

Tackling the gender imbalance

We all have our part to play in addressing the gender imbalance in the early years by encouraging more men, particularly, to work in the sector, says Maureen Lee, of Best Practice Network.

As an EYTT provider, we are delighted that we are able to benefit from the excellent work of Bristol Men in Early Years in challenging the current gender imbalance in the early years. We have established a strong link with their network and each year welcome a member of their leadership team to training days. The organisation is hosting its third National Men in Early Years Conference in Bristol this July and we have encouraged past and present trainees and tutors to attend.

We have also encouraged everyone to think about how they can encourage their own settings/schools to commit to addressing the unhelpful gender imbalance in the sector and to use opportunities through work roles and through personal contacts to talk about early years education and care as professional for everyone. The arguments for a more equal gender balance are powerful because the present situation is disempowering and unnatural.

Shaddai Tembo is a member of the leadership team at Bristol Men in Early Years and gives a slightly different perspective on the reasons why we need to urgently do something to make settings less predominantly female: 'Working with children in early years is hands on, to say the least. It involves a kind of intimacy few other professions have. These moments matter because, far from being shunted outside into the garden with a football, men working in the profession are doing these things every single day.

'Cuddles given, plasters applied, wow moments shared, and upsets sorted. If there is a man in the setting it may

not be obvious – because they should be doing exactly the same thing as everyone else. Why, then, do we persist in the call for more men in early years? What exactly do they do that we are otherwise missing?

'The answer lies in that they are often doing absolutely the same things as women, and that in itself is incredibly significant. We don't need men to come in and do traditionally "manly" things. We need more than that. We need men to come in and change the image of what men have been to a better image of what men can be. That is, caring, compassionate, vulnerable, sometimes wrong – and not afraid to be any of these.

'The importance of a role-model, woman or man, who promotes a more "gender flexible pedagogy", as coined by Jo Warin and Vina Adriano, opens up opportunities for different ways of being. This has the potential to challenge the way we think about gender and its role in wider society. Children who grow up with diverse role-models won't be as restricted by the stereotypes fed to them by the media. Moreover, this has the potential to normalise the image of men in care work which, for far too long, has been deemed a woman's role.

'What to do about this? First, we should focus on the existing workforce. By reflecting on our own practice, by challenging our expectations and changing how we relate to children, there is a chance that we can begin to shift our cultural values towards a healthier balance. Next, we need to think about ways we can make the profession more of an option, for more people. This can happen through a change in public discourse around the importance of early years provision. In other words, we need to spread the word.

'At the third National Men in Early Years Conference, the conversation around how we can effectively address the workforce imbalance and try to counteract the dominant cultural constructions that needlessly divide children will be continued. This will go a long way toward highlighting the importance of addressing gender in the early years.'

Encouraging more young men (and indeed women) into the profession is much more likely if it is genuinely valued by, and valuable to, society. We all have an important part to play – with colleagues, parents and carers and in all of our family, professional and social networks. **eye**

Useful resources

- www.bmiey.co.uk
- https://search3.openobjects.com/mediamanager/southampton/directory/files/national_men_in_early_years_charter.pdf
- The third National Men in Early Years Conference is at City Hall, Bristol, on Tuesday July 10, 2018. Tickets, at the subsidised rate of £40 or £20 for students, plus booking fees, are available at www.eventbrite.co.uk/e/3rd-national-men-in-early-years-conference-bristol-2018-tickets-43895853680

The answer is that they are often doing absolutely the same things as women, and that in itself is incredibly significant. We don't need men to come in and do traditionally "manly" things.