Measuring Early Years Mindsets: Patterns of Thinking that Shape Australia's Future

Child wellbeing | Family support | System reform

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Context: Public policy and system-level reforms for child and family wellbeing in Australia depend heavily on shifting cultural mindsets about the early years. These implicit cognitive patterns shape how the public understands social issues and assigns responsibility. This report is part of a multi-year project undertaken by the FrameWorks Institute alongside Curijo and Minderoo Foundation, with descriptive data from a nationally representative survey of 1004 Australian adults.

Survey items evaluated mindset endorsement on a seven-point Likert scale converted to a 100-point scale (0 = strongest disagreement, 50 = midpoint, 100 = strongest agreement). Findings demonstrate that Australians hold multiple, co-existing, and often contradictory mindsets, making strategic framing choices central to building public support for government policy interventions.

Key findings:

- **Mindset strength**:

80.4

Passive development (sponge) is the strongest mindset in public thinking, with a mean score of 80.4. It assumes children develop as passive absorbers, overlooking children's active role.

- **Co-existence of opposing mindsets:**

67.1

The *family bubble* mindset (67.1) assumes parents are exclusively responsible for children's development and wellbeing.

63.6

It takes a village mindset assumes that the responsibility of children's development is shared across a network of community actors.

- ***Government as partner* vs. *Government interferes with parenting*:**

72.9 (Partner)

68.0 (Interference)

The contradictory mindset indicates that Australians generally think government can and should support children and families, while also assuming that government interferes with parenting and development.

- **Demographic variation**:
  - Mindsets with high demographic variation include *it takes a village* and *structural racism* (recognises that laws, policies and systems can create racial inequities)—endorsed more strongly by younger adults (aged 25–34), parents of young children (aged ≤6) and culturally and linguistically diverse cohorts.
  - Mindsets with low variation across cohorts (entrenched and stable patterns of thinking) include *family bubble*, *individualism* (assumes that life outcomes are the result of personal choices and willpower), and *Passive development*.
- **Policy support & impact**:
  - Broad public support exists for early years policy reforms (e.g., rural/remote health access at 81.7 and quality childcare for all families at 81.1), but support is lowest for investment in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Community-Controlled Organisations (ATSICCOs) (66.1).
  - *Government as partner* is the strongest positive driver of policy support, while *otherism* (assumes there is an 'us' and a 'them', with 'them' inferior in some ways and competing for limited resources) has the strongest negative relationship to policy support, particularly for ATSICCOs in early years reforms.

- **Two mindset clusters** *(the more strongly people endorse one mindset, the more strongly they tend to endorse other mindsets in the cluster)*
  - The collective and structural cluster: anchored by the central mindset *government as partner,* focusing on collective responsibility and the broader context of social systems and structures.
  - The Individualistic, naturalistic and exclusionary cluster: anchored by *government interferes with parenting* and *otherism*, focusing on the natural way of how things work, and government efforts to bring about change are seen as interfering the natural state.

Summary: The report demonstrates that public support for early childhood reform is not fixed but depends on which mindset cluster is activated during policy communication. Communicators should leverage *government as partner* as a central lynchpin to activate the broader Collective and structural cluster, while expanding and stretching the dominant *passive development* mindset to emphasise contextual environments alongside active child and community agency. Framing highlighting *structural racism* can address public understanding deficits around ATSICCOs, while avoiding inadvertently cueing unproductive mindsets such as *otherism.*