

## **Child Care is a Business** **L. Carol Scott, PhD, LC Associates**

Change what you call something and you change how you think about it. When enough of us change how we think, we change cultural norms. It's true. When I was 25, the terms *firefighter* and *police officer* were uncommon. As a teacher, I used them so that both boys and girls could see themselves in these jobs. Others kept saying *fireman* and *policeman*. And then, suddenly, they didn't. Now the gender-neutral terms are common, and more women hold these jobs. Change language and you change culture.

We've already changed language and ideas about our profession. Years ago, if you cared for and educated children you were called a babysitter or a "day care." Yet, many now use "early learning programs" or "early education programs." The more widely used term today is "child care provider."

Cultural adoption of that term does represent progress, but it's time to change the culture by changing our language again. Why? The language we use represents our thinking; it is the outward reflection of ideas. Our current language, *provider*, undervalues child care.

The dictionary defines "provide" as *to make available or to furnish*. The implication is that parents passively receive a service determined entirely, and non-negotiably, by us. We provide; they receive. These ideas, however unconsciously, underlie our current language. Our terminology perpetuates a cultural identity of low or no value for early care and education. But a child care center or family child care home does not simply make care and education available like a free food sample you pick up at the grocery store.

Child care is a *business*. The operator of a family child care home or child care center is engaged in commerce. She or he is *selling* services, exchanging the services of care and education for money. The services are a *product*. Those who pay for that product are *customers*.

So why don't we use this language for child care? Business. Sell. Product Customer. "That sounds so cold," a child care center director once told me. "Where are the children in that kind of language?" she asked. I'll tell you where. They are at the center of a new constellation of ideas, and a potential new cultural perspective, one related to *value*.

Often, I have heard owners of child care homes and centers complain that parents choose child care that is lowest in cost, rather than best in quality. "They put more time into choosing a car or refrigerator," they say. I say, given our language, little wonder!

If I purchase a product you are selling, I look carefully at its value. I weigh quality against cost, and I examine how your product compares to competing products. I read consumer research. Does another company offer me a better quality product? I don't know about you, but I often choose to spend a little more to obtain a higher quality product.

However, if I am the passive recipient of a service you provide, I think about it quite differently. Even if I pay for that service, I may take whatever you offer without much thought about its quality or value.

The primary consumers of (i.e., investors in) child care and early education—parents, businesses and other employers, and government—can neither develop nor sustain the idea that these services have value as long as our language is about *providing services*, rather than *selling a product*. They cannot see value in a service that is provided, a service that puts them in the passive role of receiving, rather than the role of an active, discerning customer.

If we want consumers to see the value in our product, then we should stop *providing* child care and start *selling* it. We should start thinking about early care and education as a product. We should design our marketing to express the value of that product, in recognition of our competition with similar products. What are the features of it? What are its benefits for the consumer? Who are its customers and what do they want?

Changing this language and these core ideas about what we do will change the culture. Indeed, that's the only way to change the culture.