

“How Do You Solve A Problem Like Attracting, Recruiting, Retaining And Developing Men In The Early Years?”

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Adapted from Brownhill, S. (2018). “A CALL TO ACTION!” In: Wright, D. and Brownhill, S. *Men in the Early Years: Building a Mixed-Gender Workforce*. London: Jessica Kingsley Publishers.
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Strategies for Training Providers

- Training providers might consider offering a suite of vocational training that works around the many demands on men’s time (work, family, social), e.g. full-time/part-time/short one-two day courses/half day courses (AM/PM)/twilight training/early evening sessions/ weekend classes/half-term programmes/Summer Schools/online provision. All training should be credit-bearing or at least certificated to give the training ‘real worth’.
- Training providers might consider being involved in the planning and delivery of local and regional recruitment events that are specifically designed to encourage men to consider a career in the Early Years. At these events men need to “*hear how different people get into the Early Years by sharing stories*” (Interviewee 2).
- Training providers might consider working closely with institution recruitment co-ordinators to set reasonable ‘number goals’ [Simon’s words] for education and childcare courses, developing a comprehensive and realistic strategy to achieve ‘men targets’.
- Training providers might consider developing specific marketing materials that “*communicate the benefits* [of working in the Early Years to men] *without sounding desperate*”, adopting catchy slogans such as “*All Men Can Care*”. The emphasis should not necessarily be on “*being a male, more [on] what you can offer children*” (Interviewee 2).
- Training providers might consider pairing male Early Years students with male faculty members as their Personal Tutor to support their academic and professional development.
- Placement co-ordinators might consider placing male Early Years student practitioners in settings that have a male practitioner: “*They do not necessarily have to be a male mentor for them but it should be someone who they might be able to talk to at lunchtime*” (Interviewee 1). EC-MENZ [the New Zealand based national network for men in early childhood education] asserts that if there is another man working in the setting then male trainees/ employees are more likely to stay.
- Training providers might consider recruiting male Early Years students/graduates to act as Student Ambassadors to support Open Days/events, talking to prospective male students and their parents/carers/families, and contributing to local media recruitment campaigns.

Case Study

Geographically located in a central county in England, 'X' College has gained a reputation for excellence in its recruitment and retention of male students on its Early Childhood and Care (ECC) programmes that lead to them entering and remaining in the profession. Strategies that the course team have found particularly effective in recruitment that they were willing to share with Simon include:

- Developing a range of paper-based and electronic online advertising materials which contain static and moving images of a diverse range of men (in terms of age and ethnicity) in a diverse range of roles (e.g. practitioner, manager) who are working with a diverse range of young children (e.g. babies, toddlers and those of a nursery age) that are performing a range of activities.
- Visiting local secondary school providers to talk to male students prior to them making decisions about their work placement choices (at Year 10) and encouraging male students (at the start of Year 11) to think about undertaking a career in the Early Years.
- Sending prospective male students personalised emails/SMS with links to online videos about working in the Early Years that are voiced by/show male practitioners 'in action' who have successfully completed one of the courses available.
- Investing some of the programme budget on course banner adverts that are shared on social media websites, e.g. *Facebook, Twitter, Instagram and YouTube*.

In terms of retention, 'X' College has a 96% retention of men who undertake their ECC courses. Strategies used to assure this include:

- Establishing supportive mentor/mentee ('buddy') relationships by pairing first year male students with male students in the second or third year of their programme.
- Ensuring that teaching/seminar groups have at least two male students so that men do not feel isolated or alone during taught sessions.
- Setting up a male-only support group and holding regular meetings, timetabling these after they have been on block placements as this is the time when they are "*most likely to wobble*" [think about leaving the course/profession] ('Chloe').
- Offering a drop-in clinic once a week (day time and evening) for all students (especially men) to use for personalised academic writing support.
- Inviting male students to present their undergraduate Early Years research at the annual Student Conference to boost confidence and raise the profile of Early Childhood Education in the College research community. Opportunities to publish their research in the internal College newsletter have been accepted by three students, two of these being male.

Strategies for Schools and Settings

Cunningham and Watson (2002: 13) assert that ‘counsel[ors] and teachers in middle and high schools can do much to introduce young males to careers working with young children.’ Select practical suggestions that they advocate include:

- Steering young men to Early Years ‘sites [settings] when they need to fulfil...a service learning, community service, [or] career exploration’ requirement as part of their studies (p.13).
- Encouraging young men to volunteer with young children as this ‘can complement a future résumé by demonstrating experience and skills that few other young men can list’ (p.13).

The idea of ‘career exploration’ is noteworthy for it is the careers guidance that is offered to students by schools and organisations which is considered to be a significant way of presenting the Early Years as a valid career option for young males. Burgess (2014: 2) enthusiastically argues that:

Requiring [head teachers, setting managers] and careers advice services...[to] examine their own prejudices and knowledge gaps, equip themselves to acknowledge, support and promote the interests of boys and men in pursuing childcare and other caring work, and to monitor outcomes, would be of huge value in improving the gender balance in employment in this sector.

Education settings need to make their students (especially young men) aware of the many job options that are linked to working with young children – *“it’s not just limited to ‘teacher’!”* (Focus Group Participant 2). The essential work of careers advisers/counsellors is recognised by Joseph and Wright (2016: 216) who believe that ‘one strategy for attracting men into the profession can be accomplished by organising career days for secondary school students as well as members of the public’. It would be beneficial for male practitioners who actively work in the Early Years sector to be invited to these events as they could make guest speeches, ‘man’ recruitment stalls, run practical workshops, and share their experiences as ‘living advocates’ of the profession. By doing this they can help young men to see that it is not *“weird”* to want to work with young children, nor is it *“just for women”* (Focus Group Participant 4).

Strategies that might be embraced by settings across the Early Years and Primary school sectors to introduce boys to the Early Years workforce include:

Early Years sector	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Providing young boys with reading material (fiction and non-fiction) which show men as fathers, nurturers and teachers (Heller, 1994). • Offering young boys learning resources (e.g. dressing up costumes), practical activities (e.g. talking and mark making), and rich teacher/practitioner interactions that can support them in investigating a wide variety of careers as part of the curriculum (Interviewee 3). • <i>‘We need to encourage boys to play with dolls, to babysit, to be creative. We need to nurture them to be emotional beings so that when they grow up, they can see</i>
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	<p><i>the endless possibilities for careers that nurture the spirit.</i>' ('Danny', online special interest group post, 2017).</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Creating displays ('<i>When I am older I want to be a...</i>') made up of the children's paintings that show men and women in non-traditional working roles.
Primary school sector	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Using the curriculum to offer a variety of opportunities for boys to explore the roles of fathers and other males, and expand their understanding of what men can do, e.g. through Personal, Health, Social and Citizenship Education (PHSCE) learning tasks. • Thinking carefully about the language that is used to avoid gender bias when talking about work roles and responsibilities, e.g. <i>fireperson</i> rather than fireman; <i>flight attendant</i> rather than flight stewardess. • Inviting people who actively work in non-traditional roles to come and talk to children in assemblies and during class time (do ensure that they can talk at the children's level though). • Getting Year 5 and Year 6 boys (10/11-year olds) to '<i>help do sports activities with the infant school children. Maybe a similar scheme for secondary?</i>' for them to gain practical experience of working with younger children ('Marylyn', online special interest group post, 2017). • Using the Early Years in core subjects, e.g. as a real context for mathematical problems or as a topic to read and write about in English lessons.

Other strategies that education settings could embrace include:

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Openly welcome men into the setting, be they parents/carers, volunteers, student practitioners or employees (new/established).
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Be prepared to release male practitioners from their professional duties (half day/day) to attend Men's Group meetings or support <i>more-men-in-Early-Years</i> campaigns led by training providers, Local Authorities and/or other education settings.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Provide male trainees with supportive mentoring and coaching opportunities led by male practitioners where possible/appropriate.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Provide physical space for Men's Groups to be held in the education setting during/outside the working day.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ensure that in-house training events consider the professional needs of both male and female practitioners, e.g. child protection.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Use different networks (parent/carer, professional, community) to identify and actively encourage men to be volunteers/practitioners in the Early Years sector.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Use role play opportunities to 'model' male educators working in the learning environment to show that they can do what female practitioners do, e.g. change the toy baby's nappy.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • '<i>[S]peak to parents from all backgrounds about the benefits of employing male practitioners</i>' ('Wendy', online special interest group post, 2017) to change mind-sets and encourage young men/fathers to consider a career in the Early Years.

Strategies for Men's Groups

- Members of the Men's Group could visit and give talks/presentations at local education settings (at all levels) as representatives of the Group and of the Early Years profession – these could be given at school gatherings, career fayres, 'Dads and Lads' sessions, or citizenship subject teaching.
- Men's Group meetings and events could be organised throughout the year at different times (during the day, in the evening, at the weekend) so that all men are included and have a choice of when to come so that it fits around their other commitments.
- Men's Group members could *"link up with the Local Authority"* (Interviewee 3) by creating a website to promote the Group and emphasise its role in encouraging men to consider the Early Years as a career choice and supporting them in times of professional need (*"You often think: 'I am the only one facing these issues', but a Men's Group can support your wellbeing and offer you solutions"* (Interviewee 2)).
- Men's Group members could pair up prospective members of the Group with established members/practitioners, offering them 'taster sessions' that allow them to visit an Early Years setting and see what it is really like working with young children.
- Men's Groups could invite guest speakers to come and talk with (not at) Group meetings about ways to effectively attract, recruit, retain and develop men in the Early Years based on research and practice (these events should be *"marketed as continuing professional development"* (Interviewee 1)). This should be combined with activities that allow men to *"talk to others in small groups, developing a shared understanding and shared learning through questions and answers"* (Interviewee 2).
- Men's Group members could facilitate recruitment events in the form of interactive workshops, Q&A sessions and Job Evenings (a bit like the format of Parents Evening at secondary school).
- Men's Groups could tailor planned meetings to positively respond to the wants, needs and ideas of those who attend them – *"hopefully this will help to expand and extend practice"* (Interviewee 2). They could promote or *"raise awareness"* (Interviewee 2) to these meetings, the Group as a whole, and the importance of men in the Early Years through interviews with the local press/radio.
- Men's Groups could signpost men to interesting podcasts about men in childcare that allow them to learn and reflect on the thinking and experiences of men across the international Early Years sector, e.g. the excellent *Men In Childcare Podcast with Kathy Brodie* series.
- Men's Groups could support equitable practices in the sector by *"checking standards"* (Interviewee 3) so that men in the Early Years are not discriminated against.

As an enthusiastic advocate of the Early Years, David Wright is an active member of the Southampton Area Men in Early Years (SAMEY) group and was the joint organiser of the first national Men in Early Years conference in 2016. Take a look at the transcript of part of a telephone interview between Simon and David overleaf, identifying any 'lessons learned' which might be of value to you, your colleagues/peers, your setting and/or the local Early Years workforce in the active attracting, recruitment, retention and development of male practitioners in the sector:

Transcript

Simon: So, David, what do you do in the Southampton Area Men in Early Years [SAMEY] group, and how do you think the actions of the Group help to attract, recruit, retain and develop men in the sector?

David: SAMEY arose out of informal discussions between like-minded individuals who had developed a professional relationship over several years. We are all men who work in the Early Years in the Southampton area. We recognised the need for mutual support, awareness raising, advocacy and publicity. SAMEY's objectives, as listed on our website, are to: [pause]

- Promote the benefits of a career in Early Years to men/boys.
- Support male practitioners through a local network.
- Encourage and support individuals and settings through mentoring.
- Positively influence general opinions on the benefits of men working in Early Years.

Through its meetings and website, SAMEY reaches out to interested individuals of both genders with an on-going invitation to join us either in person at our meetings or to be added to our mailing list. SAMEY works closely with the Southampton Local Authority both in terms of publicising activities and campaigns, and also through the facilitation of activities. We are involved in mentoring and the support of individual male practitioners. We regularly support careers events in primary and secondary schools and colleges, manning a stand, engaging with students and parents to raise awareness of our need for the best people to pursue early years careers and informing them that these are open to both women and men.

As you know, in 2016 SAMEY was responsible for the first ever national men in Early Years conference in Great Britain, hosted in Southampton. Later that year, it also organised a national summit in London, bringing together representatives from across the country to discuss the national agenda and to agree a set of proposals for the government [coughs]. I subsequently presented these to the Early Years Minister with the gender diversity section of the Early Years workforce strategy published in March 2017 resulting from this discussion, albeit with its shortcomings! SAMEY has sent representatives to participate in conferences in Poland, Norway and New Zealand. SAMEY members have spoken at events across the United Kingdom, raising awareness and building connections, including in Bristol, York, Burnley, Oxford, London and Birmingham. Mentoring and support activities include phone and email support, matching men with job vacancies and finding them successful roles [coughs]. We have supported individual male practitioners in person, as well as managers and owners of settings. We also respond to media requests for comment, articles and interviews. We have plans for networking events with continuous professional development elements.

Our overall aim is to continue to influence culture – from individual practitioners, managers and settings through to national policy. To answer your question, we believe that each interaction we engage in makes a difference, be it directly or indirectly, and is thus valid in terms of its effect on attracting, recruiting, retaining and developing men in the sector.

General Strategies

- Organise local/regional award ceremonies with the help of local/regional businesses to celebrate the achievements of Early Years professionals in the sector – *perhaps there could be a 'Men' category?*
- Create and sustain a collaborative culture where male practitioners and those in positions of authority maintain healthy and productive lines of professional communication to ensure that their expectations are clear, realistic and understood by all.
- Engage parents/carers in a diverse range of setting-based and home-based activities to build parent-male practitioner trust and support.
- Work as a supportive team with male colleagues in the setting, targeting young children with interventions and input to address poor development/academic performance.
- Engage men by encouraging them to attend conferences “*at a city level*” (Interviewee 1), symposiums, seminars, colloquiums, workshops and roundtables to support their continuing professional development and “*highlight the imbalance in the workforce*” (Interviewee 3). Ensure that they share their knowledge with the team to benefit the whole setting.
- Work to build a professional community of ‘back-patting’ and encouragement so that all staff members regularly feel valued, especially men.
- Offer male practitioners support when they are faced with accusations of abuse – *there is nothing more important than knowing your work colleagues are behind you.*
- Develop clear appraisal systems that set targets and review actions on half/termly basis, rewarding performance to continuously motivate male practitioners in their work.
- Encourage male practitioners from different education settings across the Children’s and Young People’s Workforce in the local area to make contact with each other (face-to-face; online) to alleviate feelings of isolation or loneliness.
- Ensure that conversations and discussions in the staff/team room include and do not exclude male practitioners.
- Regularly ‘touch base’ with male practitioners in an effort to find out what is going on in their lives. Be supportive, e.g. be a ‘listening ear’, or use supply cover to release male practitioners who may need a little time away from the setting to support their mental health/wellbeing.
- Ensure that “*leadership manners [styles]*” (Interviewee 1) are democratic as opposed to being autocratic in nature to keep male practitioners ‘on side’.
- Regularly say phrases such as “Thank you”, “I appreciate your efforts today” and “I am grateful for all you have done” to remind male practitioners of the important contribution they make to the setting and the young children that they work with (Interviewee 3).