

MORE MEN, PLEASE!



Steve, Peter, Jonathan and John made invaluable contributions to my nursery, but our settings are still dominated by women and that's a shame, says **Wendy Bowkett...**

Before I began working in a mainstream school, I'd had very little contact with male teachers. I had met a couple of deputies and headmasters at conferences or training days but, having visited a number of primary schools while on a DES long course,

I was amazed at how early education was dominated by women. My husband worked in secondary education where there seemed to be a more even ratio of men to women. But working in a special school, my first job, with a multi-disciplinary approach and only three other teachers (including a

deputy and non-teaching headmistress), I had become used to the idea that working with under-eights and members of the opposite sex was rare. The men I had contact with were doctors, consultants or educational psychologists. Everyone else, from the laundry and the kitchen to the classrooms, was a woman: cleaners, cooks, nursery nurses, teachers and therapists.

So when I opened my own nursery in the late 80s, I was very pleased that, during school holidays and in the early mornings and evenings, my husband, Steve, would join in with some of the activities with the children. He fired their imaginations with trips to space by stepping into a large toy cupboard and 'disappearing', only to reappear a minute later with tales of what he'd seen on his journey. On one occasion a bright spark announced that Steve just went to the other side of the cupboard so that when we opened a single door we couldn't see him. So we opened the other door and found Steve's shoes there but no Steve!

Lunchtimes were an excellent opportunity for playing with words to



about the author

Wendy Bowkett has worked in early years settings for over 30 years, and ran her own private day nursery for 15 years. As well as contributing to Teach Nursery, she has written a number of books for those working with 0-5-year-olds.

encourage the children's creative thinking skills. As young as they were, they joined in and often added an extra something to the process. With a selection of vegetables to accompany our home-made fish pie, I remember Steve asking Emily if she would like "keys and parrots". "I'd like the keys as long as they're green and not too crunchy," she replied, "but I don't like the parrots cos they'll eat my fish". Emily wasn't partial to carrots, but loved peas!

Then there was 'Tickle-neck' - a favourite chase game. If you were caught by long-armed Steve you had your neck tickled and were put in the castle until you counted to 10!

Women's work

During our second year, a local secondary school asked if we would be happy to have students on a fortnight's work experience. After discussing the idea with staff, we decided to say yes - how else would potential nursery nurses or teachers know if working with under-fives was for them? Our first experience, though, was a shock: a 16-year-old student named Peter. He was a natural from the outset, sitting comfortably chatting and playing alongside the children.

At the end of his first day I asked him how he felt it had gone, whether the staff had been welcoming and informative, and his general impressions of the nursery. He said that he loved it, it was the career he wanted to follow and that he felt very much at home in our friendly, family-orientated setting (our nursery allowed children of any age to be wherever they wanted to be as the rooms were designated to different areas of the curriculum; siblings could play, eat and sleep together if they wished rather than be separated into different age group rooms). He mentioned that he babysat for friends of his parents and was trusted to look after a family of three children under eight throughout the summer holidays, so he was no stranger to being with young children.

By the end of the second week, and after a visit from one of his teachers,

I discovered that although this was Peter's favoured career, his parents were steering him in another direction. He was their only child and they wanted more for their son. Being a childcare worker was okay for a summer job but working with under-fives long term held no career prospects for him and he couldn't live at home forever.

I offered him a job during the summer holidays (before Ofsted this was feasible) to cover staff holidays and gave him advice as to his future. He didn't want to become a teacher; he wanted to be at 'floor' level and become a nursery nurse. He was a brilliant addition to our team during the holidays and we all missed him when he went back to school. He hadn't applied to college to become an NNEB as his parents said he would have to leave home if he did. A few years later we met him working in Sainsbury's; he was deputy manager of the fresh produce counters, living at home and still babysitting.

Men wanted

Three years later we did employ a male NNEB. Jonathan was living at home with his parents, who were completely happy with the idea of their son working with under-fives and supported him wholeheartedly. He drove to work and was completely at ease with his choice of career. Jonathan stayed with us for over three years and then moved on to work as a warehouse technician nearer his home. He had met his future wife, who already had two children, and he needed to earn more money.

In the meantime, my husband had left his teaching career to write full-time at home. He was often on hand to join in activities and help at our after-school club. Then my sister had to move with her job, from South Wales to Peterborough. Her husband, John, had been working for a car dealership and was having difficulty finding work near to their new home. To cut a long story short, we asked John if he would like to work in the nursery with us. He declined as he felt he had no experience but said he would be happy painting rooms throughout the nursery. CRB checks were carried out and John started work in a cleared room.

Parents had been informed via our regular newsletter that John would be around the nursery, and many were introduced to him by their child. Most children were fascinated by John's beard and moustache and some would crouch

51%

The proportion of male nursery workers who believed that men were discouraged from working in childcare because of society's attitudes, according to research carried out for LEYF's *Men Working in Childcare* report (November 2012)
See ow.ly/tlXTF

down outside the room watching him through the glass in the door. Gradually the door was pushed slightly open. John explained to the children that it was dangerous for them to come into the room but agreed to prop open the door so that they could chat to him as he worked, as long as they kept outside the door frame.

It was a sight to see - four children shuffling their feet forwards and stopping with their toes at the threshold! Children swapped places with one another all morning that day, asking questions and chatting. After a week of painting, giggling, singing, chatting and generally being 'one of us', John accepted a full-time position in the nursery. A year later he, and two other colleagues, started an evening course, two nights a week to become NNEBs. All three were given one day a week as study leave and became fully fledged nursery nurses after two years. John worked with us for almost four years, finally resigning when he became stuck on the A14 for over four hours for a second time in two weeks...

I feel privileged and fortunate to have worked so closely with four male colleagues, and thankful that my nursery's children had the opportunity to grow up with such diverse, caring and understanding men. I think it great pity that, even in these days of equality, more men don't work within preschool settings, helping to make a more rounded, even and brilliant environment for children under five.

Peter hadn't applied to **college** to become an **NNEB** as his parents said he would have to leave home - it wasn't a **career** for a man