



DAY CARE

According to the new policy, these centres should focus on loving care, safety, and basic stimulation for children between zero to three years old.

They are not allowed to teach formal lessons such as reading or writing. Staff must be trained caregivers.

Oversight is shared between the Ministry of Gender and local governments.

Is this the end of 'Baby Class' as we know it?

The old baby class is ending. For the 7.9 million children under five in Uganda, the next few years will determine whether this policy becomes a genuine transformation or another well-intentioned reform that fails on the classroom floor.

BY GEOFFREY OYET OKWERA

For Generation Z and Alpha parents, the term "Baby Class" comes as no surprise. But for older parents, it raises a natural question: Why are babies attending classes? For the uninitiated, Baby Class is a preschool before preschool, where you send your barely toilet-trained toddler to "study." Do not let the name fool you: it's a real class, complete with a timetable, homework, and even exams. All of this for two- and three-year-olds. Teachers defend the practice by saying it became necessary because education in Uganda is a sprint, children need to hit the ground running. There is simply no time to teach basics like reading and writing in kindergarten. To achieve

top marks at the primary level, children start preparing for final exams as early as primary three. But now, authorities are pushing back, saying this approach is not right, and it has to change. And that is why earlier last week, the government, through the Ministry of Education and Sports, unveiled a new Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) policy banning pre-primary schools, including nursery schools and kindergartens from operating day care centres. The development has since thrown all operating day care centres and parents into panic, as they remain uncertain about what the future holds for the legal operation of the day care facilities. The new directive has left them wor-

ried about the sustainability of their businesses and the fate of the families that depend on their services. But beneath the panic lies a deeper, more fundamental shift. For decades, the typical Ugandan "Baby Class" has been a miniature version of Primary One; rows of tiny desks, chanting of the alphabet, copying letters from a blackboard, homework for three-year-olds, and end-of-term exams complete with written reports. That model, educators now say, is ending. The new policy redefines what education for young children should look like. The formal, academic-driven nursery is being replaced by a play-based model. The new policy clearly separates care from education by creating two different types of centres, each with its own rules and government oversight: **Pre-primary** These are nursery schools for children between three and six years and should focus on play-based learning

and getting children ready for primary school. They are overseen by the Ministry of Education and Sports. The important rule, however, is that the same owner cannot run both a day care and a nursery school in one building under a single license. If they want to offer both, they must meet independent standards for each, for example, separate staff, separate entrances, and separate facilities. Yet for most parents and teachers, the more immediate and confusing change is not about licenses or entrances, it is about what happens inside the classroom. Under the new policy, the traditional nursery school lesson is dead. No more morning drill of reciting the days of the week. No more writing the letter 'A' 50 times in an exercise book. No more tests that sort two-year-olds into "clever" and "slow." Instead, teachers are expected to put away the chalk and bring out the blocks, the sand, the water trays, the dress-up clothes, and the building bricks. Children are to learn by touching, moving, pretending, and playing. **Policy worries parents, caretakers** Sarah Nambalirwa, a single mother with a two-year-old child, says she is worried about where her son will be cared for as she reports to work at the bank. Nambalirwa explains that her daycare facility in Namugongo, Wakiso District, at a nearby school has been taking very good care of her child, but she is now confused



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and uncertain about where she will turn to ensure his safety while she is at work. John Ricks Magala, from Jinja, expresses concern and confusion about the Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) policy after seeing reports online. Magala says he had read reports suggesting changes affecting daycare centres, but notes that parents have not been given clear guidance on the way forward. He emphasises that if such changes are true, authorities should provide detailed communication to avoid uncertainty among parents. He also argues that children below the age of four should not be exposed to structured academic content similar to that taught in primary school, emphasising that early childhood should focus more on care, play, and age-appropriate development. **Government clarifies** Dr Joyce Moriku Kaducu, State Minister for Primary Education, reiterates that the new policy does not eliminate child care services but regulates where and how they operate. Day care services will now be limited to designated home settings and approved institutional environments such as corporate workplaces, markets, and shopping malls that intend to provide childcare support for employees. The move aims to strengthen standards and improve oversight. She clarifies that day care centres will not be permitted to introduce formal academic instruction. Instead, they should focus on interactive play, early socialisation, and proper feeding practices as the foundation for early childhood development. The Ministry of Education has called on the Ministry of Local Government to integrate the ECCE Policy 2025 into existing nursery centres to expand equitable access to quality, inclusive, and sustainable childcare services. **Mixed reactions from teachers** Aya Lakot, head teacher of Grace Primary and Kindergarten Centre in Lira, welcomed the move, describing it as



Experts recommend plenty of rest for babies, which will now be possible.

ing. I must now show inspectors a play-based curriculum. I do not even know where to begin," she reveals. The head of the nursery section at Rise and Shine Primary School in Entebbe, Hannifah Nambalirwa, welcomes the regulations. She notes that children below four should not be subjected to formal classroom-style teaching but should focus on nurturing life skills, play-based learning, and emotional growth. Yet Nambalirwa recognises the cultural hurdle. "Ugandan parents want evidence. They want to see a workbook filled with writing. They want to hear their three-year-old recite the alphabet from memory. When I tell them that under the new policy, their child will spend most of the day playing with blocks and sand and pretending to be a cook, they will ask: 'But is she learning anything?' Convincing parents that play is the work of childhood may be harder than changing the curriculum itself."

The old versus the new For a generation of parents who believe that "real learning" involves a pencil, a book, and a quiet child, the new model will feel suspiciously like a holiday. For teachers trained to manage orderly rows of silent pupils, the chaos of multiple learning centres and the mess of sand and water will feel like a loss of control. Yet early childhood development research is unequivocal that children under six learn best through concrete, hands-on, play-based experiences. Abstract symbols (letters and numbers) mean little to a developing brain. But pouring water from a small cup to a large one teaches volume. Building a tower of blocks teaches balance and gravity. Pretending to be a shopkeeper teaches counting and social negotiation. The new policy is not discarding education, it is aligning with science. **The unanswered questions** As nursery proprietors, teachers, and parents digest the new policy, critical questions remain: First, how will the Ministry retrain an estimated 40,000 nursery teachers who have only ever used formal methods? Play-based teaching requires observation, documentation, setting up learning environments, facilitating rather than instructing. A one-day workshop will not suffice. Second, how will inspectors assess a play-based nursery? Measuring "quality" when children are playing, not testing, requires completely different tools. Do inspectors currently have those tools? Unlikely. Third, will parents accept the change? In urban areas where nursery school has become an arms race for "top performance" in Primary One entrance interviews, a play-based classroom may be seen as a disadvantage. Wealthy parents may simply enroll their children in expensive private schools (which are already play-based), leaving the new public system for the poor. The policy risks creating a two-tier system: play-based for the masses, academic preparation for the elite who can afford to ignore the rules. **The beginning, not the end** So, is this the end of 'Baby Class' as we know it? Yes. The formal, drill-based, homework-heavy nursery is legally finished in Uganda. But what replaces it remains uncertain. The policy is clear on what is banned but less clear on how the new model will be funded, staffed, inspected, and accepted.