

A job FOR THE boys

Nursery manager **David Stevens** explains how men can be encouraged into working in the early years...

After I'd had several jobs in retail, and a period of unemployment, I found myself with no real idea of what I wanted to do in my life. As luck would have it, I was given the chance to start a City and Guilds course in Childcare as part of a job centre scheme. It really appealed to me, as it seemed a challenging and interesting profession, which I felt would both be very rewarding and give me a sense of purpose.

Unfortunately, the City and Guilds course folded after five months, but undeterred I enrolled to do my NNEB. It made me realise that childcare was a profession that I really did want to work in, and I'm glad I stuck at it. I have worked for the LEYF for 16 years now, 10 of which I have been a nursery manager. I started work at my current setting, the Angel Community Nursery, 16 months ago, and it's the first setting in which I've worked alongside three other men.

That final point will probably not come as a surprise to many – the early years is a traditionally female-dominated industry, after all. But that doesn't mean we shouldn't ask the question: why aren't there more men in childcare? In my opinion, there are four main reasons:

■ **Low pay.** Of course, the reason good practitioners begin a career in the early years is because it offers men and women alike the chance to make a positive difference in children's lives, not because they're seeking great financial rewards, so I don't believe this is the most important factor.

■ **People are suspicious** when they encounter men seeking to work with children. There is a pervading myth that many men are paedophiles who want to harm children – it's one which, I'm happy to say, the LEYF is challenging.

■ **Childcare is perceived** by some individuals and cultures as a 'woman's job'. I remember meeting someone I knew about 17 years ago. I had not long qualified and he asked me what I was doing. I told him I was a nursery nurse, and he replied, "Is that in a garden centre?" When I told him that I worked with children, he asked, "Are men allowed to do that?"

■ **Intimidation and inhibitors** within the sector. Being the only man in a nursery can be difficult, especially if you're faced with parents who may not want men looking after their children.

The stereotypes of why I, as a man, might want to work with children, that the role was low-paid and the fact that I knew I would be working in a female-dominated profession didn't bother me; but it's safe to say not all men would feel the same. So, how can we encourage more men to begin a career in the early years – and, perhaps as importantly, why should we?





Having a **gender-balanced** team is key to **encouraging** men to **start** out, and stay, in **childcare**

DAVID STEVENS



Striking a balance

Within my setting we have four male staff, as well as three female LSAs, a nursery officer and an apprentice. We come from a wide mix of backgrounds, experiences and ages, which I feel leads to a diverse melting pot of ideas and activities, not to mention a great atmosphere within the nursery.

I also believe that having a gender-balanced team is key to encouraging men to start out, and stay, in childcare. When our male apprentice joined he was expecting to be the only man in the nursery. I know that he has found that being in a nursery with other men

Facts and figures

20%

of staff working with under-fives in the UK are male and, despite efforts on the part of the Government to encourage gender equality in the work force, that number has remained static.

Source: Children's Workforce and Development Council

has provided him with additional support and helped his confidence. One man in a female-dominated team may feel isolated, intimidated and therefore leave. The LEYF has acknowledged this in the manner in which it has changed its deployment policy – male apprentices are now consciously teamed up to aid their progress as practitioners and encourage them to remain in the sector.

The response from parents at my setting has been extremely positive. We certainly haven't experienced a mass exodus of children leaving the nursery, and parents comment that it's nice to see more men in a nursery as role models for the boys (at which point I add, "...and for the girls"). I've also noticed that dads don't feel so intimidated when attending coffee mornings and parents evenings (indeed, dads' workshops can be another way of encouraging men who may be interested in working with children to take the next step).

Most importantly, having a balanced team gives children a choice of who they want to share their play with – a choice of men and a choice of women. As Gemma, one of our LSAs, noted, "The children may go to a man for a specific area of play and may go to a woman for another; it's nice that they have the choice and that they can relate to both men and women".

Equal opportunities

Having access to male members of staff can benefit children in a number of ways. In my experience, men can bring a different approach to planning and overseeing learning experiences and can encourage (safely

managed!) risk-taking. Clearly, female practitioners can, and do, promote this too – the female staff at the Angel engage in 'rough and tumble', kicking footballs with boys and girls, and keeping a watchful eye on the children who climb the small trees in our garden – but a male perspective can introduce something new.

The presence of male staff can also help address issues of gender stereotyping. Stereotypes in relation to men and women being identified with certain jobs, are formed at an early age. I've always believed in following the children's lead and supporting their play regardless of their gender, and having male and female staff on-hand to join in whatever the activity – for example, at my setting, during a 'hairdressers' role-play, a child asked if they could wash the deputy manager's hair, to which he agreed – can support this approach. We aim to provide as many real life experiences as possible, and as a result we see boys and girls experiencing a wide variety of activities, regardless of whether they're being led by a male or female members of staff.

This brings me back to choice; a lot of work is being done to challenge such gender stereotyping, especially to encourage women to enter professions which have traditionally been male-dominated professions, such as construction and engineering. Perhaps challenging gender stereotypes in the early years, with the aid of gender-balanced staff teams, will lead in turn to more boys growing up with a drive to work in childcare.

Facts and figures

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of men interviewed for a recent poll of 1,000 believed that 'the general public don't trust men to care for babies as much as they trust women to'.

Source: The Fatherhood Institute

55%

Research carried out back in 2009 revealed that 55 per cent of parents with nursery-aged children wanted them to have access to a male childcare worker, with 66 per cent of single parent women saying that their children would benefit from having a man involved in their care and development.

Source: Children's Workforce and Development Council

Second opinion

AYDEN JAMES, A MALE PRACTITIONER AT LAVENDERS DAY NURSERY IN BEDFORD, OFFERS HIS THOUGHTS ON WORKING IN A NURSERY...

ON STARTING OUT

"I did quite a lot of work in the youth sector when I was younger with my mum, and I realised I had a talent for working with children – and after doing some freelance work in various nurseries, I knew that it was the profession I wanted to go into."

Watching children develop is very important to me – seeing them smile and laugh, seeing them happy and running around. Plus, as I'm soon to be a father, working here is the ideal preparation!"

ON WHAT MEN HAVE TO OFFER

"Female nursery nurses are very caring, very nurturing; with male nursery nurses, the same applies, but I think we're a bit more 'out there' – we play more, and in a different way. Having a male practitioner helps children to see that it's

not just women that can care for them, too – and that you don't have to be a woman to be caring, which is important for the boys. It gives them a positive role model."

ON BEING PART OF A PREDOMINANTLY FEMALE TEAM

"Although I'm the only male practitioner at Lavenders, I don't find that to be a problem – the children are always excited that there's a male practitioner working with them. I definitely plan to stay with Childbase and progress my career."



find out more

David Stevens is manager of Angel Community Nursery, a setting run by the London Early Years Foundation. For more details, visit leyf.org.uk

