

In proportion

One setting is bucking the norm of a female-dominated early years workforce by making the recruitment of men part of its commitment to equality and diversity, finds *Meredith Jones Russell*



At Chapel House Day Nursery in south London, seven of the setting's 22 members of staff are men, including the manager

Attracting male practitioners to roles in the traditionally female-dominated early years sector can be a desirable achievement for many settings. While recruitment and retention of male staff members can pose a challenge, this does not seem to be the case at Chapel House Day Nursery in West Norwood, London, where seven of the 22 members of staff are men, including the manager, Nick Corlett.

Mr Corlett says Chapel House always stood out to him for the relatively high proportion of male practitioners who worked there. 'In my 13 years in the industry, I have never

seen this many men in one setting. When I first joined, the majority were already here, and right from the beginning it was very interesting to see the dynamic,' he says.

He adds, 'I think it's beneficial for everyone, and moving forward it is definitely something we want to see more of.'

He sees many benefits in having a gender balance. 'I think a male influence can be good just because it is such a female-dominated industry,' he explains.

'A male nurturing side is maybe something children are not always used to, depending on their fathers or grandfathers. It can be beneficial to have more balance from the chil-

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dren's perspective, especially if they come from a single-parent family.'

EQUALITY AND DIVERSITY

While a gender balance is desirable, Mr Corlett is keen to stress, however, that employing male practitioners should always be seen as just one element of a setting's wider commitment to equality and diversity.

'For children, it should all be about having as many positive role models as possible; male, female, or whatever,' he says. 'I think at Chapel House, having more men has definitely evened out the team, and everyone gets along very well. But it's more that everyone has a different approach, a different energy, and all

bring different influences. It is most important to have as many different personalities as possible?

Mr Corlett also cautions against the tendency to generalise the benefits that male practitioners can bring to a setting – for example, that they are naturally more active or better suited to rough-and-tumble play. Such assumptions, he says, can be reductive.

‘People think that maybe males are more physical or more sporty, but that’s not always the case,’ he explains. ‘The most important thing is that everyone is willing to muck in and do anything, to work across all areas of the educational learning experience and understand that this is all part of the role.’

‘For example, one of our staff had a haircut the other day and ended up playing hairdressers, sat with rollers in his hair, and of course he didn’t even blink an eyelid. And why would he?’

RECRUITMENT AND RETENTION

When it comes to recruitment, Mr Corlett believes that outdated attitudes are still deterring men from entering the early years sector. ‘I think it goes back to a very, very old way of thinking; that women look after the children and men go to work. But that is changing,’ he says. ‘Even in primary education maybe ten years ago, there wasn’t anywhere near as many men working as there are now.’

Potential employers, he believes, need to present male applicants with a positive image of early years childcare and education. ‘It is important to emphasise to them that it is a learn-

ing environment, not a babysitting service. In early years, now we have a curriculum, guidelines and policy – you don’t just come in and do some jumping and skipping and that’s it.’

And essential to retaining staff is training and career progression. As part of the All About Children chain, which owns 17 nurseries, Mr Corlett says Chapel House is ‘very big on training’, offering staff the opportunity to follow a career path into their operations team or childcare and education team. He says this is vital to attracting staff, and to keeping them motivated.

He explains, ‘We have had apprentices go all the way up to become managers. The company is always open to new ideas and always moving forward, so it is a very good place to start in and then progress.’

‘Once men realise how amazing working in childcare is, they do want to get involved, and then want to stay as well.’

Mr Corlett emphasises that retention of male members of staff should ultimately be a higher priority than recruitment. ‘We will certainly continue to try to recruit male practitioners, but ultimately the best person for the role will always get it, regardless of whether they are male or female,’ he says. ‘So, while breaking the taboo for male practitioners is definitely something we have actively strived for, it is most important to make sure that people want to stick around.’

‘It is about ensuring that all applicants understand that this can be a long-term career, and that you are making a difference to a child’s life. And that is the case whether you are a man or a woman. ■



MORE INFORMATION

- www.nurseryworld.co.uk/nursery-world/news/1160580/explore-international-early-years-approaches-at-nursery-worlds-conference
- www.nurseryworld.co.uk/nursery-world/feature/1158722/positive-relationships-men-in-childcare-man-enough
- www.nurseryworld.co.uk/nursery-world/feature/1143539/learning-development-physical-development-winning
- Men in the Early Years conference in Bradford on 18 July. Tickets from Eventbrite

NURSERY WORLD CONFERENCE

The experience of male childcarers around the world will be explored at our forthcoming conference, **Play and Learning: a global perspective**. The conference, to be held in London on 28 June, will focus on what constitutes ‘quality’ in early childhood education (ECE) and give an insight into highly rated ECE systems, including those in New Zealand and Sweden.

Keynote speakers are Professor Carmen Dalli, director of the Institute for Early Childhood Studies, Victoria University of Wellington, New Zealand; and Dr David Whitebread, a developmental psychologist, early years specialist and acting director (external relations) of the Centre for Research on Play in Education, Development & Learning (PEDAL), University of Cambridge. Giving an international perspective on ‘men in childcare’ will be Dr Jo Warin of the University of Lancaster. Other topics include the Pikler method in under-threes care, Sweden’s outdoor provision and Freobel’s approach to early education.

To find out more and book a place, visit: www.playandlearning.co.uk/home

CASE STUDY : GARY KENDALL, ROOM LEADER AT CHAPEL HOUSE DAY NURSERY



What are the benefits of having a more gender-balanced workforce?

‘Having men in early years really

breaks down the stereotype that only women can care for and nurture a child. Differences in opinion and ideas give children a broad range of activities and learning experiences. As practitioners we learn never to limit a child’s learning and

development by assuming they cannot achieve something due to their gender, race or religion, and as children we are told we can grow to be anything we want. I think as the number of men at Chapel House has grown, it has had a really positive impact on the setting.’

Have you faced any challenges as a man working in the early years?

‘I have faced nasty accusations about my intentions in wanting to work with children, and have come up against challenges from people thinking that it is not a “man’s

place” to care for children. But I have been very lucky in having fantastic support from my family, peers and managers. I definitely think there has been a positive shift in opinion over the past ten years.’

How do you think settings can attract more men to the sector?

‘I think the key is to continue to let them know that this is a career option, for example by having more men visible in recruitment campaigns and at job fairs. Childcare is incredibly rewarding and, let’s face it, is a lot of fun too!’