a part to play in demanding policies that support and care for whole families experiencing challenges so they can stay together.</p>

Tip #3: Talk about policies, not “the government.”

Get specific about the policies, collective decisions, or other social actions that are needed, rather than simply asserting that the government has a role to play. Avoid generic appeals to the need for government action.

For example:

Instead of this...	Try this...
<p>A strong network of care requires the combined efforts of families, community members, and the local as well as federal government.</p>	<p>→</p> <p>A strong network of care requires the combined efforts of families and community members to champion policies like the Play Outside Act.</p>

Tip #4: Give parents and other caregivers a clear role in collective caregiving.

Highlight the common mission of all parents to create better conditions for children, and illustrate ways that parents themselves can be agents of social change.

For example:

Instead of this...	Try this...
<p>As families in New York state are facing widespread shortages in child care, the Children’s Agenda is calling for change. Through a coordinated letter-writing campaign, the organization is pushing for dedicated state funding.</p>	<p>→</p> <p>As New York state faces widespread child care shortages, a multiracial coalition of parents is demanding we deepen our collective commitment to care. A letter-writing campaign led by parents spells out the need for dedicated state funding.</p>

RECOMMENDATION # 2

Emphasize that we owe collective care to children of every race, ethnicity, and identity, and not just “our own” kids.

Why this is needed: Throughout our nation’s history, the kinds of public supports and services that promote positive outcomes in children and families have been overwhelmingly concentrated within white communities, and actively denied to communities of color—a trend that persists today. Unfortunately, this fact is not part of dominant public thinking. Many people, particularly but not exclusively those who identify as white, think structural racism is a thing of the past rather than an underlying cause of modern-day disparities. As a result, they wrongly attribute poor outcomes to incompetence by parents of color or, worse, to a presumed cultural dysfunction implicitly linked to Blackness. For these reasons, we need to make race and racism explicit within conversations about kids’ wellbeing. Using the *Collective Caregiving* frame, we can convey that advancing racial justice requires clear intentionality and targeted collective action.

How to do it: Follow the tips below ...

Tip #1: Emphasize that as citizen-caregivers, all kids are our kids—no matter their race or identity.

This helps to strengthen and deepen our shared sense of identity as concerned and responsible community members. Explicitly naming race or another relevant identity also reduces latent assumptions about “other” communities being responsible for “their own” children.

For example:

Instead of this...	Try this...
America’s most vulnerable and underprivileged children deserve comprehensive representation and all the resources possible to help them heal from past trauma and begin to thrive.	→ America’s children are our children. Let’s make sure we care for kids of all races, ethnicities, and backgrounds by giving them the tools to succeed, a supportive cushion in hard times, and the resources to thrive.

Tip #2: Explain how we currently provide collective care unevenly.

Offer concrete examples of policies that carry different impacts for different racial groups, and explain how they create or exacerbate racial inequities.

For example:

Instead of this...	Try this...
<p>By pushing forward damaging regulations and misguided policies like those in the Consolidated Appropriations Act, the administration is imperiling the wellbeing of children—most of all children from families with low incomes, immigrant children, and children of color. We stand with our partners to fight for children and our nation.</p>	<p>By pushing forward the Consolidated Appropriations Act, which cuts SNAP emergency allotments for groceries, the administration is failing in our duty to support and care for children from families with low incomes, immigrant children, and children of color—who are already most affected by food insecurity.</p>

Tip #3: Offer concrete solutions to extend collective care to children and families of color while stressing the goal of universal care for all kids.

Emphasize that policies can be purposefully designed to correct past injustices and promote the full inclusion of all families.

For example:

Instead of this...	Try this...
<p>In 2021, with the successful passage of HB2878, Illinois launched the Early Childhood Access Consortium for Equity. This initiative is charged with developing and implementing a systemic statewide strategy that will help incumbent early childhood educators, especially those from BIPOC and low-income communities, to overcome existing barriers and attain higher degrees and credentials.</p>	<p>In 2021, Illinois launched the Early Childhood Access Consortium for Equity to ensure that early childhood educators from BIPOC and low-income communities can attain higher degrees. Through scholarships, increased access to coursework, and improvements to the way credit is awarded for prior learning, this initiative is elevating how our society cares for kids of color by addressing racial inequities in education.</p>

Tip #4: Highlight the need to listen to families across groups.

Emphasize that we can learn how best to care for all children by acknowledging the expertise and valuing the perspectives of parents and families with different racial identities and backgrounds.

For example:

Instead of this...	Try this...
<p>The expanded Child Tax Credit (CTC) was effective in DC, according to a recent study by the Urban Institute. It provided necessary cash payments to 32,000 Black children and 6,000 Latine children across the District, ultimately cutting DC’s child poverty rate by more than half.</p>	<p>We know the expanded Child Tax Credit (CTC) was effective in DC because Black and Latine parents told us so. They described being able to use the associated cash payments to buy food and clothing, and pay rent and utility bills, which cut the District’s child poverty rate by more than half.</p>

RECOMMENDATION #3

Illustrate how collective caregiving happens everywhere and through every issue.

Why this is needed: To the extent that people see the needs and wellbeing of children as relevant in a legislative context, they tend to focus on policies that directly affect designated caregivers and pertain to either households or schools. Beyond issues like paid family leave, child care affordability, and education, people struggle to see how kids are impacted by government action at all. To expand public thinking about the myriad of policies that shape the lives and experiences of children, we need to help people see that we care for kids through all of the decisions we make as a society.

How to do it: Follow the tips below ...

Tip #1: Tell stories that illustrate how policies of *all* types shape children’s experiences.

Choose a setting other than a home or school to illustrate how children are affected by a range of different contexts and conditions that surround them.

For example:**Try something like this...**

In March 2020, Kansas City, Missouri, made public buses free for everyone. Keenan was in eighth grade at the time, and he started taking the bus to school. So did several of his cousins and neighbors, which meant he didn't have to commute alone. Keenan's grandmother also started visiting by bus two evenings a week to make dinner and help out with his younger brothers while Keenan's mom took the bus to her night classes for nursing school.

Like Keenan and his family, a majority of riders in Kansas City (68%) are either going to work, looking for work, or going to school, so increased access to transportation has meant increased access to employment and education, too. For families with children, the positive impact has been palpable. Parents like Keenan's mom have more available resources and more reliable routines, which means greater stability and better outcomes for all members of the family.

Tip #2: Use the natural environment as an example of where collective action is needed to care for children.

Talking about shared priorities like clean air and water can effectively stretch public thinking about the kinds of social issues that impact kids.

For example:**Try something like this...**

Lead in drinking water can harm children's physical and mental development. The main source of this problem is lead pipes that connect water mains under the street to our homes and businesses. The Bipartisan Infrastructure Deal, passed in 2021, allocates federal funding for lead pipe replacement. Now we just need mayors across the country to step up care for children and families by putting those resources to work replacing our cities' lead pipes right away.

Tip #3: Provide a vision of a future where we prioritize children in decision-making around all issues—and explain how we’re currently falling short.

Paint a picture of collective caregiving that is clear, compelling, and achievable: one that involves identifying problems, working together to address them, and continually improving conditions for kids.

For example:

Try something like this...

We can create a better future for children and families—a future where, as a society, we prioritize the health and wellbeing of all kids. Right now, multiple barriers prevent families from accessing essential physical and mental health care, from piles of paperwork and confusing fine print to restrictive and discriminatory eligibility criteria. Too many adults are forced to cope with untreated illnesses, which compromises our collective care for kids. By thinking through the implications of our health care policies on our nation’s children, we can increase our capacity for societal caregiving, expand access to BIPOC families, and improve our entire health care system.

Conclusion

In the United States, we all recognize that consistent, quality care is essential to the health and wellbeing of children. Unfortunately, our default public understanding of what constitutes “care” is extremely limited. Most people see caregiving exclusively as an individual endeavor: the responsibility of certain designated adults who provide love and attention to particular children. This narrow conception of care diminishes our society’s capacity for collective caregiving. It confines our responsibilities to the children in our own personal lives, ignoring the critical importance of social and civic caregiving. It also leaves a huge swath of society—non-parents, people whose children are grown, neighborhood residents, faith leaders, elected officials, and so many others—without any role at all.

We can deepen and develop our shared understanding of what kids and families need to thrive by redefining care as *collective*, *inclusive*, and *expansive*. This involves, first and foremost, recognizing that caring for kids is a social responsibility and a collective endeavor. It’s something we all do together, through the practices we adopt and especially the policies we implement. Second, we can affirm the same commitment of care to all of our society’s kids, instead of providing more or better care in some communities than we do in others. In particular, we must be explicit and unequivocal about the need to raise our level of care for children of color, who have received substantially less and poorer care than white children since our nation’s founding. Third, we can demonstrate that caregiving connects to nearly every other social issue and happens in all different kinds of contexts. Rather than an isolated or private consideration, caring for kids is integral to a healthy, functioning society.

Shifting the cultural narrative in the above ways has the power to foster the American public’s sense of collective responsibility toward children, and at the same time increase the salience of children within policymaking at multiple levels. Just as importantly, this new narrative can strengthen a shared belief in our capacity as a society to work together, to identify our most pressing challenges, and to implement needed solutions that will benefit whole families and entire communities while boosting target outcomes for kids.



About FrameWorks

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

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