

Valuing male child care professionals

By Phillip Rowell

We need men in child and youth care work. We need men to serve as strong, positive role models to boys, and to challenge the images of manhood ... [to] send a message, not only to boys, but to girls and to society as a whole, that real men care for others. (Winfield, 2005).

For some children, families and services, the employment of a male child care professional can be a new experience. Sometimes they can be curious or skeptical; why would a man want to care for children? Others will think the opposite and advocate that it is a wonderful affirmation of gender equality, equal opportunity and recognition of the importance of promoting positive role models.

For most services that employ a male child care professional there is a sense of partnership when women and men work together to build positive and trusting relationships with children and their families. The experience is rewarding and adds a new dimension to the provision of quality child care.

In 2001, only four per cent of the 68,000 child care professionals in Australia were men (recent figures suggest two per cent) while approximately 20 per cent of primary school teachers are male (ABS, 2001; Community Child Care, 2006; de Brito, 2007).

Despite these statistics there are dedicated, passionate and committed male child care professionals working with children. They are contributing to the diversity of children's services across a range of child care settings, although it may be more common for men to work in outside school hours care services. This is possibly due to the skills and interests of school age children and qualifications for staff reflecting social work, recreation or leisure requirements.

Valuing male role models

Child care services are representative of their communities and the broader society. Children and their families reflect many aspects of humanity which include culture, religion, language, additional needs and gender. Similarly, child care professionals represent the same diversity and depth of skills and knowledge, which reflects their beliefs, lifestyles and traditions.

Just as it is crucial to consider the cultural needs of children and their families, it is equally vital to recognise the importance of promoting and encouraging positive gender behaviours and modeling to girls and boys. One way this can be achieved is by the inclusion of male child care professionals with skills, practices and behaviours that reflect masculinity that can benefit a service's understanding of diversity.

Furthermore, male child care professionals who build trusting partnerships with children and their families, and work collaboratively with female colleagues, become a valuable resource for services. Male child care professionals can:

- Encourage children to develop their gender identity
- Promote respectful, harmonious relationships
- Initiate play and learning experiences which acknowledge the similarities and differences between genders
- Challenge stereotypes by promoting alternative images of masculinity which are not aggressive or unemotional
- Encourage families, especially fathers, to be more involved in the service's operations and support the role of fathers as important contributors to children's lives
- Advocate child care and education as a valued and worthwhile career path
- Reinforce that caring is a human response of which both men and women are capable

Understanding the challenges faced by men

While everyone needs to be treated equitably and fairly, it is also essential to recognise that how people interact with others, and why they do things in certain ways, is individual and may vary depending on their culture, lifestyle and gender.

Just as women may experience many challenges when entering male dominated professions such as medicine, journalism or law, male child care professionals also face challenges which are unique to them. This is often highlighted when men first choose child care as a career and face skepticism and questioning, not only from society, but from family and friends.



For some male child care professionals, finding a balance between being perceived as an equal while wondering if their skills are as 'natural' as their female peers can be unsettling, even if the judgement is unintentional. When men are confronted with traditional attitudes or beliefs that question their ability to nurture and educate children it can devalue the importance of children experiencing the diversity of gender roles.

These attitudes often relate to cultural expectations and social norms that define nurturing as a predominantly feminine quality. In some cultures, the care of young children is the primary responsibility and role of women, where men may have little input in child rearing practices until children are much older. There are also many other social and historical influences which have evolved over time that have established beliefs about what are acceptable feminine and masculine practices.

When caring for children, men may encounter and deal with a number of issues daily that challenge their professional decisions and practices, and if not supported and understood by child care services, they can feel isolated and alone. Questioning attitudes or unsupportive strategies can also affect how male child care professionals develop their caregiving practices and influence how they build relationships with children. Men may believe they need to reflect behaviours attributed to male stereotypes to become accepted, such as implementing practices which promote overtly masculine traits such as handshakes or 'high fives' instead of a hug.

Alternatively, skills such as carpentry or playing sport may automatically be assigned to men because it supports society's perceptions of masculinity. Male child care professionals may also be referred to as an authority figure when dealing with children's inappropriate behaviours, and be consequently perceived by children as a disciplinarian. Such actions reinforce masculine stereotypes of power or control, which contradicts the aim of planning children's experiences which promote gender equity and anti bias concepts.

Supporting men in their role

Children should have a variety of role models when they are growing up. If childcare and early education remain completely female dominated, children lose out on the contribution men can make and men lose out on a fulfilling career. (Jamieson, 2002).

While the inclusion of a male child care professional can be rewarding and positive, the challenge for some services is to understand some of the issues men face, and develop strategies to support and encourage them in their role. Services need to promote a culture that values each individual and embraces diversity and equality, which should be reflected in policies and practices that are developed in collaboration with all stakeholders.

Male child care professionals, along with their female colleagues, need to be supported by services so that children experience positive outcomes from observing men and women working together in harmony and sharing the responsibilities of caregiving. The following strategies may assist services in supporting male child care professionals:

Talk with male child care professionals about their values, goals, expectations, fears and concerns and develop strategies that support and encourage positive learning outcomes.

Network with other services that have had similar experiences and discuss strategies which ensure services remain equitable while meeting individual gender needs.

Consult with other child care professionals and external agencies for support and professional development opportunities or resources, which can assist in understanding the importance of gender equity in the workplace.

Develop and review the service's philosophy, policies and procedures to ensure that they reflect stakeholders' values and beliefs. When people express concern regarding men who care for children, discuss equal opportunity legislation and the procedures the service employs to promote child protection in relation to all adults, regardless of gender. For example, working with children checks and effective supervision.

Learn about the gender models in children's families, especially the role of fathers, and communicate to them the importance of their contribution to the child care experience. Establish a fathers' group to discuss how they can be involved in their children's experiences.

Provide a mentor for male child care professionals and students who can encourage and guide others through concepts of leadership and the importance of continued professional development.

Review caregiving practices which may be perceived as gender stereotyped such as nappy changing or carpentry, and redefine them as nurturing and learning skills and not feminine or masculine attributes.

Plan for professional development opportunities or family forums that discuss issues about the importance of respecting and celebrating gender diversity in the service.

For most male child care professionals, the decision to care for, and work with children is a conscious one. They may face skepticism from family, friends and society; they may face issues based on their gender which challenge them. However, male child care professionals choose the role because, like their female colleagues, they are passionate and committed to making a difference to children's lives, which is an attribute both men and women can share ■

References and further reading

- Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) 2001. Occupation by sex (a) - persons (cc55), table, Census of population and housing, Australia, Cat. No. 2022.0, ABS, Canberra, p. 2.
- De Brito, S. (2007, March 14). Where are all the male school teachers? *Sydney Morning Herald*.
- Cameron, C., Moss, P., & Owen, C. (1999). *Men in the nursery: Gender and caring work*. London: Paul Chapman Publishing.
- Community Child Care Co-operative Ltd. (2006). Men in childcare. *Broadside*, July, 6.
- Farquar, S., Cablk, L., Buckingham, A., Butler, D., & Ballantyne, R. (2006). *Men at work: Sexism in early childhood education*. Retrieved May 10, 2007, from http://www.childforum.com/publication_details.asp?REF_NO=26
- Jamieson, C. (2002). *Men urged to opt for childcare careers*. Retrieved May 5, 2007, from <http://www.scotland.gov.uk/News/Releases/2002/11/2490>
- Lynch, P. (n.d.). *Diversity and inclusion - means men too!*. Retrieved May 14, 2007, from <http://www.cecde.ie/english/pdf/Vision%20into%20Practice/Phil%20Lynch.pdf>
- Niva, L. (1998). *An Australian study of professional male child caregivers' beliefs, values and attitudes to childcare*. Retrieved April 23, 2007, from <http://www.aare.edu.au/98pap/niv98344.htm>
- Peeters, J. (2003). Men in childcare. *International Journal of Equity and Innovation in Early Childhood*, 1(1), 72-83.
- Sargent, P. (2005). *The gendering of men in early childhood education*. Retrieved May 10, 2007, from <http://www.male.fly.to/>
- Winfield, J. (2005). *One women's thoughts about male child and youth care workers*. Retrieved November 5, 2007, from <http://www.cyc-net.org/cyc-online/cycol-0708-winfield.html>