

Raising Agents, Not Just Thinkers:

Why Agency is the Superpower Our Children Need in the Age of AI

1. Introduction: The Shifting Paradigm

"Agency > Intelligence. I had this wrong for DECADES." This powerful statement from Rachel Carrell, CEO, Koru Kids, recently resonated deeply with many of us in the Early Years world.

For decades, our society has placed intelligence on a pedestal. We've been obsessed with IQ scores, academic achievements and cognitive milestones. But we may have been focusing on the wrong metric all along. In an age where artificial intelligence is rapidly transforming what it means to be "smart," there's a more fundamental quality that will determine our children's future success: agency.



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2. Agency

But what exactly is agency? Forget complicated definitions for a moment. Think of agency as the inner drive that makes a child not just learn, but act. It's:

- **Taking initiative:** Not waiting to be told what to do, but seeing a need or opportunity and jumping in. Think of the toddler who decides to help put away blocks, unprompted.
- **Making decisions:** Even small ones! It's the preschooler confidently choosing which book to read and feeling the weight of their own choices.
- **Exerting control:** Understanding they can influence their environment and actions. It's the young child who, instead of giving up when a tower falls, figures out how to rebuild it stronger.
- **Setting goals and pursuing them:** Even simple goals like finishing a puzzle or learning to ride a scooter. It's the grit to see something through.
- **Problem-solving:** Not just knowing answers, but figuring out how to find them. It's the child experimenting with different ways to stack cups, learning through trial and error.

Just as machines once turned physical strength into a commodity, AI is now doing the same with certain forms of intelligence. This shift demands a radical rethinking of how we approach early childhood development.

2.1 Why Early Years is the Agency Hotspot

At Babyzone, the focus on the first 1001 days of a child's life isn't arbitrary. As the Royal Foundation (2024) notes, "Our early childhoods, the time from pregnancy to five, fundamentally shape our whole lives." During this critical period, 80% of neural connections that influence thinking, behaviour, resilience and stress response are formed by age two (Johnson & Smith, 2016).

This isn't just a future concern – it's an urgent call to action. Early childhood is a period of incredible brain plasticity. Children's brains are wired to learn through exploration, play and interaction. They are naturally curious, inherently agents of their own learning. Our role, as parents and policymakers, is to nurture this innate agency, not stifle it. Too often, our well-intentioned efforts to educate and protect can inadvertently diminish a child's sense of control and initiative.

These early years represent our greatest opportunity to foster agency. When children develop a sense of autonomy and capability from the start, they're more likely to become what Babyzone describes as "kind and empathetic" individuals who actively shape their world rather than passively navigate it.





2.2 How Babyzone's Approach Builds Agency

Examining Babyzone's model through the lens of agency reveals why their impact runs deeper than traditional early years services:

Evidence-informed classes that empower

Babyzone's 30+ daily classes aren't focused merely on what children know, but on how they engage with learning. By designing activities that strengthen the parent-child bond and enhance the home learning environment, they're creating the fertile ground where agency can flourish.

Community spaces that promote exploration

The purpose-built premium spaces offer safe environments for independent exploration - a key component of agency development. When children can freely navigate sensory rooms, reading corners, and puzzle areas with supportive adults nearby, they practice making choices and taking controlled risks.

Partnership approach that models problem-solving

By bringing together over 50 delivery partners spanning healthcare, education, and community services, Babyzone demonstrates the power of collaborative problem-solving. Children witness adults working together to create solutions, setting a powerful example of what agency looks like in practice.

3. Practical Strategies for Parents: Raising Agents at Home

So, how do we, as parents, raise children who are agents, not just thinkers? Drawing inspiration from Rachel Carrell and applying it to the world of Early Years, here are practical, actionable strategies:

1. **Assign real responsibilities early (Even for Toddlers!)**
Don't underestimate what even very young children can handle. Putting away toys, helping sort laundry, setting the table (even if imperfectly!) – these aren't just chores; they are messages that your child is a capable contributor.

Babyzone Application: Even toddlers can help tidy up after play sessions or choose which activities to try next. Babyzone's classes often incorporate age-appropriate responsibilities, children that their contributions matter.

2. **Involve children in problem-solving, every day**

Turn everyday hiccups into problem-solving opportunities. "Oh no, the tower fell! What could we try to make it stronger?" or "Hmm, this toy is stuck. How can we get it out?" Guide them with questions, not just answers.

Babyzone Application: During creative play sessions, parents can ask open-ended questions rather than providing immediate solutions, encouraging children to think critically.

3. **Hand over decision-making power (Within safe boundaries)**

Start small and age-appropriate. Let toddlers choose between two outfits, preschoolers decide which snack to have, or young children pick the activity for family playtime. Offer "bounded choices" – options you are comfortable with – but let them feel the autonomy of making their own selections.

Babyzone Application: Babyzone's variety of simultaneous activities allows children to make meaningful choices about what interests them, supported by parents who respect these decisions.

4. **Encourage independent exploration and play**

Resist the urge to constantly direct, entertain or over-schedule. Unstructured play, both indoors and outdoors, is crucial. Let them explore their environment, follow their interests and learn through their own discoveries. Step back and observe; you might be surprised by their ingenuity!

Babyzone Application: The carefully designed spaces at Babyzone provide safe boundaries within which children can explore independently, developing confidence in their abilities.

5. **Celebrate initiative, not just "being smart"**

Shift your praise. Notice and acknowledge when your child takes initiative, tries something new, perseveres through a challenge or helps solve a problem. Instead of just saying "You're so smart!", try "I loved how you took charge and started tidying up your toys!" or "I saw you didn't give up when the puzzle was tricky, great effort!"

Babyzone Application: When children suggest new ways to use materials or solve problems in classes, Babyzone practitioners highlight these moments, reinforcing the value of taking initiative.



4. Policy Implications: Building Agency-First Early Years Systems

For policymakers serious about preparing the next generation for an AI-driven future, the focus must shift from narrow educational outcomes to developing agency at scale:

1. Prioritise play-based learning

Early years curricula should be designed to maximise child-initiated play, exploration and hands-on learning. Move away from rote memorisation and didactic teaching methods that stifle agency. Babyzone's evidence-informed classes demonstrate how learning through play builds both skills and agency.

2. Invest in family-centred spaces

Babyzone's model of high-quality, accessible community hubs demonstrates how physical environments can nurture agency. Policymakers should prioritise funding for spaces where families can gather, learn and grow together.

3. Support parental confidence and training

As the Royal Foundation (2021) notes, "Primary caregivers play the most crucial role, but they do not exist in a vacuum." Policy should acknowledge that building children's agency requires supporting parents' own sense of agency through community connections, practical resources and professional development for early years educators.

4. Re-evaluate assessment in early years

Success metrics should evolve beyond traditional developmental milestones to capture growth in initiative-taking, decision-making and self-regulation—the building blocks of agency. This requires a shift towards more observational and holistic assessment methods.

5. Break down service silos

Babyzone's partnership approach with over 50 delivery partners shows how bringing together healthcare, education and family support creates a more holistic environment for developing agency. Policy frameworks should incentivise this integration.

6. Scale what works

Babyzone's growth from 5 to 8 locations by 2025 demonstrates scalable impact. Policymakers should identify and invest in expanding evidence-informed programmes that successfully foster agency.



5. Babyzone's Commitment to Raising Agents

At Babyzone, we are deeply committed to supporting parents in raising confident, capable children ready to thrive in a rapidly changing world. This renewed focus on agency strengthens our core mission.

As one Babyzone parent noted, "It feels like therapy for parents. The kids are safe, free and learning. The parents can take part with them and feel empowered." This sentiment captures the essence of agency development—creating environments where children feel both secure enough to take risks and free enough to make meaningful choices.

The Future is Agentic

The rise of AI presents both exciting possibilities and valid anxieties. But one thing is clear: the future will be shaped by those with agency – those who can think for themselves, take initiative and adapt to constant change.

This view aligns with technology pioneer Reid Hoffman's concept of "Superagency." Hoffman suggests that rather than diminishing human capability, AI can dramatically amplify our agency when approached with the right mindset. In his work, he offers a roadmap for using AI inclusively and adaptively to create positive change - imagine AI tutors personalising education for each child based on their unique interests, or AI advisors helping families navigate complex early years services.

What makes Hoffman's concept so relevant to our work is that it presupposes the very qualities we're nurturing at Babyzone: initiative, decision-making, and the confidence to direct one's own path. By fostering agency from the earliest days, we're not just preparing children for an AI-powered world—we're setting the foundation for them to achieve what Hoffman describes as "superagency," where human ingenuity and AI capabilities combine to create extraordinary possibilities. The children with the strongest sense of agency today will be those best positioned to harness AI as a tool for amplifying their impact tomorrow.

In a world where AI increasingly handles information processing and routine cognitive tasks, our children's success will depend less on what they know and more on how they approach challenges, make decisions and take initiative.

By shifting our focus from intelligence to agency in these crucial early years, we aren't just preparing children for school—we're preparing them for a rapidly changing world where the ability to direct one's own path will be the ultimate advantage.

The question for all of us—parents, practitioners and policymakers alike—is not just "Are our children smart?" but "Are our children developing the agency they need to thrive in an AI-powered future?"

By working together, we can empower the next generation not just to navigate this new world, but to actively shape it for the better. Let's work together to raise a generation of agents, not just thinkers.

This article was informed by Babyzone's pioneering work in early years development and inspired by Reid Hoffman's book 'Superagency' and Rachel Carrell's insights on agency.

To learn more about Babyzone's approach, visit their website or read their Theory of Change.



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