

# A question of man management

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There is a general agreement that men in childcare are 'a good thing' – indeed, the government has set a target to increase the number of male practitioners working in childcare. At LEYF, eight per cent of the staff are male, and one of our nurseries is led by a male team. While this exceeds the government target of two per cent, I confess to still having some doubts about how the argument for encouraging men into the sector is phrased.

Getting men into childcare has to begin from the principle that we need men who want to do the job. They'll be joining a female-dominated workforce – some arguments imply that this is 'a bad thing', that we need men if we are ever to improve our pay and conditions because men won't work in low-status jobs. This is a slippery slope because it undermines the whole sector, patronises those women who have developed it, and sets men up as knights on white chargers – when in fact they should choose childcare because they like working with children, do a good job and want to make a difference.

We need to have a more informed and intelligent discussion about why we want men in childcare if we are to develop the right strategies to attract the right kind of men. Since having a male team at LEYF, I've changed some of my thinking and strategies about how I recruit and deploy men. For example, I no longer place men in a nursery alone if possible. I realised it was unfair to expect one male to reverse significant societal issues such as family breakdown and some children not having any male role models in their lives. I also found out by asking men directly that many disliked being the only man in their team. They found it a bit scary and at times uncomfortable – not altogether surprising, as after a while women tend to forget men are men in the team and just make them part of the group. Some cope but others don't and find being one of the girls a bit much!

**We need to have an informed discussion about why we want men in childcare if we are to attract the right kind of men**



As a sector we need to think more carefully about what male practitioners can bring to childcare, says **June O'Sullivan...**

**98%**  
THE PROPORTION OF ENGLISH PARENTS IN FAVOUR OF MALE CHILDCARE PROFESSIONALS.

SOURCE: MAJOR PROVIDERS GROUP, 2011

If we really want men to join us in the sector, we need to talk to them more and develop the argument more coherently. We need to think carefully about what we're asking from them, because in our zeal to increase their number we may inadvertently drive them away. Men can play a part in providing children with a well-rounded experience, but to expect them to readdress the gender imbalance, provide positive role models for children and rebuild trust with women who may have been hurt or abandoned by their child's father is asking too much.



Let's start sensibly. As women we need to welcome men into the team as colleagues and equals not to be a particular role model. Let's gather our confidence and experience to lead a sector where men can play a part but where women lead the charge. If we think that by welcoming men into the sector we will change pay and conditions and suddenly be seen as a more viable option, then we are doing ourselves a disservice.

Early years has a history and heritage that is female-dominated. It has room for men, but they are men not superheroes. We need to encourage them because we want team members for both sexes and we want a range of skills and interests that can be best delivered by men and women together. We need to temper the debate for men in childcare with a rational and considered understanding of what men can do to add value.