

I am a World Forum Men in Early Childhood Education Co-coordinator and Australian representative, and coordinate and teach at a small community preschool. As founder of the national Males in Early Childhood Network Group, I provide mentoring for male early childhood students, and have presented locally and nationally on men in early childhood education.

I would like to highlight that currently in Australia, the number of men involved as staff in early childhood services is 2.6% of the total workforce. Men are not targeted as potential early childhood educators, which does not make sense if we are wanting a diverse workforce.

The benefits for children to have more men involved in early childhood services are far reaching. Developmentally, it is beneficial for young children to have exposure to gender diversity within their service. Having a stable male role model in the early years can assist in forming healthy gender identity for both boys and girls. Male participation allows children of both sexes to see that men can be as capable as women in caring for and teaching young children.

There are also benefits for fathers. If a male is present on the staff team, a rare circumstance, it can provide a signal to fathers that men are welcome in the early childhood centre setting. Seeing males in these roles shows that men can play a part in children's care and education. This may encourage fathers to increase their involvement and be an active participant in their child's experience of the early childhood service.

In the broader context, males as early childhood educators could also demonstrate to the wider community that men are capable of taking responsibility for children.

Men do not enter the field for the following reasons –

- Negative community attitudes that men face, including the fear of being accused of abusing children or being branded a paedophile.
- Low pay and working conditions in childcare, including the predominance of part time positions. Therefore the profession carries little prestige.
- The presumption that teaching young children is only for women or that childcare is little more than baby-sitting.
- Children's services employers and training institutions lack an understanding of how to recruit, support and retain men as workers or students. Males are often seen as tokens or a novelty, noticed because of their gender, not their skills or qualifications.
- Men studying in early childhood have an extremely low number of other men in the profession they can model themselves on.
- Men working in isolation from other men find it difficult to maintain confidence in their value in the field.

So what can be done to help counter these barriers?

- Targeting men to enter men-only early childhood training courses. This approach has been used successfully in Scotland.
- Establish and support male mentoring by making networks available to decrease isolation and encourage other men to enter the field.
- On the policy level, there must be a recognition of the importance of male workers in early childhood. The current Early Years Workforce Strategy does not specifically mention men as potential recruits when addressing the perceived future shortages of staff.
- Different models of early childhood services may be needed that will benefit the children and be more attractive to men. Men have been interested, for example, in working in the Norwegian outdoor preschool model.

There is a great deal of work to be done to reach a point where the early childhood sector reflects the shifts in the greater community, where there is strong support for fathers to be more actively engaged in caring for their children, but men as workers in the field are largely absent.