FRAME WORKS

54 reasons
Part of the Save the Children Australia Group

# Reframing Child Rights:

## Core Ideas and Current Framing

NOVEMBER 2024

Thirty-five years ago, Australia signed on to the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (or CRC for short), which describes and upholds the fundamental rights of all children. These rights are not just protections for children, but a comprehensive framework for making sure every child and young person thrives. A child rights framework is distinct from other approaches to improving child welfare and wellbeing in critical ways. It has unique potential to enable transformative positive social change that includes all children, especially those facing the greatest challenges in their lives. However, child rights – both as a concept and framework – remains misunderstood and contested, hindering public support for and widespread adoption of the Convention's principles into both policies and daily lives of people in Australia.

Communications on social issues like child rights routinely backfire because advocates fail to account for the prior understandings and implicit assumptions (e.g., "cultural mindsets") that the public brings to bear on the topic at hand. Cultural mindsets are a way of organising our experiences and making sense of information that are widely shared and culturally specific. In the case of child rights, people likely bring to bear a range of overlapping and sometimes conflicting mindsets, some of which pose significant challenges to advancing child rights, and some of which may provide opportunities for building understanding and support for change.

Mindsets about child rights are reinforced by public discourse and popular narratives about children and young people. While public discussion about child rights specifically is relatively sparse, when it does appear in the media the focus is often on zero sum arguments that pit children's and young people's rights against parental control and community safety. Popular narratives about child rights also reflect larger debates around race, culture, social class and

other dimensions of inequality. This creates obstacles for communicators who want to shift the conversation and make child rights a central part of Australian society.

This research memo documents the first phase of a planned large-scale reframing project on how to reframe child rights. Specifically, it documents what needs to be communicated about child rights; how organisations advocating for child rights are framing them; and what narratives around child rights are appearing in the media. Comparing these three things provides the groundwork for the next stages of research – an exploration of public mindsets about child rights and the development of a new framing strategy to build people's understanding of, shift their attitudes towards, and build support for child rights.

## The Core Ideas of Child Rights

Below are eight core ideas that advocates and other stakeholders want to convey about child rights, based on interviews and feedback from people with expertise from across the field. These ideas are the central content that needs to be communicated to people outside of this field, including members of the public, policymakers, and other stakeholders and decision-makers.

Importantly, the way these ideas are expressed below is intended as a relatively 'plain language' and simplified summary of the core ideas. The language used departs in some ways from how advocates and experts conceptualise and prefer to express these ideas. It is intended as a summary of 'what' needs to be communicated but not 'how' that communication should be done.

### Core Idea 1: Children in Australia are guaranteed the rights outlined in the Convention on the Rights of the Child.

The Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) is an international treaty signed and ratified by Australia that describes the fundamental rights of children and describes how they should be ensured. The CRC is grounded in the understanding that children are themselves inherently valuable, not just as potential or future adults.

The Convention has four guiding principles that underlie every right:

1. Principle of non-discrimination;
2. Principle of right to life, survival, and development;
3. Principle of doing what is in the best interest of the child;
4. Principle of meaningfully engaging and respecting children's views.

These four principles and all the rights of the Convention are highly interdependent, both in the document and in the lived experience of children.

## Core Idea 2: Child rights are human rights.

Human rights are universal, inalienable, indivisible and interdependent freedoms and protections that belong to every human being.[1] Although the rights that are laid out in the Convention are designed to address the developmental needs and circumstances that differentiate childhood from adulthood, at a fundamental level child and adult rights are the same.

## Core Idea 3: Child rights provide a comprehensive framework for ensuring children and young people thrive, with a particular focus on equity and non-discrimination.

The Convention is a blueprint for an approach to child development, safety and wellbeing that is comprehensive and holistic, because it explains and knits together child rights across domains (e.g., education, health care, social welfare systems) and contexts such as family, community, and culture. Child rights is a lens that advocates, researchers, parents, policymakers and children and young people themselves can use when designing social systems that impact children's lives, and when engaging with children directly. It has a particular focus on ensuring that all children and young people can thrive, including those who face the greatest challenges and complexity in their lives.

## Core Idea 4: Children's rights complement adults' rights.

Children's rights are distinct from parents', caregivers', and other adults' rights, but don't compete with or invalidate those rights. The Convention calls the family 'the natural environment for growth and well-being of all its members', meaning children's rights are interwoven with parents' and caregivers'.

Many of the rights in the Convention, such as the right to education, health care, and an adequate standard of living, benefit not just children but families. For instance, redesigning the social welfare system using a child rights framework could prevent family separation by supporting families before they reach a point where children need to be removed from the home. Child rights also give parents, caregivers and families more tools for advocating on behalf of their children when their needs are not being met or when they are at risk of harm.

Ultimately, using a child rights approach to decision making across social systems would benefit everyone, because it would create better long-term outcomes for children now and in the future.

### Core Idea 5: The expression of children's rights reflects their development and age.

All children and young people have the same rights, but the ways in which they are expressed, experienced and ensured depends on age and a child's dependence on adults. Infants and very young children do not have the ability to actively pursue their rights or verbally advocate for themselves, meaning they are more dependent on adults to ensure their rights are upheld. Young people in mid to late adolescence, on the other hand, generally have more autonomy and can more easily advocate for themselves and others.

The centrality of certain rights may also vary by developmental stage. For instance, for infants and younger children, the right to play may be more relevant, whereas the right to access information from diverse sources may be more important for an adolescent. However, all of the rights outlined in the Convention apply to all children and young people ages 0–18 years old.

### Core Idea 6: Children and young people's active participation in decision making is a right and leads to better outcomes.

Adults need to facilitate children and young people's right to express their views and actively participate in decisions that affect them. Programs and policies should be intentionally designed to take their input into account in order to better serve their needs and wellbeing. When children are able to express themselves and are taken seriously by adults it promotes healthy development, builds resilience, and leads to better overall wellbeing. Better outcomes for children also contribute to the overall health and wellbeing of society.

### Core Idea 7: The rights of children facing discrimination and marginalisation are particularly precarious.

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children, refugee children, children living in poverty, children with disabilities, and children involved with the social welfare, child protection, and criminal justice systems are more likely to have their rights violated. Children in these groups are more likely to experience a lack of safe and healthy housing, low-quality education, and removal from their families. Involvement in the youth justice system carries high risks for rights violations as the system was not adequately designed with children in mind. Many children from migrant backgrounds are also at high risk, including for some because of their status as non-citizens, even though they still carry the same rights under the Convention as all other children in Australia. This may be due in part to the fact that their parents' rights are also being violated; for instance, refugee children may be illegally detained with their parents. Children in these groups are also the least likely to have avenues to participation in decision making and advocacy for their own rights.

Upholding cultural rights is particularly important for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children, including because of the extensive history of violation of these rights. All children have the right to practise and maintain shared traditions and activities and participate in the cultural life of their communities. Because Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children are more likely to be removed from their families and become involved in the youth justice system, they are

often separated from their families and communities, where traditions and cultural activities are observed. When cultural rights aren't considered, whether in the social welfare, education, child protection or youth justice systems, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children risk losing their language and identity, compounding the harm of other rights violations. Active participation in decision making that affects Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children – together with the broader right to self-determination of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples – is critical, including because settler systems do not currently take into account or understand their history and cultural knowledge.

### Core Idea 8: Adults are accountable for upholding child rights, and governments have particular responsibilities.

Everyone is responsible for ensuring children's rights are promoted and protected. All adults, not just parents, need to understand what child rights are, and have the skills to uphold them. Importantly, rights are expressed and upheld through constant negotiation between people, and this includes children's rights. Promoting and protecting children's rights requires that adults listen to children's views and respond to their needs, whether in personal interactions or in higher-level decision making. And because the capacity to actively participate varies by age, language, ability, and other factors, adults need to be equipped with the knowledge and skills necessary to understand children's best interests through the child's point of view, enable their participation to the extent possible and represent their views and best interests to ensure their rights are upheld.

Governments have a particular responsibility to ensure children's rights are upheld. Child rights need to be central to policies and practices across institutions that serve and affect children, such as education, health care and the social welfare system. Federal, state and local governing bodies need to take into consideration child rights and the effects of policies on children now and in the future in all their decision making.

# Sector Frame Analysis

As part of this research, researchers conducted a narrative scan and analysis of public-facing communications materials from organisations and agencies advocating for child rights or engaged with the core ideas of child rights. This analysis identified five framing trends, detailed below. Most organisations are currently using some combination of frames and applying frames unevenly across their communications; some frames or framing themes appear in some organisational materials and not in others.

### WHAT IS A FRAME?

Frames are choices we make whenever we communicate. They are choices about what we say, how we say it, what we emphasise, and what we leave unsaid. These choices affect how we think, feel, and ultimately act on that information. The way that advocates, policymakers and other stakeholders frame issues shapes how the public sees the world. Frames can increase the salience of a social issue, influence whether people see an issue as a matter of personal or collective responsibility, and increase or decrease their support for effective solutions. Importantly, finding effective frames requires empirically based research. For more information about frames and how they work to build understanding and support follow this link.

## Framing 1: Aspirational, future-oriented, and collective.

A number of organisations are currently framing child rights using an aspirational tone that encourages audiences to envision a future where children's rights are ensured. Communications using this frame tend to include an explicit or implicit call for collective action and connect positive outcomes for children to their communities and society.

Aspirational framing has the potential to shift people's support for child rights by helping them think about ensuring them as both attainable and as a matter of collective responsibility. However, this framing can and should be balanced with explanations about the challenges to achieving those aspirations. Communications need to include clear links between the aspiration or vision; the problem (such as lack of enforcement or racial discrimination); and attainable solutions, including ones at the community level or that people can actively engage in themselves.

**Example:**

> *The UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) sets out an inspiring vision for childhood and children – a world where all children's rights are fully respected and fulfilled.*[2]

## Framing 2: Healthy development and wellbeing.

Communications materials using this framing link child rights to healthy childhood development and wellbeing. This framing tends to be more strongly explanatory because it has to explain what healthy development looks like, and effective framing around child development is increasingly robust.[3] Organisations are using this framing to communicate about a range of different child rights, such as health, youth justice, and education.

This framing is directly related to the key component of Core Idea #5 – that the expression of children's rights reflects their development and age – and can be used as an entry point to open up wider discussion about child rights. Using healthy development and wellbeing framing could move people's thinking away from unhelpful assumptions about child rights as simply flowing through, or even in opposition to, adult rights. Instead, it could lead to more productive thinking about how ensuring child rights creates thriving children.

**Example:**

> *Children do their best when they are supported, nurtured, and loved; when they can go to school, play with friends and sleep in their own bed each night. Yet right across Australia, children as young as 10 are arrested, charged with an offence, hauled before court and locked away in prison cells ... Locking up children doesn't make our communities safer. Instead it sets many children on a path to further offending and the adult criminal justice system ... Children belong in classrooms, and playgrounds, not handcuffs, courtrooms, and prison yards.*[4]

## Framing 3: Empowerment and voice.

This framing draws on the component of Core Idea #6 and makes it a framing choice. When organisations use this framing they talk about child agency and engagement as issues of "empowerment" and "having a voice." This framing is common in communications pitched at younger readers but is used in communications for adult audiences as well. When communicators use this framing, they assume that children's empowerment and engagement in decision making is a commonly accepted goal.

It is important to empirically test whether this is the case, and whether this framing increases people's support for child rights. In the meantime, communicators should always incorporate clear explanations about how agency and engagement are promoted and achieved, especially for very young children and children with disabilities.

**Example:**

> *[We] empower children and young people to build self-confidence, self-esteem and skills that enable them to have a voice and be heard.*[5]

### Framing 4: Problem-oriented.

Organisational communications using this framing foreground the problems that need to be tackled when it comes to promoting and protecting child rights. This framing is often – but not exclusively – found in communications about the rights of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children. Sometimes this framing relies on crisis language and darker imagery, such as pictures of unhappy children and families, to illustrate the issues they are addressing.

By highlighting the problem to be solved, problem-oriented framing can increase a sense of urgency among audiences, and when the problem is firmly rooted in a causal chain of cause → effect → solution, has strong explanatory power. The potential pitfall of this framing is creating a sense of fatalism if the solutions aren't also clearly stated. Balancing urgency and efficacy is key, and this framing strategy needs to be tested to ensure there aren't backfire effects, particularly in communications focused on inequities between groups.

#### PROBLEM-ORIENTED VS. EXPLANATORY AND SOLUTION-FOCUSED FRAMING

Problem-oriented framing may inadvertently cue othering and "Us vs. Them" and "zero sum" mindsets. It can also lead to fatalistic thinking about issues as unsolvable when descriptions of problems are not matched with clear solutions. By contrast, explanatory and solution-focused framing makes clear links between causes, effects and solutions, balances urgency and efficacy (we *need* to and *can* create change), and collectivises solutions.

### Framing 5: Human rights.

Some organisational communications explicitly link children's rights to human rights as a whole, emphasising the content of Core Idea #2. This framing is less prominent than the framing discussed above. As the CRC itself makes clear, it cannot be assumed that people automatically extend human rights to children, whether as a framework for policy or as a concept. It is important to empirically test when and where linking child rights to human rights as a *frame* is most effective.

**Example:**

> *Children's rights are the basis for securing human rights for future generations – and they should have the power and agency to claim them*[6]

## Additional framing choices.

Organisations are using an array of additional frames, in particular values, throughout their communications. In particular they are using the value of "fairness" to activate a sense of collective responsibility for creating a fairer society. Another common value is "future investment" – an economic frame that could increase people's sense of collective benefit. Both of these frames should be empirically tested to see if and to what extent they create stronger support for child rights. In addition, communicators should keep in mind that "rights" is itself a value: a societal ideal that people collectively hold and ascribe to. The term "child rights" is itself a frame.

# Media Scan

A thematic scan of news media in Australia led to identification of three major themes.

### Theme #1: Public safety vs. child rights.

The most common topic that either explicitly or implicitly evoked child rights centres on crime and youth justice. In particular, between 2022–2023 there was comparatively widespread reporting and commentary on increases in youth crime, abuses in youth detention centres, and the potential of raising the age of criminal responsibility from 10 to 14. Some of this coverage included opinion pieces and quotes from child rights organisations.

However, there was also a clear public safety vs. child rights framing that is being used to advocate against reforms to the criminal legal system. This framing cues an assumption that child rights protections potentially come at the expense of the general public's safety and wellbeing. It activates unproductive mindsets about adolescence as a "dangerous time" when young people are unable to control their behaviour and engage in risky endeavours that can threaten the rest of their communities. This Us vs. Them thinking is likely exacerbated when people think of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander adolescents.

It is imperative that child rights advocates have an evidence-based counter-framing strategy to move the public discussion away from this othering narrative and towards a more productive conversation about how to make sure children's and young people's rights are protected and promoted. This framing strategy will also need to effectively convey the importance of child and youth participation and engagement in institutional decision-making (see Core Idea #6).

### Theme #2: Parental rights.

The "parental rights" narrative rests on the presumption that when protections for child rights are enforced, it diminishes parents' rights. This cues "zero sum" thinking that pits adults' and children's rights against each other, creating a competitive narrative that obscures the importance of Core Idea #4: that these rights are complementary. In the news media scan, examples of this theme appeared in reporting and commentary about children being taken into care; the privacy of transgender students in schools; and fathers' rights under the Family Law Act.

### Theme #3: Lack of developmental capabilities.

A third theme found throughout the thematic scan was an argument against child rights because children and young people are not mature enough to exercise those rights. This framing makes the argument that children and young people are too young to make decisions or have voice in decision-making. This framing is particularly notable because it exploits the developmental trajectory of childhood and adolescence to argue against child rights, flipping the healthy development framing found in organisational communications on its head. This presents a challenge to effectively framing Core Idea #5 in particular. Examples of this framing were found in articles about gender identification and gender-affirming care, and access to voluntary assisted dying.

## Other topics and themes.

Two other topics appeared in the media scan but narratives about them weren't as prominently contested during the timespan from which the sample was drawn.

*Right to an education*. Unlike some of the other rights discussed above, the right to an education – whether or not it was referred to as a "right" – appeared uncontested in the media scan. Education was often listed in conjunction with the rights to health care and welfare or social services. Media coverage did include critiques of the educational system as failing to uphold children's right to quality education, particularly for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children.

*Social media and digital and online environments*. The threat social media poses to children and adolescents, and positive effects of social media and digital and online environments more broadly, was a less common theme in this scan. When the two topics were discussed, the focus was on safety from exploitation and bullying and in a few cases parents' inability to control their adolescents. However, shortly after the timespan covered by the research sample, there was substantial public discussion of proposals to ban children and young people under the age of 16 from accessing social media, including action by governments. This is particularly notable because the right of children to participate, according to the experts who informed the core ideas, is predicated at least in part on the right to access information. It could spur a larger debate around child rights, which could both strengthen the current negative narrative and create room for a rights-based counter-narrative.

# Challenges and Emerging Recommendations

Although in-depth research on cultural mindsets and testing of new framing strategies relating to child rights have yet to be done, several challenges facing communicators have already emerged strongly and there are several framing moves communicators can make today.

Some key challenges identified so far are described below, along with shifts in communication and framing that can be adopted now. These emerging recommendations are informed both by the analysis-to-date summarised in this memo and best framing practices drawn from the broader research base about framing generally, and specifically in relation to children and in the Australian context.

## Limited public discourse.

Child rights and the policies and practices to promote and protect them are not well known. There is little explicit discussion of child rights in the media except in relation to youth justice. As a result, child rights are only on the radar when there are problems, rights are "aged up" to young people, most child rights lack salience or are a black box, and solutions and collective responsibility are absent.

To counter this, communicators can consider:

- Talking about what will happen when child rights are fully protected and promoted
- Giving explanatory examples of how rights are intertwined across ages, contexts and domains
- Explaining the developmental aspects of child rights – that the expression of children's rights reflects their development and age
- Focusing on solutions.

## Children's and adults' rights are seen as 'zero sum'.

Rights are often discussed as either/or, not complementary and reinforcing. This framing is reinforced by 'parental rights' and 'public safety' narratives. As a result, child rights aren't discussed as an asset to child development, there is further 'othering' of children and young people, benefits to parents of a child rights approach are invisible, and societal benefits of a child rights approach are dismissed.

To counter this, communicators can consider:

- Putting child rights in the context of larger social endeavours
- Explaining, not just asserting, how everyone benefits when child rights are upheld.

## Need for a unified framing strategy.

Sector communications use a plethora of untested values and frames relating to children's rights. Many communications are problem-focused and lack strong explanations or solutions. As a result, it is difficult to combat unproductive narratives across issues areas, a lack of consistent explanation and shared solutions means awareness does not lead to understanding and support, there is potential for fatalistic thinking if audiences don't know where they fit in, and there is a missed opportunity for sector-building.

To counter this, communicators should develop a unified, evidence-based framing strategy.

## Tips for communicating about child rights

| Instead of... | Try This |
|---|---|
| Mythbusting: repeating false narratives in order to refute them. | Start with what child rights are and then rebut the false narrative. |
| Leaving children's and young people's rights out of conversations about human rights. | Explain how families benefit when child rights are upheld, with concrete examples. |
| Focusing exclusively on children's vulnerabilities. | Talk about how rights support healthy development. |
| Assuming people understand what different types of rights entail or how they overlap. | Make explicit the links between individual child rights and explain how they are connected, including between cultural rights and other child rights.<br><br>Explain how child rights are expressed and experienced differently depending on children's age and development. |
| Placing responsibility solely on parents or other adults associated with children like teachers. | Make it collective – be explicit about the role of communities, governments, and society. |
| Talking about problems without solutions. | Offer concrete, causal, collective solutions as often as possible. |
| Asserting that upholding child rights creates benefits. | Explain what will happen and how everyone benefits when child rights are upheld. |

# Conclusion

Taken together, this three-pronged research approach indicates that there are both opportunities and challenges to communicating effectively about child rights in ways that mobilise strong support for their protection and promotion. The Core Ideas outlined above provide the anchoring knowledge that needs to be framed, while the sector scan demonstrates how the sector is currently communicating that information and the promising framing strategies already in place. Finally, the media scan points to the problematic counter-framing sector communications are up against.

A critical next step for this research is research into how people in Australia think about child rights on a deep cultural level. Determining which mindsets people bring to the core ideas – and which ones are activated by the framing in both child rights advocates' communications and by the media – is the best way to determine which framing strategies will be most effective.

# Appendix: Background and Methods

This research by the FrameWorks Institute was initiated and commissioned by 54 reasons (part of the Save the Children Australia Group) in partnership with the Queensland Family and Child Commission (QFCC).

The research included a combination of interviews and listening sessions with experts on child rights and content analysis of field materials and news articles, undertaken across 2023-24.

As a first step in the descriptive research process, FrameWorks staff conducted one-hour interviews and two listening sessions with 12 Australia-based experts on child rights. In these interviews and listening sessions, staff asked open-ended questions designed to elicit the core principles of child rights shared among experts.

The synthesised results of the interviews and listening sessions were validated through a further facilitated session including some of those already interviewed and selected other experts, and review by subject matter experts within 54 reasons and QFCC.

The "Core Ideas" derived from this process will ultimately define the tasks that a new framing strategy must accomplish.

FrameWorks staff then conducted a content analysis of public-facing web-based materials from a sample of 25 Australia-based advocacy, charitable, policy and governmental organisations that were identified as representative of organisations that communicate publicly about child rights or issues directly relating to child rights, weighted towards those whose communications are likely to be especially influential on how the field and general public think about child rights.

Each material was analysed for its framing choices, such as tone, values (e.g. empowerment), issue framing (e.g. healthy development) and orientation (problem vs. solution) to identify common framing strategies.

FrameWorks also conducted an analysis of media content to identify common narratives found in popular discourse. Researchers created a sample of newspaper articles, including commentaries and editorials from Jan 1, 2022 to December 31, 2023. Articles were selected using boolean searches of relevant terms. The articles were then coded for keywords to create smaller samples and analysed for common themes and narratives, specifically examining the data for narratives around child rights.

# About FrameWorks

The FrameWorks Institute is a non-profit 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, multi-disciplinary 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.

Learn more at www.frameworksinstitute.org

# Endnotes


1. https://www.ohchr.org/en/what-are-human-rights
2. 54 reasons. (n.d.). Kids Corner. https://www.54reasons.org.au/kids-corner
3. An important thing to note is that not all organisations in this scan who are communicating about childhood development and wellbeing are explicitly discussing rights, so the link between development and rights would be hard to discern for someone outside of this sector.
4. Raise the Age. https://raisetheage.org.au/
5. CREATE Foundation. https://create.org.au/who-we-are/
6. Amnesty International. (n.d.) Child rights. https://www.amnesty.org.au/campaigns/child-rights/

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FrameWorks Institute. (2024). *Reframing Child Rights: Core Ideas and Current Framing.* Washington, DC: FrameWorks Institute.

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