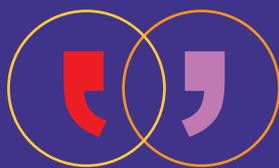


**The
Workshop**

Talking about **early brain development:** *A short report*



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About this report

This short report is designed to help explain some guiding principles for you to construct effective communication strategies, messages and narratives about early brain development and recommend potential next steps in the work to shift narratives and deepen public understanding on this issue.

This report is based on:

- A rapid review of framing evidence on early brain development.
- A partial map of the current territory of public narratives and mindsets around early brain development developed following a two day early brain development collection wānanga in March 2021.
- Our existing evidence-led building blocks of narratives for change.

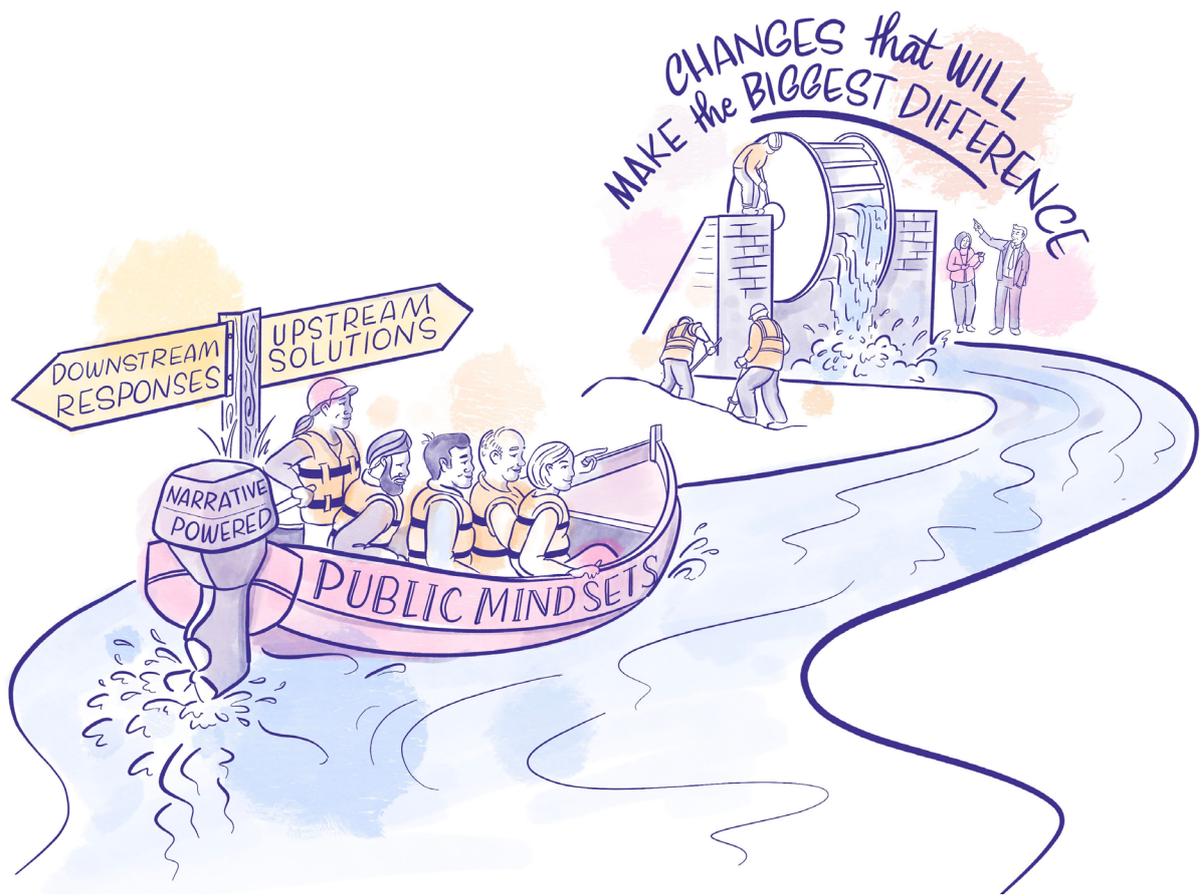
It was developed by The Workshop for the Child Wellbeing Unit of the Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet from analysis of the contents of a two day wānanga, a brief review of the framing literature and The Workshop's unique evidence-based framework of narratives for change.

About narratives and framing

The Workshop researches and advises on narrative and communication strategies that can help deepen and shift public thinking on complex issues, improve decision-making, and contribute to evidence-informed system changes.

Mindsets play a central role in people's ability to think deeply about and support any kind of change. Mindsets are deeply embedded, often invisible, ways that people think about how the world works. These mindsets are informed by enduring narratives or stories in our cultural discourse. Mental short-cuts we all use, which help us survive in an information rich world, also serve to protect our existing mindsets.

For people to be willing to support and actively engage in best policies, investments and practices, we need to deepen people's understanding of the causes of and solutions to problems. Researchers have found that shifts in people's thinking are driven by tested narrative strategies.



This short report sets out how you can avoid surfacing unhelpful mindsets and narratives and provides evidence-based alternative narratives and language to strengthen and surface people's helpful thinking.

How to use this report

- This short report offers preliminary recommendations for narrative strategies about early brain development.
- What we are able to offer in this report are research-informed predictions which have not been research-tested (although some are being tested in practice) in Aotearoa New Zealand.
- Our recommended next steps in the work to shift narratives to deepen understanding of early brain development include research to see whether these preliminary message recommendations actually shift the thinking of persuadable audiences in Aotearoa.
- For now, we encourage advocates and experts to start experimenting with these narrative strategies to see how they work with your audiences.

Overview

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 - Step 2.** The 5 building blocks of narratives for change
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 - Building block 2.** Lead with a concrete vision for a better world
 - Building block 3.** Connect with intrinsic values that matter to people
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 - Step 4.** Check for common errors that can surface unhelpful thinking
 - Step 5.** Check your images
 - Step 6.** Test your narratives with the right audience

Step 1: Map the landscape of thinking and stories

The first step in shifting mindsets is to understand the unhelpful and helpful ways people currently think and talk about early brain development. Knowing this, you can choose messages that will avoid surfacing unhelpful thinking, and navigate people towards the helpful.

The description of the current landscape of thinking and narratives in this report is based largely on the contributions of a group of experts and advocates at the wānanga. As a result, this is only a partial map of the current landscape. Suggestions for next steps to develop a more comprehensive map of the narrative landscape are included below.

Unhelpful thinking to avoid in early brain development messages includes:

- ➔ Individualist narratives that focus on individual behaviour and individual parental responsibility. These narratives are unhelpful because they surface and reinforce unhelpful and shallow thinking about the barriers to early development, and therefore surface shallow ideas about the solutions that will work.

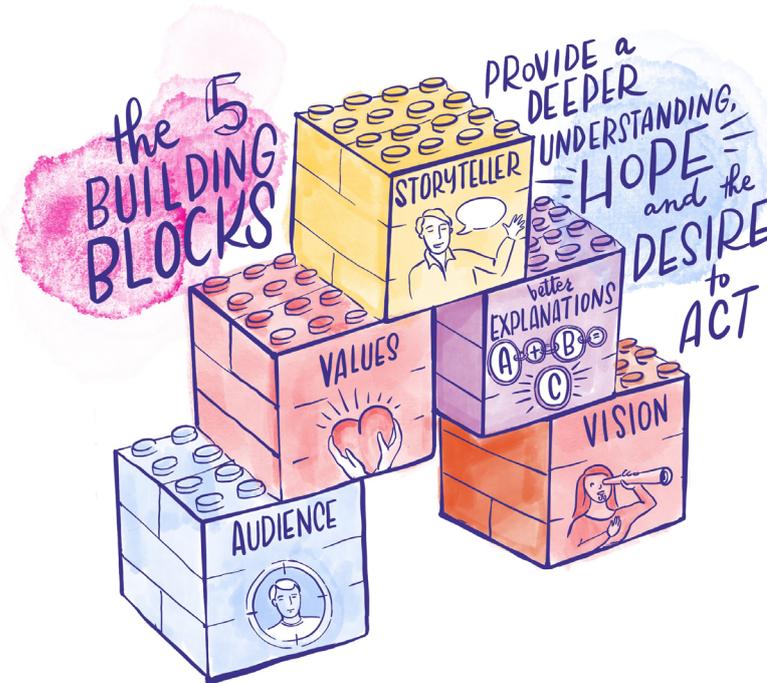
- Ways of thinking and talking that centre Western knowledge, such as when funders or policy makers don't value Indigenous knowledge enough and talk about things through a "Western lens" that values biomedical Western knowledge too much.
- Talking about individual benefits for children and failing to explain that it is good for all of us if babies are cared for.
- Narratives that talk about "old" and "traditional" Western/ Pākehā ways of thinking about parenting and child-development as these are inhibiting change. These mindsets are Pākehā-centric, gendered/ patriarchal, centring the nuclear family, and individualistic.

The helpful thinking to navigate towards includes:

- Narratives that emphasise collective action and benefits, and draw people's attention to upstream structures and systems so they support changes that will make the most difference to build supportive environments for early childhood development.
- Narratives that value Indigenous knowledge and ways of being and are led by and for Māori. Ways of thinking that value cultural connection, including talking about positive role models from one's culture.
- Narratives that value and advance whānau self-determination, and being empowered to influence your child's development.
- Narratives that focus on collective wellbeing and shared, collective benefits.
- Narratives that acknowledge the intergenerational and long-term nature of the issue and explain that it requires long-term consistent responses. For example, how parents and groups of people pass their parenting ideas, wisdom and their trauma through generations.
- Narratives that take a broad and holistic approach to child wellbeing, for example, using phrases such as "child wellbeing" to be broader than "early brain development". Also talk about the links between human health and planetary and environmental health.

Step 2: The five building blocks of narratives for change

Using these five building blocks of communication, you can avoid surfacing unhelpful thinking and instead surface more helpful thinking.



Building block 1

Identify the right audience and tell YOUR story

Effective strategic communications will activate the people who are already persuaded by your message and evidence, and convince people who are open to persuasion.

Avoid	Embrace
<p>Constructing and testing narratives just for people who are already persuaded. Because they are already persuaded, they are good at making sense out of even a confusing or ambiguous message. By focusing on persuaded people, You may not find narratives that surface helpful thinking.</p>	<p>Narratives tested on persuadable people, people who hold some unhelpful thinking on early brain development but who are not firmly fixed and tend to move their views. Their support is critical to tipping the balance towards necessary changes.</p>
<p>Constructing narratives specifically to counter people who are firmly opposed to your evidence, solution and message, e.g., correcting false facts or negating unhelpful thinking. Doing this reinforces unhelpful thinking.</p>	<p>Constructing your story for the people most likely to be persuaded (using the tools and strategies set out below). This may include funders who are already involved in the early brain development space.</p>

Audiences prioritised by wānanga participants

Participants in the wānanga identified audiences at the broader economic and social policy level, including politicians, policy-makers, funders and the media, as being their top priority for mindset change in relation to early brain development. Alongside this strong focus on shifting mindsets using narratives at the policy, funding and media levels, participants also identified a need for some household and family members to understand these key insights, with a particular focus on fathers.



Key insight:

Effective strategic communications will activate the people who are already persuaded by your message and convince people who are open to persuasion.

Building block 2

Lead with a vision for the better world

A vision builds hope – this is important because people are constantly being reminded of all the problems in the world. Describe the better world that the people most affected by your issue want and need. Flip your problem (lack of a supportive early brain development environment causes harm) into an inclusive vision (how children’s and whānau lives would be better with supportive early brain development systems and environments, and how this would benefit us all).

Avoid	Embrace
A vision that is simply the removal of a harm (e.g., lack of a supportive learning and development environment). Starting with a problem. Starting with the policy solutions/law change.	A vision that uses concrete language and is about how children’s and families’ lives will be better when early brain development is well supported.
An abstract vision that doesn’t describe concrete impacts on people’s lives.	Describe this concrete outcome, not just the better processes or policies needed to achieve this. When you talk about these concrete future benefits, be explicit about the interconnection of the benefits for children, families, and the wider community.



Key insight:

Lead your message with a clear vision of how the world will be better in concrete ways when the changes you are advocating for have all been made. This will motivate people to support your change, and build their hope that change is possible.

Building block 3

Use helpful values to connect with your audience

Values are what matters most to us in life. They are at the heart of human motivations. Engaging with people's values is shown to help better communicate science. Research shows that what matters most to most people is taking care of each other and the planet, discovery, creativity and being supported to choose and reach our own goals. These are known as *intrinsic and collective values*. These intrinsic values are the ones most likely to engage people in deeper thinking about complex issues and improving systems for collective wellbeing.



Avoid	Embrace
<p>Prevention and protection Although these are important components of programmes with children and whānau, when used to lead communications these values don't help people to think about the causes of problems or motivate support for necessary systems-level solutions.</p>	<p>Social Responsibility This helps people to consider the collective responsibility of ensuring that children have the environment and resources they need to develop. It helps people see and understand the need for societal and systems-level solutions.</p>
	<p>Interdependence and interconnectedness This helps people see that our lives are connected and we depend on one another to be able to address issues in our lives. It also helps people think about collective benefits and solutions.</p>
<p>Security values Telling people that early brain development matters by raising fear for their own health and safety or that of their loved ones, this leads people to be less tolerant of complexity. This is unhelpful if we want people to understand science and support any kind of complex action.</p>	<p>Community Strength This helps build support to address issues like toxic stress in communities with evidence-based programmes to make them stronger.</p>
<p>Fairness without context The word fairness, like the word equality, means different things to different people. Using the word without clear context will surface some ideas that are counterproductive to our message. Avoid using words like 'fairness' or 'equality' without being specific about what you mean by the word.</p>	<p>Fairness across communities and families When we talk specifically about fairness across communities and families, this surfaces the idea that children should have what they need to be able to develop and have good health and wellbeing. It is shown to increase willingness for people to act and support solutions.</p>

Avoid	Embrace
<p>Cost-effectiveness Focusing on cost also surfaces unhelpful individualism thinking and doesn't surface thinking about early brain development as a social or community issue.</p> <p>E.g., Preventing harm to children will save taxpayers and government money.</p>	<p>The Human Potential Value This helps people see that our communities are stronger when all people, including children who have huge potential, can realise their full potential.</p>



Example of what the interconnectedness value looks like in a message:

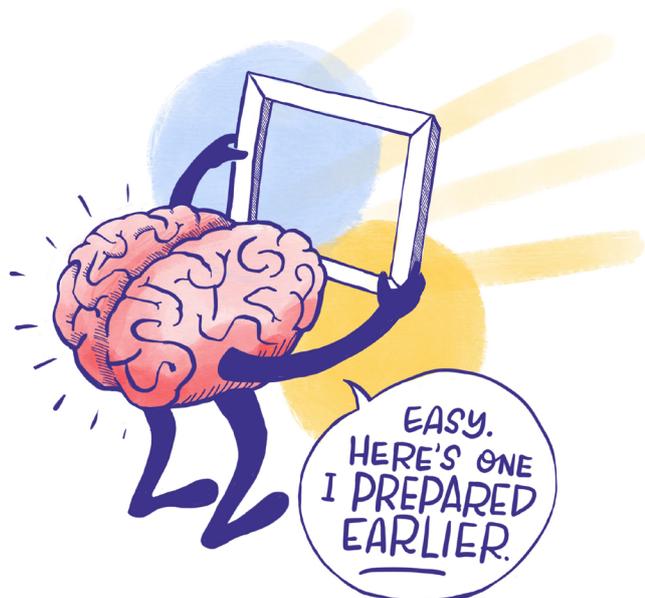
“As New Zealanders, we need to recognise that we are all connected and what affects one part of our community affects us all. When we address the wellbeing of children, our whole country benefits. One way to do this is to set up policies around early brain development that make sure all children and whānau are strong and supported. Simply put, New Zealand would be better off if the government lifted the load off families overloaded with pressures and stress like poverty and we all worked together to support families and children to thrive. We will all thrive in Aotearoa New Zealand when whānau and their babies are thriving.”

Building block 4

Provide better explanations

Frames

Frames are pre-packaged, often unconscious, explanations about how the world works and why people do what they do. Frames surface particular ways of thinking about an issue. We cannot avoid frames, and when we negate or myth bust unhelpful ones we inadvertently reinforce them. But we can replace unhelpful frames with better ones.



Avoid	Embrace
<p>Fatalism If the causes of and solutions to toxic stress are not explained properly in terms of the role of effective services, then people think that negative experiences in childhood necessarily lead to negative outcomes.</p>	<p>Resilience When talking about toxic stress explain people's capacity for resilience to avoid the thinking that the damage from these experiences in childhood is irreversible. It also helps emphasise the role of effective services.</p>
<p>Individualism This makes people think that the solutions to support early brain development are entirely the responsibility of parents. It focuses attention on personal behaviour changes rather than creating supportive environments.</p>	<p>Self-efficacy This helps people understand that parents have self-determination and control and can make positive changes, while still recognising the impact that external factors and systems have upon them. What helps is to explain the external conditions that affect outcomes first and then tell stories about individual autonomy. This frame helps people move away from the idea that responsive parenting is simply a matter of good choices.</p>
<p>Toxic stress as a personal problem in need of individual behaviour change.</p>	<p>Toxic stress as a public concern in need of community-based solutions This helps people to understand the role we all play in building healthy environments for all children and highlights communities themselves as agents of change.</p>
<p>Leading with problems This feeds into fatalism, and doesn't help people believe that change is possible. It is important to talk about problems, but leading with a vision helps to frame those problems as barriers that can be removed.</p>	<p>Good health and wellbeing both now and in the future. This helps people to think about the positive benefits of building children's brains and bodies for their health and wellbeing now and setting them up well for their futures.</p>
<p>Relying on the value of Western science traditions alone Conversations about brain science are not always helpful – especially for communities who have good reason to not trust scientists.</p>	<p>A collective process of knowledge production Saying something like, "We know a lot more than we used to about how toxic stress affects development" includes those you are speaking with along with scientists. This is one way to acknowledge the value that different ways of knowing such as mātauranga Māori bring to the topic, without being extractive of that knowledge.</p>

Metaphors

Metaphors are a simplifying explanatory tool we can use to help our audience quickly grasp better, deeper explanations for complex problems. A metaphor takes something we understand on a practical everyday level and connects it to the abstract or complex to make sense.

Metaphors to embrace

Useful metaphors being used in Aotearoa New Zealand

Te whare tūpuna (meeting house)	This metaphor helps explain Māori understandings of wellbeing and describes how cultural healing practices using tikanga (practices and protocols) and kawa (values) can be recovered to address patu ngākau (deep emotional wounds) and pōuritanga (darkness) experienced by Māori. These practices rebalance mauri (energy) and restore the natural balance between māramatanga (understanding/brainwave) and pōuritanga. ¹
Harakeke (flax plant)	This metaphor illustrates how the child grows and is protected within a supportive whānau environment. It helps audiences see that what works best to support the child in the first 1000 days are culturally appropriate and evidence-led interventions that are designed by the community to support the wider whānau. ²
Whakapapa	This metaphor describes the connection between a child through its parents back to its ancestors and to a set of traits that it has inherited from them. ³ It also uses the value of wairuatanga or spirituality. The whakapapa metaphor is also used by Rangimārie Te Turuki Arikirangi Rose Pere to connect mātauranga Māori with the brain science to illustrate how the child's brain is supported by different levels equated to its whakapapa. ⁴
Seed and seedling	This metaphor describes the context of a child's learning environment that is created through relationships between whānau, adults who work with children, and children. ^{5,6} We think this metaphor probably helps to lift the gaze to the systems and structures required to support early brain development.

Metaphors tested internationally to explain how brain development happens at the individual level

Brain architecture	This explains that brains are built through an active process that begins before birth and continues into adulthood. It recognises that interventions that happen at any point in a child's life will improve their experiences and build/shape their brains.
Serve and return	This metaphor empowers the adults in a child's life to actively build relationships and engage in turn-taking language interactions that help with language acquisition.
Air traffic control	This metaphor helps to explain the cognitive processes that children's brains have to develop (its executive function) with the support of those around them. This metaphor works particularly well to help audiences understand children who have less well developed air traffic control systems.

¹ Smith, T. (2019). He ara uru ora: Traditional Māori understandings of trauma and well-being. Te Atawhai o Te Ao. <https://teatawhai.maori.nz/wp-content/uploads/2020/04/He-Ara-Uru-Ora.pdf>.

² Centre for Social Impact. (2015). Opportunities to make a positive impact in the first 1,000 days of a child's life. Centre for Social Impact. <https://www.baytrust.org.nz/vdb/document/12>

³ Rameka, L. (2015). Te Ira Atua: The spiritual spark of the child. He Kupu: The Word, 4(2). <https://www.hekupu.ac.nz/sites/default/files/2017-10/Te-Ira-Atua-The-spiritual-spark-of-the-child.pdf>

⁴ McCaleb, M., & Mikaere-Wallis, N. (2005). Relationship-shaping: Teacher consistency and implications for brain development. The First Years: Ngā Tau Tuatahi. New Zealand Journal of Infant and Toddler Education, 7(2). http://baby.geek.nz/Old_Site/Writing_files/Relationship-shaping.pdf

⁵ Ministry of Education. (2009). Te Whatu Pōkeka: Kaupapa Māori assessment for learning: Early childhood exemplars. Ministry of Education. <https://www.education.govt.nz/assets/Documents/Early-Childhood/TeWhatuPokeka.pdf>

⁶ Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet (DPMC). (2019). Child and youth wellbeing strategy. DPMC. <https://childyouthwellbeing.govt.nz/sites/default/files/2019-08/child-youth-wellbeing-strategy-2019.pdf>

Metaphors tested internationally to explain how wider systems create the conditions for brain development

Toxic (harmful) stress	Toxic (harmful) stress is what a child experiences when in a harmful environment due to factors like extreme poverty or violence in a community. The metaphor emphasises that these factors are often outside of the control of the whānau. It is particularly useful in helping audiences understand that action can be taken by those with the power to make changes to the things causing the stress, such as providing appropriate resources to whānau and communities.
Overloaded	The overloaded truck (lorry) metaphor illustrates the weight that stressors like poverty place upon families. When the truck is overloaded, it negatively impacts a family's capacity to care for their children's needs. When severe enough, the overloading can cause a breakdown. This metaphor is especially useful for lifting the audience's gaze upstream to see the broader social factors that cause family stresses that impact children. It makes it easier to identify the agents responsible for collective, society-wide solutions to these causes.
Tipping the scales	The metaphor describes a child's development as a scale that we want to tip towards the positive side of good developmental outcomes. This is done through the child's positive relationships and supportive environments and experiences. It highlights the multitude of factors that influence good outcomes and illustrates how protective factors (like language acquisition) can help weight the scales in favour of these good outcomes.

Explanatory chains

Use an explanatory chain to explain cause and effects of early brain development. An explanatory chain has four main parts (setting the scene, identifying the cause of the problem up front, direct and indirect domino effects and impacts, ends with solutions) and uses facts carefully.



Example: A chain of facts to explain the importance of early brain development

1. Set the scene

We can have a future in which whānau have everything they need to realise their mana motuhake. A future in which we all have the space and time for babies and children to feel safe and connect with their whakapapa. We all have the collective responsibility of ensuring that children have the environment and resources they require to develop.

2. Cause (with facts)

But in New Zealand today, too many whānau and communities are overloaded with pressures and stresses, like poverty and a lack of government support, locking their capacity to support their children's development.

⁷ Example adapted from NSPCC. (2021). *Sharing the brain story: Using metaphors to explain child development*. National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children. <https://learning.nspcc.org.uk/media/2547/sharing-the-brain-story-metaphors-summary-booklet.pdf>

3. Domino effects

This impacts children's wellbeing over the long term, and interferes with the ability of whānau and communities to support the development of their children.

4. Solution

We have an opportunity to build healthy brains and the wellbeing of tamariki and whānau together. You can hold people in government and policy makers accountable, and encourage them to fund evidence-led solutions that offload stress from whānau.⁷ We will all thrive in Aotearoa New Zealand when whānau and their babies are thriving.

Providing proof that change is possible

There are several ways of thinking, or cognitive biases, which prevent people from acting to support change. These include:

- Normalcy bias: People tend to think change is not possible, or even needed, and that the way our society is constructed now is how it will always be.
- Fatalism frame: People tend to think that people in government or in wider society will not act.
- Perception gap: People believe that others don't care about the things they care most about, even when most people share their aspirations.

One effective strategy to overcome these biases is providing people with proof that others are prepared to act, and are already acting. This is called providing social proof.

You can provide social proof by:

- Showing all the people who support change, often unexpected people (see messengers below).
- Ask people to tell others that they are supporting the change.
- Talk about how people from across backgrounds and cultures came together in the past to support change to achieve something New Zealanders value.
- Be sure to name the values that people came together to support.



Building block 5

Use diverse storytellers

The messengers who convey messages about the importance of early brain development also matter. Research on messengers and trust is complex, but findings suggest we should use:

- a wide range of messengers
- messengers who are well qualified to comment on the context of the message
- unexpected messengers who may align with persuadable people's values, e.g., former National MP Chester Burrows on justice reform
- intergenerational messengers, e.g., young people or children talking to their parents and grandparents.

Perceived expertise matters more than actual expertise.



Step 3: Build a story using vision, values, barriers and solutions

Put together your message by combining the elements outlined in this guide using this formula:

First >> Describe your vision for a better world and why this matters (the values)
Check: Are you using helpful values?

Then >> Name the barriers and problems that are in the way
Check: Are you using tested metaphors?
Check: Have you selected and used facts that give better explanations about causes?
Check: Have you named the agents responsible for removing these barriers?

Finally >> Present solutions. Include an action proportionate to the problem.

Step 4: Check for common errors that surface unhelpful thinking

Avoid	Embrace
Leading with facts, problems or policy solutions.	Lead with your concrete vision of a better world.
Myth busting or negating someone else's story. E.g., 'You may have heard' or 'It is NOT true that'.	Stay focused on telling your story as a more effective way to replace myths without amplifying them.
Phrases that make the wrong people responsible. E.g. 'Parents are the ones responsible to change their behaviour to support their child's development'.	Phrases that name the people responsible, and their behaviours. E.g., 'People in government, policy makers, and communities can provide better collective solutions to support children, parents and whānau'.
Using prevention, protection, security fears or cost-effectiveness as the 'why' to support early brain development. E.g., 'It will cost more in the long run if we don't' or 'To keep you and your community safe'.	Using our collective social responsibility and interconnectedness as the 'why' to support early brain development. E.g., 'We will all thrive in Aotearoa New Zealand when we work together to ensure that whānau and their babies are thriving'.
Phrases without people in them. E.g., 'The law needs to change' or 'Children's brain development should be supported'.	Phrases that name people who can act. E.g., 'People in government and policy makers can implement evidence-led solutions to support early brain development'.

Step 5: Check your images

The images we use to illustrate our messages can either reinforce or undermine the helpful values, metaphors and frames we have chosen. In particular, images often activate values or suggest metaphors.

Ask these questions about any images you want to use:

- What are the values this image engages? Does this image evoke unhelpful values like protection, prevention or cost-effectiveness or helpful values like social responsibility and interconnectedness?
- What frames does this image engage? E.g., Does the image engage an individualism frame by representing a person or parents alone?
- What metaphors does this image engage? Common helpful metaphors images of an overloaded truck to illustrate toxic stress or scales tipping towards the positive side of good developmental outcomes.

Avoid	Embrace
Negative or stereotyped imagery that does not match the values and solutions-led story you are telling. E.g., children who may be experiencing poor outcomes from the lack of a supportive learning environment.	Positive imagery that reflects the values and solutions-led story you are telling. E.g., children, parents, whānau and communities enjoying one another and doing well together.

Step 6: Test your communications

Testing tells you whether your message leads to the outcomes you are aiming for. There are two main ways to be sure that you are using a tested message:

- Use a message that has already been tested.
- Test your message.

Check: Test with your persuadable audience, not the already convinced or the opposition.

Inspiration

Here is an example of a communication strategy that reflects some of the recommendations in this message guide.

▶ Video: [Someone you love might need your yes](#)

Next steps

This report provides an initial and partial map of the existing narrative terrain and includes some initial ideas about what kinds of narrative strategies might be useful to deepen understanding. This report will hopefully also provide people across the sector with some preliminary ideas about narrative strategies which they can use. The scope of this project didn't allow for a comprehensive map of existing narratives, nor did it include any scope to develop or test new narratives. So there is scope for further work across all three phases of the process of narrative change, as follows.

Mapping: Further work & possible next steps

Further work to map the narrative terrain (through generative primary research):

- Broadening the map by having researchers speak to a wider group of people;
- Deepening insights through in-depth interviews with experts to better understand the narratives they are currently using, and why, as well as what they want people to understand;
- Some research to gather and analyse the current thinking of other audiences identified but not prioritised at the wānanga;
- Gather and analyse data directly from the audiences identified, e.g., through focus groups, to get direct evidence of their current thinking and the narratives that are influencing their thinking;
- Primary research on narratives. Experts at the wānanga identified some specific narratives which they think are either underpinning unhelpful thinking, or promoting deeper and more helpful thinking about the issue. A next step would be to look at the narrative landscape (e.g., media coverage) to see where, and in what form, those narratives appear;

- A more comprehensive review of literature in Aotearoa - the scope of this project was focused on framing and narrative research but a literature review with a broader scope might uncover more examples of how experts are currently framing brain development.

Testing: Further work & possible next steps

Testing: further work to develop and test narrative strategies to surface helpful thinking:

- Developing a set of likely communication techniques, including values, metaphors, explanatory chains that have the potential to shift or deepen thinking on this topic.
- Survey experiments using quantitative methods to test the effect of particular communications techniques on people's knowledge, attitudes and motivations to act.
- In-group stress testing in which we put particular frames into group conversations to see how they are used in these group conversations and perform against other dominant frames already in use.

Implementing: Further work & possible next steps

Implementing: developing tools to help people apply the insights in their work and communications. Some of the ways this can be done include:

- short message guide
- video explainers
- checklists
- templates for emails and op-eds
- training courses
- briefs for creative agencies.
- coaching and peer review

Advisory/Champions Group

To improve the quality and usefulness of the research insights and build a foundation for sector implementation, we recommend the involvement in some structured and ongoing way of people with lived expertise and advocates. This can be achieved through a well-supported and resourced (paid) advisory/champions group:

- An advisory group of advocates and people with lived experience who are champions for narrative change, and who can advise on the suitability of narrative strategies as they are developed and before they are tested.
- This can help identify and eliminate (before testing) any narrative strategies which might be 'effective' at deepening the thinking of persuadable audiences but which are inappropriate in some other way.

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