

Men Working in Early Years and Childcare

Why it is important and how to achieve it

1. Introduction

There are many arguments in favour of a more gender-balanced early years and childcare workforce – and fewer and fewer people prepared to argue against this familiar policy goal. There are also a number of local authorities nationally implementing promising approaches to recruiting men into childcare careers, and some local training institutions positively seek to recruit men. And yet in the UK we are no closer to achieving it than we were a generation ago.

Why is this? Supply or demand? Is it men themselves who vote with their feet – for many different reasons, economic, social, cultural, personal - resisting attempts to entice them towards working with young children? Or is it that, consciously or not, many of those recruiting workers with young children remain sceptical (again for many possible reasons) about whether this is really a job for the boys?

And what can we do about it? Many words have been expended on this question. This guide does not seek to offer definitive or even very new answers. It seeks to suggest a range of practical steps that would make a difference. These are offered in a spirit of optimism – we will not transform the gender balance of the early years workforce in overnight. But there are relatively straightforward steps that can be taken in any area that will make a real difference. New approaches to training and employing male workers which can give them the skills and confidence to undertake this rewarding career, and meet the particular challenges it presents for male workers.

And last but not least – why is it important? On this point at least, there is an emerging consensus. A more gender-balanced workforce is important for promoting gender equity in access to childcare work; developing a more diverse workforce with broader skills/experience; encouraging positive male role models for both girls/boys; and challenging gender stereotypes.

2. How many men work in early years and childcare jobs?

Only 1-2% of early education and childcare workers in England are male. In 2008 the % of male childcare workers in England was:

- Full daycare - 2%
- Sessional daycare - 1%
- Childminders - 2%
- Nursery schools - 2%
- Primary schools - 1%
- After school clubs - 7%
- Holiday clubs - 14%

This very low level of men in the early years and childcare workforce has remained stubbornly unchanging. This is not just a UK phenomenon. Very few countries have more than 2% of men in the early years and childcare workforce. Some have less. This is in contrast to the strong trend for fathers and father figures to be more involved in looking after their own

children. As long ago as 2003, the EOC reported that fathers did about 30% of parental childcare.

This has not changed significantly for a generation. Government targets and initiatives have come and gone without making inroads into this imbalance. In 1998, the *National Childcare Strategy* set a target of 6% male practitioners by 2004, later dropped. The Coalition's *Programme for Government* (2010) states that: "we want....a greater gender balance in the early years workforce." So the political will is there, but hitherto that has not been translated into effective national change.

However, international comparisons suggest that change is possible. Of course, international differences in work roles, status, sector development, and work/social culture, make comparisons complex. However, for example, Denmark had 8% male childcare workers in 2005. This may partly reflect rather better pay and a wider age range of children than in the UK statistics (nearly half those worked in clubs with children over 5). Norway had a figure of 3% in 1991, rising to 10% in 2008 – a reflection in part of a legal responsibility to work towards 20% male workers.

3. What are the barriers to change?

Key barriers include:

1. Male concerns (some well-founded) about the attitudes of parents/colleagues/peers about men working in early years, and about working in a predominantly female environment.
2. Lack of timely advice explaining the attractions of early years work, and encouraging men to seriously consider it.
3. Too few courses specifically marketed to men and designed to support them
4. A failure amongst early years employers to be proactive in recruiting men.
5. Low pay is a source of dissatisfaction for a MINORITY of male workers.

It is true that male early years workers can often be worried about what others might think - peer pressure, false accusations, parental negativity about intimate care are all concerns. *But it also true that important to remember that public attitudes are generally more supportive than in the past.* For example, 98% of female nursery workers say they want male colleagues; 77% of the public (and 55% of parents) are in favour of male early years workers; and 84% of parents say they would place their children in a childcare setting employing male workers.

Many male workers also dislike pressure to do stereotypical male activities (football, heavy lifting, being "role models" for boys), and many are also not comfortable working in a predominantly female environment.

In other words, there are a range of real and widespread concerns – but there is good reason to think that timely advice and support can be an effective response to those concerns

4. What can we do?

Here are a range of positive, straightforward steps local agencies can take to encourage more men working in early years and childcare:

1. **Set up a steering group in your area** which is committed to making things happen- a doing shop, not a talking shop. Invite lots of different agencies and individuals to get involved. Statutory, voluntary and private childcare providers; secondary schools; careers services, colleges that offer vocational and professional courses that are pathways into early years work; men already working in early years; local parents etc. Write down what you hope to achieve, how, and by when. Review your goals and achievements regularly. Link up with other relevant local forums – eg a local early years and childcare one.
2. **Consider running a local conference** to explore and explain why a more gender-balanced workforce is important; to understand why we need more men working in early years and childcare. Give delegates the chance to say what they think the local challenges are and how they can be overcome. Encourage delegates to complete pledge forms stating what steps they commit to taking. The steering group should agree to track progress of the pledges.
3. **Survey local early years employers and providers of professional training**, to establish how many men are already working, volunteering, or training to work in early years, and what steps they are already taking to improve this.
4. **Colleges offering early years and childcare courses should review them** – to assess whether recruitment of men is working well enough – and whether the content of the courses is relevant and supportive for male trainees. Do courses challenge gendered assumptions about the early years workforce, and support both male and female trainees to reflect on and handle a range of gendered assumptions that they will face (or may themselves make)? Colleges should consider offering male only introductory & entry level courses - possibly qualification courses. All courses should equip men with the confidence, awareness, skills, and support networks to work well with (mainly female) colleagues and parents, in the context of highly gendered assumptions. They do NOT need to promote a distinct identity / approach for male workers.
5. **Supportive colleges at teaching & management levels.**
6. **Careers advice should communicate to boys and men that working in early education and childcare is fulfilling, challenging, and offers good careers progression. Good careers advice for all age groups of men is essential. The advice needs to** give good information about the varied pathways that exist for men wanting to consider a career in early years, including entry at HE level. There needs to be a focus both on career change for older men, as well as on the 14-19 age group of young men.
7. **Schools should proactively promote more flexible attitudes towards gender roles**, and encourage boys and young men to consider school courses (eg Social Care BTEC) and work experience which can be pathways into early education and childcare. The steering group should make contact with headteachers from secondary schools to raise awareness of the importance of this agenda. A whole school approach is crucial – embodying a commitment to explore and challenge gender stereotypes, and consider the impact on both women and men, throughout the life of the school.

8. **Fathers who are in contact with children's services** should be encouraged to consider early education and childcare as a positive career option.
9. **Early years employers should proactively support recruitment of men.** They should offer taster/volunteering opportunities for young men considering working in early education and childcare (and placements for male trainees on local early years and childcare courses). They should use positive images/messages appealing to men in routine recruitment and targeted campaign. **Recruitment campaigns should be both** short term, catchy, high profile, AND mainstream and routine. **Employers** should also be positive about the value of male workers to parents and other workers – and they may need guidance (including about safe recruitment practice) and top tips from the network to help them do this convincingly.

10. **Positive messages for parents about the value of male workers in early years and childcare** should also come from the local Family Information Service, Careers Services etc. Online case studies profiling male workers, and how children and parents react to them, can be very useful.

11. **Male early years practitioners, managers and volunteers should be supported as role models and mentors** for men thinking about early years work as a career option. The steering group should develop male ambassadors who would be willing to speak at events, and online case studies. These case studies could be youtube videos, transcripts, podcasts – and can be very powerful. Here are two quotes:

“Some families unfortunately that don't have a male involved...so it brings that balance where the child has a male to play and work and teach and guide.”

“I was a stay at home dad.....Started volunteering at the local playgroup....it's not nine-to-five, it's not a suit and a tie...Sometimes when a child finally understands something that you've been telling them about all day.... it's incredibly rewarding.”

12. **Early years and childcare courses should offer targeted support to male trainees**, including advice and guidance on employment and career progression, one-to-one mentoring and peer support, support and advice on handling any safeguarding concerns that might be raised. Female trainees should be encouraged to actively support male trainees and workers in early education and childcare.

13. **Establish a local male practitioner network** – which should offer mentors/roles models and develop case studies to encourage recruitment and retention of men on training courses and in early years careers. Develop a database of contacts for male practitioners and volunteers. There are already networks in some parts of the country, which could act as a template and a source of ideas and support. For example, the London Early Years Foundation, a charity with 25 community nurseries in London, co-ordinates a London-wide network of practitioners and other people interested in more men working in childcare. They have carried out research on worker attitudes, and try to raise public and policy awareness.

Of course, recruitment is only part of the story. It is also crucial to **avoid a revolving door syndrome**, where male early years workers and trainees drop out because of the pressures and prejudices they can face. Put simply, they need ongoing support, through:

- **A male practitioner network** - pre and post qualification, to share good practice, experience, and research, and offer mutual support.
- **Mentoring** - from experienced male practitioners during college courses and in employment settings.
- **Adopting a code of conduct and safer recruitment practice for employers and colleges**. This then becomes an opportunity to encourage and support male employees.
- **Dealing with any negativity from parents and female colleagues** – it is crucial for employers to support male workers as full team members.
- **Think and talk about gender-related issues** – to help male and female trainees and workers avoid pitfalls and develop supportive approach, recognising and valuing differences between and within genders.

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