

## **When the bough breaks the cradle will fall....down will come baby, cradle and all...**

An open letter to all early childhood stakeholders like parents, preschool, daycare owners and policy makers.

(I hope this reaches our Prime Minister Hon. Shri Narendra Modi and Hon. Union Minister for WCD Madam Maneka Gandhi and Hon. Chief Minister of Maharashtra Shri Devendra Fadnis)

One of the most important aspects of achieving Quality Standards is the ability to sustain them in early childhood care and education projects. Quality and policies are not a goal to achieve and forget, but a mission to uphold everyday in every aspect.

I compare what is happening today in the early childhood sector to the Titanic because the Titanic sank when it ran into an iceberg and this tragedy lost lives, valuables, and trust of thousands of people. Last year early childhood care and education in our country too has faced its share of icebergs, the past year has not been very good for early childhood care and education especially the big dent it has left on parents trust of branded and unbranded chains. Be it the chaos and stress that parents experienced because of the closing down of a branded chain of preschools or the severely dangerous incidents that happened in daycares and preschools leading to trauma, injury and even death in some cases.

When such instances occur we always blame it on external factors (icebergs) such as the lack of CCTV or for example- in the case of the famous preschool chain that left parents stranded blamed it on an investor! This means that just like the Titanic we assume we sink due to an 'external iceberg'. But did you know that it was not just an iceberg that sank the Titanic? Ongoing research from British journalist Senan Molony, has evidence that proves that: The real reason for its sinking was a fire outbreak in the fuel tank bay of the ship, which happened before the Titanic took off on its journey. Due to the fire the ship's hull heated up to 1,000 degrees Celsius and when Titanic hit the iceberg the steel gave way with a huge gap as under extreme heat steel becomes fragile and loses 75% of its hardness.

We are happy that state governments are drafting safety policies for the early childhood sector, but we urge that these policies not be limited to 'rules on paper' but also have comprehensive aspects of training, implementation, supervision/auditing. We believe that policies can be drafted to save the early childhood 'ship' from icebergs, but what about the fire that is destroying it from within and making it susceptible to damage from 'icebergs'? Till the triple factor of 1. training, 2. guidelines and 3. center audits, are not brought into the picture the early childhood sector will continue to face these issues and keep sending state governments into a tizzy preparing 'policies' to tackle the issue. But most of these policies made in this 'knee jerk reaction' style are short term, more of a public appeasement and lead to no long-term quality enhancement of the sector.

These knee jerk reactions till now have not looked into the core issues but have given 'so called solutions' (different in different states!) like registering preschools with local authorities (how does that help? So paying 25,000 and kids are safe?) Or passing a child protection policy that states that child care centers should be in safe areas and to have cctv cameras (the Kharghar daycare where a child was beaten up by a caretaker had cctv cameras, did that deter the caretaker?) or bringing a new rule that preschools cannot be set up in residential areas! (So is a commercial area safe for young children? And the amount of time they will travel to reach these areas, is that good for them?). An earnest appeal from the Early Childhood Association to the team deciding the safety policy for Maharashtra and other states-

1. Involve key stakeholders like Early Childhood Association, Branded Day care and Preschool owners who have been successful in running quality centers till date, Parents who will actually benefit from these policies. Until you do not involve all of these you will not have a workable policy that safeguards children keeping the ground reality in mind.

2. Do not limit safety policies to a certain age group, because by doing so you are suggesting that safety ends with that age group (in this case it is up to 3 years, so what about 3 to 6 years?)
3. Have a comprehensive safety policy for birth to 6 years both for early childhood care (daycares, crèches) and early childhood education (playschools, preschools, balwadis, kindergartens). This policy should cover all safety aspects be it school buses, center safety, childcare safety and safety during field trips as these children are taken on short field trips.
4. Do not limit it only to a policy on paper, have detailed guidelines on how to achieve implementation of the policy. For example just stating that centers to have CCTV cameras is not going to help, as seen in the Kharghar case there was a CCTV camera but no one was monitoring it.
5. Define a training program/course for Early childhood Education and care, presently there is no course defined like we have B.Ed. course. Also courses presently being run lack latest global research and topics like risk assessment, fire drills and child proofing centers etc.
6. Bringing a policy is fine but who will ensure that it is implemented? Bring in associations like ours to help audit centers regularly.

### **An appeal to our Prime Minister Shri Narendra Modiji-**

At the Early Childhood Association we are worried about the future of early childhood care and education in our country. Its time the government stopped 'babysitting' this sector and started respecting and investing in it both through proper budgetary investments and 'thought through' long term beneficial policies that serve both the privately run centers and the government run too. With multiple policies in multiple areas and states which are limited to only 'outlining rules', it will end up deterring the committed and passionate early childhood educator from setting up quality centers which in turn leads to more 'profiteering minded' people coming into this sector who will bribe their way through all these so called new laws and policies and end up giving low quality education and care to the children. We humbly and strongly urge the government to look into 3 key areas-

1. One nation- One Policy- Be it for starting preschools or curriculum or safety etc. there should be one common policy with defined non-negotiable for every state to follow. States can then add relevant cultural or area specific points.
2. Consultative process before defining policies, laws and regulations in early Childhood care and education- government should involve important stakeholders before defining laws or policies, involve associations like Early Childhood Association , parents and center owners as we know the ground reality of how and what needs to and can be implemented.
3. Define the developmentally appropriate curriculum and assessment for all ages in the early years centers, so that a child in Delhi or Chennai is not being exposed to different learning expectations that are not in line with their age or stage of development.

**Its time not only to save the cradle (centers) but the bough that holds the cradle (training, guidelines, support, supervision) otherwise if the bough breaks, then down will come cradle, baby and all.....**

Sincerely,

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