Seven Ways Screenwriters Can Tell More Authentic Stories About Child Care

Research shows viewers want to see child care depicted honestly in TV and movies. Here's how writers can upend tired tropes.

By Vicki Shabo

Child care is a common pressure point in everyday families' lives, yet the complex challenges and little details of securing it are often left out of TV and film storylines.

Want to learn more about telling better child care stories? See our Re-Scripting Child Care and Early Learning On Screen guide.

Seven Tropes or Stereotypes—and How to Subvert Them

Parents, children, and early educators can all be fascinating, complex, relatable characters, whether they are central to a story or supporting it. Language and depictions that make care invisible or an afterthought, treat child care as "babysitting" or "daycare," and flatten the emotional lives of parents, kids, and caregivers are missing key moments of connection with audiences and opportunities to shift cultural narratives about early care and learning

1

TROPE OR STEREOTYPE TO AVOID	**Invisible care arrangements.** Parents who give no thought or attention to child care, and children who have no needs or whose needs are discounted.
ALTERNATIVE	Active conversation, negotiations, and logistics that show the interplay between work and care.
WHY?	The vast majority of parents work outside their homes, and they cannot go to work without considering child care. This care is often expensive and hard to find, especially if care provided by a parent, friend, family member, or neighbor isn't feasible or when work schedules and care options do not easily align.

2

TROPE OR STEREOTYPE TO AVOID	**Invisible children.** Children on screen or off-screen, but part of the story, who have no needs or whose needs are discounted or used solely for comedy.
ALTERNATIVE	Discussions about or depictions of children being cared for physically, socially, and emotionally, even in small ways, in the background, without dialogue.
WHY?	Children's brains develop rapidly in their earliest years. Providing examples of parents and paid caregivers engaging thoughtfully with children can provide a powerful example to normalize high-quality care and inspire empathy and understanding in people who do not have children.

3

TROPE OR STEREOTYPE TO AVOID	**Child care is a mom's expense.** Discussing or referencing child care costs as a percentage or multiple of a mother's wages in a household with married parents.
ALTERNATIVE	Child care costs framed as part of the shared household budget or in relation to other essential costs, such as food, utilities, or housing. Helpful sources: • Child Care Aware Index of Child Care Prices • Economic Security Project Dashboard • Urban Institute Affordability Index
WHY?	Positioning child care costs solely in terms of a mother's income, without any reflection, sarcasm, or commentary, actually reinforces the idea that a mom is the only alternative to paid child care. It also suggests a mom's work is optional if the cost of care is more than the mom's pay. Using comparisons makes the issue more tangible and positions child care as a significant core expense—shared by the entire household. Pointing out the long-term costs to a woman's financial stability, job prospects, and retirement can be a complicating and interesting addition to a story.

4

TROPE OR STEREOTYPE TO AVOID	**Mom is responsible for part-time care, of course.** Moms are the default caregivers, without conversation or explanation—cutting back on hours, quitting jobs, or leaving work to manage unexpected child care needs or doctor's appointments. Conversely, dads are inept, lazy, or just "babysitting" when caring for their kids.
ALTERNATIVE	Discussion about who is watching the kids, doing child care pickup, taking a sick day, or changing a job schedule when child care needs or costs shift. Dads share the same levels of joy and competence as parents and have equal responsibilities in child care.
WHY?	Creatives can help normalize the expectation that moms and dads are equally suited to care for children and reinforce many younger men's interest in being more engaged with their children.

5

TROPE OR STEREOTYPE TO AVOID	**At-home parenting is a breeze.** Stay-at-home parents are essentially vacationing and shown as frivolous, disorganized, or inattentive to their children. Moms are focused on other things, while dads are bumbling, or parents are perfect caregivers and household managers who either never experience stress or exhaustion or consider stress and exhaustion to be virtues.
ALTERNATIVE	Stay-at-home parents facing highs and lows; teaching and nurturing children rather than just "babysitting"; domestic labor as part of the stay-at-home parent's role.
WHY?	Normalizing the domestic labor of at-home parents as work, and showing the executive functioning and emotional demands of stay-at-home parenting reinforces the value of unpaid care.

6

TROPE OR STEREOTYPE TO AVOID	**Child care is child's play, with an eye on the clock.** Paid caregivers are depicted as incapable, unskilled, comedic foils, or invisible, or simply there to pass the time while a parent is working.
ALTERNATIVE	Trained professional workers who are knowledgeable about children and development; care about what's best for kids; offer wisdom, support, and community for overwhelmed and stressed parents; have their own families and personal lives; and struggle with managing work and family in jobs that are often high-stress with low wages.
WHY?	Bringing visibility to how child care is labor, and a professional job helps shift culture toward recognizing its societal and economic value. Using the term "child care" rather than "day care" helps to underscore that a care worker is actively teaching and nurturing a child rather than passing the time and watching the clock.

7

TROPE OR STEREOTYPE TO AVOID	**In-home care providers are just babysitters, and babysitting is easy, fun, and unskilled.** Conflating full-time social and emotional care and teaching with "babysitting."
ALTERNATIVE	Early childhood care is dedicated, professional work that includes teaching social and emotional skills, nurturing, and physical care. In-home caregivers are also full humans with their own lives, concerns, and personal and family needs.
WHY?	Professionalizing the value of in-home care for children and treating in-home caregivers in holistic ways with respect to their own lives and circumstances can help to shift audience expectations around safety, wages, and benefits.

ABOUT US

The Re-Scripting Gender, Work, Family, and Care initiative at New America's Better Life Lab advises entertainment creators and executives on ways to tell rich, meaningful stories and amplify the great shows and films already doing that work. We aim to see more authentic stories on screen that engage and grow audiences by reflecting their own lived experiences and aspirations. Please contact us at entertainment@newamerica.org for resources and research, storytelling support, and connections to other experts.

Acknowledgments: We thank early child care and education experts Elliot Haspel and Julie Kashen and filmmaker Jen Bradwell for providing helpful feedback on this resource.

This resource guide was originally published in October 2026. Read it online at go.newamerica.org/rescriptingchildcare.