A BIG CHALLENGE: BRAINS IN DEFAULT MODE

In the late 1980s, the National Institutes of Health supported research on the human brain and human development. This research spurred the Carnegie Corporation and others to connect brain development with early education. Efforts to link the findings to public policy included a White House conference on brain research that featured a number of leading cognitive linguists who delved deeper into how our brains process information.

A concept of "framing" emerged that has since led to numerous approaches to developing messages for issue campaigns. Several research organizations and think tanks have been formed to examine the connection between the workings of the human brain and how best to frame messages around public policy issues. These groups include the Berkeley Media Studies Group, Frameworks Institute and Rockridge Institute, as well as UCLA, Yale, Georgetown, and the University of Southern California.

A leading cognitive linguist is George Lakoff, who reminds audiences:

> "Words activate frames. That's why words are so important. A single word can activate not only the defining frame, but also the system its defining frame is in. The system of frames has, at the top, moral frames, so if you make any proposal that is social or political, the assumption is that you're doing it because it's 'right.' Whatever you do, don't try to dismantle common myths about such and such with a rational argument. It's worse than ineffective. It's shooting yourself in the foot because in stating their frame, you reinforce it."

Lori Dorfman, director of the Berkeley Media Studies Group, describes the process this way: "Frames are mental structures that help people understand the world, based on particular cues from outside themselves that activate assumption and values they hold within themselves."

She uses the following example to demonstrate the power of frames by asking: "What do you think is the text of the following phrase?"

FOSTER PARENT

People's knowledge of the alphabet and language leads them to believe the words are "FOSTER PARENT."

But if we show that that "No, it's not...., it's:"

EQSTFB PAPFNT

This example shows that our brains are trained to respond to seemingly familiar information with a "default mode" reaction.

Our big challenge in improving the image of foster/adoptive/kinship/grand families will be to move people from their default mode, which is likely negative, into a new and positive frame, or to reframe the pictures/frames of foster care altogether.

A first step in message development to improve the image and coverage of foster/adoptive/kinship families is to assess the current media environment and coverage of the issues.

"*Most critical are moral values that, when triggered by a word or phrase, tend to shut down further analysis and trump any contrary facts. These "default modes" have in the past filed any references to foster care in a negative frame.*"