

# Men at work

Stories about gender inequality at work regularly hit the headlines, usually involving under-representation of women – such as in engineering, where females number one in 10. But what about the other side of the story?

The number of men working in nurseries is one of the biggest imbalances in all of today's workforces, with males making up just 2% of staff in early years care.

We spoke to nursery workers, NDNA members and expert organisations to find out why – and whether things are finally changing.

"Tom was just 20 years old when he joined our company. He – like many people, male and female – was simply looking for a chance to find a career that suited him," says Chris Townson, Director of Toybox Great Denham Nursery, NDNA's Nursery of the Year for the South of England.

Ten years on, Tom has flourished into a reliable, professional and trusted member of the team - and Toybox is still bucking the national trend by employing at least one male in each age group.

However, it hasn't always been an easy journey. Chris says: "I remember attending a safeguarding course where I had to remind the trainer that men are not the only gender that is a threat to children. On another occasion, we had a parent question the ethics of a man changing a child's nappy."

This typecasting is one of the main reasons so few men work in childcare, with former Conservative leadership contender Andrea Leadsom recently commenting: "Your odds are stacked against you if you employ a man. We know paedophiles are attracted to working with children" – to widespread outcry.

**"In my early days, parents would be telling my manager they weren't comfortable with a male changing nappies."**

Luke Walker, Deputy Manager at Rookery Nook Private Day Nursery in Bradford, said: "Comments like that really set the debate back. Things are easier for men in childcare now but there's a long way to go."

### Committed candidates

He continues: "I've been working for six years. In my early days, parents would be telling my manager they weren't comfortable with a male changing nappies. I'd been CRB checked like everyone else but it made me feel like I'd done something wrong.

"It took a while to build trust but I found that invariably, when families got to know me, they were fine with me and really pleased that I was working with their children."

Other reasons for the sector's gender imbalance include its status as a profession.

Luke continues: "Sometimes girls drift towards childcare but for boys leaving school it's a conscious decision and therefore there are some really good, really committed candidates. I went into childcare because I'd loved babysitting my cousins so much.

"It's so satisfying seeing children learn and grow and knowing you contributed to that."

Shaddai Tembo, from Bristol Men in Early Years Network echoes Luke's experience. He says: "Early years is rarely offered to men as a career choice. There is little understanding around the career path early years can offer and it is often perceived as a default option for girls at college."

The group is a city-wide network of men who work in childcare, and they aim to encourage more men to take up a career in early years.

Shaddai told us about the effects of the imbalance of male and female staff in nurseries: "It leads to a less diverse workforce.

"There is value in boys seeing role models in their everyday life. While many do have a male present in their lives, some don't, and it is those that benefit most from positive male interactions."

### Children's warm response

This is something Ken McArthur, NDNA York network chair and Nursery Management Today's most influential person in childcare for 2016, has experienced at his own nursery.

He said: "I think everyone knows the benefits of men working in childcare now. Polly Anna's is a small setting but we have one male member of staff, and the children respond brilliantly to having a man in the role.

"Richard is outgoing and he makes the children laugh. He sees that children should be happy and he engages the three and four-year-olds in particular."

If you are interested in learning more about men working in early years or becoming part of a regional group, search online for Men In The Early Years (#MITEY), Bristol Men in Early Years Network, Southampton Area Men in Early Years, Men in Childcare (Scotland) and YorOK (York network).

Another male professional, Adrian Davies, has just finished his Early Years Teaching qualification and will be teaching a reception class from September.

He said: "There are a few guys I work with and the kids warm to them really quickly. If a man was thinking about working in early years I would encourage them, because of the positive impact they have on children's learning and their different perspective."

Adrian first became involved in early years care when his children were young and he was looking for part-time work. There is a wider sign of this change in the statistics, as the number of men working part-time is set to rise by 20% by 2024.

Around two-fifths of nursery staff work part-time, making it a good career for people working reduced hours.

Support is growing for men working in childcare, from organisations like the Bristol Men in Early Years Network. Ken McArthur is part of a similar network in York. Both have the support of their local councils.

### Cohesive approach

There are also networks in Southampton and Scotland. The Fatherhood Institute is running a Men in the Early Years campaign and has set up a Men in Childcare Forum in Tower Hamlets. The first UK-wide Men in Early Years conference also launched earlier this year.

With more and louder calls for action, and support growing, it seems that now is the time for change. It doesn't look like it will happen easily or quickly, but most of the childcare workers and experts we spoke to are hopeful.

Ken McArthur said: "I think things are starting to change. Slowly, more men are working as early years educators."

And Shaddai Tembo said: "I do believe that as networks link up, a more cohesive approach is now being taken to engage more men and raise the profile of the sector as a whole.

"We look forward to meeting again in the autumn to work on an action plan for our next big conference, lobbying government and setting some concrete outcomes for the future."

## TIPS FOR NURSERIES AND MALE EARLY YEARS PRACTITIONERS

**Q: How can I attract male staff to my nursery?**

**A:** "This year we have added a male to our apprentice programme by actively going into schools and presenting to both males and females the option of a professional career in the childcare sector. Having three other men already working in the nursery encourages more to join. We are able to demonstrate equality and that having men around is the norm to us, not the exception. By shaping how our community thinks of us as a nursery, we then use this to recruit and manage a different type of Early Years Educator - staff irrelevant of gender that are looking for a profession in which they really can make a difference for the next generation, by delivering outstanding care and education."

*Chris Townson, Director of Toybox Great Denham Nursery*

**Q: What can I do to support my male nursery colleagues or staff?**

**A:** "Owners and managers don't always realise that male staff can feel uncomfortable, for example wearing the uniforms and using shared toilets. You have to turn it on its head and imagine a woman in that position. Male staff - particularly young workers - don't necessarily have the courage to tell their employer that they are uncomfortable, so it's about giving them that courage."

*Ken McArthur, owner of Polly Anna's Nursery*



*Luke Walker, deputy manager at Rookery Nook Day Nursery, at work with children*