

Opinion: Education is the responsibility of the state—care of young children should be too

October 20 2023, by Ulrike Hohmann



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Parents face [eye-watering costs](#) for childcare in the UK. A part-time nursery place for a child under two sets parents in Britain back, on

average, [£7,134 a year](#).

The government has put plans in place for increased [childcare](#) funding for the children of working parents: 30 free childcare hours for children aged over nine months, to be rolled out by 2025.

But there will still be a price for parents. Nurseries may charge for costs in addition to the government's funded hours. And 30 hours does not nearly cover the time a parent working full-time will need care for their child.

Education or care?

Education is seen as the responsibility of the state. Free education is a universal benefit for all children of a certain age. Parents are unlikely to provide this kind of education by themselves.

On the other hand, care is the duty of parents. If they cannot temporarily provide it due to work or study, they are responsible for finding and funding childcare. But there is a huge overlap between care and education—one does not stop and the other begin when a child enters their reception year at school.

On a practical level, the division between care and education is weak. For example, helping a toddler to get dressed—taking care of them—involves talking to them about their right and left, pointing out and naming parts of the body, and identifying colors and items of clothing. This has educational benefit. And educating children works better with care. The could mean wiping a child's nose before sitting down close beside them to help them read a story.

What's more, we know the education children receive before they start school is important. They come to school already knowing some math,

for instance, and some will know more than others. Research shows that the ones who know less are likely to be [behind their peers](#) for the whole of their school life.

Under the [government's](#) plan for increased funding for childcare, the fragmented range of options will also remain. Choosing between childminders, day centers and school nurseries, as well as their differing costs, makes securing childcare a stressful experience. This is the result of governmental attitudes to childcare.

For a long time, a mother's decision to seek employment was seen as personal preference—and the consequences of it not a task for the state. That was until [New Labor](#) emphasized the role of working parents and [early childhood education](#) and care to promote economic and social mobility. The necessary expansion of childcare services was left to the private, voluntary and independent sectors.

A complex system

Now, 70% of group-care places are in [private nurseries](#). As expected, the private for-profit market aims to make profit, which may be used to service interest on loans (for example, for expansion) and [to pay shareholders](#). These complex financial structures may be a risk to the sustainability of the childcare sector.

There are at [least eight government programs](#) offered in England to support childcare and entice mothers into paid work. Some involve payment to childcare providers. Others allow parents to reclaim a proportion of costs. Unfortunately, families may not know about all of the options available to them, and so some benefits go [unclaimed](#).

There are solutions. One is making childcare free at the point of use—because looking after children is good for society in both the short

and long run. But this argument is almost never heard, as if it is unthinkable or deemed impossible.

Another option is the development of a public—though still with costs to parents—child education and care system in England. This would provide all young children with accessible, affordable, enjoyable and high-quality education and care provision within their communities from birth until compulsory school age, overseen by the state.

This provision would promote children's development and well-being, while simultaneously meeting their parents' childcare needs. It would allow for an adequate work–life balance within families by recognizing the [valuable role](#) of child rearing within society.

Government regulation of childcare places and costs would save parents from complex reclaiming procedures, and would not rely on knowledge about support programs. The costs could be means-tested, allowing families with low incomes to access free childcare. This approach could also stabilize childcare providers' financial planning.

A further step would be to move away from individual sessions booked by parents to a system of stable childcare places for individual children. It would follow the principle of school attendance—a place for every child—without the punishment for non-attendance. The benefit is more stability and more predictability for all involved.

Reducing the cost of childcare paid by [parents](#) only works by moving away from viewing children as the private luxury of families, and instead understanding the value of the education they receive before they start school. We should see the care and [education](#) of [young children](#) as an intertwined common good, benefiting all.

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