



Beyond Prevalence: An Explanatory Approach to Reframing Child Maltreatment in the United Kingdom

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The most prevalent form of maltreatment, child neglect, gets the least attention from the public and policymakers

Members of the British public have come to recognize that child maltreatment is both highly prevalent and morally reprehensible. This recognition is no doubt due, in part, to effective advocacy and campaigns that have used statistics and a vivid imagery to communicate the prevalence

and reprehensibility of acts of child maltreatment. The question is whether the success of these efforts has resulted in public mobilization around policies that have the potential to prevent and address child maltreatment in the United Kingdom, or if they have left the public stuck in an overwhelming and debilitating

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sense of the problem at hand. Our research suggests the latter.

In 2012, the FrameWorks Institute, in a partnership with the National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children (NSPCC), began a long-term communications project. We began this research with the purpose of designing and empirically testing strategies that could be used to communicate more effectively about issues of child maltreatment. The goal was for the communication strategies developed to have the demonstrated ability to generate a broader public understanding of the issue of child maltreatment and, in turn, increase public support for the policies and programs necessary to improve the lives of children.

Our research has found that several key assumptions that have driven communications practices around child maltreatment in the past are no longer valid. The British public *has* been convinced that child maltreatment is prevalent, reprehensible, and that it is a major social problem. These positions evidence the success of past communications efforts while simultaneously suggest that future gains in public understanding and issue support will require a new communications agenda and a different set of strategies. Importantly, our research shows that aspects of public understanding — including conceptions of the *causes* of abusive and neglectful behaviors, the effects that these behaviors have on children and society, and the solutions to effectively address child maltreatment — continue to impede the efforts of organizations working to decrease rates of maltreatment, assist those children who have experienced these actions, and improve outcomes. In this article, we demonstrate how *explaining* critical aspects of the issue constitutes the next frontier of efforts to use communications to address issues of child maltreatment in the United Kingdom.

It should come as no surprise that the public draws on a powerful set of beliefs and assumptions to reason about the issue of child maltreatment. Through in-depth interviews and experimental survey research, we find that members of the British public draw on a complicated set of cultural models — implicit, but shared, understandings, assumptions and patterns of reasoning — to think about what maltreatment is, why it happens, what effects it has, and what can, and should, be done about it.

It should also come as no surprise that those working on the science, policy, and practice of child maltreatment have their own ways of understanding these issues. By reviewing relevant literature and conducting a series of interviews with child maltreatment experts, we distilled a high-level consensus account of the expert perspective on child maltreatment. This account constitutes what we call “the untranslated core story of child maltreatment,” and represents the core of what experts and advocates wish to communicate about the issue.

Those familiar with this issue will also not find it surprising that there are substantial gaps in understanding between public and expert perspectives. We focus here on these gaps, as they point to the main challenges that communicators must address in effectively framing this issue. One of our most important findings is that members of the public lack a way of connecting *acts* and *effects* of maltreatment. This is largely because of a thin understanding of the ways in which maltreatment undermines children’s neurological, psychological and cognitive development. This gap in understanding hampers the public’s ability to think about how to most effectively address child maltreatment and improve outcomes for children.

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