
What You Can Do Today

Recruiting and Retaining Men in Your Center

by Roger Neugebauer

A distinguished looking elderly man is shown asking his financial advisor, "I'd really like to take this job. It's something I've been wanting to do for a long time. What I want to know is whether I can afford to do this." The advisor assures him that his stock portfolio guarantees him financial security, and the commercial closes showing the gentleman playing happily with children in a child care center.

Many from the early childhood community applauded this financial services commercial for showing child care in such a positive light.

Others were not so happy.

Alan Berlin, executive director of **Southern Oregon Child and Family Council Head Start** in Central Point, Oregon, was angered by the commercial. He argued that it gave the message that the man chose child care only after he determined that he was already financially secure. It fostered the prevailing view that men cannot afford to pursue careers as preschool teachers.

The issue of men working in child care is haunted by such clashing perspectives:

- At a time when the media is playing up the new caring, sensitive man of the '90s, less and less men are finding their way into the caring professions.
- While many parents prefer centers with male teachers because they want their children to have positive male role models, many other parents avoid centers with male teachers because they don't want their children at risk to sexual abuse.
- While directors typically lament the lack of men in child care, many believe that men do not have a nurturing instinct.

What's the Problem

Despite all of these contradictions, one fact is incontestable — less than 1 in 20 workers in child care centers is a man. For a variety of reasons, our profession has been unsuccessful in recruiting significant numbers of men:

Societal attitudes. Many of society's attitudes about women and work have changed dramatically. For example, younger generations are much more likely than older generations to accept mothers of preschool children entering the workforce. Attitudes about men and work have not shifted as dramatically. By and large, it is still not viewed as normal that men should either choose to stay home to care for their preschool children or to work in a nurturing profession.

Low pay. Even though it is now okay for women to work, men are still expected to be the breadwinners. Men typically feel responsible, and are commonly held responsible, for earning enough to support one's family. Salaries in child care often fall below what men expect to earn to fulfill this responsibility. (This

begs the question Why is it not equally unacceptable for women to work in low paying jobs? — but that debate needs an article all to itself.)

Director attitudes. As tempting as it is to blame this problem on society in general, some of the responsibility lies within the profession. Not all directors are liberated in their views on men in child care. A survey by Tom Masterson of over 200 center directors in Ohio yielded these surprising findings (Nelson and Sheppard):

- Most directors believed that women had a natural ability to nurture children and that men failed to have this instinct.
- Most directors would not consider hiring a male without an early childhood degree even though they admitted having hired females without degrees.
- Most directors would not consider allowing a male teacher to change diapers or to toilet train toddlers.
- Directors were much more likely to fear that male teachers would molest children than female teachers.
- Directors were more fearful that male teachers would play too roughly and injure children than female teachers.

For all of these powerful reasons, men do not eagerly seek, and are not often aggressively sought after for, work in early childhood. But some courageous men, fortunately, do find their way into our centers. Once employed, they still find many hurdles to cross:

Suspicion. Over the years, male teachers have shared with me many encouraging stories of the kudos they receive from parents who are happy to have a male teacher on

staff. Unfortunately, they too often share incidents where parents, through direct assertions or indirect innuendoes, express distrust of their motives and behaviors. I particularly remember this comment a male teacher shared in a workshop on men in child care . . .

“I take great pride in my work with children, and it used to bring me great joy. This all changed the first time a parent asked the director to take her child out of my classroom because she didn’t trust me. Now every time I comfort an injured child or snuggle up with a child to read a book, I find myself being anxious that a parent will observe this and question my motives.”

Parents and staff, as well as adults a male teacher encounters away from the center, may also question his choice of profession. The implication conveyed is that he is working in child care only because he was unable to land a job worthy of a man.

Unequal treatment. Male teachers often joke about how they are always called upon to lift heavy objects, to check out why the center’s van won’t start, or to repair the fence. Not so funny, however, are center rules and procedures that single men out: “Male teachers cannot change diapers”; or “Male teachers may not take children into the bathrooms”; or “Male teachers may not be left alone in charge of a classroom.” Often these rules are well-intentioned — they are seen as protecting men from charges of abuse. The implied message, however, is that men are not to be trusted.

Isolation. “Because men in the early childhood field have to face isolation on a daily basis,” reports Bruce Sheppard, “it ranks as one of the major issues having a negative impact on men.” With so few men working in early childhood educa-

tion, a male teacher has few opportunities to talk to other men on a regular basis about his fears and frustrations as well as his joys and aspirations.

What’s to Be Done

Our profession’s performance in recruiting and retaining men appears to be heading in the wrong direction. The National Day Care Study (Ruopp) found that in 1977 just over 6% of all center classroom staff were men. The National Child Care Staffing Study (Whitebook) reported that in 1988 men comprised only 3% of the teaching staff in their survey. Years of inflammatory coverage on sexual abuse, and the lack of progress on salaries, apparently have taken their toll.

It is imperative that this trend be reversed. Children are spending significant portions of their childhoods in preschool and child care settings. If children only experience women as teachers in these settings, this will reinforce and perpetuate the myth that only women have the ability to nurture, that raising children is strictly women’s work.

So here are some things you can do at your center to recruit and retain men. Many of these ideas come from an excellent resource, **Men in Child Care and Early Education: A Handbook for Administrators and Educators**, edited by Bryan G. Nelson and Bruce Sheppard (see “Resources”). Others were contributed by Exchange Panel of 200 members and by other directors and male teachers interviewed for this article.

Examine your own attitudes. Tom Masterson’s survey results came as a real shock to many directors. We all like to see ourselves as open minded and accepting. But if you, the director, believe that men aren’t by

nature nurturing, or that men are more likely than women to be abusers, your efforts to employ men will be half-hearted.

Don't use parents as scapegoats.

Sometimes directors disguise their own anxieties about male teachers by blaming parents for their lack of support for men. Have you ever said, "Parents would withdraw their children if we hired a man to care for the infants" or "We'd be exposing male teachers to charges of abuse if we let them change diapers"? If you have, ask yourself if you were indeed speaking for the parents or for yourself.

Before you embark on a campaign to employ male teachers, you need to examine your own attitudes, and be convinced 100% that this is the right thing to do. This self-examination is just as important for male as female directors. Male directors are by no means immune to having anxieties about employing male teachers.

Be up front with parents. If your program is going to make employing male teachers an important goal, you need to be pro-active in broadcasting your intentions to current and prospective parents.

If a parent has serious misgivings about leaving their child in the care of a man, it is better for that parent to withdraw their child than for them to be unhappy, suspicious, and accusatory. On the other hand, parents who have mixed feelings about male teachers may have their anxieties relieved by a director confidently assuring them that employing male teachers is a real plus.

Working in the early childhood field is a courageous move for men. Likewise, directors who are determined to employ men in their program will

be called upon to display the courage of their convictions.

Provide comfort in numbers. **Willy Stump** explained that he sought employment at **Learning Tree Montessori** in Seattle, Washington, because this center already employed five men. This is an extremely important factor for men looking for work in early childhood. If your center is recruiting its first male teacher, assure candidates that you are committed to hiring more than one man. And, take heart — convincing a second man to work in your center is much easier than recruiting the first.

Stand out. Increase the likelihood that men looking for work in early childhood will apply at your center by publicizing your male-friendly environment. Director **Jane Humphries**, for example, was able to have the success of hiring men at **St. Luke's Child Development Center** in Oklahoma City, Oklahoma, featured in an article, "Men in Child Care," in the statewide **Daily Oklahoman**.

Spread the word among early childhood professionals in your community that your center places a priority on hiring men. Give workshops at local conferences on recruiting and retaining men. In your job announcements, state that your center is recruiting male and female teachers.

Sandra Monahu, owner of **First Care of Wheaton**, in Wheaton, Illinois, let the instructors at the local college know that her center employs men. Now they call her when they have a male student looking for work.

Recruit one on one. According to Nelson and Sheppard, men working in the field often were encouraged to enter the field by a supportive individual. "Whether it is the

director, a board member, a parent or spouse," they suggest, "there needs to be someone who makes the initial gesture of asking a man to work in child care."

Karen Stephens, director of the **Illinois State University Child Care Center** in Normal, Illinois, keeps her eyes open at all meetings and college classes for potential male teachers to approach. Once Karen observed that a communications major who came to her center to videotape children for a class project was relating well to the children. She encouraged him to come back as a volunteer. He ended up getting a second degree in early childhood and has now been a head teacher in her center for seven years.

Advertise in all the right places.

Think about where in your community men who may be interested in working in early childhood may congregate. **Jane Romatzke**, director of the **Tempe After School Enrichment Program** in Tempe, Arizona, has had success in recruiting men by targeting her advertising on college campuses, in recreation centers, in health clubs, and at sports activities. She also has found it effective to reword traditional help wanted announcements to include words like *recreation, activities, and leadership*.

Nelson and Sheppard recommend advertising in city-wide, neighborhood, and ethnic newspapers. To reach unemployed men, they suggest that you place your ad under *General Help* and that you label it *Youth Work*.

Treat all employees alike. Its can be easy to fall into the trap of assigning men stereotypical jobs — those of an athletic, mechanical, or active nature. Just as you would never think of assigning different tasks for black and white teachers, you should not

treat male and female teachers differently.

Chuck Larson, director of **Seagull Schools** in Honolulu, Hawaii, strives to avoid having preconceived expectations for men. He encourages them to be themselves and teach in a manner that emphasizes their personal strengths.

Alan Berlin cautions against having a separate set of policies for men. For example, your policies should read that no employee (not no *male* employee) should be left alone in charge of children.

This may be a difficult decision for directors. On the one hand, you can certainly see how male teachers would be offended by rules that communicate that they are not to be trusted. On the other hand, you may be dealing with some degree of paranoia from parents, or more likely from your lawyer or your insurance agent, who want you to be extra cautious. Try not to cave into this paranoia. Instead, invite anxious adults to spend time at the center observing the professionalism of your male teacher(s).

Involve fathers. One way to provide a more comfortable environment for men, as well as to provide a richer experience for the children, is to increase the participation of fathers in your program. For over ten years, for example, the **Fairfax-San Anselmo Children's Center** in Fairfax, California, has been holding a monthly Saturday morning *Men's Breakfast*. Fathers or male friends are invited to come to the center with their children to have breakfast, to discuss parenting issues, and to make repairs at the center. The impact has been dramatic. Not only do 50% of the fathers attend the breakfasts, but nearly 100% of them attend parent conferences; and the center has been able to recruit at

least one male teacher for each classroom. (For practical ideas on increasing the involvement of fathers, check out **Getting Men Involved** by James A. Levine.)

The Care Castle in Colorado Springs, Colorado, increases male presence by recruiting male senior volunteers. Director **Judy Priebe** reports that currently six men volunteer at least once a week to work in classrooms with the toddlers and preschoolers.

Help men find support. According to Nelson and Sheppard, directors should help their male teachers find support outside the center. Encourage them to attend conferences where workshops about men in child care are being offered or where male caucuses are being held. Help them connect with any local organized groups of men in child care. If no such group exists, encourage and help them to get one started.

Provide good working conditions. The most professionally committed teaching candidates, male and female, will want to work in the best centers — centers that offer the best quality services and provide the best working conditions for staff.

Two of the three teachers at the **Peaks Island Child Development Center** in Peaks Island, Maine, are men. When director **Janine Blatt** asked them why they chose to work at her center, their reasons had nothing to do with gender issues. Instead, they cited the center's environment, the working conditions, the working wages and benefits, and the professional orientation of the center. Likewise, **Harold**, a teacher of two year olds at **The Good Samaritan Hospital Child Care Center** in San Jose, California, has remained at this

center because of "the competitive salary, good benefits, and pleasant working conditions." Karen Stephens concludes that she has had success in retaining male teachers the same way she retains female teachers — by giving them "support to do their job and continually showing appreciation for their effort and good work."

We have a long way to go in recruiting men into the early childhood profession. Hopefully some of these ideas will be helpful to you. When you find new ideas that enable your center to recruit and retain men, please share them with us. We want others to be inspired by your success.

Resources and References

Levine, James A. et al. **Getting Men Involved: Strategies for Early Childhood Programs**. Scholastic Inc., Early Childhood Division, 730 Broadway, New York, NY 10003, (800) 325-6149. (\$12.95 plus \$2.25 shipping/handling)

Nelson, Bryan G., RN, and Bruce Sheppard, MTS (editors). **Men in Child Care and Education: A Handbook for Administrators and Educators**. Men in Child Care Project, 2420 31st Avenue South, Minneapolis, MN 55406. (\$15, including shipping)

Ruopp, Richard et al. **Children at the Center**. Cambridge, MA: Abt Associates, 1979.

Whitebook, Marcy. **Who Cares? Child Care Teachers and the Quality of Care in America**. Oakland, CA: Child Care Employee Project, 1989.