



— Frequently Asked Questions —

Staying On Frame in Real Time

The vast majority of questions and comments that communicators hear from the public and policymakers can be predicted by the research-based “[swamp](#)” of cultural models on that issue.

If you can predict, you can prepare.

A strategic framer prepares by anticipating the questions that will emerge from the swamp, considering the “traps” that are lurking in a possible response, and then choosing a well-framed response with the potential to build a more productive way of thinking about the issue. The sample question-and-answer sequences here show this tactical thought process in action. The exemplars come from questions and issues raised by stakeholder groups, but the models aren’t intended to simply script “the right answers” to questions you might be asked. Rather, this is a teaching tool, offering illustrations of how to talk more effectively about early child development, child care policies and programs, and related issues by applying FrameWorks’ research-based recommendations. While communicators are welcome to use the recommended responses, we encourage you to use the analysis of “false start” and “reframed” answers to build your capacity to apply these principles fluidly throughout your communications practice.

Q: Teenagers today are more violent and predatory than they were a few decades ago. Locking them up may not be ideal, but shouldn't public safety be our priority?



THE FALSE START ANSWER

Many people believe that youth violence is a greater problem today than in the past, and news coverage of juvenile crime adds to that impression, but in fact, research doesn't support those claims. Instead, for many reasons, arrests of juveniles for violent crimes have declined steadily over the last two decades. More importantly, though, not only is it less than ideal to put juvenile offenders in detention, but it's also harmful to them and less safe for the public in the long run. Youth and young adults who enter the juvenile justice system, especially those who are detained or incarcerated, are more likely to commit crime upon their release. Detention can have a negative effect on their educational achievement, future job prospects, and long-term mental health and financial stability. Locking youth up only worsens a bad situation, making them more likely to recidivate in the future, with harmful consequences for public safety. We can't prioritize public safety unless we prioritize treating young people appropriately. Otherwise, we just contribute to the problem.



THE REFRAMED ANSWER

Increased public safety begins with practical solutions that help our young people to thrive, divert them from the juvenile justice system, and pave the way for strong communities with plenty of opportunity for all those who live in them. Sending youths into detention is like placing them in a maze without exits. Once they are in the system, it's difficult for them to get out. Detention actually increases the likelihood of recidivism because it compromises juveniles' ability to access the mental health care, education, job training, and other resources that are proven to keep them on the right track in the first place. Stopping young people's entrance into the juvenile justice maze to begin with is an important strategy for improving both their long-term outcomes and public safety. For those youth already in the system, we need to redesign the maze so it has more paths out, through better access to the resources they need to reenter their communities successfully. Diversion programs, improved mental health care in schools, and mentorship programs are some of the ways we can prioritize public safety and address youth crime effectively.

THE FALSE START ANALYSIS

- By not opening with a tested Value, this reply misses an opportunity to engage listeners by reminding them of why the issue matters.
- If you don't believe it, don't say it. Research shows that repeating an opposing argument in order to defeat it has the opposite effect on listeners, who will misremember the false information as true. Instead, spend your prime communications real estate making the affirmative case for your position.
- Emphatic declarations and rhetorical flourishes generally backfire; a reasonable Tone is the best bet for holding listeners' attention.

THE REFRAMED ANALYSIS

- This reframed reply opens with the tested Value Pragmatism, helping to steer the conversation towards solutions.
- Framing strategically also means knowing what not to say. By focusing on how alternatives to detention improve public safety, this reply avoids communications traps like trying to prove people wrong.
- Using the Justice Maze Metaphor increases listeners' understanding of how the system works, in order to prime their support for desirable solutions.

Q: I've heard of programs where they take kids to jail to show them what's waiting for them if they make bad choices. Sending juvenile offenders to prison seems like a good way to teach them a lesson!



THE FALSE START ANSWER

The best way to keep children out of prison as adults is to not send them there as children. Starting in the 1990s, the practice of charging young people as adults became more common in the US, as a response to increased youth crime in the preceding decade. From 1990 to 2010, the number of juveniles in adult prisons or jails increased by almost 230 percent. Now roughly one-tenth of young people in detention are held in an adult prison or jail. This is a problem on two counts. First, it's expensive: the average cost to incarcerate an individual in an adult prison is more than \$31,000 per year. Second, being surrounded by adult offenders has been shown to increase juveniles' likelihood of becoming serious criminals. According to researchers, young people charged as adults have a 35 percent greater chance of being rearrested than those who are tried as juveniles. Since young people can be rehabilitated more easily than older offenders, we can save money and reduce crime by implementing more programs to keep them out of prison in the first place.



THE REFRAMED ANSWER

Many people don't realize that adolescence is a time of intense brain-building, when the skills and abilities that young people need for strong brain functioning as adults are being hardwired, much as a house has electrical and plumbing systems installed after the walls and roof have been constructed. This is when teens develop skills like decision-making and priority-setting, and their brains are not yet fully mature. That's one reason why sending children to adult prisons is a bad idea: for this construction project to turn out well, youth need to be in environments that support their healthy development. Treating juveniles as adults in the system is like using only one gear on a bicycle: it doesn't address the external factors, like neglect or unsafe environments, that shape young people's circumstances and keep them from getting where they need to go. Without access to supportive adult relationships, good schooling, and proper health care and nutrition, young brains can experience trauma that has long-term consequences: higher recidivism rates, worsened mental health, and lowered economic prospects. A better, more practical solution is to create interventions and programs that recognize the particular needs of youth, so that they can get the help they need to grow into healthy, engaged adults. We need to shift gears and prioritize juvenile detention alternatives, such as diversion programs and improved access to mental health care in schools.

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THE FALSE START ANALYSIS

- Statistics and data are no substitute for simplified explanation and instead can just raise more questions for the public than they answer. Choose your numbers carefully and use them judiciously.
- FrameWorks' research shows that appealing to cost-effectiveness decreases public support for many criminal justice policy measures—the public believes no amount is too much to spend to keep people safe. Use the tested Value Pragmatism instead.
- While it's important to explain the problem, equal time should be given to explain the solution. This builds policy support and fosters optimism that the problem can be fixed.

THE REFRAMED ANALYSIS

- This reframed reply uses the Metaphor Brain Architecture to explain adolescent brain development in an easy-to-access way that helps people understand the damage that can be done by treating children as adults.
- The Metaphor Justice Gears helps to illustrate why treating children as adults in the system is ineffective and helps people to imagine alternatives.
- Unnecessary facts have been replaced with deeper explanation of how brain development works.
- This reply divides space more equally between explanation of the problem and explanation of the solution.
- A dash of Pragmatism helps reinforce what's at stake.

Q: I just think some children don't turn out right, no matter what their parents do. If someone's born that way, what can we really do to fix that?



THE FALSE START ANSWER

Many children and adolescents in America experience mental health problems as a result of their difficult circumstances. These youth are imperiled by abuse, neglect, poverty, and domestic and community violence. Without effective help and intervention, these children suffer, struggle, and fall into despair and hopelessness. Some young teens cannot manage the emotional, social, and psychological challenges of adolescence and eventually engage in destructive and violent behavior. Sadly, too many states have ignored the crisis and dysfunction that creates child delinquency and instead have responded by creating juvenile justice systems that harm, rather than help, young people with mental health problems. Unless we overhaul these systems, the lives of far too many of our young people will continue to be drastically and irreparably harmed.



THE REFRAMED ANSWER

Children and adolescent mental health can be thought of like a table: if it doesn't rest on a level floor, it will wobble, which will keep it from working well. For young people, the "floor" is their environment: abuse, neglect, poverty, and community violence can all destabilize the levelness of their mental health, making it hard for them to function well in daily life. Many youth who enter the juvenile justice system have diagnosable mental health issues, and detention only makes their wobbliness worse, because it decreases their access to the supports they need to get better. Tables can't fix themselves, of course, nor can children fix their mental health. Instead, they need help from experts who can repair the floor, the table, or both, so that little wobbles don't become big ones. By reducing juvenile detention and supporting more effective alternatives, including better access to mental health care, we can assist in restoring more children and teens' level mental health, and that will improve our communities and their overall well-being.

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THE FALSE START ANALYSIS

- The attempt to inspire compassion in readers in this answer is likely to trigger the public's deep sense of fatalism about our ability to address social problems.
- The focus on some young people's inability to handle stressful conditions feeds into the dominant belief that crime is the result of people's bad choices and lack of self-control.
- The public lacks a basic understanding of child mental health. The focus on description rather than explanation in this response leaves people to fill in the holes about why some people turn out better than others with their own expectations and assumptions about mental health.
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THE REFRAMED ANALYSIS

- A reasonable Tone in this reply avoids triggering listeners' sense of fatalism or belief that nothing can be done.
- Explanation, rather than description, makes complex development processes "easy to think." The Metaphor Levelness boosts the explanatory power of this answer by offering a sticky message that helps people to think about mental health and how it works.
- By concluding with a "big picture" result of the proposed solutions, this reframed reply shows the collective benefit of supporting policies and programs to address child mental health in more appropriate ways.