

A Letter to Educators

Surviving the Child Care Crisis

by Kisa Marx

Editor's Note

As you reflect on Marx's personal and philosophical crossroads, consider this: Have you ever found yourself questioning your approach or presence within early education? Marx's experience invites us to examine moments when our practice demands reevaluation. How do we navigate the tension between personal growth and the expectations of the early childhood field? This process of reimagining can be transformative, helping us stay connected to the evolving needs of children and families.

— Ron Grady,
Editor-in-Chief, Exchange Press

In 2022, after two decades as a provider, I found myself on the front lines of my very own child care crisis. I had a successful business, I adored the children whom I shared space with, and I was absolutely miserable. The pandemic had done a number on your girl. The frustration, the pressure to do so much for so many—with a smile and a pleasant disposition—had taken a toll on my health, on my well-being, and on my humanity. I felt isolated, and my feelings of depletion were invalidated by those who insisted I was fine. I found myself tapping a nearly empty well, attempting to foster a sense of belonging for children in my care without being able to care, on any level, for myself. It was as if I was being asked to function in a state of perpetual vertigo, constantly pivoting to meet the revolving door of regulation changes, all while feeling unseen, unsafe, and unsure. I did what was expected of me—remaining

open, risking my health and the health of my family members, all to meet the needs of families that relied on me—but at times, I felt anything but essential.

For months I swallowed these conflicting thoughts, because, I thought, that's what we caregivers do, right? We hang our problems up at the door and put on happy faces as calmly as Mr. Rogers donned his inside shoes and cardigan. However, I found that there were many breaches in the system—concerns began to drip and drop in, threatening my ability to stay afloat. It all went something like this:

Safety concerns created gaps between me and my communities near and far. *Drip.*

Physical distance corroded existing connections and inhibits the formation of new ones between myself and children's families. *Drip.*

Concern over prioritizing the logistical care of days overtakes concern for the more relational dimensions of care. *Drip.*

Commodification crept in, reducing care to checklists and services rendered rather than relationships to be nurtured.

Inequity seeped in, turning care into a transactional exchange rather than a shared experience.

And, finally, burnout. When the distress grew too significant, the levees broke, and there I was, surrounded by wreckage and had to figure out how to rebuild.

What I found among the debris were receipts of transactions that had been wrapped in the term "care." I cooked, I cleaned faces, ensured that hands were washed, diapers changed, books were read, naps were taken, and children were returned to their parents in the same condition as when I received them. Care had become a euphemism for work,



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and work was routine. I once heard a line by Carol Garboden-Murray: “Care can be uncaring.” This, I have found, is true—care without thought can be uncaring. The “work” of care can become transactional if you let it: rinse and repeat, five days per week, 33–50 weeks per year, if you let it. When care lacks intention, it can become a habit devoid of mindfulness, consideration, or compassion. This hollowed-out care can sideline the priorities of emotional safety, and over time, diminish humanity. While the pandemic ultimately led me to this burnout, the pieces of this beautiful disaster had been set in motion long ago, when the work of caring for days had completely overshadowed the care of children. My life had become an exercise in proving and production, empty of humanity. But that is the thing about humanity: it persists. It fights to be heard and, eventually, tears down any obstacle in its way. I love that for us.

While it is true that the process of rebuilding takes time, those of us fortunate enough to rise intact following devastation know that there can be beauty in starting over. You get to reflect on the things that you have done—both experiences you cherish, as well as those you never want to repeat. You have a chance to create a new system, building upon the ideas that truly matter, while discarding those that threaten to take you down all over again.

If you are really lucky, I mean *really* lucky, you—no, we—get to reflect on our own role in the whole mess that allowed burnout to creep in in the first place. Let me tell you, this is the part where we really level up.

And then we ask ourselves:

How have we been complicit in the ways we think about, talk about, and do early childhood education that made this shift away from relationships and care feel like it was not just possible, but necessary during a challenging time? How, when the tough times are seemingly behind us, will we take these lessons forward into what’s next?

Disconnected Discourses

I remember speaking at a conference focused on creating child-centered practices when one of the speakers, a highly



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credentialed educator, began talking about children four and under needing to be told what to do. They alluded to them being manipulative and literally called them monsters. When I challenged them, this educator, with all of their letters behind their name, responded by saying their claims were rooted in “science,” as if a field grounded in heart-centered practice couldn’t possibly connect to what’s documented in the mind. “It’s true,” I told them. “You seem to be well-versed in the science, but the science you’re referring to isn’t rooted in child development research. When these two don’t align, we do harm to the children we serve.”

In my experience, there has been a disconnect between what we know, what we have experienced, and what we do in the field of early childhood education. Concepts like compliance, rigor, and the idea that we need to transmit prescribed knowledge to children dominate much of the discourse. *Drip.* These priorities, whether internally or externally imposed, influence our core beliefs and values, the stories we tell of what it means to be in this field, and our expectations for ourselves and for children. *Drip.* Taken together, these may result in a disjointed pedagogical approach that is supposedly grounded in Developmentally Appropriate Practice, but in actual practice, omits the needs of the children in our daily care. This continual omission led to my own wreckage, and is where, I assert, there is a danger of ongoing harm.

A Response

In response to this daunting reality, I ask myself and I ask you—I ask us: Is it possible to build approaches that align with Developmentally Appropriate Practice, honor educators, and center children? Can these be place-based and equitably oriented? And how do we, as educators, merge our expertise and lived experiences to create an intentional culture of belonging that provides actionable outcomes?

It will not be easy to recount experiences where you may have done harm simply because you weren't aware that your actions were self-centered and not centering the children in your care. You may find, as I eventually did once I understood the magnitude of this transformation, that you mourn not knowing the things you didn't know sooner, the times when you should have stepped in and been a voice for the children instead of worrying about the responses of the adults, the connections you failed to make with families, and the relationships that weren't fully formed because doing things as they have always been done created the enclosures that drove a wedge between them. It will sting when you think of the times you've omitted your own humanity and you're just gonna have to make space for the hard parts, but there's also this: now that you know what you didn't know before, there's no turning back. You can't unsee it, you can't undo it. The seed was planted the moment you became aware, it will germinate in your desire and take root with every bit of knowledge you are dedicated to taking in. This season of change is not about leaps and bounds, it's about pacing yourself, moving purposefully with grace and small steps, and that is what I wish for you as you move forward.

If we are to infuse new life into a field that at times feels as if it is on life support, due to the child care shortage or burnout, early educators are in need of a paradigm shift.

Educators are exhausted with performative teaching tactics grounded in buzzwords: kindergarten readiness that sidesteps children's actual ages and stage of development; play-based learning that, while playful, is still adult-chosen, adult-initiated, and adult-governed; not to mention the weight of assessments and objectives offered without consideration of what is informed by or responsive to the varying needs of the children. All of these threaten to overtake them. Educators long for a space to be. They need a space to dialogue about their pain points, celebrate their wins, and to collaborate on holistic ways to incorporate care of self within the profession of care work.

The field of early education must prioritize supporting teachers and others who work with and for young children

to meet their own needs while also fulfilling their professional and personal callings to meet the needs of children. Although I felt this especially in the midst of the pandemic, it remains true today and feels appropriate to reiterate at this time: Educator, provider, caregiver well-being ought to be a top priority as we continue to imagine ways forward in this field that is, arguably, one of the most essential pieces of the economic and social infrastructure of our country.

As I look out at the landscape of the field today, it seems as if we are poised to move into a new era of early childhood within the United States. A pandemic and administrative shifts have seemingly positioned us at the cusp of something unknown. I stand here, alongside all of you, with little else but my resolve and my convictions. I neither anticipate still waters, nor fear turbulent seas. We have seen and endured both, and will do so again and again. Let us commit to reassessing our priorities always, reimagining care to include care for ourselves, and to rebuilding the structures of our field in ways that allow care to persist at its heart.

Brick-by-brick, I invite us all to confidently embrace our ongoing growth. Let us adopt and / or to leave behind practices and perspectives that prioritize institutionalization over care—both for children and for ourselves. Our resolve will, I argue, make these frameworks of care indestructible.

What comes next? The truth is, I don't have an answer. I do believe, however, that if we are to evolve as a field that we have to foster or reaffirm a commitment to ongoing self- and professional development that leaves us open to new possibilities rather than hemmed into strict or inflexible practices. In this way, our personal and professional development mirrors children's development: it is dynamic, relationship-centered, and responsive to shifts in culture and society. Guided by these principles, the possibilities for pushing the needle forward are myriad. Instead of wasting time waiting on answers, let us learn to be at peace living with and in the question. We are all still learning, and that is by design.

With that in mind, I will leave you with a favorite quote of mine by writer and activist, adrienne maree brown, that kept me focused as I was deconstructing, rebuilding, and reimagining my practice. These words remain a lighthouse on my darkest days, when I feel like I am not enough or that what I am doing is not making a significant impact. It is during those times that her words, "small is good, small is all" become a balm for my soul. Who knows, maybe they will serve as a beacon while you are on your journey as well. Until next time, stay gold.



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