Guest Speaker: David Wright Co-organizer of the Southampton Area Men in Early Years (S.A.M.E.Y.) Network spoke candidly about his personal experiences and how he ended up changing careers and working in Early Years. He observed that most men he met who work with children do so not because they consciously chose it as a career when they first left education but for rather more personal reasons and usually with the support of a partner or mother who is already working in the Early Years sector. He reflected that to encourage more men in to the sector it will need to be known and seen as an attractive option from an early age and the routes into the sector will need to be easier and better supported so men are less reliant on already having a loved one on the inside to provide knowledge, support and encouragement.

David talked about S.A.M.E.Y.’s aims; to mentor men new to Early Years; to try and get men into the same workplace/placement; to try and publicise men in Early Years and raise the profile. S.A.M.E.Y. have visited schools and had fun interactive stands at career fairs. This has been in conjunction with the local authority and would ideally also be done at an earlier age (before GCSEs) so children are aware and see it as a positive option before they start having to choose subjects that may affect their future careers.

S.A.M.E.Y. promote a “Boys and girls need women and men” message. Making it clear that just because they are a male group they are not saying that men are better educators than women or that it is just boys that benefit from men in the early years. We discussed diversity and equality, postulating that maybe a reason girls achieve more academically than boys is because the education environment is predominantly feminine during the formative years while observing that much of society after leaving education is still prejudiced in favour of men. So maybe by not having a gender balanced society in the early years of education we are failing our boys (academically by not engaging them with education) and our girls (socially by not preparing them for interactions with men). It is also possible that if men were more equal academically, society and business might not be conducted from such a defensive male perspective. We also discussed gender being formed less from biology and more from societal expectations.

David spoke of his experience in Poland and his knowledge of Men in Early Years in other countries saying that across the western world the statistics are similar with the percentage of men in the Early Years workforce hovering at around 2%. 
The exceptions to this appear to be in Norway and Iceland. In Norway there was a government funded initiative to increase the number of males and they reached 25%. This is above the 20% threshold thought to be the point at which a minority group is no longer perceived as unusual and is accepted by the majority and as such becomes self sustaining. However, when the funding was cut and the initiative stopped in Norway the numbers of men working in Early Years dropped and is currently at around 8%.

In Iceland there was a reform in the education system that gave equality of status to all education professionals from Early Years Teachers through to University Lecturers. Although David was not sure of the exact statistics he said that a happy result of the reform was gender equality amongst Early Years Professionals. This led to a discussion of the idea that maybe we don’t need to bang on about raising the profile of men within Early Years but rather focus on raising the profile of the profession itself.

David talked about the power of social media and how effective it has been for him in making contact with other support groups and networks. We talked about the need for cohesion between network groups across the UK and the strength this will give us to go further, a central place for guys to go to so we can communicate. David is organizing a national conference in Southampton early next year which we are welcome to attend and aims to strengthen links and begin to give us a national voice.

Iain has begun to reach out to secondary schools and higher education places about increasing our profile. Mark has made contact with Kenny Spence from the Scottish Men in Childcare (M.I.C) group. M.I.C have been selected to chair the European DECET network (Diversity in Early Childhood Education and Training). Diversity seems to be a big buzz word at the moment.

We now have a Men in Early Years Network page on the Bristol Early Years Research Website (bristolearlyyearsresearch.org.uk). This is funded by the Teaching Schools budget and is managed by Lucy Beck who is very helpful and incredibly efficient. It is looking great and in addition to our aims and ethos (which are already there) we plan to have a map of Bristol on there with all our settings and contact details and links between our settings and the site. We will also have our research questions and research findings, data, case studies, testimonials, articles, photos, podcasts, films, and links on there as well as harnessing the power of Survey Monkey to conduct our own research, so people visiting the site will be able to take part in our research. This will also mean our individual settings can conduct the same research without having to transcribe and interpret lots of handwritten data. Indeed, other networks and settings from around the country can also participate in the research if they choose. Initial research will look at perceptions, parental as well as young people (Secondary, Primary and Nursery
Ben, Jack, Rashani, Mitch and Will are formulating the questions and trying to present them in a tick box format rather than open ended questions. For example, ‘On a scale of 1-10 how comfortable are you leaving your child with a male practitioner?’ rather than ‘How do you feel about leaving your child with a male practitioner?’

Anyone interested in being involved with the content of our webpage please contact Jay. This is also a great time to send in any photos, articles, links to research etc.

We accepted Liz Jenkins (Head of St Werburgh’s Park Nursery School) offer to attend one of our meetings to run through the process of what happens from a management perspective if a member of staff has an allegation made against them. This will be done in conjunction with Jay giving his perspective having been on the receiving end of an allegation. We agreed that it would be good to have a support team within our network to help with issues of child protection and allegations. Any one interested in being part of this support group please contact Jay. We talked about ways of keeping yourself safe while still delivering best practice and compassionate care. David said he (S.A.M.E.Y?) are working on guidelines on how to protect yourself for men and women working with children, keeping in line with safeguarding policies. He is happy to share them with us.

Sally Jaeckle, who is the Early Years Services Manager for Bristol City Council (previously; Senior Early Years Adviser, South West) has made contact with us to see how the council may be able to support us. Initial thoughts were for data and funding. We looked at Surrey County Council (Early Years and Childcare service) who host their Men’s website and have a dedicated member of staff offering support just for men who work with children in Surrey, as well as 21 short films of men working with children. Surry has more than double the national average with 5% of the Early Years workforce male.

Our network continues to grow, we now have 36 members.

Next meeting 9th June 2015 2:30-5:30

Please let Rosie (rosie.ducket@bristol-schools.uk) know if you are coming to the meeting so we know what size room to use and how many refreshments to provide. Please can members who did not attend get in touch to let us know why, so we may be able to remove barriers and enable future participation. We also agreed on an anonymous feedback box as another way for members to be able to express their thoughts about the network.