

How 'daycare' became 'school' ^[1]

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EXCERPTS

Chelsea Clinton made headlines recently as she campaigned for her mother—not for the policy proposals she defended, but for the fact that she did not accompany her not-quite-2-year-old daughter Charlotte to the first day of her Manhattan "school." While detractors were quick to berate her for missing this defining event in her child's life, supporters rushed to her defense by noting that the child's father, who took Charlotte to school together with the family nanny, is perfectly capable of taking the lead. But what's missing from the discussion is an objection to the controversy's premise—since when has "school" started at age 2?

The question highlights recent changes in the favored everyday lexicon of parents to refer to programs for their babies and young toddlers—programs that were once simply called "daycare." Whether consciously or subconsciously, though, educators, psychologists, and parents themselves are noticing that parents are increasingly swapping out the term for the more in-vogue "school." Parents' "first day of school" photos on Facebook feature children not just in uniforms, but in onesies.

Technically, a school should meet the defining standard of serving as an institution whose primary goal is education. For under-2s, though, when everything from drinking out of a cup to peeing on the potty is technically educational, that distinction becomes more difficult to make.

Sarah Fader, the CEO of the mental-health nonprofit organization Stigma Fighters, noted that guilt may be one of the causes behind the more liberal use of "school." New parents often struggle to reconcile the pressure to return to work with the guilt or sadness they may experience when separating from their child. Mothers without famous last names may not have their parenting decisions scrutinized in tabloids, but they are certainly scrutinized by their peers. "Calling it school distracts from this harsh reality," Fader said. "The children are learning something every day. Their environment is enriched."

As more American children enter formal childcare programs at earlier ages and for longer hours, that need for legitimacy becomes even stronger. Although formal education in the United States typically starts with kindergarten at age 5, the average American child under age 3 spent more than 30 hours weekly in childcare, according to the National Center for Education Statistics. The Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development reports that 30 percent of American children under age 2 attend some sort of formal childcare. To accommodate these numbers, there has been huge growth in the number of childcare facilities in the United States: As of 2007, there were a total of 766,401 childcare facilities, up from just 262,511 in 1987. If parental guilt is indeed one of the elements contributing to the linguistic trend, parents sending their children to childcare programs can at least take comfort that they are in good company.

Still, the change in semantics is significantly more complex than a guilt-reducing linguistic flourish. Dismissing the cadre of parents describing their diaper-wearing, bottle-drinking children as going to "school" would be ignoring an important underlying cultural phenomenon: Early-childhood education experts agree that something has fundamentally changed about American childcare in the past decade, and that the change in terminology reflects that shift. The switch is not a coincidence; childcare programs are, indeed, becoming more educational.

Gina Lofquist, the senior director of teacher education for the American Montessori Society (AMS), agreed that "what parents are searching for, and what schools are trying to provide, is a way to provide education in a childcare setting that looks different than it has in the past."

Parents are no longer simply selecting the closest child-care center with spots available, but are instead participating in a two-way selection process to find the right fit for their child and the educational philosophy that best matches their own. In this context, Montessori, Reggio Emilia, and Waldorf schools—progressive models for education—have become household names as they emerged as leaders in efforts to unlock effective and holistic approaches to early-childhood education.

But not all schools, even ones with fancy titles, are so carefully structured, and the profit motive behind the linguistic trend is impossible to ignore. The average cost of care for a non-infant preschooler at an accredited childcare center is \$11,050 yearly, according to the National Association of Child Care Resource and Referral Agencies. With so much money at stake, providers are eager to give parents what they

want. That ongoing courtship entrenches the dynamic: Parents, eager to give their children a head start, select programs that seem more educational for their babies and young toddlers. In turn, the programs continue to market themselves in a way that conjures up an especially educational image.

That, says the University of Delaware professor Roberta Golinkoff, can be dangerous under the wrong circumstances. Changing the sign on the door to say “school” instead of “daycare” may be innocuous, but there are signs that the linguistic changes correspond to a rise of a more structured, scheduled day reminiscent of schools for older children. Children are often rushed from one activity to the next, explains Golinkoff, without sufficient time to play and explore at their own pace. For babies and toddlers, that approach can be counterproductive to childhood development.

“There’s an extreme overemphasis on content for American kids,” said Golinkoff, who recently co-authored the book *Becoming Brilliant: What Science Tells Us about Raising Successful Children*. “It’s, like, all that matters is getting information in kids’ heads, and that’s unfortunate,” she said. “Content is crucially important, but it’s not the only thing that matters. It’s not just all about memorizing the ABCs, which unfortunately these schools are probably going to torture little kids to do,” Golinkoff joked.

So what else should childcare providers focus on? According to experts: plenty of free play, plenty of opportunities to socialize and be part of a community, and plenty of exposure to new experiences. “A good preschool tries to help children gain self-confidence, become more independent, and develop interpersonal skills,” writes the American Academy of Pediatrics (AAP) in the book *Caring For Your Baby and Young Child*. The AAP also acknowledges concerns about programs that are created to cater to parents’ fear or guilt rather than children’s needs: “Be wary of programs that claim to teach academic skills or ‘speed up’ children’s intellectual development. From a developmental standpoint, most preschoolers are not yet ready to begin formal education, and pushing them will only prejudice them against learning.”

Not all experts think that the daycare-as-school trend is troubling, though. Others don’t take it too seriously, noting that the trend may indeed be more about semantics than substance. For the psychologist and radio host Stacy Haynes, the shift in favor of “school” is just an innocent linguistic adjustment that can help reluctant youngsters overcome anxiety. “Older children go to school and so younger siblings want to go to school, too,” she said, calling the reference a “play on words” that can instill confidence in children once it actually is time for kindergarten. “Many parents find their children are willing to go to school if they know they have already attended ‘school,’” she explained. For this reason, Haynes recommends that parents refer to outside care as school from the beginning.

Complicating matters further, there are some exceptions in which a more intense educational environment can be beneficial even for very young children, such as federally mandated early-intervention programs or preschool special-education programs, or those for students that may be exceptionally gifted and ready for a more challenging or stimulating environment. Pediatricians can evaluate children or refer them to a child-development specialist who can make specific recommendations for children who may fall under these categories.

Ultimately, whether a child care is titled a “school” or a “daycare,” and no matter how it functions, the American Montessori Society’s Lofquist notes that it is certainly a good sign for children’s futures that parents seem to be increasingly involved, informed, and aware about childcare options. “Parents are becoming more and more savvy, and they realize that their child has that capability of learning, and standards are raising,” Lofquist said. “The reality is, children are learning continuously. You can’t stop them.”

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