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Education or Childcare?

Understanding the Dual Responsibility of Early Childhood Education

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Editor's Note

Public conversations surrounding early childhood education often frame childcare and education as separate, and sometimes competing, services. Parents frequently speak of finding childcare, while educators speak of learning, development, and school readiness. Policymakers distinguish between workforce participation and educational outcomes. Investors evaluate occupancy, enrollment, and financial performance. Yet for the child, these distinctions do not exist. Every interaction contributes to development, regardless of whether it is labeled as care or education.

This paper explores the relationship between these two responsibilities and argues that the distinction, while administratively convenient, is practically incomplete. Caring for young children and educating them are not independent activities but interconnected obligations that influence one another throughout the earliest years of life. High-quality early childhood institutions recognize that nurturing, protecting, teaching, and inspiring children are inseparable aspects of the same mission.

The objective of this paper is not to redefine terminology or advocate for one educational philosophy over another. Rather, it seeks to provide a framework through which parents, educators, operators, and policymakers can better understand the dual role that early childhood institutions occupy within modern society. As families increasingly depend upon these institutions, the conversation should move beyond whether a center provides childcare or education and instead consider how effectively it fulfills both responsibilities simultaneously.

Executive Summary

For many families, the search for an early childhood education center begins with a practical question: who will care for my child while I am at work? This question reflects an economic reality shared by millions of households around the world. Modern families often depend upon professional childcare not as a preference but as a necessity. As workforce participation has evolved and dual-income households have become increasingly common, early childhood centers have assumed an essential role in supporting both children and their families.

Yet while parents may begin their search seeking childcare, children experience something far more significant. Every conversation, routine, relationship, and moment of play contributes to cognitive, emotional, social, and physical development. Long before formal academics begin, children are constructing language, building confidence, learning empathy, developing curiosity, and establishing patterns of behavior that will influence future learning. Whether intentional or not, every childcare environment becomes an educational environment.

The distinction between childcare and education therefore deserves careful examination. Childcare emphasizes safety, supervision, health, nutrition, and well-being. Education emphasizes learning, exploration, communication, and development. Neither responsibility can fully succeed without the other. Children cannot learn effectively unless they feel secure, while

care that neglects developmental opportunities overlooks the extraordinary capacity of the early years.

The most successful early childhood institutions understand that these responsibilities are complementary rather than competing. They recognize that caring for children creates the foundation upon which meaningful education occurs, while educational experiences enrich the quality of care itself. Families should not be forced to choose between environments that are safe and those that are intellectually engaging. The highest standard of early childhood education delivers both.

Ultimately, this paper argues that the future of early childhood education depends not upon choosing between childcare and education, but upon embracing their integration. Institutions that understand this dual responsibility are better positioned to serve children, support families, and contribute positively to society.

Introduction

Beyond a False Choice

Few questions arise more frequently in conversations about young children than whether a particular institution is a daycare or a preschool. Parents ask it while touring facilities. Operators hear it during enrollment meetings. Policymakers reference it when discussing funding. Investors encounter it when evaluating educational businesses. The question has become so commonplace that it is rarely examined. Instead, it is accepted as though childcare and education occupy opposite ends of a spectrum, requiring institutions to prioritize one over the other.

This assumption deserves closer scrutiny because it reflects an adult perspective rather than a child's experience. A young child does not distinguish between being cared for and being educated. The child experiences a single environment in which every interaction contributes simultaneously to feelings of security, belonging, curiosity, and growth. A teacher comforting an anxious toddler is strengthening emotional regulation. A caregiver encouraging language during lunch is fostering communication skills. A routine transition between activities becomes an opportunity to develop independence, patience, and self-confidence. The ordinary moments of the day become extraordinary moments of development precisely because young children learn continuously rather than episodically.

Historically, childcare and education emerged through different institutional pathways. Childcare developed largely in response to social and economic needs, providing safe environments for children while parents worked. Early education evolved through educational philosophy and developmental psychology, emphasizing learning experiences during the years preceding formal schooling. Over time, these separate traditions created distinctions in regulation, funding, professional identity, and public perception. Although understandable, these distinctions have sometimes obscured a more important truth: children benefit most when both traditions are integrated into a unified approach.

Modern neuroscience reinforces this perspective. During the first five years of life, children's brains develop at an extraordinary pace. Neural connections strengthen through repeated experiences, responsive relationships, language exposure, exploration, and emotional security. Development does not pause while a child is receiving care, nor does learning occur only during designated instructional periods. The architecture of the brain responds continuously to experience, making the quality of everyday interactions profoundly significant.

Recognizing this reality changes how institutions should define their purpose. Rather than asking whether they are providers of childcare or education, they should ask whether every aspect of the child's day contributes meaningfully to healthy development. Such a question elevates the conversation beyond labels and redirects attention toward outcomes that genuinely matter.

The distinction between childcare and education is therefore less important than the integration of the two. Institutions that understand this principle do not simply supervise children until parents return from work, nor do they pursue academic objectives without regard for emotional well-being. Instead, they create environments in which children are simultaneously protected, encouraged, challenged, and inspired. It is this balanced approach that represents the highest aspiration of early childhood education.

I. Why Society Created Childcare

The existence of childcare reflects one of society's most practical needs. Families require safe, reliable environments where children can remain while parents fulfill professional responsibilities, pursue education, or manage the many obligations of daily life. Throughout history, extended families often shared these responsibilities across multiple generations. Grandparents, relatives, and neighbors collectively participated in raising children, allowing caregiving responsibilities to be distributed within communities. As societies urbanized, households became smaller, geographic mobility increased, and workforce participation expanded, these traditional support structures gradually diminished.

Today, early childhood centers occupy a role that extends well beyond convenience. They have become critical infrastructure supporting economic productivity. Millions of parents depend upon reliable childcare in order to maintain employment, pursue careers, and provide financial stability for their families. Businesses likewise depend upon accessible childcare because workforce participation increasingly relies upon parents' confidence that their children are safe and well cared for throughout the day.

This economic function is both legitimate and necessary. Without dependable childcare, many parents would face difficult choices between employment and caregiving. Communities would experience reduced workforce participation, employers would confront greater instability, and economic growth would be constrained. Viewed from this perspective, childcare is not simply a private family concern but an essential component of modern society's broader economic framework.

Yet recognizing childcare's economic importance should not diminish its developmental significance. Indeed, the opposite is true. Because children spend substantial portions of their earliest years within these environments, the quality of those experiences becomes profoundly important. Institutions originally created to meet workforce needs inevitably influence childhood development whether intentionally designed to do so or not.

This reality places considerable responsibility upon early childhood providers. Every classroom, every routine, every conversation, and every relationship contributes to a child's understanding of the world. The question is therefore not whether childcare environments educate children, but whether they do so thoughtfully, consistently, and intentionally.

II. Why Children Experience Education Regardless of Intent

Adults often associate education with formal instruction. We imagine classrooms, lessons, teachers standing before students, and measurable academic outcomes. Such images are appropriate when discussing primary and secondary education, but they are less helpful when considering the earliest years of childhood. Infants and toddlers do not distinguish between moments designated for learning and moments intended simply for care. Their brains interpret every experience as information. Every sound, facial expression, routine, gesture, and relationship contributes to their understanding of themselves and the world around them.

This distinction is fundamental because it reshapes how we evaluate early childhood environments. A caregiver helping a child wash their hands is not merely completing a hygienic task; they are introducing sequencing, language, independence, patience, and routine. A teacher sitting quietly beside a frustrated child is not simply resolving a behavioral challenge; they are modeling emotional regulation, empathy, and trust. Even seemingly ordinary moments—putting on a coat, sharing toys, eating lunch together, waiting patiently for classmates—become opportunities through which children develop social competence and emotional resilience.

Unlike older students, whose learning may be concentrated around academic subjects, young children learn through immersion. Development occurs continuously because their brains are continuously interpreting experience. Language develops through conversation rather than vocabulary lists. Confidence develops through repeated encouragement rather than motivational speeches. Curiosity develops when exploration is welcomed rather than restricted. The environment itself becomes the curriculum, and every adult becomes a teacher whether they consciously intend to teach or not.

This reality explains why two childcare centers with similar facilities, comparable staffing ratios, and identical daily schedules may produce dramatically different developmental outcomes. The difference often lies not in the resources available, but in the intentionality with which those resources are used. An educator who understands child development recognizes educational opportunities embedded within ordinary routines. Another may see only a schedule to be completed. The children experience both environments very differently, despite outward appearances suggesting they are nearly identical.

Research in developmental psychology consistently reinforces this principle. Responsive interactions, meaningful language exposure, secure attachments, and opportunities for guided exploration all contribute to healthy cognitive and emotional development. These experiences cannot be confined to designated instructional periods because they occur throughout the child's day. Education during the early years is therefore less a collection of lessons than a continuous pattern of experiences thoughtfully designed to encourage growth.

Recognizing that children learn continuously carries important implications for institutions. Success cannot be measured solely by curriculum guides, educational materials, or structured classroom activities. Instead, institutions should evaluate the quality of every interaction that occurs within their walls. The educational experience begins when a child arrives each morning and continues until they leave, encompassing every relationship, every conversation, and every routine along the way.

III. The False Divide Between Care and Learning

The distinction between childcare and education has persisted largely because each concept evolved to address different societal needs. Childcare responded to economic necessity by providing safe supervision while parents worked. Education developed from a desire to prepare children intellectually and socially for formal schooling. Over time, these separate origins produced separate vocabularies, regulatory systems, professional identities, and public expectations. Yet for young children, these administrative distinctions hold little practical meaning.

Perhaps the greatest misunderstanding surrounding early childhood education is the assumption that care and learning compete for time or attention. Some believe that institutions emphasizing education necessarily provide less nurturing environments, while others assume that centers focused on care devote insufficient attention to intellectual development. Both assumptions misunderstand the nature of childhood itself. The most effective educational experiences emerge precisely because children feel secure, while high-quality care naturally incorporates opportunities for learning.

Consider a child who feels anxious during the first weeks of enrollment. Before meaningful learning can occur, that child must develop trust in caregivers, confidence within the environment, and emotional security throughout the day. A teacher who patiently establishes those relationships is not postponing education; they are creating its essential foundation. Likewise, educational activities that encourage exploration, creativity, and communication reinforce children's sense of competence, making them more confident and emotionally secure. Care strengthens learning, and learning enriches care.

This relationship extends beyond emotional development into every aspect of childhood. Nutrition supports concentration. Physical safety encourages exploration. Predictable routines reduce anxiety and foster independence. Positive relationships increase language development. Outdoor play strengthens both physical health and problem-solving abilities. Each element

contributes simultaneously to well-being and learning because young children's development occurs as an integrated whole rather than through isolated domains.

Consequently, institutions should resist defining themselves exclusively by either function. A center that advertises itself solely as childcare risks minimizing the extraordinary developmental opportunities available during the earliest years. Conversely, a school that emphasizes academics while overlooking emotional well-being misunderstands the conditions under which meaningful learning occurs. Excellence lies not in choosing between these identities but in recognizing that each depends upon the other.

Parents increasingly appreciate this integrated approach. Modern families often seek environments that provide reassurance not only that their children will be safe, but also that they will be challenged, encouraged, and inspired throughout the day. They understand intuitively that education begins long before kindergarten, even if they cannot always articulate precisely how it occurs. Institutions that communicate this broader understanding build stronger relationships with families because they acknowledge both practical realities and developmental aspirations.

Ultimately, the childcare-versus-education debate reflects a false choice. The highest-quality early childhood institutions neither supervise children passively nor pursue academics prematurely. Instead, they thoughtfully weave together nurturing relationships, purposeful environments, meaningful experiences, and intentional teaching into a seamless whole. Children do not experience separate periods devoted to care and education. They experience childhood, and it is within that uninterrupted experience that lasting development occurs.

IV. What Parents Are Really Looking For

When parents begin searching for an early childhood program, practical considerations understandably dominate the conversation. Location, operating hours, affordability, safety, teacher qualifications, cleanliness, and availability often determine which schools receive serious consideration. These are reasonable concerns because families are entrusting their children to others during some of the most formative years of life. Confidence in an institution begins with the assurance that children will be protected, respected, and cared for with professionalism and compassion.

Beneath these practical considerations, however, lies a deeper aspiration. Parents rarely seek supervision alone. They hope their children will be happy. They hope they will make friends, develop confidence, become curious, learn to communicate effectively, and enjoy coming to school each morning. Whether explicitly stated or not, families desire environments that contribute positively to their children's growth. They recognize that these early experiences matter, even if they cannot predict precisely how those experiences will influence the years ahead.

The strongest early childhood institutions recognize both dimensions of parental expectation. They understand that operational excellence creates trust, while educational excellence creates

value. Families may initially enroll because of convenience or reputation, but they remain because they witness meaningful development in their children. New words emerge unexpectedly. Confidence grows. Independence becomes visible. Children begin asking thoughtful questions, expressing empathy, solving simple problems, and approaching new experiences with enthusiasm. These changes reinforce parents' confidence that the institution is contributing positively to their child's development.

Communication therefore becomes one of an institution's most important responsibilities. Parents benefit from understanding not only what occurred during the day, but why particular activities matter developmentally. A simple art project becomes an opportunity to discuss creativity and fine motor development. Outdoor play supports physical coordination and collaborative learning. Story time encourages vocabulary, listening, imagination, and early literacy. When educators explain these connections, families begin to appreciate that education extends far beyond traditional academic instruction.

This shared understanding strengthens the partnership between schools and parents. Rather than viewing childcare as a service performed on behalf of working families, parents increasingly recognize themselves as participants in a collaborative developmental journey. Home and school become complementary environments united by a common purpose: helping children flourish intellectually, emotionally, socially, and physically.

The institutions that cultivate this partnership distinguish themselves not through marketing alone, but through consistency. Every interaction with families reflects transparency, professionalism, warmth, and respect. Trust grows gradually through hundreds of small experiences, each reinforcing the belief that the institution genuinely understands both the responsibilities of care and the opportunities of education.

V. The Responsibility of Early Childhood Institutions

Recognizing that childcare and education are inseparable carries important implications for the institutions entrusted with young children. Their responsibility extends beyond maintaining safe facilities or implementing well-designed curricula. They become stewards of childhood itself, shaping environments in which children develop habits, relationships, confidence, and ways of thinking that often persist long after individual lessons have been forgotten. This responsibility is both profound and enduring, demanding a level of intentionality that reaches every aspect of institutional life.

The physical environment represents one of the first expressions of this responsibility. Classrooms should be designed not merely for supervision but for exploration. Spaces ought to invite curiosity, encourage independence, and provide children with opportunities to make discoveries appropriate to their developmental stage. Furniture, learning materials, natural light, outdoor environments, and even the organization of the classroom communicate expectations about learning. A thoughtfully prepared environment quietly encourages children to ask questions, solve problems, and interact confidently with the world around them.

Equally important is the quality of the adults who populate these environments. While facilities and educational resources contribute meaningfully to a school's success, it is the daily interaction between educators and children that ultimately defines the educational experience. Young children remember how adults made them feel long before they remember specific lessons. An encouraging word, patient guidance through frustration, genuine enthusiasm for discovery, and consistent kindness establish relationships through which meaningful learning becomes possible. In this sense, every educator teaches not only through instruction but through character, conduct, and example.

Institutional culture likewise deserves careful attention. Children are remarkably perceptive observers of the environments around them. They notice how adults treat one another, how conflicts are resolved, whether mistakes are approached with patience or criticism, and whether curiosity is welcomed or discouraged. These observations become lessons in themselves, shaping children's understanding of respect, cooperation, and community. Consequently, organizational culture is not merely an internal management concern; it is an educational asset that directly influences child development.

Professional development must therefore extend beyond curriculum implementation and regulatory compliance. Effective educators benefit from continuous learning in child development, communication, emotional intelligence, classroom management, family engagement, and leadership. As research continues to deepen our understanding of early childhood development, institutions should foster cultures of ongoing improvement rather than complacency. Excellence in early childhood education is not a destination achieved through certification alone but a continuous commitment to learning alongside the children being served.

Finally, institutions bear responsibility not only to individual families but to the communities in which they operate. Every child who develops confidence, empathy, resilience, and curiosity contributes positively to society in ways that may not become fully apparent for decades. Schools therefore occupy a unique position within the social fabric, influencing future classrooms, workplaces, neighborhoods, and civic life. Recognizing this broader responsibility encourages institutions to think beyond enrollment numbers and financial performance toward the enduring impact they leave upon future generations.

VI. Looking Beyond Labels

The language surrounding early childhood education has evolved considerably over the past several decades. Terms such as daycare, childcare, preschool, nursery school, learning center, and early childhood education each emphasize different aspects of the same broad responsibility. While these distinctions may serve administrative or regulatory purposes, they often fail to capture the comprehensive nature of what exceptional institutions actually accomplish.

The question is therefore not whether one label is inherently preferable to another. Rather, it is whether the institution fulfills the responsibilities those labels collectively imply. Parents seek

environments where children are safe, nurtured, challenged, respected, and inspired. Children require stable relationships, purposeful experiences, opportunities for exploration, and encouragement appropriate to their stage of development. Communities benefit from institutions that support working families while simultaneously preparing future generations for lifelong learning. No single label adequately encompasses all of these expectations.

As public understanding of early childhood development continues to evolve, so too should the language used to describe it. Increasingly, educators, researchers, and policymakers recognize that the earliest years represent a distinct phase of human development deserving thoughtful investment and careful stewardship. This shift encourages institutions to define themselves less by historical categories and more by the quality of the environments they create and the developmental outcomes they support.

For operators, this broader perspective carries strategic significance. Institutions that clearly articulate their educational philosophy while acknowledging families' practical needs establish stronger relationships with parents and distinguish themselves within an increasingly competitive marketplace. They move beyond marketing themselves as convenient childcare providers or academically rigorous preschools and instead present themselves as partners in children's earliest years of growth and development.

Investors and organizational leaders similarly benefit from recognizing this evolution. Early childhood education should not be viewed merely as a service industry responding to demographic demand. Properly understood, it represents an institution-building endeavor grounded in trust, long-term relationships, educational quality, and community impact. Organizations that embrace this broader mission are more likely to cultivate enduring reputations, sustainable growth, and meaningful societal contribution than those focused exclusively on occupancy or financial performance.

Ultimately, language matters because it shapes expectations. Yet labels alone cannot define quality. The measure of an early childhood institution lies not in whether it describes itself as providing childcare or education, but in whether every child leaves more confident, more curious, more compassionate, and better prepared for the opportunities that lie ahead.

Final Observations

The debate between childcare and education has persisted largely because it attempts to separate two responsibilities that, in practice, cannot be meaningfully divided. Children do not experience care and learning as independent activities. They experience relationships, environments, routines, conversations, challenges, and discoveries that together shape every aspect of their development. From the child's perspective, these experiences form a single, continuous journey through the earliest years of life.

This understanding invites parents, educators, operators, and policymakers to reconsider how early childhood institutions are evaluated. Operational excellence and educational excellence

should not compete for attention but reinforce one another. Safe, nurturing environments create the conditions in which meaningful learning occurs, while purposeful educational experiences enrich children's daily lives and strengthen their emotional well-being. Institutions that successfully integrate these responsibilities provide immeasurably greater value than those emphasizing one while neglecting the other.

The future of early childhood education therefore depends not upon resolving whether schools provide childcare or education, but upon recognizing that exceptional institutions accomplish both simultaneously. They understand that every interaction teaches, every relationship matters, and every ordinary moment possesses extraordinary developmental potential. Their purpose extends beyond serving today's families; they help shape tomorrow's communities by investing thoughtfully in the earliest years of human life.

As societies continue to recognize the importance of early childhood development, the conversation should increasingly focus on quality rather than terminology. Labels may continue to evolve, but the underlying responsibility remains unchanged. Children deserve environments that protect them, encourage them, challenge them, and inspire them. Institutions that faithfully embrace this responsibility will not merely care for children during the day. They will help lay the foundations upon which lives, families, and communities are built.

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The perspectives presented in this paper are informed by established scholarship in early childhood development, developmental psychology, neuroscience, and educational research. While the analysis and conclusions are those of the author, they reflect decades of research examining how children's earliest experiences shape cognitive, emotional, social, and physical development.

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The Chhabria Papers is a publication series of Chhabria Capital Partners, LLC dedicated to examining the principles that shape enduring institutions, industries, and enterprises. Through original essays, research papers, and practical analysis, the series explores the intersection of leadership, stewardship, organizational development, and long-term value creation across a broad range of sectors.

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