

# Men in Early Years – some thoughts.....

by Pete Moorhouse



Through my work delivering training and presentations I get to participate in a number of early years conferences. I am always taken aback by the lack of men – sometimes none at a conference of over 200 people, often just one or two solitary figures in a sea of women.

The statistics vary due to sources and figures vary slightly according to the specific sector (nurseries, childminders, reception classes) – but it is widely accepted that less than 2% of the early years workforce are male, and this figure, after peaking around 2015 is currently in decline. In professions that were also traditionally seen as women dominated occupations, things have changed to a much greater extent, for example in nursing there are now 16% male, social workers 20% male and care staff 17% male. The underrepresentation within the early years workforce is striking, actually the lowest % of men from 380 listed professions. It is clear that there is still a mountain to climb in changing the gender balance of those working in the early years. This is a very similar situation in the majority of countries with some having even less, for example in southern European countries. Norway is a rare example of reversing this trend. The Norwegian government made a determined effort to recruit more men into early years and numbers increased from 3% in 1991 to 10% 2008. In 2012 the UK coalition government published targets for raising the number of men working in childcare, but there was no significant progress. A Mori poll found that the majority of parents are in favour of men working as childcare professions, but there was still a significant minority (12%) that were opposed.

Men have of course of course been involved in early childhood education for many years. As well as the examples of educational pioneers such as Froebel, Dewey and Malaguzzi, many settings across the UK now have benefitted from male staff for many years. Historically, in many cultures early childhood education was initially incorporated within the realm of the church, with education being provided by men through their role as priests or monks. When I worked in Japan, I was aware that there were a significant number of men working in early childhood education and this was thought to be because it had traditionally been men teaching children in monasteries. In the UK access to early childhood training was initially restricted, for example at the Froebel Institute the first year men were admitted was 1966, but now all training establishments are available to male student, although still the uptake is small and currently falling.

## **Benefits of men in early years**

Children can benefit from having both genders in a setting and this can contribute to a more holistic nurturing environment. Men provide children with positive male role models and also provide opportunities for children to experience positive male – female relationships, seeing staff of different genders cooperate, laugh together and respect each other.

Many children may not have a significant male figure in their home lives, male early years practitioners can provide the experience of a positive male role model. It can allow children to experience building an emotionally supportive and safe relationship with an 'emotionally available' male practitioner. Getting boys to acknowledge emotions and articulate them is so important (suicide rates for young men) and male teachers can support this through modelling and listening.

It can allow children who have had negative experiences with men build positive relationships with men in safe caring environment.

Having positive male role models may in fact help reduce the attainment gap. There are currently many concerns regarding boys' levels of academic achievement/ disengagement in comparison to the achievement of girls across the education system. Having men supporting and encouraging learning may help develop boy's positive attitudes to learning.

Nurseries and pre-schools are dominated by female teachers, mothers and female carers. Fathers can feel uncomfortable in this environment and be reluctant to get involved in their child's education. Fathers may often miss out on information or feeling included in their child's time in early years. A male figure within the nursery or pre-school will support fathers in their involvement and understanding. It can also impact on how fathers feel about their role as care givers.

Children can benefit from the different experiences and caring styles men bring to the profession – this can impact on reducing the levels of challenging behaviour. Much has been written about gender difference in relation to attitudes to risk with men (generalisation) allowing children more freedom to take on new challenges.

Men can sometimes bring more play, active movement, and 'rough and tumble' play to the way they interact with their children. This can be a positive interaction when managed effectively and children will respond positively to this variety of input, and for some children more active learning is how they learn best. Providing these different perspectives, teaching styles, and life experiences can enrich the learning environment.

Having men in the setting provides children with a more accurate reflection of the gender mix of their classroom, their community and the world around them. It become more normal. We don't want children to just view nurse education a solely women's work.

Male practitioners can challenge the stereotypes in relation to toys and activities. If we want our children to grow up in a world where there is equality of opportunity for all we need to challenge stereotypes – men can cook – play in the home corner, men can clean – and of course work with young children.



## What are the barriers for men:

There is still a prevailing attitude that caring for the young is women's work and it is unmanly. These days, roles are becoming more fluid, often with both parents taking caring roles for their young children or even with fathers staying home to look after young children while their partner works. But this trend is not being evidenced in the male staffing numbers working in early years. I feel it misguided to think that men lack the skills to nurture young children. In reality there are more differences within a gender than between the genders. There are many men that would make wonderful early years staff but never consider it a viable option. It's hard to be what you don't see.

Men may be discouraged by the prospect of working in a predominantly female environment – perhaps feeling out of place. It can feel awkward and isolating being the solitary male in a team, the only man in the staff room at lunch time. Could it also be that some are reluctant to employ men – despite being of equal merit?

How do we feel as men as carers. Caring is often perceived to suit female staff due to their caring nature and maternal instinct. How do we feel with men comforting children? – sometimes children will need a cuddle, a comforting arm, they will want to sit on your lap. How do we feel about more intimate care such as changing nappies? Sometimes this can sound alarm bells. Was that inappropriate contact? The reality is that the majority of abusers are male and thus we can tend to be more suspicious – whether consciously or subconsciously. The impact of this is that men can be apprehensive to nurture and support children in a healthy, natural way. Many men across the country have talked about the increasing constraint they feel in having physical contact with children in their care. These are complex issues to reflect on and many men can find it easier just not to work in early years because of this. No one wants to feel judged or doubted.

Men can be perceived as having similar traits. There are some gender differences, but these are of course gross generalisations. 'Men are more physical, like activities such as roughhousing– like to be active and goof about'. I know plenty of men that don't. 'Men don't talk much' – I know plenty of men that do. 'Men lack empathy and a caring instinct' – I know countless men that are.

There needs to be more support from senior leadership teams to help male staff cope with negative attitudes and to build their confidence as valued practitioners.

Leadership also needs to know how to sensitively manage allegations if they are made against men. There needs to be more advice and guidance both for men and settings on how to navigate these issues.

Low wages are another factor. The wages obviously are not an attraction to anyone in the sector – in general it is clear that successive governments have undervalued early years professionals and quality provision. Wages clearly need to increase for all staff. But lots of us work in Early Years despite the low wages – because we know what a delight and joy it is to work with young children. We have to share this secret!



## Conclusion:

When I do talk with men who work in early years – their commitment is clear, they see it as a privilege to be a part of children's learning and development and ensuring that the children in their care flourish and make the best possible progress. They make an important contribution.

The way forward:

Firstly we have to see the current status quo as a problem that we need to find a solution to.

As a sector I believe we need to make much more effort to encourage men to train to become nursery practitioners and early years teachers. We all need to have these conversations.

Male school students should be offered work experience in nurseries and careers advice should challenge stereotypes, and see early years education as a viable positive career choice.

The government needs to set targets to increase the recruitment of men and have a clear strategy to implement these. Clearly there is an acute shortage of staff due to the current expansion. Could men be part of this solution?

Low wages do not help encourage men into the sector. Wages are a huge issue across the sector and a society we need to rethink the value we place in early years. The foundation stage is so critical for children's development and it clearly needs vastly more investment. It is well documented that investment pays for itself with better outcomes in the long-term.

Nurseries and schools need to be much more proactive. Settings can encourage men to apply for jobs. We can also explain to parents why having men is beneficial, and reassuring those that have concerns. We have to acknowledge that there are extreme views out there with some viewing men that want to work with children as odd at the very least.

I am also an advocate of positive discrimination. The staff team should better represent the make up of the children. In order to attain this I feel recruitment should not be solely based on merit. If a 'under-represented' candidate is with a small margin of say 5% in interview scoring then it should be acceptable to offer them the position. I feel this is important. There is added 'value' in having more men, just as there is added value of having more BAME staff within a diverse cohort of children. Children need role models they can relate to.

Currently there are very high drop out rates of men. We need to support male colleagues to remain in the profession. Here the Senior Leadership Team can play an important role, by acknowledging some of the challenges men face and offering support. It can be beneficial also for men to connect with other men working within early years ( especially if isolated within a school), and paid time should be allocated to facilitating this. In Bristol we were lucky for many years to have a men's support group (Bristol Men in Early Years). Men can join the national men's advocacy group: [MITEY \(Men in the Early Years\)](#)

Importantly, as individuals, we can all play a part in changing culture and work towards providing a better gender balance for the children in our care. If we are committed to equal opportunities – for children and adults – we need to challenge stereotypes. We don't want children to think only women can be care givers just as

we don't want girls to think they can't be engineers. We need more men to believe that they can contribute to this wonderful sector, and that their contribution will be valued.

At times in history we need to think differently. Friedrich Froebel was a visionary pioneer of early childhood. He was a radical. He had a vision that education could be different in so many ways. When he developed his ideas around kindergarten in the mid 1800's, education was a male occupation, having its origins within the church. He saw that women could make a valuable contribution and founded the first teacher training college for women. This was ground breaking at the time. Nearly 200 years on the world looks very different again, culture has shifted and roles have changed. I'm convinced Froebel would now want to encourage a greater gender balance within settings. Today we expect that men will be directly involved with their young children at home, and I believe all settings should work towards offering a more gender balanced workforce as this is in the best interests of children's holistic development.

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