

# Nursery CRIMES

BETA, NOW THE NEXT NURSERY RHYME, TITLED THE PERIODIC TABLE—LITHIUM, BERYLLIUM, BORON, CARBON.....!



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**THOUGH A** hyperactive human resources development minister Kapil Sibal is at the helm of educational affairs in the country, the focus seems to be entirely on higher education. In the much-neglected primary education sector, guided and controlled by state governments and not the Centre, the situation is alarming.

India's preschool industry — nurseries, playschools, kindergartens etc which cater to children in the three-plus age bracket — unofficially estimated to be worth nearly Rs 4,000 crores is neither recognised or regulated. There isn't even a list of dos/don'ts, forget a common approved curriculum. With almost three-quarters of the country's population under the age of 35, this sector is likely to be worth Rs 13,000 crores by 2012 as demand

for quality kindergartens intensifies.

"In Delhi, for example, there are about 1,900 playschools catering to around two-three lakh students", Delhi state public school management association president, R.C. Jain, pointed out.

In an effort to check malpractices arising out of this huge shortfall, a 100-point system established by the Ashok Ganguly Comm-



tee was approved and implemented in Delhi on the order of the high court in 2007. The system aims to provide weightage to issues like short distance between the school and residence of a student, a sibling in the same school, girl child et cetera.

Though this reform is unique to Delhi, yet all is not well with the system. "The rules for nursery admissions are not implemented by schools. Every school is allowed 30 points for fixing its own criteria, by way of which they are able to carry out their shady activities", R. Baladevan, director of School Choice Campaign, an NGO, pointed out.

The government on its part maintains that the schools are following the rules. "We monitor the situation on a

## 'Points' to remember

In Delhi, points are now used for nursery admissions. The 100-point system, created by the Ganguly Committee, was approved and implemented by the Delhi high court in 2007.

Residing within 3 km (weightage as per the distance)	20
Sibling	20
Both father and mother post graduate (weightage as per the qualification)	10
Alumni (one of the parent)	10
Girl child	5
Child with special needs	5
Criteria to be fixed by school	30

periodical basis and ensure that no violation of rules takes place", Delhi education minister Arvinder Singh Lovely said.

Monitoring is easier said than done as there is no regulatory mechanism to check the functioning of these schools. That's why activists have demanded

transparency of results, criteria, fee refund and less amount to be charged by schools for reserving a seat.

"Schools must display the exact break-up points for each child when they release the admissions list. The break-up of points must be based on 'definitive' criteria avoiding vagueness like



Parents wait in a long queue for application forms for nursery admissions in Chennai. PHOTO: N. Sampath

Playschools these days offer the quickest route to getting rich. Add some frills and parents will pay Rs 1 lakh for admission alone. Who is to blame? Schools without scruples or parents with aspirations? We investigate



'group discussions', 'national level achievements of parents' etc", Mr Baladevan said.

The situation in states is worse. In Andhra Pradesh, for example, there are no guidelines on nursery admissions. Elite schools exploit this to their advantage and collect huge money in the form of donations, capitation fee, transport fee etc. Most schools even don't follow a common admission schedule, forcing parents to run after schools for months.

Parents complain that the Hyderabad's elite schools, such as Hyderabad Public School, have been collecting Rs 85,000 as capitation fee apart from Rs 35,000 as tuition fee and Rs 12,000 as transport fee for a nursery kid. They say that other prominent schools, such as Oakridge International School, collects Rs 1,25,000, Srinidhi International School Rs 1 lakh, and Delhi Public School and Niraj Public School in the range of Rs 85,000 to Rs 1,00,000.

While the state directorate of school education remains a mute spectator, most schools began issuing admission forms from the first week of October and started conducting "interviews" for parents.

"Though various courts in the past have categorically stated that schools should not conduct 'interviews' of parents for nursery admissions, none of the schools bother to follow this. The directorate of school education, which has the responsibility to implement the norms, is a mute spectator", said A. Anand Kumar, a parent.

K. Mrudula, another par-

ent, said, "Schools call us for interviews only to verify our financial status. They ask for quotations on how much we can spend on the education. They collect all the quotations and shortlist children based on this, in descending order. I submitted applications in about 10 schools but could not secure a single seat as my quotation was below the 'fee bracket' fixed by the schools".

As if this was not enough, the random admission schedule followed by various schools further compounds the problem. "We are forced to run after schools for months for securing admission. Moreover, we need to deposit money in multiple schools as we are not sure where our child might get admission. This imposes an

All that these playschools are concerned with is extracting money from parents. Paying high fees did not hurt us when we got our kid enrolled in this particular school, but the staff they have are just young pretty things with neither any clue nor the compassion needed to handle kids. It is nothing but a marketing gimmick. That's why so many play schools advertise like crazy..."

MALA RAI,  
a parent from Delhi

enormous financial burden on parents. If the government makes it mandatory for schools to follow a common admission schedule,

lot of time and money will be saved. We will also be spared taking sporadic leave from work to collect and submit application forms and attend interviews", said S.S. Mulehuddin, a parent.

Some parents complain that certain school managements insist on fulfillment of certain "impractical conditions" before giving admissions. "Some schools insist that the mother should not be employed and should be a homemaker so that she can teach the child at home. They also insist on a minimum education qualification of graduation for a mother", said Rohit Rao, another parent.

(Inputs by Preeti Karmyogi)



## Chill! It's just about ABC

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IT'S THAT time of the year again when hysteria grips parents seeking admissions for their three-year-olds to playschools.

With the country's economy in an upward swing, the criterion for parents seeking playschools has also transformed. A school nearby, or one that's cosy, relaxed and fun doesn't make the cut any more. Parents now want their kids playing in schools where children of the rich and famous go. And it helps, of course, if the school also has uniformed staff, computers, and is fully-air conditioned. This checklist of parents is partly to reaffirm their social status, and partly aspirational. So when these parents fear or face rejection, they either pop anti-depressants, or pull strings to get their often not-yet-potty-trained kids in.

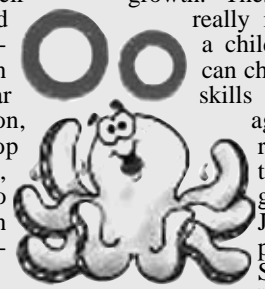
That's the reason why hundreds of schools have sprung up across the country working on a franchise pattern. They know what parents want — an impressive list of alumni, success rate of admission to Class 1 in good schools, temperature-controlled classrooms and buses, computers — and that's what they offer, for a price. NGOs working in the field state that there are several cases where parents are desperate for admission to a particular school. Baladevan R, director, School Choice Campaign, an NGO, talks of a father who took seven-months' leave to see his kid through in a nursery school of his choice. "At an age when the child is supposed to play, s/he is made to sit with textbooks and learn things which wean him/her away from their childhood", Mr Baladevan said.

Dr Jitender Nagpal, a psychiatrist with Vimhans, says that parents must not get carried away by the glamour of colourful air-conditioned rooms of "branded schools". He maintains that parents often create a lot of stress for themselves. "Rather than looking at their child's needs, parents want to get their child admitted to so-called 'best' schools. They should opt for a school that has a good faculty, interacts with parents and children, has a good student-teacher ratio and a protective and safe environment. Children need a joyful learning environment and not hours on a bus commuting to these branded schools", he added.

Educationists are unanimous about the importance of playschools in a child's growth. "These schools are really important for a child as teachers can channelise their skills at this early age. This is the right time for their mental growth", says Jyoti Bose, principal of Springdales School, New Delhi. But, Dr Nagpal emphasises, care should be taken to ensure that children are not stressed during this learning process and that the focus should be on children having fun.

Fun is, perhaps, what some parents are aiming to reintroduce with their creative solutions. Rajan Arora, for example, launched [www.nurseryadmissions.com](http://www.nurseryadmissions.com). "The website aims to connect similarly-stressed parents, discuss issues regarding admissions, guide parents and reduce their stress", Mr Arora said. He came up with the idea of launching this website after he faced a stressful situation trying to get his son admitted in a playschool in 2007.

Dr Nagpal says at this tender age all a child needs is "emotional enrichment". "Unconditional love of parents, safety, security, a lot of approval from caring people around is what a child needs the most", he said.



# Playschools: The new cradle-snatchers

SUPRIYA SHARMA

IF THERE'S anything that becomes the talking point of mummies' kitty parties after sharing sharp observations about reality shows, jewellery exhibitions or the latest slimming pill in the market, it is down to which nursery school the kids are going to. Just like the part of the city they live in and the car they drive establish a family's social standing, a child's nursery education is part of the package to be in the "it" crowd. That's partly the reason why we see fly-by-night preparatory schools stressing more on good-looking staff than on what they actually plan to teach the children. Parents are so fixed in this social trap that many now want to

make bookings for their child's school admission even before he/she has come into this world. And some schools are only too happy to lap up this opportunity.

"A new school opens in town and all mothers make a beeline for it without finding out if it's actually worth sending their kid to", says Tara Chopra, principal of The Learning Tree in Sujana Singh Park, New Delhi. Though there's a nursery school in every nook and cranny of the city, high-end chains are opening up hundreds of branches across the country. Amol Arora of Shemrock group of schools, which runs over 100 playschools all over India, says, "Yes we have expanded because we aim

I tried getting my daughter admitted to a plush playschool in Lokhandwala. I was asked to provide my income and residence proof. Now, since we live in Versova, they refused to admit our child. We found out later that we did not fit their standard as they admit only children of celebrities."

SAKIN MERCHANT,  
a parent from Mumbai

to reach as many kids as we can. We don't want them to travel all the distance. There are a lot of schools that are trying to ape Shemrock to make money, but they'll die out very soon. Opening and shutting

keeps happening in the playschool industry". And nursery schools you thought were different from banquet halls?

Perhaps one thing that doesn't keep happening or at least wasn't heard of much was aggressive sale of "advance bookings". "When my wife was admitted in the hospital for delivery last year, we started getting calls from this reputed playschool in Connaught Place to make a booking. We were aghast. We had never heard of anything like this before and even after our repeated refusals they kept calling and harassing us for months", says Neeraj Jain (name changed on request) who suspects that the school had probably "tipped" the clerical staff at

the hospital for personal details of soon-to-be parents.

But not all operate in a clandestine fashion. One of Delhi's most popular prep school, Mother's Pride, has an above-board scheme offering heavily discounted bookings for children less than one-year-old (the right age for nursery is three-plus). "It's a win-win situation for both the parties. Parents get monetary benefits, while we get our business", says Sarita Sayal, director, Mother's Pride. Apparently, the school authorities don't need to



approach hospitals. They accumulate enough names and numbers from parents attending their baby shows and other cultural events.

"We get over 15,000 parents coming to our school every year. Mother's Pride is a brand name", adds Ms Sarita. Shemrock has dabbled in this trend too. "We have parents coming to us, insisting that we take their child who is not even two yet, so we give them a discount on the advance money", Mr Arora says. Violations are plenty, yet there are some law abiders and small pockets of hope. At New Delhi's Vasant Valley, for instance, the entire admission process is online —

filling of forms, announcement of results and, fixed

I was late by an hour last year and missed getting the application form. So I stood all night this time to make sure I got the form. Not just the night vigil for the form, I also spent an entire week preparing for the interview. The questions mostly focused on my and my wife's education, our capacity to pay the donation and the fees. I did not go through this kind of hell even for my own engineering college admission."

S. RATHNAM,  
a parent from Chennai

seats for children of "economically weaker" parents. Then, The Shri Ram School meets all the parents who apply and, according to Manika Sharma, "We reach out to single parents, parents who have adopted a child, inter-caste marriages and differently-abled children".

Amongst good standalone schools, The Learning Tree is surely garnering a lot of recognition. "Our school is different since we teach in the open, with no windows, fans or airconditioners. There is enough space for the kids to run around. We don't push the kids straight into class and we also encourage parents to stay with the kids till they get used to the new surroundings", says Tara Chopra, the Principal.