

# Men Working in Childcare

*Does it matter to children? What do they say?*



*You are worried about seeing him spend his early years  
in doing nothing. What! Is it nothing to be happy?  
Nothing to skip, play, and run around all day long?  
Never in his life will he be so busy again*

*Jean-Jacques Rousseau*

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# Introduction

*“One of the most powerful lessons that I have learned is that even young children are able to reflect on issues that impact on their identity and their lives. The world of children is governed by the same values and beliefs that govern the world of adults”*

Segura-Mora 2002

## Purpose of the Research

A great deal has been written about the benefits of men working in early years childcare but very little research has been carried out looking at the benefits from the children’s perspective. The modest amount of research that exists is largely focused on older children because researchers have found it difficult to find ways in which to collect reliable evidence from very young children.



The report examines previously written research that looks at some of the issues around men working in childcare. One of the difficulties we encountered throughout was that much of the evidence was not recent so we have tried to obtain the most current available to us.

We began by looking at the numbers of men in childcare in the UK, Europe and the rest of the world. The figures obtained were often several years old but did show a general trend.

In 2012 the UK Coalition Government published its targets for raising the number of men working in childcare. We examined each of their proposals, the need for an overall strategy to encourage men into childcare based on existing information, evidence of social attitudes to men working in childcare and barriers and opportunities that have emerged relating to men in childcare.

We were interested to see how these aims were being met in the UK and overseas.

As the centre of our research was what the children thought, in order to balance the evidence, it was important to look at what external influences may impact on the results.

We wanted to establish whether any previous research had been conducted to elicit children’s views and if so what had the results shown. We also looked at recommended research methods to ensure that our data was as reliable as possible.

The first objective of our triangulated research was to examine the answers we received from the staff and compare them with already published data. We wanted to see if it matched and whether the LEYF approach made a difference.

We needed to know the level of importance placed on a variety of activities by staff and whether or not they felt men could offer different and enhanced experiences to the children.

In order to check whether the children agreed with what the adults said, it was necessary to ask them what activities they enjoyed most and whether they preferred doing them with men or women. Only when that data was analysed could we see if a pattern emerged and whether play was chosen along stereotypical lines.

## Introduction to LEYF

LEYF is one of the UK's leading childcare charitable social enterprises. It offers high quality, education and care in 24 Ofsted-registered nurseries offering places for 2000+ children in six London Boroughs. It is committed to excellence in Early Years education, training and research.

The child-centred approach in everything LEYF does remains as bold and creative as when it was first started back in 1903. LEYF has an action research model underpinning its commitment to quality and continually tests new ideas and dedication to stand up for what it believes in.

LEYF research is underpinned by the organisational five values:

- Child centred
- Creative
- Courageous
- Collaborative
- Constant

The intention is always improve things for the children and staff through research efforts. Where possible we try and link clusters of staff together to encourage collaboration and self-reflective enquiry.

For that reason our research was not carried out by external researchers unknown to the children, but rather by the practitioners with whom they are very familiar.

## The LEYF Approach to Men in Childcare

David Stevens, Manager of the Angel Nursery, which, for a while, had 4 male staff out of a team of five, represented LEYF at the Men in Childcare conference in Edinburgh. He had already attended the Men in Childcare Network Ireland International Conference, where he was the only UK representative.

LEYF has long been exploring why it is important to encourage men into childcare. LEYF believes the emphasis on poor pay, lack of promotion opportunities, poor status, fear of accusations of abuse and paedophilia, discomfort working in such a highly female work environment and an

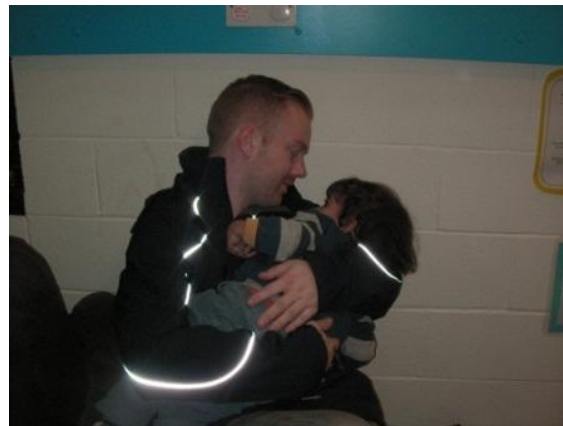
expectation that one man can address the shortfall of positive male roles in so many children's lives detracts from the main question which is *"Do you want to work with children?"*

## The LEYF Research Model

Action research is the preferred approach at LEYF. We see action research, not necessarily as a 'fixed method' but a commitment to practitioner research to observe and problem solve through the ongoing practice of enquiry resulting in an attitude of learning from experience.

## Men Working in Childcare: The Numbers

We began by looking at the statistics that are currently available, first in LEYF, then in the UK and finally overseas. It is very difficult to find recent figures in any of these areas, as they are often not published, so the ones cited are the most recent that could be found.



Cameron and Moss, (2007) reported that, *"gender is an almost invisible issue in the field of early childhood. It is rarely remarked upon, even by male workers, and available data is scarce"*.

Farquhar, Cablk, Buckingham, Butler, and Ballantyne, (2006). suggested that the number of men working in early years has continued to decline over the past decade. Allan, (1993) and Sargent, (2005) argued that the dearth of male teachers is the result of multiple factors related to the perceived feminised nature of early years work).



There is some evidence that men's interest in working with children increases with age; it is a profession that appeals more to mature men. Research with young men suggests that a higher percentage would be interested in childcare work than the current proportion suggests. This raises the question why they are being deterred and what is putting them off?

The Major Provider Group Survey of Men in Childcare (2011) polled 132 male school leavers aged 16-19, 17 unemployed men and 39 male early years practitioners. 54% of the school leavers said they would not want to work in a predominantly female environment and would feel social isolation. 50% were worried about what other people would think. This included peer pressure and men's fears of being accused of inappropriate behaviour. They



also voiced concerns about negative parent attitudes to men carrying out intimate care of young children. Men felt they had to work much harder than women to gain parental trust. Concerns were expressed that there may be deep-rooted prejudices from women opposed to men working in childcare or the expectation that they would be expected to do stereotypical activities like football and lifting heavy objects and the pressure of being role models to young children.

38% cited low pay and status. The respondents commented that the breadwinner needed higher earnings and the part-time nature of much of childcare better suits women who need to fit around their own childcare responsibilities.

A great deal has been written about the need to make all-male and all-white professions accessible to everyone (Rothenberg, 2001). When researching the reasons why men choose to work or not to work in Early Years Childcare we found that early

childhood education (ECE) remains one of the most gender-skewed occupations in many Western countries. The rates range from 1% - 4% in most countries (Sumsion, 2005) and 8% in countries such as Denmark and Norway (Jensen, 1996; Sumsion, 2005).

## 1. LEYF

At the time of the report figures were taken from 23 nurseries (the 24<sup>th</sup> was still in a take-over transition). Out of the 23 nurseries, 8 employed 9 male staff. They comprised:

- 2 managers
- 1 deputy manager
- 5 nursery officers
- 1 apprentice.

## How the figures are made up

The total number of practitioners across the organisation was 263. The total number of staff employed in the nurseries was 271 with 8 chefs, 4 of whom are men. Head Office comprises of 34 staff, 10 of whom are male.

The statistics for the organisation as a whole are:

- Percentage of male practitioners : 3.4%
- Percentage of males working in the nurseries (including chefs): 4.8%
- Percentage of male staff at Head Office: 29.4%
- Percentage of men across the whole organisation: 7.5%

## 2. United Kingdom Statistics

According to The Childcare and Early Years Survey of Providers (2010) the number of men working in early years childcare have risen.

- 2003 - 1% workforce male
- 2005 - 2-3% workforce male
- 2010 - 2% in full daycare and childminders, 1% in sessional care

Nutbrown (2012) says in her review of early years qualifications, *"I want to address an issue which is raised often: how can we address the gender imbalance in our workforce and encourage more men to seek careers in early education and childcare? Men are estimated to make up only one to two per cent of staff in early years settings, depending on setting type, and this has consistently been the case over many years"*

In Scotland statistics show that in 2007, of the 32,800 people working in pre-school and childcare centres in Scotland, men made up less than 3% of the workforce.

In 2007 the General Teaching Council for Wales highlighted the fact that only 27% of teachers in all schools in Wales were men and in primary schools the figure was just 16%. No figures could be found of the percentage of men working in the early years childcare sector.

### 3. European Statistics

The Childcare sector in Ireland's representation of male workers is less than 1 %.

In Hungary and Spain, male early childhood workers are literally non-existent.

In Austria, the proportion of men among early childhood pedagogues amounts to 0.8% (OECD, 2006) and a similar picture can be seen in Russia (Taratukhina, et al., 2006).

In 2005 Denmark had the highest proportion of male childcare workers, constituting 8% of the workforce. Cameron, (2006, p. 71) estimated that of those workers, the minority (2%) worked in nurseries with children under three, 6% worked in kindergartens and the majority (41%) worked in clubs with older children.

In Germany 2012 statistics suggest men make up 3.5 per cent of the staff at day care centres.

In the Netherlands the male childcare workforce is approximately 1-2%.

Norway increased its number of men in childcare from 3% in 1991 to 10% in 2008.

### 4. Statistics for the Rest of the World

In the United States, men represent roughly 2% of all teachers in preschool and kindergarten classrooms (Bureau of Labour Statistics, 2007, p. 29)

In 2006, 85,257 child care professionals in Australia were men, while male preschool teachers accounted for only 1.6 per cent of the total early childhood teaching population (ABS 2006, p. 2)

In New Zealand, only 2% of the early years workforce are men. Farquhar et al (2006) reported that men represented just less than 1% of the staff in kindergartens, childcare centres and home-based childcare/education services

In Africa the recruitment into childcare is an area that has been slow to change and the situation is similar in South America and Asia.

### What Governments Say?

In both 1998 and 2000 the Government set targets to raise the number of men working in childcare; both initiatives had little impact.

Despite a report by the Daycare Trust in 2003, *'Men's work? Changing the gender mix of the childcare and early years workforce'* very little has happened.

### What the European Union Says?

Despite raising the number of men working in childcare being a prime political objective of the European Union since with its target, set in 1995, to raise the proportion of men to 20% by 2006 it has failed to happen.

The Care Work in Europe project (Cameron and Moss, 2007) said that it was imperative to overcome the notion that care work is *'what women naturally do'*, and to actively address the



gender gap in the ECEC workforce. Experts agreed that the number of men working in ECEC must rise to 10% (European Childcare Network, 1996; Care Work in Europe, 2007; Children in Europe, 2008; Seepro, 2010)

The messages from the European Commission are clear. It noted that in order to raise professional standards, training and remuneration, quality and motivation of the workforce was fundamental in delivering the objectives of child development and social equity calling for greater emphasis to be given to qualifications. They noted ***‘an almost complete absence of men in the profession, reinforcing the stereotype that childcare is women’s work only’, and denying many children of male role models’.*** *reduce gendering.* The Council conclusions on early childhood education and care (2011) reiterated the need to increase the proportion of men in childcare and to remove stereotyping.

## The Coalition Government Stance

The UK Coalition Government pledged their support for a greater gender balance in the early years workforce. This has been most evident through the Nutbrown Review, (2012) Professor Nutbrown was commissioned to carry out a review of early years qualifications and commented that she believed the low numbers of men working in the sector was a much wider issue than early education and childcare qualifications. She stated it to be ***‘about widespread social perceptions of what it is to work with young children and the widely held belief that this is ‘women’s work’.*** She voiced her belief that young children benefit from spending time with men as well as women.

She recommended that, by establishing clearer career routes and improving the perceived status of the early years workforce, more men will see the value of the profession, and be encouraged to consider working with children.

We expect a Government response to her report later this year.

## What stops Men from Working in Childcare?

We scrutinised research that has examined the reasons for the limited number of men in childcare and there appear to be several key themes.

The most robust objection to men in childcare appears to be about how men are perceived within society. Cameron, et al., (1999, 2001) believed the

main reason for the predominantly female workforce in early childcare and education is that it is seen as ***‘women’s work’*** and this reproduces its own patterns in recruitment and training. ***“It has had an impact on the historical and pedagogical understandings of why childcare exists, how it is conducted and organized, and what is gender appropriate have evolved through practice and policy over time”*** ( p. 8).

*“Changing attitudes and beliefs takes time. Remember that each individual needs to change at their own pace. The overall message is one of valuing each individual for the skills and background they have. This includes their family background, race, beliefs, language and so on. Each individual sees the world through their own perspectives and with assistance through the perspectives of others.”*

Arthur, L (1993)

Much more worrying is evidence from (Blount, 2005; Fifield and Swain, 2002; Weems, 1999) who concluded that women are viewed as nurturers; there is an assumption that men wishing to work in this context are often effeminate, homosexual, and/or paedophiles.

The consequence Farquhar et al. (2006) and King (1998) asserted that this position discourages both homosexual and heterosexual men from wanting to work with young children—further reducing the presence of men in early childhood education.

Seifert (1988) believed that this stereotyping of men that says they are unsuitable to carry out a nurturing role has made it ***“difficult to recruit men into careers of teaching young children”***

Haase (2008) commented that ***“male teachers are also under a cloud of suspicion as to why they would choose primary teaching and would want to work with women and children*** (Sumsion, 2000)” (p. 599).

Fagan, (1996), argued that women are more comfortable working with women and that most early childhood programmes are designed around working with mothers and not fathers. He also noted that there is some indication that there is a certain level of tension between men and women in early childhood programmes due in part to the number of single mothers who resent the lack of support from their own children’s fathers.



Sanders, (2002) suggested that male early childhood teachers have to defend their choice of a profession to family, friends, and female teachers.



Neugebauer, (1999) indicated that some women teachers have more trouble relating to fathers than to mothers and to male colleagues rather than female colleagues.

Murray, (1996: 374) in a study of childcare staff, found that “in the childcare environment men are often sought after as workers because of the perceived need to have male role models for children”, models which were seen as **‘doing truck play with the boys’**

Farquhar (2012) asserted that as men are rare in early childhood work, their employers and colleagues tend to regard them as something to brag about and show off as if they are a trophy or prized asset. She notes that while men may find this attention is nice, there is also a negative side to being one of a few men in a woman’s job.



LEYF’s policy is to put, whenever possible, two male practitioners together in a nursery to help to

alleviate feelings of social isolation and of being **‘the token male’**.

Nursery World (26 July 2011), asked men why they did not apply for jobs in childcare. One said, **“I’m a man. And men don’t look after children”**.

An article in the Mail on Sunday (September 14<sup>th</sup> 2012) affirms many of society’s perceptions around stereotyping. It says, **“It’s normally only women who are trained in the art of turning curtains into costumes and become a dab hand at changing nappies at a world-famous nanny college. But now one male teenager is set to be the first-ever man to pass through the education degree course that turns out the modern Mary Poppins”**.

In a Nursery World article, (‘Berated, frozen out, colluded against...’ why one male practitioner knows he is definitely not welcome, 02 October 2012) a practitioner said, **“Being expected to assemble office furniture, move desks around, or to welcome being handed the office toolkit, are taken as read”**. He went on to complain that as a man he was expected to fix the nursery computer because it is assumed that, as a man, he was an expert in IT.

She noted that a possible outcomes for men may be a feeling of isolation in not having male colleagues, being under constant pressure to prove they are just as good as women at caring-type jobs and being singled out for attention or being made to feel uncomfortable or different in an all-female environment.

According to Cameron, Moss and Owen (1999) and Demuyne and Peeters (2006) early childhood care and education in Europe is based on a particular concept of care, what they describe as **‘mothercare’** and this is the primary reason for the extremely limited number of men in early childhood education and also for the low involvement of fathers in early childhood provision.

Owen (2003) noted that whereas the career choice for women of working in childcare will be welcomed as an affirmation of their caring role in society choice for men, the reaction was more likely to be one of **“surprise, confusion and ridicule.”**



Johnson (2008) believed that caring for and teaching young children are appropriate and necessary roles for women and men. He says, ***“Not only are gender stereotypes artificial, but they also can interfere with children’s learning about interpersonal relationships, caregiver interdependence, and caregiving skills that all children need as they mature”***.

However, interestingly, Owen (1998, P 4) commented that; while there is a general agreement that more men should be encouraged to work within services for young children, there is a lack of evidenced writing as to why there should be more men.

## Why Do We Want Men in Childcare?

*These earliest years are one of the most critical times in human development and our investment here establishes the foundations of all learning in the future. There are sufficient data to support the positive potential of quality media that is age-appropriate during the preschool years to help prepare children for entry to school, while also supporting social, emotional, cognitive and physical development”*

UNICEF

Strong research evidence of the benefits of more men working in childcare is limited, mainly due to the lack of examples of gender-balanced workforces to study. However, one of the main arguments for encouraging men into working in childcare is the importance of seeing to have both men and women in caring roles. Ruxton, (1992: 25) noted that the vast majority of early years staff recognised the importance of positive male role models which help to challenge the stereotypical view of men as ‘breadwinners’ alone, and to validate their role as ‘carers’.”.

Jensen (1998, P. 122) made the case for a ‘gender pedagogy’ and not a ‘gender-neutral’ culture. He noted that boys and girls are different in some ways and choose different games and activities. This presents different challenges to those employed; both female and male. He asserted that the daily pedagogic work must take these differences into account. He believed this can be more easily fulfilled by a mixed-gender workforce that will contain a greater diversity of masculine and feminine traits.

Shonkoff and Phillips, (2000) said that children’s development is the result of the interaction between biological maturation and the environment, including their experiences and relationships. The basic architecture of the brain, which underpins all developmental domains, is built through an ongoing process that begins before birth, is active during the early years and continues into adult life

Gender identification is often associated with the choice and use of toys. According to a number of studies done in the 1970s, 1980s, and 1990s sex differences in toy play have been found in children as young as one year of age.

Carter, (1987), Etaugh and Liss, (1992); Henshaw, Kelly, and Gratton, (1992) and Paretti and Sydney, (1984) noted that children’s toy preferences were found to be significantly related to parental sex-typing with parents providing gender-differentiated toys and rewarding play behaviour that is gender stereotyped. Ruble, (1988) asserted that whilst both mothers and fathers contribute to the gender stereotyping of their children, fathers have been found to reinforce gender stereotypes more often than mothers

Chodorow (1978) and Johnson (2008) pointed out that if most of our nurseries are staffed by women, young children may make stereotypical assumptions about male and female roles. This reinforces stereotypic notions about gender attributes and roles. (Piburn 2006) noted that if more men were employed in childcare we would actively discourage these ideas of stereotyping, many of which are embedded in social culture.

Fagan, (1996), Parke, (1996) and Lamb, (2000) contended that men bring more play, active movement, entertainment, and rough and tumble play to the way they interact with their own children and the way they interact with children. They asserted that men encourage children to take more risks, enabling more physical, outdoor, ‘rough and tumble’ play because of their physical strength. Children may also form their own stereotypes based on the stereotypes they observe in the adults within their environment (Martin, 1995). Wood’s, (2002) study reflected the expectations by which boys are required to play with only masculine toys and the acceptance of girls playing with toys of a feminine and gender neutral nature.

Cameron (2006) talked about a male worker who said he was conscious of reacting against performing in a stereotyped 'male' way: ***"[I am] aware of situations where men have functioned in a completely different way with children...when they're out in the garden, it's the men that are kicking the ball about and running up and down with it...and I've consciously tried to prevent myself getting sucked into that"***.

Just recently, the European Parliament Committee on Women's Rights and Gender Equality (June 2012) commented that,

***"Gender stereotypes in primary and secondary schools influence the perception of young children and youngsters of how men and women should behave"***.



The report also noted that given the media's significant influence on people's perception on gender equality, special orientation courses are needed to raise awareness in Advertising Standard Committees and self-regulatory bodies about the negative influences of gender discrimination and stereotypes in the media.

There is also an opinion that many children, especially pre-secondary school, lack a male role model in their life, and that many more have limited contact with fathers working long hours. It is believed that both boys but and girls, can benefit from contact with positive male role models in early years and primary school contexts. It is often said that boys are relate better to male workers, though it is recognised that this is by no means always the case.

Owen (2003) studied parental attitudes to men in childcare and found that one clear reason why parents supported men working with young children was *'concern for the boys'*. He cites an example of a mother of a six month old boy who said she was keen for there to be a male role model and felt strongly there should be a male contact for him as he got older'.

The British public is broadly in favour of men working within the childcare profession, according to research from MORI in 2003. Three-quarters (77%) were in favour and 12% against. Many also recognised the benefits this can bring, particularly in providing positive male role models (mentioned by 53%) and a mixed gender environment (mentioned by 57%). Most parents (84%) said that they were willing to place their children in a childcare setting where a male childcare worker was employed, though a third (34%) said other parents may be more suspicious.

Parents felt men were more likely to play football, to do things outside and to *'muck about'*. They *'let the kids get on with it'* and *'are not inhibited by risk'*. Women, on the other hand, were seen by parents as providing the substantive, consistent parts of caring. He noted that parents reflected the observation that men in the home do the *'fun'* childcare and women do the routine nurturing.

The Major provider Group Survey (2011) noted that almost all (97.8%) of female childcarers in day nurseries said they would value having male childcarers working alongside them as part of their team. Interestingly, 97.9% of parents who use group childcare are happy for men to work with children aged three to five in day nurseries.

Jensen (1998, p.122) asserted that since boys and girls are different in some ways and choose different games and activities, give different challenges to those employed; both female and male we should be striving for a *'gender pedagogy'* and not a *'gender-neutral'* culture. He believes that the daily pedagogic work must take these differences into account and that this can be more easily fulfilled by a mixed-gender workforce.

## What Do Children Think about Men in Childcare?

*Since we can never crawl inside an infant's mind, it may seem pointless to imagine what an infant might experience. Yet that is at the heart of what we really want and need to know. What we imagine infant experience to be like shapes our notions of who the infant is. These notions make up our working hypotheses about infancy.*

Stern

We were keen to establish whether or not any meaningful research had been undertaken looking at the views of very young children about men in childcare. We found very little and what we did find was inconclusive. We therefore hoped that by conducting our research we could find out whether boys and girls chose different activities according to gender and whether those choices were influenced by the gender of the practitioner. Fine-Davis et al (2005) they studied a small cohort of children at two childcare centres in Dublin. The research was based on interviews with six children.

Children were asked about the centre and encouraged to draw a picture of the centre. Then they were asked, **"Who minds you here in the centre?"** They were asked what kinds of games and other activities they did with their female and male childcare workers respectively. Interviewing the children was found to be less productive than anticipated due to the young age of the children; hence, this aspect of the research was not replicated in Centre B. Of the six children interviewed, three were male and three were female but quantitative data were not collected from the children interviewed.

The research found that the children seemed to like all of their childcare workers, male and female, and did not particularly see them as carrying out different functions. It concluded that since some of the young male children had developed strong bonds with the male childcare workers and missed them if they were gone, it indicated the positive effect these childcare workers are having in meeting the children's psychological needs.

A project conducted in 2007 by Foreman for CWDC sought children's views on men working in childcare in after school clubs and two childminding settings in Cambridgeshire and Peterborough. Altogether 22 children were interviewed, 17 from the after school clubs and 5 from the childminder settings. The age of the children interviewed was not specified but one might assume the majority were over the age of 5 as they attended after-school clubs. Children were asked questions about activities they did and enjoyed, activities they did specifically with male practitioners, differences in activities between male and female workers and children's perceptions of benefits of having male workers.



The children in the childminding settings said they had seen men carrying out stereotypical female jobs, washing up, looking after you when you were hurt etc. They talked about role-play and drama and how they liked singing and acting competitions. When asked if they did anything different with male practitioners most of the children talked about football or electronic games. The majority felt it was different being looked after by a man. The children commented that play with men was more physical that they *'pushed the swings higher or the roundabout faster'*. They were seen to play more with the boys and the younger children and were more *'fun'* or *'silly'* in that they told more jokes or funny stories. Overall the report concluded the children perceived there to be benefits to having male practitioners.



# Methodology

## LEYF's Research Methodology

We began our research project by looking at published secondary research to set the scene and get a contextual overview of what we know about Men in Childcare. At LEYF our approach is best summed up by Dahlberg, Moss and Pence, (1999, p. 49;) who say that listening to children is about acknowledging that ***“children have a voice of their own, and should be listened to as a means of taking them seriously”***



We looked at how research is undertaken with under-fives and found that few studies have addressed any research questions directly to the children. Sayeed and Guerin (2000) note that, ***“research is largely based on observations of players (children) and non-players (adults) as the players are not generally expected to be able to describe what they are/were doing while they are/were engaging in play”*** (p.2)

We were aware that interviewing very young children as part of a research project is difficult for two main reasons. Firstly children's skills in reading and writing are not developed and this restrains the possibilities of research methods. Secondly, the lack of maturity to understand some types of questions and the difficulty of verbal expression also lead to very poor data gathering. We therefore decided to use a model suggested by Clarke (2000) using, ***“the use of mapping and modelling, diagrams, drawing and collage, child to child interviewing and drama and poetry”***.

Clarke believed that these participatory research methods appeared to have particular relevance when seeking to reveal the multiple perspectives of young children ***“who are themselves the least powerful individuals in the institutions they are part of”***. (p. 3)

Kuhn and Eischen (1997) and the Mosaic Approach cited in Spaces to Play: Clark and Moss (2005) also recommended that researchers present children with visual-based concepts rather than verbal statements in order to provide them with a framework that they can process and through which they can begin to provide feedback.

We therefore decided to use a triangulated approach to our research by using more than one method of investigation in order to enhance confidence in our findings. Our research involved quantitative and qualitative methods (e.g. a focus group, observations, questionnaires and child interviews (based on visual clues.)

With the secondary research undertaken, we decided to carry out our own in-house research. LEYF currently has 24 nurseries, eight of which have male practitioners:

- Angel
- Furze
- Fitzrovia
- Katharine Bruce
- Luton St
- Micky Star
- Queensborough
- Warwick

Action research at LEYF is a key aspect of how we ensure quality. It's all about asking questions of ourselves and checking how we can do things better to give children the best service. One way of doing action research LEYF style is through our *Sounding Boards*. In essence, staff are invited to join us to discuss how we can improve or develop new ideas, and in return they get their dinner.

We held a Sounding Board to discuss our research and invited all the nine male practitioners working for LEYF from eight nurseries. The meeting was



hosted by the manager of Furze, Richard Lester at his nursery in Chadwell Heath. The goal for the night was to agree how we might best establish children's views in this area, both as part of our continuing exploration of the distinct role men play in childcare provision and our plan to launch the London Men in Childcare Network on the 19th November.

The Sounding Board group devised questionnaires to be completed by staff, both male and female, working in the eight nurseries. They were e-mailed out and the managers printed enough copies for each member of staff. We asked questions about their age and the number of years they had worked in childcare. We asked whether they had ever worked with a male colleague before and whether they knew the percentage of men working in the early years workforce and why they thought that number existed with a multiple choice answer. Once again with a multiple choice we asked what they felt were the benefits in general of men working in childcare and then specifically about the benefits to children.



We asked whether men offered different kinds of activities to children than women and gave a mixture of choices ranging from physical play to play more stereotypically associated with girls. We wanted to know if the children ever commented about the gender of early years staff

members and if so what they had said, (in their own words).

The research on the children was a little more complex. We wanted the methodology to be really child-focused. The decision was taken that the research would be carried out by practitioners who are familiar to the children rather than an external person as we felt this would avoid some of the difficulties encountered by previously published researchers.

We put together a pack with guidance notes to ensure that each nursery used the same method of evidence collection. The pack consisted of a frame

with Velcro. On the frame were the names of all the staff members except the one designated to carry out the research. It was clearly stated that the interviewer must be a woman. Underneath the names were laminated photos of selected activities. Staff were instructed to use the ones provided and not use any others.

The activities agreed were based on the stereotypical assumptions from the current research:

- Rough and tumble play/gymnastics
- Superhero play
- Cooking
- Construction
- Science experiments (minibeast activity. We said this activity must involve a member of staff holding the insect)
- Dolls (washing)
- Stories and songs
- Football
- Trains
- Skipping ropes

The pictures of activities deliberately did not show any adults because we did not want there to be a covert suggestions of the gender of staff the children might choose.

## The Research

We asked the staff to select 4 confident children (2 boys and 2 girls) aged 3+ who had been in the nursery for some time and were familiar with all the activities on the list.

We asked parents to consent to their children being used in this research project and assured them that no names (the children nor the nursery) would be used in the report.

The member of staff who carried out the activity with the children did not have her picture included because we did not want the child to feel they had to pick that member of staff each time.

We said the activity should not last more than 5 minutes and should be carried out five times in one week. Practitioners carried out a one to one with each child. The children were asked to put the picture of the activity with the member of staff they liked doing it with. The interviewer had to record what the children said word for word.

# Findings

## Results of the Staff Questionnaire: Men Working in Early Years Childcare. Does it Matter to Children?

We had 56 replies from staff, both male and female from across the eight nurseries where male practitioners work: they included two male managers

### Q1: What is your age?

|             |    |         |
|-------------|----|---------|
| 40+ years   | 23 | (41.0%) |
| 20-30 years | 15 | (28.6%) |
| 30-40 years | 11 | (19.6%) |
| 16-20 years | 6  | (10.7%) |
| Not given   | 1  | (1.8%)  |

### Q2: How long have you been working in early years childcare?

|               |    |         |
|---------------|----|---------|
| 10+ Years     | 25 | (44.6%) |
| 5-10 years    | 11 | (19.6%) |
| 1-2 years     | 7  | (12.5%) |
| 2-5 years     | 7  | (12.5%) |
| Under a years | 6  | (10.7%) |

### Q3: Have you ever worked alongside a male colleague?

|     |    |         |
|-----|----|---------|
| Yes | 54 | (96.4%) |
| No  | 2  | (3.6%)  |

### Q4: What do you think is the percentage of men in the early years workforce?

|            |   |         |
|------------|---|---------|
| 10%        | 8 | (14.3%) |
| 20%        | 8 | (14.3%) |
| 2%         | 6 | (10.7%) |
| 15%        | 6 | (10.7%) |
| 5%         | 5 | (8.9%)  |
| 3%         | 4 | (7.1%)  |
| 5-10%      | 2 | (3.6%)  |
| 8%         | 2 | (3.6%)  |
| 25%        | 2 | (3.6%)  |
| 2-3%       | 1 | (1.8%)  |
| 7%         | 1 | (1.8%)  |
| 10-15%     | 1 | (1.8%)  |
| 21%        | 1 | (1.8%)  |
| 30%        | 1 | (1.8%)  |
| 35%        | 1 | (1.8%)  |
| 40%        | 1 | (1.8%)  |
| Low        | 4 | (7.1%)  |
| Don't know | 1 | (1.8%)  |

#### Q5: Why do you think that is?

|   |    |         |
|---|----|---------|
| Not encouraged by other people                      | 34 | (60%)   |
| Society's attitude towards men                      | 29 | (51%)   |
| Working with children                               |    |         |
| Would not feel comfortable                          | 21 | (37.5%) |
| Working in a predominantly female environment       |    |         |
| Not something they feel comfortable with            | 20 | (35.7%) |
| Not masculine enough                                | 20 | (35.7%) |
| Negative male stereotyping                          | 19 | (33.9%) |
| Poorly paid   | 16 | (28.6%) |
| Low status  | 12 | (21.4%) |
| Don't have the patience to work with young children | 9  | (16.0%) |
| Cultural clashes                                    | 8  | (14.3%) |
| Poor career structure                               | 7  | (12.5%) |

#### Additional Comments

- Lack of advertising aimed at men
- Lack of awareness about what is actually involved in working in the early years sector. I think the perception is that it's all about attending to the children's physical needs and just playing with them. There is not enough knowledge of what a practitioner's educational role and expertise is involved and how important this is for the children's potential and future life chances to be realised.

#### Q6: What do you think are the benefits of men working in early years childcare?

|   |    |         |
|---|----|---------|
| Important for men to be seen as nurturing, sensitive and positive role models | 42 | (75%)   |
| It helps to change attitudes to men working with young children               | 37 | (66.0%) |
| Challenges all gender stereotypes   | 28 | (50.0%) |
| Mixed staff teams lead to more successful workplaces                          | 26 | (46.4%) |
| Accepting men as educators from the earliest stages                           | 21 | (37.5%) |

#### Additional Comments

- Good role model for child with no father figure
- So all children have a male role model
- Could bring more structure, discipline and a father figure
- Having family structure in nurseries

#### Q7: Do you think there are benefits to children of having men working in early years childcare?

|     |    |         |
|-----|----|---------|
| Yes | 55 | (98.1%) |
| No  | 1  | (1.8%)  |

### Q8: What are they?

|  |    |         |
|--|----|---------|
| Boys get a good role model   | 44 | (78.6%) |
| Girls get a good role model  | 33 | (58.9%) |
| Children have a more natural family environment with men and women | 27 | (48.2%) |
| It's good to spend time with men and form relationships with them  | 16 | (28.6%) |
| Men have chosen specifically to work with young children           | 6  | (10.7%) |

#### Additional Comments

- Young children need to experience play and learning from good male role models, especially those children who are from single parent families
- It's good for fathers to have male staff to relate to

### Q9: Do you think men offer different kinds of activities for children than women?

|     |    |         |
|-----|----|---------|
| Yes | 43 | (76.7%) |
| No  | 12 | (23.3%) |

|                                   |    |         |
|-----------------------------------|----|---------|
| Football                          | 28 | (50.0%) |
| Rough and tumble play/ gymnastics | 23 | (41.0%) |
| Superhero play                    | 11 | (19.6%) |
| Construction                      | 11 | (19.6%) |
| Science experiments               | 7  | (12.5%) |
| Trains                            | 7  | (12.5%) |
| Cooking                           | 6  | (10.7%) |
| Stories and songs                 | 3  | (5.4%)  |
| Skipping ropes                    | 2  | (3.6%)  |
| Dolls                             | 1  | (1.8%)  |

#### Additional Comments

- Men really add to these not necessarily offer different kinds of play activities
- They give a male approach
- DIY experiences
- Creative play potential
- Men can approach activities from a different perspective
- No, I think it's a personal choice and I don't feel gender has a role in the activities provided
- Do not agree with this question
- Men can offer any activity in the curriculum just as women can
- I think it depends more on individual interests regardless of gender
- I think both men and women are capable of providing all activities
- In my working experiences, male workers encourage children to engage in a variety of play
- From my past experience men have engaged in all activities
- I think men and women should do a mixture of activities each so reduces stereotyping

### Q10: Do the children ever comment about the gender of early years staff members?

|     |    |         |
|-----|----|---------|
| Yes | 13 | (23.2%) |
| No  | 43 | (76.8%) |



#### Q11: If yes, what have they said (In the children's own words)?

- "B is strong" (Eric 4.5 years)
- "It's a boy's game so B plays boys games" (Jack, 3 years)
- "I like playing football with you"
- A male member of staff wore a pink T shirt and the children asked "Why is he wearing girls' clothes"?
- "He's a boy and he can't wear pink"
- "D is a boy"
- "C is a boy"
- "X is a boy"
- "You're a girl. You have earrings" (to a male member of staff)
- "It's a man. Why is he here?"

### Results of the Research Carried Out with the Children

We had some difficulties with the results of the research with the children insofar as two nurseries did not carry out the research as requested. Those results were not included because we wanted to ensure the soundness of the data. It did mean, however, that the control group was smaller than hoped for. Also two nurseries carried out the research with children who were under three so those were also excluded from the data. The following results are therefore from 23 children, 14 boys and 9 girls.

#### Comparative results of the research as carried out with the children and the staff in answer to the question



#### "Do you think men offer different kinds of activities for children than women"?

We asked each staff member to rate the importance of male input into each of the activities.

We compared each of the responses from the children with the staff responses.

We also looked at the numbers of boys choosing to work with a male practitioner, girls choosing to work with a male practitioner, girls choosing to work with a female practitioner and boys choosing to work with a female practitioner.

We summarised the findings in the following tables.

### 1. Rough and Tumble Play/Gymnastics

What did the staff say? : Results

| Do men offer something different to this activity? | Yes | As a percentage |
|--|-----|-----------------|
| Rough and tumble play/gymnastics                   | 23  | (41.0%)         |

What did the children say? Results:

| Who do you want to play with? | Boy wants male practitioner | Girl wants male practitioner | Girl wants female practitioner | Boy wants female practitioner |
|-------------------------------|-----------------------------|------------------------------|--------------------------------|-------------------------------|
| Rough and Tumble/gymnastics   | 1<br>(4.3%)                 | 0                            | 4<br>(17.3%)                   | 5<br>(21.7%)                  |

### 2. Superhero Play

Adult Results

| Do men offer something different to this activity? | Number | As a percentage |
|--|--------|-----------------|
| Superhero  | 11     | (19.6%)         |

Child Results

| Activity  | Boy wants male practitioner | Girl wants male practitioner | Girl wants female practitioner | Boy wants female practitioner |
|-----------|-----------------------------|------------------------------|--------------------------------|-------------------------------|
| Superhero | 10<br>(43.4%)               | 1<br>(4.3%)                  | 1<br>(4.3%)                    | 0                             |

### 3. Cooking

Adult Results

| Do men offer something different to this activity? | Number | As a percentage |
|--|--------|-----------------|
| Cooking  | 6      | (10.7%)         |

Child Results

| Activity | Boy wants male practitioner | Girl wants male practitioner | Girl wants female practitioner | Boy wants female practitioner |
|----------|-----------------------------|------------------------------|--------------------------------|-------------------------------|
| Cooking  | 3<br>(13.0%)                | 2<br>(8.6%)                  | 2<br>(8.6%)                    | 3<br>(13.0%)                  |

### 4. Construction

Adult Results

| Do men offer something different to this activity? | Number | As a percentage |
|--|--------|-----------------|
| Construction                                       | 11     | (19.6%)         |

Child Results

| Activity     | Boy wants male practitioner | Girl wants male practitioner | Girl wants female practitioner | Boy wants female practitioner |
|--------------|-----------------------------|------------------------------|--------------------------------|-------------------------------|
| Construction | 0                           | 0                            | 1<br>(4.3%)                    | 0                             |

## 5. Science Experiments

### Adult Results

| Do men offer something different to this activity? | Number | As a percentage |
|--|--------|-----------------|
| Science experiments                                | 7      | (12.5%)         |

### Child Results

| Activity            | Boy wants male practitioner | Girl wants male practitioner | Girl wants female practitioner | Boy wants female practitioner |
|---------------------|-----------------------------|------------------------------|--------------------------------|-------------------------------|
| Science experiments | 2<br>(8.6%)                 | 0                            | 4<br>(17.3%)                   | 3<br>(13.0%)                  |

## 6. Dolls

### Adult Results

| Do men offer something different to this activity? | Number | As a percentage |
|--|--------|-----------------|
| Dolls  | 1      | (1.8%)          |

### Child Results

| Activity | Boy wants male practitioner | Girl wants male practitioner | Girl wants female practitioner | Boy wants female practitioner |
|----------|-----------------------------|------------------------------|--------------------------------|-------------------------------|
| Dolls    | 0                           | 2<br>(8.6%)                  | 18<br>(78.2%)                  | 2<br>(8.6%)                   |

## 7. Stories and Songs

### Adult Results

| Do men offer something different to this activity? | Number | As a percentage |
|--|--------|-----------------|
| Stories and songs                                  | 3      | (5.4%)          |

### Child Results

| Activity          | Boy wants male practitioner | Girl wants male practitioner | Girl wants female practitioner | Boy wants female practitioner |
|-------------------|-----------------------------|------------------------------|--------------------------------|-------------------------------|
| Stories and songs | 0                           | 0                            | 1<br>(4.3%)                    | 6<br>(26.0%)                  |

## 8. Football

### Adult Results

| Do men offer something different to this activity? | Number | As a percentage |
|--|--------|-----------------|
| Football   | 28     | (50.0%)         |

### Child Results

| Activity | Boy wants male practitioner | Girl wants male practitioner | Girl wants female practitioner | Boy wants female practitioner |
|----------|-----------------------------|------------------------------|--------------------------------|-------------------------------|
| Football | 3<br>(13.0%)                | 1<br>(4.3%)                  | 4<br>(17.3%)                   | 2<br>(8.6%)                   |

## 9. Trains

### Adult Results

| Do men offer something different to this activity? | Number | As a percentage |
|--|--------|-----------------|
| Trains   | 7      | (12.5%)         |

### Child Results

| Activity | Boy wants male practitioner | Girl wants male practitioner | Girl wants female practitioner | Boy wants female practitioner |
|----------|-----------------------------|------------------------------|--------------------------------|-------------------------------|
| Trains   | 0                           | 1<br>(4.3%)                  | 1<br>(4.3%)                    | 2<br>(8.6%)                   |

## 10. Skipping Ropes

### Adult Results

| Do men offer something different to this activity? | Number | As a percentage |
|--|--------|-----------------|
| Skipping ropes                                     | 2      | (3.6%)          |

### Child Results

| Activity       | Boy wants male practitioner | Girl wants male practitioner | Girl wants female practitioner | Boy wants female practitioner |
|----------------|-----------------------------|------------------------------|--------------------------------|-------------------------------|
| Skipping ropes | 0                           | 1<br>(4.3%)                  | 1<br>(4.3%)                    | 2<br>(8.6%)                   |



## Discussion

The data showed that the majority of practitioners (40.0%) were over the age of 40 and that 44.6% have been working in early years childcare for more than 10 years and another 19.6% who have worked in the sector for between 5 and 10 years. They were all in favour of men in childcare. There was generally a gross over-estimation of the percentage of men working in the early years childcare sector with only 10.7% correctly estimating the figure at 2%, though another 7.1% judged the figure to be low.

It was noteworthy that 60.7% felt the main reason for the low numbers was that men were not encouraged to join the profession by people, including school and family and another 51.8%, which was similar to the major provider Group survey results of 50%, thought that it was because of society's attitude to men in childcare. One of the main reasons cited in the Major Provider Group survey that 38% thought poor pay and career structure are one of the main deterrents; this was not the key issue for the respondents who scored 28.6% and 12.5% respectively. The comments noted the apparent lack of advertising and an awareness of what the job involves, particularly the responsibility for the education of the children.

When considering the benefits of men working in childcare 75.0% believed it was very important for men to be seen as nurturing and sensitive role models and another 50.0% felt they could change challenge society's attitudes towards men working with children however, only 10.7% thought that the fact that men choosing to work in childcare was significant.

In line with published research 78.6% felt that men in childcare were good role models for boys and 58.9% for girls. One respondent noted the importance for fathers.

Only 75.0% of staff believed that men offered something different for children. There were some thought-provoking comments that were almost equally divided between those who thought that all staff offered the same experiences and those that said they believed that men brought something additional.

It was very interesting that 1.8% did not see there are any benefits to children of having men working in early years childcare.

23.2% said the children made comments about practitioners' gender. It is interesting that the colour pink is a reason for children's observations. The history of pink and blue gender stereotyping did not begin until the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. There are indications that the two colours were used interchangeably until World War II. However, examples of pink as a mark of the feminine are frequently found, one of which being the use of a pink triangle to identify homosexuals in Nazi prison camps. After the war the tide shifted permanently in favour of blue as a boy's colour. By 1959 the babywear buyer for one department store was telling the Times, ***"A mother will allow her girl to wear blue, but daddy will never permit his son to wear pink."***

The comment ***"It's a boy's game so B plays boys games"*** (Jack, 3 years) says much about attitudes from external influences.

The comments about men wearing earrings are also noteworthy. Men have worn earrings for as long as civilization has existed. Jade earrings dating to 3000 BC have been found in Southeast Asia. Many of those earrings adorned men, not women. Modern



day questions about what earring wearing symbolizes for men are rooted in phobias about sexuality and gender.

Ears were probably first pierced for magical purposes, very many primitive tribes believe that demons can enter the body through the ear, because demons and spirits are supposed to be repelled by metal, ear-piercing prevents them entering the body. Sailors used to have an ear

pierced to improve eyesight, and if the bodies washed up somewhere it would pay for a Christian burial. In many societies ear piercing is done as a puberty ritual, in Borneo the Mother and Father each pierce one ear as a symbol of the child's dependence on their parents.

Ear piercing is an almost universal practice for men and women and it is only in western society that it's deemed effeminate.



## Children's Data

When we examine the children's responses and compare them to those from the staff we have some very interesting and sometimes surprising results.

50.0% of staff believed football was an area of play that men could offer the children something in addition. Only 43 % of children opted to play football, surprisingly perhaps that was 26% girls and 17.2% boys.

We felt it was important to look more closely at those figures to see whether boys were choosing to play with male practitioners and girls with female practitioners. The data showed, however, that 13% of boys and 4.3% of girls chose to play with men but 17.3% of girls and 8.6% of boys chose to play with women.

Likewise with rough and tumble play, 41% of the staff felt male input was valuable and 43.5% of children opted for this activity. Surprisingly only 4.3% were boys and 39.1% were girls. The 4.3% of boys opted to play with a man but the other 21.7%

of boys chose rough and tumble with women. No girls chose this activity with a man.

This flies very much in the face of pre-existing research that indicates that men engage children much more than women in rough and tumble and physical play.

The very low take-up of construction was unexpected with 22% of staff flagging its importance but only 4.3% (one girl) choosing to carry out the activity with a woman. 19.6% of staff believed that Superhero play was an activity where men could bring something special, however, 52% of children opted for this activity, 47.8% boys and 4.3% girls. This was obviously an activity where children preferred to a significant degree to play with men.

Only 10.7% of staff thought that cooking was an area where men could add to children's experience. However, 43.5% of children opted to cook, 26% of boys and 17.2% of girls. It was fascinating to note that the numbers were identical, i.e. 13% boys chose to work with men and 13% girls chose to work with women and 8.6% of boys chose to work with women and 8.6% girls chose to work with men.

The doll play was perhaps predictable. Only 1.8% of staff thought this was important area for men to be role models. All 95.6% of the children, 87% of whom were girls, opted to play with women. However, since 75.0% believed it was very important for men to be seen as nurturing and sensitive role models and another 66.0% felt they could change society's attitudes towards men working with children, perhaps consideration needs to be given as to whether staff too are actually adding to stereotypical images in areas of play that are thought to be "female".

The take up by children for skipping and trains was identical at 17.2% and in their choice of whether or not to work with a man or woman. In both cases no boys chose a man, 4.3% of girls chose a man, 4.3% of girls chose a woman and 8.6% of boys chose a woman. The staff expectation was 12.5% for trains and 3.6% for skipping. This was perhaps surprising as trains are often stereotypically seen as something boys prefer and the adult male role models that one sees skipping are usually sportsmen in training.

12.5% of the staff thought science was an important area of learning for men but 39.1% of the children chose it. Of those only 8.6% were boys. During the 1970s and 1980s, the consistent underperformance of girls in maths and science was a major concern. These issues seem to have been successfully addressed and GCSE results show year on year that girls are catching up and even overtaking boys in what was once considered to be a “male” subject.

Perhaps one area that needs particular note is that of stories and songs. Only 5.4% of staff felt it was significant for men to bring an additional perspective. 30.4% of children opted for this activity, 26% were boys and 4.3% girls. All chose to work with women.



We know that poor male literacy is an issue causing concern throughout every stage of learning. National Literacy Trust research (2012) indicates that only 1 in 4 boys read outside of class every day. It notes ***“By the time they reach school, many boys are already lagging behind in literacy: at age five, there is a gap of 11 percentage points between boys’ and girls’ achievement in reading”.***

They go on to say, ***“The Commission has found that the gender gap begins in the home, with parents supporting boys very differently from girls. In school, what is taught and how it is taught and assessed all impacts on boys’ achievement, while boys’ gender identities, influenced by society’s expectations and reinforced by their peers, can negatively impact on their attitudes to reading, the amount of time they spend reading and ultimately their reading skills”.***

The report reveals that many young boys do not have male reading role models at home. In their last annual literacy survey of nearly 21,000 young people it showed that the mother is more likely to be the reader role model for both boys and girls.

In the staff questionnaire one practitioner commented, ***“Young children need to experience play and learning from good male role models, especially those children who are from single parent families”.*** If this is the case male staff should consider as a matter of importance how they model literacy, particularly reading to boys.

The commission quotes Owen Thomas, Service Development Manager, from Working with Men who said ***“...in society our roles as men - the vast majority of men, apart from the elite - were defined by physicality as opposed to intellectual pursuits...There is change in societal norms and the role of gender in society. Certain groups of men are left behind. When this happens, as mothers become the bread-winners in the family homes, men and boys try to express their masculinity through uber-displays of machismo.”***

It was interesting to note that there were no recorded comments about gender during the activity research. Staff logged what the children said and it was all about the activity itself and not about the staff members.



## Conclusions

In summary, it was interesting that in our research 60% felt the main reason for the low numbers was that men were not encouraged to join the profession by people and 51% thought that it was because of society's attitude to men in childcare. However, when considering the benefits of men working in childcare 75.0% believed it was very important for men to be seen as nurturing and sensitive role models and another 66.0% felt they could change society's attitudes towards men working with children.



In line with published research 78.6% felt that men in childcare were good role models for boys and 58.9% for girls. Although, only 75.0% of staff believed that men offered something different for children. There were some thought-provoking comments that were almost equally divided between those who thought that all staff offered the same experiences and those that said they believed that men brought something additional.

It was interesting that the only time children commented about staff gender referred to very commonplace issues of society's gender-stereotyping, i.e. the colour pink and jewellery.

The choice of children's activities did give some surprises and did not match staff expectations nor published research. Although football and rough and tumble play are considered to be activities where men are thought to bring something extra,

actually only 43 % of children opted to play football and of those 26% were girls and 17.2% boys.

With rough and tumble play of the 43.5% of children who opted for this activity only 4.3% were boys and 39.1% were girls. The 4.3% of boys opted to play with a man but the other 21.7% of boys chose rough and tumble with women. No girls chose this activity with a man.

Our research does not bear out published research that children see men offering more "fun" in these activities.

Given that men are often considered to be lead practitioners on construction and trains, we found the very low take-up of these activities surprising as trains are stereotypically seen as something boys prefer with adult male role models.

Superhero play, however confirmed research findings by being an activity where men could bring something special. Of the 52% of children opted for this activity, 47.8% were boys and 4.3% were girls and almost all chose to carry out the activity with a man.

Cooking was selected by 43.5% of children, 26% of boys and 17.2% of girls. An equal number of children chose to work with men and women.

The doll play included as a likely stereotypical girls activity produced predictable results. Virtually all children choosing this activity were girls who chose to play with women. This may be an area of play that needs more male input in order to dispel gender stereotyping.

The low take up by children for skipping from all children was interesting given that traditionally this was a key playground game and all nurseries have skipping ropes and the media and male images often portray sportsmen, especially footballers and boxers skipping in training.



The low take up by boys of science activities may also need to be addressed as boys have now been overtaken by girls in GCSE science.

The level of importance placed on a variety of activities by staff and whether or not they felt men could offer different and enhanced experiences to the children did not usually match the evidence provided by the children's choices. The research provided some surprising results. 50% of staff thought that football and 41% rough and tumble were activities that men could bring something extra. However, only 17.3% of children chose to play football and 4.3% rough and tumble with a male practitioner.

The results for one area of learning give real cause for concern. A worrying 5.4% of staff felt that stories and singing was a topic that men could add something special. Of the children who chose stories and singing 4.3% were girls and 26% were boys. None of them chose a man with whom to work.

The conclusions from this research are occasionally predictable, sometimes surprising and at times very

different from what was expected. Some of the results show examples of social stereotyping yet others are the opposite of what one might have anticipated.

The reason for this is uncertain. Children have clearly made their choices and the unexpectedness of those choices has confirmed that adults were not influencing them. One cannot, of course, rule out that children's choices were made because of their personal preferences for certain staff members.

The outcome has positively shown that it is possible to effectively carry out research with young children as long as the research methods are appropriate to their age and stage of development.

Overall, this research has provided extremely valuable insights into children's choices.



## Recommendations

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The research was extremely valuable as a way of allowing children's voices to be heard, particularly as they did not necessarily always give the answers that may have been expected. It would be helpful to extend this project and involve more children over a longer period of time across many more settings firstly in London and then beyond. In particular repeating this research using a slightly more refined method and in a way that collects data from a larger number of children over a longer period of time and a wider range of staff.

The staff perception that men cannot add any value to reading stories and singing also confirmed by the majority of children who chose female staff for these activities needs to be addressed. Challenging this view is critical given the worrying data about boys' literacy skills and the continuing negative attitude that reading is for girls!

Unless men provide positive gender-modelling in literacy, boys attending the nursery, particularly those who do not have male reading role-models at home, will continue to see reading and literacy that is done by girls and women. Given, any future success in education is predicated on competent literacy then failing to address this almost confirms failure for many male children.

Attention to the role of men supporting children's literacy, particularly boys, presents exciting opportunities to devise ways to work with fathers to raise awareness of the importance of them reading with their sons and being seen reading for pleasure. This needs to be linked to strategies to develop parent engagement and extend ways of enriching the home learning environment.

The staff responses highlight the lack of encouragement and even hostility by others to men joining the early years childcare profession. This focuses on the need to work with secondary schools and job centres to raise the awareness of career opportunities in the sector.

A high level of publicity and advertising is required to raise public awareness and to dispel many existing stereotypes especially a surprisingly commonplace assumption about the type of men attracted to childcare. This is not helped by negative media campaigns based often on supposition which infiltrates society and confirms rather than challenges negative assumption.

The results have been very interesting and valuable. The launch of the London Network of Men in Childcare could establish ways in which settings could work together and share experiences and successes.

The London Network may help to prevent male practitioners from feeling so isolated. Male practitioners are uniquely placed to dispel images of childcare being a "female" occupation and nurseries from being a "female preserve". They have opportunities to link more closely with fathers and to help to raise their confidence and parenting skills.

Finally, children's voices can be heard and when they are they demonstrate that what they want is often different from what adults think they want. It would be helpful to get an even clearer picture from carrying out this research again with a larger group of children over a longer period.

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