

How we talk about early childhood education matters ^[1]

Author: Berentson-Shaw, Jess

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EXCERPTS

Dr Jess Berentson-Shaw, our resident science expert, wants us to change the way early childhood education is discussed.

Words mean things.

That sounds simple enough doesn't it? But unfortunately it's not a sentiment everyone seems to agree with. The words we choose to use as researchers, policy makers, and communicators are not neutral. Words convey deep and enduring cultural stories about what and who matters most in society and how things work.

And the words we use about early childhood education and care (ECE) in this country are telling one story, and it is not a good one.

In the rush to point out some problems with ECE, all the deficit-based stories risk embedding a negative narrative. We need a more nuanced and balanced story of ECE in New Zealand – one that is contextualised and informed by the needs and experiences of all people involved.

Parents really don't have much choice about childcare

A few weeks back new research showed that mothers are primarily the ones to take time off to raise children in New Zealand, and that they experience a pay penalty for that. When they go back to paid work (and most women do) they are paid less, move up the ranks more slowly, and retire with less.

Other research shows women also do the lion's share of unpaid work caring for children and around the home. Childcare out of the home is for many women the only way they can hope to stay afloat financially.

A better balance between men and women with regards to paid and unpaid work would probably help. However men are in general paid more and face cultural norms that say women should be the main caregiver, which disenables many women from making that choice.

Most families would like more flexibility and choice around the balance of work and parenting, but we have a housing crisis. Because housing costs have risen so steeply while incomes have not kept up, people need to work more to keep paying high accommodation costs.

Being able to afford to have one parent stay at home full-time is the exception, not the norm.

It speaks volumes that the last longitudinal study we did on income and wealth in New Zealand found that over half of all families go into income poverty for at least a year after having a child.

We also have a system of financial support that says if you are a sole parent in receipt of welfare you MUST enrol your child in an ECE when they turn three, or at 12 months for some parents. Parents in receipt of welfare often have access only to the poorest quality ECEs, as quality issues tend to increase in lower income neighbourhoods.

Childcare is something most people don't get a whole lot of real choice about. For some there is literally no choice at all. If we value the wellbeing of children and their parents then we need to explore alternatives.

Overall ECE is a positive thing in children's and families' lives

There is nothing intrinsically bad about ECE. In Denmark children are in near-full time ECE from the age of one or two. It is not a country of stressed out and damaged children because of it.

Danish ECE is high quality and there are different cultural norms about the use of it, but their experience shows that ECE can be a very functional, critical part of core services. There are clearly some concerns being raised in New Zealand about our ECE and they should be raised. But how we look at and talk about problems, and how we frame them alongside wider contextual issues – while also talking about the many benefits – is critical.

It is critical to ensure parents are not made to feel awful. And it is critical so we can ensure all children experience wellbeing in their early years.

Talking about ECE? Let's widen the frame

At the heart childcare quality research and policy is about building positive lives for children and families in ways that work best for them. So we can start research there. Include parents and children in research from the start – ask them what they need and what they care about. Let them guide the process.

So-called participatory research is critical to get information and look at outcomes that have meaning to people whose lives are most affected – not just what's important to researchers and policy makers. It is surprising how centering people in research can change the focus and outcomes, and even the solutions. No research is without bias, and research focused singularly on finding out everything that is wrong with childcare has a particular frame.

So let's frame up some other issues about caring for, and educating, children. Ask questions about how society is structured and whether it is ideal for parents' and children's wellbeing.

What should we be talking about? Here are some ideas for starters: How we structure working hours; paid parental leave; how we value unpaid labour and construct gender roles; housing affordability; the gender and motherhood pay gap; family poverty; the limited choice in childcare and education; how we fund childcare; and all the systemic and structural issues that mean people don't have much flexibility and choice about having children, education, working, and being well and happy.

Given that childcare is always going to be needed, we also need to research good childcare. We need to look at the benefits to children, and the countries doing it well, what their structure and model of delivery is like (perhaps profit making *gasp!* might have a role to play?) and talk about those.

How about exploring alternative models, like paying parents to educate their own children instead of only paying others to do it?

We should not ignore the problems, but there is a difference between just looking for what is wrong and looking for what is right. Here is a good example of research talking about enablers to good childcare experiences.

It is totally unacceptable that some childcare centres are short of space or too noisy, but that is not the whole story. What do we know about actual measured harms? Where is the data on those children who experience positive outcomes through engagement in ECE? And what are we comparing ECE to? In-home carers from organisations like Porse for example? What about if there was no affordable ECE at all and women were forced to be at home? What are the harms and benefits of each of those options to children and parents?

With a wider frame on all the things that matter we can focus on constructive stories and action. It also means we don't leave parents feeling they have done badly by their children if they use ECE.

We must lift the focus to what kind of society we have built and whether it is based on what matters.

Change the words

If we constantly frame ECE in deficit language then we'll inevitably come to believe that out-of-home childcare for young children is bad.

Nothing is black and white in research. Values inform all that we do – and how we talk about it.

We know that bad news stories reach further and farther than positive stories. People respond to negative information with more emotion, they recall repeated stories better, and are more likely to believe the ideas they are most frequently exposed to.

There are more effective ways to ensure ECE is the best it can be. Let's focus a bit more on talking about what we value for all children and parents and how to achieve that, and a little less on the the parts of ECE that are not working.

It is not about not looking for the problems – it is about rebalancing the story for everyone's benefit.

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