

# MEN IN CHILDCARE

*How can we achieve a more gender-balanced  
early years and childcare workforce?*



# INTRODUCTION

Awareness is growing that, despite decades of progress towards greater gender balance in many professions and industries, the early years and childcare workforce lags behind—remaining stubbornly dominated by female staff. Fewer than 2% of staff working in early years and childcare in England are men, according to latest figures.

There are many reasons why a more gender-balanced early years and childcare workforce should be our goal, not least the benefit to children of growing up surrounded by caring men as well as women.

But while few in positions of power and influence would argue against aiming for greater male participation in this vital industry, we are no closer to achieving it than we were a generation ago.

Why is this? Supply or demand? Are men voting with their feet – resisting attempts to entice them towards working with young children? If so, what are their reasons for doing so—are they economic, cultural, social or personal...or a combination of these? Are those who recruit staff to work with young children still skeptical about whether this is really a job for the boys? If so, why? And crucially, how can we speed up progress?

This report arose as part of a Department for Education-funded project led by the Fatherhood Institute in 2013-15, aimed at supporting local recruitment of more male

staff and volunteers in early years and childcare services. Our role was to help early education and childcare services develop and implement a strategy to recruit and retain more male staff and volunteers.

We worked with key managers and staff in four local authorities to develop a strategy for recruiting more male staff and volunteers, drawing on emerging good practice and local surveys of practice.

Later we shared ideas for local strategies (summarised in this guide) with four other local authorities, and worked in different ways with them to support implementation. The eight authorities were Brighton, Bradford, Lambeth, Leicester, Milton Keynes, Southampton, Southwark and York.

This guide does not seek to offer definitive or even very new answers, but rather to highlight a range of practical approaches that could make a difference. We hope you find it useful. If you have any ideas about how to attract and retain more male staff, we look forward to hearing from you. You can get in touch with us by email or via the FI's social media pages, which are included on the 'Useful resources' page (see page 10).

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Written by David Bartlett, and edited/  
designed by Jeremy Davies.

# THE SCALE OF THE PROBLEM

Right now, only 1-2% of early education and childcare workers in England are male.

Latest figures show that in 2008 the percentages of childcare workers in England who are male were:

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

These very low levels have remained stubbornly unchanging.

## An international perspective

This is not just a UK phenomenon. Very few countries have more than 2% of men in the early years and childcare workforce, and indeed some have less.

But the figures are in stark 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 Equal Opportunities Commission reported that fathers were doing about 30% of parental childcare. So men are becoming much more confident and comfortable as hands-on

carers – but the workplaces in which they could pursue these skills on a professional basis have a long way to go, to catch up.

Worryingly, government targets and initiatives have come and gone without making significant inroads into the gender imbalance in the childcare workforce.

In 1998, the *National Childcare Strategy* set a target of 6% male practitioners by 2004, later dropped. The Coalition's *Programme for Government* (2010) stated that: “we want...a greater gender balance in the early years workforce.” But while the political will may be there in the background, up to now this has not been translated into real, tangible improvements.

The good news is that international comparisons suggest change is possible.

Differences in work roles, status, sector development, and work/social culture, make comparisons between countries complex. But it's worth noting that Denmark had 8% male childcare workers in 2005, for example...even if this may partly reflect better pay and a wider age range of children than in the UK statistics (nearly half those worked in clubs with children over 5).

And Norway had a figure of 3% in 1991, rising to 10% in 2008 – a shift which is likely to be a reflection in part of a legal responsibility for employers to work towards 20% male workers.

# WHAT ARE THE BARRIERS TO RECRUITMENT?

There are numerous factors involved in men's low participation in the early years and childcare workforce. These include:

- Men's concerns (some well-founded) about the attitudes of parents, colleagues and peers towards men working in early years, and about working in a predominantly female environment
- Lack of relevant, timely and tailored information and advice for men about the benefits and challenges of childcare careers
- Too few vocational training courses specifically marketed to men and designed to support them
- A failure among employers to proactively recruit men, and ensure that workplaces are welcoming of male staff
- 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.

Men considering careers in childcare can experience negative attitudes from friends and family – and once working in the field can face negativity and prejudice from parents and colleagues; in the worst cases this can extend into undermining and bullying behaviour.

Male stereotyping can also be an issue; many male workers report feeling pigeon-holed by their gender – for example being expected to take responsibility for all engagement with fathers and other men who come into contact with the service; feeling pushed into doing stereotypical male activities (like football, for example); and being set up as “role models” for boys (the implication being that their value rests purely in their gender, rather than their qualities, skills and knowledge).

But it is also 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.

So there are a range of real and widespread concerns, which need to be addressed if we are to dismantle the barriers to male recruitment. But there is also good reason to believe that if you are committed to improving the gender-balance of the workforce, and if you develop and pursue the right strategies, you will achieve your goal.

Over the next four pages we offer suggestions about how to get there.

# DISMANTLING THE BARRIERS

To make significant improvements in the gender-balance of your workforce, it can be useful to focus on four key approaches:

## 1. BE STRATEGIC

No single organisation or individual is going to solve the lack of men in the childcare workforce overnight – what’s needed is concerted and ongoing effort from a range of interested parties.

With this in mind, it can be useful to set up a steering group in your area which is committed to making things happen- a doing shop, not a talking shop.

The kinds of agencies and individuals who might be represented on such a group include:

- statutory, voluntary and private childcare providers
- local authority commissioners of childcare services
- secondary schools and other education providers
- careers advice services, Job Centre Plus, recruitment agencies
- colleges offering pathways into early years work
- men already working in early years



- local parents (dads as well as mums).

Give your group a clear mission and mandate: agree what you hope to achieve, how, and by when. Review your goals and achievements regularly.

Running a local conference can help you explore and explain why a more gender-balanced workforce is important, and give people 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, with the steering group overseeing and tracking their progress.

Gather data, to create a baseline against which to measure your achievements. Start by finding out how many men are already working, volunteering, or training to work in early years, and what steps are already being taken to improve this.

# **DISMANTLING THE BARRIERS**

## **2. REVIEW YOUR WORKPLACES AND TRAINING OFFERS**

Colleges offering early years and childcare courses should review what they offer – to assess whether attempts to recruit men are working well enough, and whether the courses’ content, tone and delivery is sufficiently 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 they will face (or may themselves make)?

Colleges might consider offering male only introductory & entry level courses - possibly qualification courses. All courses should be designed to 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 or approach for male workers.

Male early years practitioners, managers and volunteers should be supported to become role models and mentors for men thinking about early years work as a career option. The steering group could think about recruiting male ambassadors who are willing to speak at events, and feature in

online case studies, podcasts and the like. These can be very powerful, as they offer potential recruits ‘real’ voices of experience.

Early years and childcare course providers should offer targeted support to male trainees, including advice and guidance on employment and career progression, one-to-one mentoring and peer support, and help 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, and also to explore their own attitudes towards men and childcare.

You may want to create a local male practitioner network, whose members can offer mentoring and act as a ‘listening ear’ to any men considering a move into professional childcare. A key step towards this could be to develop a database of male practitioners and volunteers in your local area.

There are already networks in some parts of the country, which could act as a template and a source of ideas and support. Check out the London Early Years Foundation, for example, which co-ordinates a London-wide network of practitioners and other people interested in more men working in childcare.

You’ll find more details about LEYF in the Useful Resources section on page 10.

# **DISMANTLING THE BARRIERS**

## **3. ADDRESS THE LACK OF DEMAND FROM MEN**

Careers advice should communicate to boys and men that working in early education and childcare is fulfilling, challenging, and offers good career progression.

Good careers advice for all age groups of men is essential. The advice needs to ‘normalise’ male participation in the childcare industry – offering men clear information about what the work involves, the kinds of qualities and skills required, and the varied pathways that exist for men who want to consider a career in early years, including entry at higher education level.

It can be helpful to focus on promoting childcare careers as a ‘second career’ option for older men, as well as on attracting young men in the 14-19 age group. With this in mind, emphasise the transferability of skills from men’s previous careers, and invite them to reflect on their personal experiences as hands-on carers. Aiming for a workforce that is diverse in age as well as gender can bring additional benefits to the children.

Schools, careers advisors and recruiters 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 provide pathways into early education and childcare.

Secondary school head teachers and careers leads should be brought on board, to raise awareness of the men-into-childcare agenda. A whole school approach to exploring and challenging gender stereotypes, can have a huge impact. Think about the ‘Inspiring Women’ campaign where women give talks to girls at school (see page 10). Could you build on this idea?

## **4. LOOK AT YOUR MARKETING AND PROMOTION**

There are lots of ways early years employers could be proactively supporting the recruitment of men, for example by offering taster/volunteering opportunities for young men considering working in early education and childcare—and organising placements for male trainees on local early years and childcare courses.

Routine recruitment materials should use positive images of men as well as women, and include messages designed specifically to appeal to men as a target group.

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 prac-

# DISMANTLING THE BARRIERS

tice) and top tips from the steering group, to help them do this convincingly.

Fathers in contact with children's services should be encouraged to consider early education and childcare as a positive career option; you could also ask them to 'speak up' in favour of male recruitment into the sector – for example talking about how much they value male staff, and would support a more diverse workforce.

You may also consider developing a wider awareness campaign aimed at service users (ie parents), focusing on the value and importance of male workers in early years and childcare. This could include case studies of male workers and the positive work and relationships they have developed with children and their parents.

## CASE STUDY: SETTING A TARGET



*Co-operative Childcare has set itself a target to increase men in its workforce to 10% of the total. Its Men in Childcare campaign uses the tagline 'A brilliant career that's not just for girls'.*

*Find out more and watch the campaign video:*  
<http://www.thecooperativechildcare.coop/careers/men-in-nurseries/>

## AVOIDING 'REVOLVING DOOR SYNDROME'

No matter how successful you are at attracting men into the workforce, it's vital to remember that recruitment is only part of the story. You need to make sure you avoid a revolving door syndrome, where male early years workers and trainees end up dropping out because of the isolation, pressures and prejudices they can face. So think about how you can develop a package of ongoing support. This might include, for example:

- 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.
- Encouraging open conversation about gender – to help male and female trainees and workers avoid pitfalls and develop supportive approaches, and recognise and value differences between and within genders.

# CONCLUSION

It's clear that we will not transform the gender balance of the early years workforce overnight. But it is equally clear that by taking ownership of the issue and taking some straightforward actions, both agencies and individuals can improve matters.

Why should you bother? Well there is an emerging consensus that both men and women should be able to choose careers that suit and satisfy them according to their own preferences, skills and qualities, rather than according to their gender.

Just as it is now considered 'right' to create the circumstances in which girls feel 'safe' and welcome entering STEM (science, technology, engineering and mathematics) disciplines, shouldn't we also be thinking creatively about how to support boys who might enjoy and excel in traditionally female-dominated industries?

A more gender-balanced early years and childcare workforce could bring all sorts of benefits:

- For children, for example through a greater availability of a diversity in caring styles, and the challenging of gender stereotypes
- For the workforce as a whole, which could experience a rise in status resulting from higher male participation
- For future generations of boys/young men, through wider career choices
- For parents, most of whom see the value in greater male involvement in their children's all-important early years.

So perhaps the question now is less 'why should we focus on this?' and more 'can we afford not to?'

# USEFUL RESOURCES

Bringing Men into Childcare Facebook page [www.facebook.com/bringing-men-into-childcare](http://www.facebook.com/bringing-men-into-childcare)

Childlinks 'Men in Early Childhood Care and Education' report by Barnardo's Ireland [http://www.barnardos.ie/assets/files/publications/free/childlinks\\_body28.pdf](http://www.barnardos.ie/assets/files/publications/free/childlinks_body28.pdf)

Fatherhood Institute [www.fatherhoodinstitute.org](http://www.fatherhoodinstitute.org); Facebook page [www.facebook.com/fatherhoodinstitute](http://www.facebook.com/fatherhoodinstitute); Twitter account [www.twitter.com/fatherhoodinst](http://www.twitter.com/fatherhoodinst).

Inspiring Women campaign <http://www.inspiringthefuture.org/inspiring-women/>

London Early Years Foundation 'Men Working in Childcare' report <http://issuu.com/leyf/docs/leyf-research-report-men-working-in-childcare-2012?e=2376217/3799187>

London Network of Men in Childcare Facebook page [www.facebook.com/MeninchildcareLDN](http://www.facebook.com/MeninchildcareLDN) and Twitter account [www.twitter.com/meninchildcareldn](http://www.twitter.com/meninchildcareldn); their promotional video <http://vimeo.com/81021501>

Mencare2 [www.mencare2.com](http://www.mencare2.com)

Men in Childcare [www.meninchildcare.co.uk](http://www.meninchildcare.co.uk)

Men in Early Childhood Education [www.meninchildcare.com/global](http://www.meninchildcare.com/global) and [www.facebook.com/meninchildcare](http://www.facebook.com/meninchildcare)

Men Teach [www.menteach.org](http://www.menteach.org)

## Contact us

If you have ideas or potential collaborations you would like to share, please contact the FI's head of communications Jeremy Davies at [j.davies@fatherhoodinstitute.org](mailto:j.davies@fatherhoodinstitute.org).