



EUROPEAN SOCIAL FUND:
 helping develop employment by
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National Flexi-work Partnership
 work-life balance project



Men in Childcare:
 promoting gender equality in children
evaluation of a pilot project



margret fine-davis • ciara o'dwyer • mary mccarthy
 • grace edge • mairéad o'sullivan • keeley wyne

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Trinity College Dublin



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Table of Contents		Page
	<i>Acknowledgements</i>	<i>i</i>
	<i>List of tables</i>	<i>iii</i>
	<i>List of figures</i>	<i>iii</i>
1.	Introduction	1
1.1	Background	1
1.2	Rationale for the Men in Childcare project	1
2.	Method	4
2.1	Description of the pilot project and research design	4
2.1.1	Recruitment of men into childcare traineeship	4
2.1.2	Attitudinal study in two childcare centres	4
2.2	Limitations of small-scale case-studies	5
2.3	Sample	5
2.4	Questionnaire	6
2.5	Data collection	6
2.6	Data analysis	7
3.	Results	8
3.1	Background characteristics	8
3.1.1	Centres	8
3.1.2	Staff	8
3.1.3	Parents	10
3.2	Motivations of childcare workers: reasons for entering the world of childcare	12
3.3	Attitudes to male childcare workers	13
3.3.1	Attitudes of managers, staff and parents	13
3.3.2	Attitudes of children	15
3.4	Skills men bring to childcare	16
3.5	Gender balance within the centres	18
3.6	Safety, trust, responsibility	19
3.7	Perceptions of childcare	21
3.8	Career prospects for male and female childcare workers	22
3.9	Recruiting men into childcare	22
3.10	Childcare policy issues	23
4.	Summary, discussion and implications	27
4.1	Introduction	27
4.2	Reasons for working in childcare	27
4.3	The male childcare worker as a “role model”	27
4.4	Issues of trust	28
4.5	Men entering female dominated professions	28
4.6	Promoting gender equality and equal opportunities	29
4.7	Implications for the development of childcare in Ireland	29
	References	31

List of tables		Page
2.1	Breakdown of the sample	5
3.1	Age profile of the male and female childcare workers	8
3.2	Highest educational achievement of male and female childcare workers	9
3.3	Proportion of male and female childcare workers with a qualification in childcare	9
3.4	Highest educational achievement of managers	10
3.5	Marital status of parents	10
3.6	Age profile of parents	10
3.7	Highest educational achievement of parents	11
3.8	Employment status of parents	11

List of figures		Page
3.1	Percentage of agreement/disagreement with the statement <i>“I approve of having men working in childcare because they provide a male role model to children”</i>	13
3.2	Percentage of agreement/disagreement with the statement <i>“Having male childcare workers is especially good for families with single mothers as it gives the child a male role model”</i>	14
3.3	Preference of parents when talking to a member of staff regarding their children	14
3.4	Extent of approval/disapproval with having male childcare workers in childcare centres in general	15
3.5	Percentage of agreement/disagreement with the statement <i>“Working with children is best done by women”</i>	17
3.6	Percentage of agreement/disagreement with the statement <i>“It does not matter what the sex of a childcare worker is, as long as they are kind and competent”</i>	17
3.7	Extent of agreement/disagreement that in general more men should be employed as childcare workers	18
3.8	Percentage of agreement/disagreement with the statement <i>“I think some parents are uneasy about having male childcare workers in the childcare centre”</i>	20
3.9	Percentage of parents’ agreement/disagreement with the statement <i>“I would be uneasy having male childcare workers in the childcare centre”</i>	20
3.10	Percentage of agreement/disagreement with the statement <i>“I would be uncomfortable with male childcare workers carrying out personal care activities such as changing nappies”</i>	20
3.11	Percentage of male childcare workers’ agreement/disagreement with the statement <i>“I would be uncomfortable carrying out personal care activities such as changing nappies”</i>	20

1 INTRODUCTION

1.1 Background

A recurring obstacle to the full participation of women in employment is the fact that women have the dual burden of work and domestic care (Fine–Davis, Fagnani, Giovannini, Hojgaard, and Clarke, 2004). The traditional view is that childcare is ‘women’s work’ and is something men cannot or do not do. Encouraging men into childcare challenges these prejudices and promotes equality in roles between men and women, both at home and in the workplace.

The Men in Childcare Pilot Project was carried out in order to introduce an innovative approach to gender mainstreaming at the early stages of a child’s life when attitudes to gender roles are being formed. The Project was developed to highlight the need to desegregate a gendered profession and was the first of its kind to be carried out in an Irish context. It involved two phases. The first was to encourage more men into childcare through a campaign to recruit men into the existing FÁS Childcare Traineeship, and the second was to evaluate the effects of men as childcare workers. This involved collaboration with FÁS, one of the partners of the National Flexi-work Partnership, as well as childcare providers in the public and private sectors. Thus the pilot involved an action component and a research component. These will be described in detail in Sections 2 and 3. Before describing the project and the results of the research, it may first be useful to describe the rationale for the project in the context of some of the key findings of previous research in this area.

1.2 Rationale for the Men in Childcare Project

Looking after and taking care of children has traditionally been categorised as something that mothers do. Consequently childcare services are often seen as offering mothering substitutes (Cameron, Moss and Owen, 1999). It is no surprise then that the childcare profession is comprised of an almost all-female workforce even though research has shown that boys and girls both benefit from interacting with positive and nurturant male role models. Chick, Heilman-Houser and Hunter (2002) argue that childcare centres should consider the ‘hidden messages’ that all-female childcare centres may send to children. One such message is that childcare is something that men cannot or will not do and that by



extension, caring of any sort is a task that is essentially “unmanly”. The presence of caregivers of both sexes demonstrates to children that men as well as women can be carers. Men can provide role models for children in a caring context and show that “manliness can include caring” (Parkin, 1997). Male childcare workers can challenge stereotyped views of women and childcare, i.e., traditional and widely held beliefs that work in childcare is ‘naturally’ gendered in terms of being ‘women’s work’ (Cameron, 2001). The presence of male childcare workers can help to challenge and reverse stereotypical views of men’s caring abilities and encourage staff to challenge their own gender assumptions (Burgess and Ruxton, 1996; Cameron *et al.*, 1999).

In her discussion paper, Jensen (1996) identifies five main reasons to encourage the participation of men in the childcare sector. These include for the welfare of: 1) children; 2) staff; 3) parents; 4) the men themselves; and 5) the labour market. We discuss these in turn overleaf:

1. For the benefit of children

The first, and most important reason to encourage more men in to the childcare sector is to benefit the children they will care for. This is not a criticism of the excellent work being carried out by women in both the formal and informal childcare sectors. It is, however, in the best interests of children that they receive care from both women and men. A more equal gender mix among childcare providers will ensure that children are cared for in an atmosphere of gender equality. Another argument is that children brought up in one-parent families headed by women will benefit from their interaction with positive male figures.

2. To facilitate staff well-being and egalitarian gender role attitudes

Much of the research around men in childcare shows that female childcare workers support the introduction of more men into the childcare sector. It has been found that an all-female working environment can, at times, be stressful and that the presence of male childcare workers can often diffuse the tension. Men often provide a “counterculture” to the traditional culture of the childcare centre. This brings variety and diversity of opinion and views to the childcare centre, creating different dynamics and perspectives amongst the childcare team. Moreover, as the presence of male childcare workers challenges stereotypical views of women, men and childcare (Cameron, 2001), their presence encourages other staff to challenge their own gender assumptions (Burgess & Ruxton, 1996; Cameron *et al.*, 1999).

3. For the benefit of the parents

Research has shown that parents of children are mainly positive about the employment of male childcare workers in childcare centres. Some may express initial doubts; however when they get to know the male childcare worker(s), these doubts are usually assuaged. The presence of male workers in a childcare centre can often help to create an environment in which male parents feel more comfortable and relaxed. Centres which only employ female childcare workers can sometimes make male parents feel like “outsiders.” The presence of male childcare workers can often be influential in getting fathers more involved in a centre and the daily life of their child.

4. For the benefit of the male childcare workers themselves

Caring in general, and specifically for children, is often seen as “women’s work.” There are, however, no biological reasons why men cannot be good carers. All-female childcare centres can, however, reinforce and perpetuate the myth that men cannot care for and look after children. The participation of male childcare workers not only shows that men can, do and want to care for children, but that it is both interesting and emotionally rewarding work, thus shattering the myth that childcare is the “natural” preserve of women.

5. To promote equal opportunities in the labour market

The formal provision of childcare has been developed to ensure that both men and women have equal opportunities in accessing and participating in employment. Ironically, however, the childcare sector itself remains an extreme example of gender-segregation in the labour market. The fact that it is female-dominated is one of the main reasons put forward for the low status of childcare as a profession. Literature indicates that female-dominated professions, such as teaching, nursing and social work tend to be viewed as lower status than more male-dominated or gender balanced professions (Sumsion, 2005; Lyons, Quinn and Sumsion, 2003). In addition, a higher percentage of the small number of men that do enter female-dominated professions tend to earn promotion faster than their female counterparts. Thus, despite the fact that research has shown that both boys and girls benefit from interacting with positive and nurturing male role models, very few men are employed as childcare workers at present. Recent observers have begun to question whether this gender imbalance in the childcare profession is having an effect on the attitudes of children towards men and women, thus reinforcing traditional stereotypical roles (Chick *et al.*, 2002; Cameron, 2001). De-segregation of the childcare sector would not only ensure a more equal mix of the sexes employed in childcare centres, it should also effect changes in the attitudes of young boys by helping to ensure that, when they become adults, they develop more egalitarian approaches towards the distribution of domestic work and caring roles.

The basic premise that surrounds the encouragement of men into the childcare profession is that it is both beneficial and desirable to show young children that men can, and want, to care for them. It is the view of the National Flexi-work Partnership that the development of egalitarian gender role attitudes and behaviour in children, including the notion that men can and want to be carers, can be fostered through the promotion of non-stereotyped role models in the childcare sector. It is hoped that the children exposed to nurturing male role models in this context will develop attitudes about male and female behaviour which will carry over into their adult life. It is important that this approach to gender mainstreaming is introduced at the early stages of a child's life when attitudes to gender roles are being formed. This has widespread implications for all household and domestic tasks and can potentially help to facilitate a more equal redistribution of these tasks between women and men. If children are provided with positive role models at an early stage of their life, when attitudes to gender roles are being formed, they are likely to develop more egalitarian attitudes about male and female behaviour, which they can then carry over into their adult life. Children, and thus, in the long term, society, will benefit from more men working in childcare, as they will see that both men and women take responsibility for caring.

2 METHOD



2.1 Description of the pilot project & research design

In order to assess the effect of men as childcare workers within an Irish setting, a case-study approach was adopted, whereby the attitudes of centre managers, parents, children and staff towards male childcare workers would be assessed. It was hoped to recruit male childcare workers and place them in childcare centres willing to participate in the pilot project in order to increase the number of men working in childcare in Ireland. FÁS, one of the collaborating partners in the National Flexi-Work Partnership, was already providing training for childcare workers through its Childcare Traineeship. FÁS agreed to participate in a recruitment drive to encourage more men to enter the childcare field and to take up its Childcare Traineeships. In addition, two private childcare providers, who were also collaborating with the Work-Life Balance Project as childcare employers, agreed to provide job placements for these trainees. Both said they would be able to provide jobs for several male childcare workers at the end of the training.

2.1.1 Recruitment of men into childcare traineeship

It was decided to focus on recruitment for a FÁS Traineeship course that was scheduled to start in September 2003, headed up by FÁS in Loughlinstown. A series of advertisements was placed in papers in the catchment areas and FÁS offices also highlighted the scheme. The NCNA (National Children's Nurseries Association) also gave the scheme publicity in their publication, *NCNA News* (NCNA, 2003). Pat Kenny on RTE Radio interviewed the Project Director and a male childcare worker in one of the collaborating centres. All of these approaches helped to raise awareness around the issue of men in childcare and to assist in recruiting men to the traineeship.

Approximately 40 men contacted the Project and, of these, five applied to FÁS to be considered for the traineeship. Unfortunately, one of the two courses due to start in September 2003 was postponed and rescheduled for January 2004. Two candidates started this course and one completed it. In addition, another FÁS Traineeship due to start in another location was also postponed.

In practical terms, the take up for the Men in Childcare training proved less than the Partnership would have liked. This highlights the difficulty in recruiting men to this field, but also reflects the postponements in the FÁS training courses at this time. Nevertheless, the real value of this exercise rests in the awareness level raised through the project and its impact on all who participated in the process, as well as in the results of the research to be reported here. This is the first time an in-depth qualitative and quantitative study of attitudes towards men in childcare has been carried out in Ireland.

2.1.2 Attitudinal study in two childcare centres

Following on from the recruitment process, two childcare centres were chosen for participation in the pilot project, both of whom had been represented on the Project's Working Party of Employers and both of whom currently employed male childcare workers. In addition, the male trainee who completed the FÁS course was interviewed. He was working in another privately-owned centre at the time of interview.

Of the two childcare centres studied, one ('Centre A') was community-based, located in a lower socio-economic area in a Dublin suburb, and the other ('Centre B') was a privately owned centre in a Dublin suburb, catering for children of a higher socio-economic background. Both centres were studied in order to assess the attitudes of parents, as well as managers, female and

male childcare workers employed in the centre towards the issue of male childcare workers.

Within each childcare centre, a sample of parents, managers, male and female childcare workers were interviewed in order to evaluate the effect of male childcare workers on the centre as a whole. Attitudes of a sample of children in Centre A were also studied.

All of the staff and parents were informed of the purpose of the study and asked to participate. In order to protect the confidentiality of the two centres, as well as all of the respondents interviewed, as little information as possible will be revealed about both centres in reporting the results of the study. Pseudonyms are used throughout the report in relation to any respondents referred to.



2.2 Limitations of small-scale case-studies

In her literature review of studies on men in childcare, Cameron (2001) remarks that small-scale studies raise questions about representativeness and reliability. It is difficult to generalise their results but recurring and divergent themes and issues can be identified across the studies and it is possible to seek explanations for these. She also states that many studies examining the issue of men in childcare are small-scale, and often result in findings that differ from those of other studies. She attributes this to the fact that the small number of childcare centres evaluated within each study does not provide a wide enough scope for generalised findings. As the present study looks only at two childcare centres, it is also the case that the findings cannot be generalised to other childcare centres in Ireland. However, as the subject of the effect of men in childcare is a relatively new area in Ireland and few studies have been carried out, the present study is an important contribution to the area.

2.3 Sample

A total of 42 people were interviewed for the study. This included a sample of managers, male and female childcare workers and parents from Centres A and B, as well as the male FÁS Trainee Childcare Worker. In addition, six children from Centre A were interviewed. A total of five male childcare workers were interviewed, along with 13 female childcare workers who work directly with the male childcare workers, five managers, 13 parents and six children (see Table 2.1). The parents all had children being cared for by the male childcare workers interviewed. The children were all in groups with the male and female childcare workers. Twenty-six of the 42 people interviewed were from Centre A, 15 were from Centre B and the remaining respondent was the male FÁS Trainee Childcare Worker. Of the 13 parents interviewed, 11 were female. Four of the five managers were female and one male. Of the six children interviewed, three were male and three were female.



Table 2.1: Breakdown of the sample

Respondent Group	Centre A		Centre B		FAS Trainee		Total	
	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%
Male Childcare Workers	3	11.5	1	6.7	1	100.0	5	11.9
Female Childcare Workers	7	26.9	6	40.0	-	-	13	31.0
Managers	2	7.7	3	20.0	-	-	5	11.9
Parents	8	30.8	5	33.3	-	-	13	31.0
Children	6	23.1	0	0.0	-	-	6	14.2
Total	26	100.0	15	100.0	1	100.0	42	100.0

2.4 Questionnaire

Four separate questionnaires – for managers, for male childcare workers, female childcare workers and parents – were designed to explore people’s attitudes towards male childcare workers¹. While each questionnaire aimed to explore the attitudes of respondents in a particular group, there was a high degree of overlap of questions in order to compare the attitudes between the groups.

Each of the four sets of respondents was first asked for some background information. Managers were asked for some information about the centre they managed, including the number and ages of children attending the centre and the number of staff employed there. The male and female childcare workers were asked to give some information about the length of time they had been working in the centre and in the area of childcare in general. They were also asked to give some details about their job description and their experience of the job to date. Parents were asked a series of questions on their children attending the centre and the level of contact they had with the childcare centre.

Parents, managers and female childcare workers were then asked some questions on their attitudes towards male childcare workers, including the extent to which they approve or disapprove of the latter, and whether they perceive any benefits or problems in employing male childcare workers. Male childcare workers themselves were asked what they thought were the attitudes of parents, staff and children towards male childcare workers in general.

All four groups were asked the extent to which they agreed or disagreed with a series of statements about male childcare workers, such as “It doesn’t matter what the sex of a childcare worker is, as long as they are kind and competent,” “Working with children is best done by women”, etc.

Each of the four sets of respondents were then asked some demographic questions, including their sex, age range, marital status, highest educational qualification. Parents were asked whether they participated in paid employment and staff were asked whether they had a qualification in childcare.

All respondents were asked if they would like to make any recommendations on the development of the childcare field in Ireland and on childcare policy in Ireland.

In addition to the other four groups described above, six children from Centre A were interviewed. The interviews were carried out in an open, unstructured manner, with a very brief list of questions as a guide. The interviews with the children were conducted according to best practice; age appropriate questions were asked, and drawing paper and crayons were supplied to the children to make them feel comfortable and as a way of eliciting information. For example, after introductions, children were asked about the centre and encouraged to draw a picture of the centre. Then they were asked “who minds you here in the centre?” They were asked what kinds of games and other activities they did with their female and male childcare workers respectively. Permission of parents/guardians and the childcare centre were obtained before the interviews were carried out. In all cases, a staff member from the centre was invited to sit in on the interview to ensure that the child felt comfortable and secure. If the child was alone with the interviewer, the door was left open. Interviewing the children was found to be less productive than anticipated due to the young age of the children; hence, this aspect of the research was not replicated in Centre B.

2.5 Data collection

Interviews were carried out on an individual face-to-face basis during the period April 2004 to January 2005. Each interview took between 30 to 40 minutes to complete. Both qualitative and quantitative data were collected; however the emphasis was on eliciting qualitative responses. Almost all of the interviews with the male and female childcare workers, centre managers and parents were carried out within a private room within the childcare centre. Some of the managers were interviewed in their own offices, while another male childcare worker who was no longer working in the centre was interviewed in his new place of work. Extensive field notes were taken at each interview, in which relevant quotes made by the interviewee were written down.

2.6 Data analysis

The qualitative and quantitative data were analysed separately. The qualitative data consisted of richer information, as it consisted of open-ended quotes from the interviewees. In addition, it was possible to compare and contrast the attitudes of the managers, male and female childcare workers and parents under different headings. The qualitative findings made up the central focus of the analysis, with the quantitative results adding a corroborative element and allowing more precise comparison of attitudes between groups. As the interviews with the children were structured differently, they were analysed separately from the four other groups.

The qualitative data were analysed thematically, through a coding process. Firstly, the qualitative data were 'coded', whereby certain themes were extracted from the field notes. The codes were then assessed to explore similarities and/or differences in responses of the various groups. The codes and relationships within the text were then explored to produce a coherent explanation of the findings from the data.

The quantitative data were analysed to explore the distribution of answers across each of the four groups, as well as which variables, if any, had a bearing on respondents' attitudes towards men working in childcare. Quantitative data were not collected from the children interviewed.

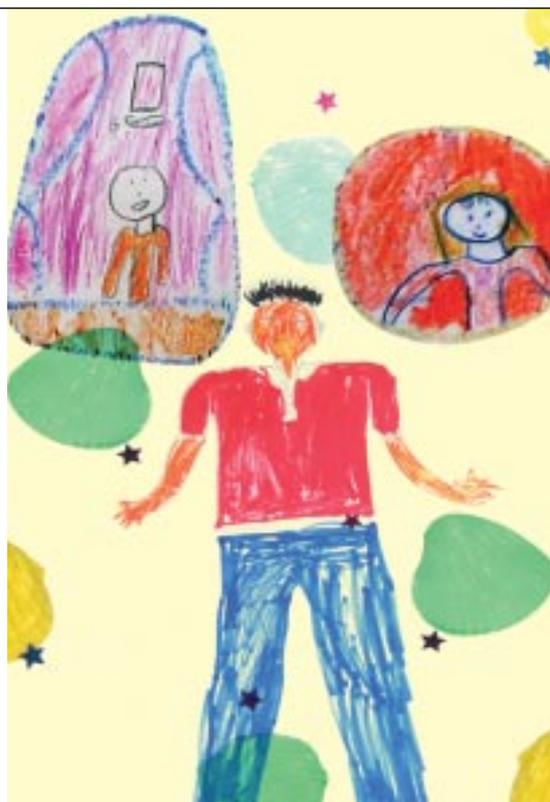
3 RESULTS

3.1 Background characteristics

In this section we describe some of the background characteristics of the two centres studied and of the respondents. It should be borne in mind that these two centres are not representative of all childcare centres in Ireland. They are specific, and indeed unique centres because they both have male childcare workers. This is a relatively rare occurrence in Ireland. Further, it should be borne in mind that the samples for the study are small and consist only of the male childcare workers, their female colleagues and managers who work with them, some of the children in their care and some of the parents of the children. They are not complete samples of the staff in these centres. Thus, the data reported only apply to the respondents interviewed for the study.

3.1.1 Centres

Centre A caters for approximately 200 children, ranging in age from eight weeks to 12 years. At the time the study was being carried out, there were 60 childcare staff members working in the centre, 58 of whom were female. Forty-five of the female childcare workers had children of their own attending the centre. The two male childcare staff care for both the pre- and after-school children. In addition a male who had formerly worked at Centre A was also interviewed. Centre B caters for approximately 80 children. The children attending the centre range in age from three months to 12 years of age. One male childcare worker, who looked after both the pre- and after school children, was employed at the centre at the time the study was being carried out, as well as 17 female workers.



3.1.2 Staff

The staff interviewed for the study included the two male childcare workers currently working in Centre A, as well as a former male childcare worker from that centre. Seven female staff who worked together with these male childcare workers were also interviewed. From Centre B, the single male childcare worker was interviewed, as well as six female childcare workers who worked with him. In addition, the male FÁS trainee was interviewed in the Centre in which he was doing his placement.

The majority of the childcare workers were relatively young. Three (60.0%) of the male childcare workers were aged between 20-29 and two (40.0%) were between 30 and 39 (see Table 3.1). Most of the female workers (8, 61.5%) were aged between 20-29, although

Table 3.1: Age profile of male and female childcare workers

Age Group	Centre A (n=10) %		Centre B (n=7) %		FAS Trainee (n=1) %	Total (N=18) %	
	M (n=3)	F (n=7)	M (n=1)	F (n=6)	M (n=1)	M (n=5)	F (n=13)
17-19	-	-	-	33.3	-	-	15.4
20-29	33.3	57.1	100.0	66.7	100.0	60.0	61.5
30-39	66.6	42.9	-	-	-	40.0	23.1
Total	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0

the age profile of the female staff in Centre A was somewhat older than that of Centre B. Of the rest, three (23.1%) were between 30 and 39 and two (15.4%) were aged 17-19.

The average length of time the female childcare workers had worked in childcare was considerably longer than that of the male workers, 3.9 years and 2.4 years respectively. One female worker had worked in childcare for over 10 years, and two for over seven years. While one of the male childcare workers had worked in the area of childcare for nine years, the rest had worked for less than a year.

The educational achievements of the childcare workers interviewed were varied. As can be seen in Table 3.2, 80% of all of the staff were educated to Leaving Certificate or above. Forty per cent of the males and 46.2% of the females had a third level qualification.

Over three quarters of the female childcare workers had a qualification in childcare (76.9%). This compared with 40% of the male workers who were similarly qualified (see Table 3.3).

Table 3.2: Highest educational achievement of male and female childcare workers

Highest Educational Qualification	Centre A (n=10) %		Centre B (n=7) %		FAS Trainee (n=1) %	Total (N=18) %	
	M (n=3)	F (n=7)	M (n=1)	F (n=6)	M (n=1)	M (n=5)	F (n=13)
Primary	-	42.9	-	-	-	-	23.1
Junior Certificate	33.3	-	-	-	-	20.0	-
Leaving Certificate	33.3	28.6	100.0	33.3	-	40.0	30.8
3rd Level Certificate/ Diploma	33.3	14.3	-	50.0	100.0	40.0	30.8
Undergraduate Degree	-	14.3	-	16.7	-	-	15.4
Total	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0

Table 3.3: Proportion of male and female childcare workers with a qualification in childcare

Presence/Absence of Qualification	Centre A (n=10) %		Centre B (n=7) %		FAS Trainee (n=1) %	Total (N=18) %	
	M (n=3)	F (n=7)	M (n=1)	F (n=6)	M (n=1)	M (n=5)	F (n=13)
Qualification in Childcare	66.6	85.7	-	66.7	-	40.0	76.9
No Qualification in Childcare	33.3	14.3	100.0	33.3	100.0	60.0	23.1
Total	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0

As can be seen from Table 3.4, one manager (20.0%) had completed the Leaving Certificate and another (20.0%) had an undergraduate certificate/ diploma. Two (40.0%) held a university degree, while one (20.0%) had a postgraduate qualification. In addition, four of the five centre managers had a qualification in childcare.

Table 3.4: Highest educational achievement of managers

Highest Educational Achievement	Centre A (n=2) %	Centre B (n=3) %	Total (N=5) %
Leaving Certificate	50.0	-	20.0
Third Level Certificate/Diploma	-	33.3	20.0
Undergraduate Degree	50.0	33.3	40.0
Postgraduate Degree	-	33.3	20.0
Total	100.0	100.0	100.0

3.1.3 Parents

Just over two-thirds of the parents in the sample were married or co-habiting and just under one-third were unmarried (see Table 3.5). All of the parents interviewed with children in Centre B were married or cohabiting, whereas half of the Centre A parents were married or cohabiting and half were single.

The majority of the parents (61.5%), were aged between 30-39. Of the remainder, 23.1% were aged between 40 and 49 and 15.4% were aged between 20 and 29. The parents in Centre A were younger overall (see Table 3.6).

The educational background of the parents interviewed varied greatly depending on which Centre they were affiliated to. Just over half of all parents with children in Centre A (57.1%) had completed Primary School only. A further 28.6% had obtained the Junior Certificate and 14.3% the Leaving Certificate. This contrasted with parents in Centre B, of whom all had obtained a Leaving Certificate or above and 80% of whom had a third level qualification (see Table 3.7).

Table 3.5: Marital status of parents

Marital Status	Centre A (n=8) %	Centre B (n=5) %	Total (N=13) %
Single	50.0	-	30.8
Married/Cohabiting	50.0	100.0	69.2
Total	100.0	100.0	100.0

Table 3.6: Age profile of parents

Age Group	Centre A (n=8) %	Centre B (n=5) %	Total (N=13) %
20-29	25.0	-	15.4
30-39	62.5	60.0	61.5
40-49	12.5	40.0	23.1
Total	100.0	100.0	100.0



The parents' employment status also varied by centre. In Centre A, 50% of the parents were employed, 12.5% full-time and 37.5% part-time (see Table 3.8). In Centre B, more were employed (80% in total), but all of these were working part-time. Overall, 61.5% of the parents were employed and 38.5% were not employed. This illustrates that while most of the parents used the childcare facility in conjunction with their employment, a significant minority who were not employed also used it, most of these being attached to Centre A.

Of those interviewed, two (15.4%) had one or more children aged one to two years old. Twelve (92.3%) had one or more children aged between three and five.

The level of contact parents had with employees in each of the centres was mixed, ranging from a few minutes once a day to a fuller breakdown of their child's activities on a daily basis.

Table 3.7: Highest educational achievement of parents

Highest Educational Achievement	Centre A (n=7) %	Centre B (n=5) %	Total (N=12) %
Primary	57.1	-	33.3
Junior Certificate	28.6	-	16.7
Leaving Certificate	14.3	20.0	16.7
Third Level Certificate/Diploma	-	40.0	16.7
Postgraduate Certificate/Diploma	-	20.0	8.3
Postgraduate Degree	-	20.0	8.3
Total	100.0	100.0	100.0

Table 3.8: Employment status of parents

Employment Status	Centre A (n=8) %	Centre B (n=5) %	Total (N=13) %
Employed Full-time	12.5	-	7.7
Employed Part-time	37.5	80.0	53.8
Not employed	37.5	20.0	30.8
Other	12.5	-	7.7
Total	100.0	100.0	100.0

3.2 Motivations of childcare workers: reasons for entering the world of childcare

Comments made by male and female childcare workers shows that they decided to go into childcare for different reasons. When asked why they decided to go into childcare, the majority of the female workers indicated that it was something that they had always wanted to do and many of them said it was because they loved children and being around them. Many had referred to having had babysitting jobs, having been around children before.

“...I always loved being around children. I always knew I wanted to work with children.”

(Female childcare worker, Centre A)

“...I loved kids. My sisters had children. I had patience for them.”

(Female Childcare worker, Centre A)

“...I really enjoy working with children. It’s what I’ve always wanted.”

(Female Childcare worker, Centre B)

As in the case with several of the female childcare workers, some of the males had worked with children before, sometimes in a voluntary capacity, such as in the scouts. While the male childcare workers also indicated that they enjoyed working with children, some seemed to have come to childcare “by accident”, after having tried other careers and having felt unfulfilled in them.

“...I was studying to be a chef. I didn’t like it... I went to FÁS, filled out the questionnaire and the results showed: ‘Childcare Assistant/Counsellor’. I was the eldest of 10 grandchildren and minded them. I was also involved in the Scouts/Beavers (6-8 year olds) and am now running the Beavers. I like working with kids. I thought ‘I’ll give it a crack’. I went to a night course and enjoyed it and I got a certificate. I was the only man in my class in the college.”

(Male childcare worker, Centre A)

“...I was a scout leader for eight years and liked working with kids. I was shocked when I got the job. I didn’t expect to get it. I thought I’d like to ‘give it a bash.’”

(Male childcare worker, Centre B)

One male worker stated that he had felt something was “missing” while he was working in another job.

“...I had tried several careers – electrician, chef, being at sea, an architectural draughtsman... but I wasn’t happy. I felt something was missing. I’m very happy with childcare.” (Male childcare worker, FÁS Trainee)

However, once in the job, both men and women were motivated by the interaction with the children and the opportunity to be involved in their development. One female childcare worker indicated that she was stimulated by watching the children progress under her care:

“...I think it’s a very worthwhile job - very demanding – but the job satisfaction is brilliant, ’cause you can see their reaction in their faces – that they’re happy. And you can see the parents’ reaction when their own children are happy and content. The atmosphere – being child-centred – is what makes it great.”

(Female childcare worker, Centre A)

Another enjoyed preparing activities for the children:

“...I love it. You’d be lying in bed and thinking about what more you can do tomorrow. I love it.”

(Female childcare worker, Centre A)

Similarly, the male workers got a great deal of satisfaction from interacting with the children:

“...They’re great. They love it. They love having me around. They hang out of me! A lot of kids do know me. They like that.” (Male childcare worker, Centre A)

“...I get a great response. It feels like being the “pied piper” – kids want to play with me! The kids talk about me to parents and they say “my teacher”. They’ve started hugging me when I go for lunch. And they can’t wait to get into the room in the morning – “Paul² (the male childcare worker) is in!” One lad always was late and caused trouble, he had a lot of problems, but he became quieter – his mum did a parenting course and talked to me about this. I felt I got the confidence of the mother and child.” (Male childcare worker, Centre A)

Another felt his own confidence grew as he developed relationships with the children, and realised he was getting better at his job:

“...Lately I’ve felt that the parents have more time to talk to me. Once I got the parents’ confidence and the child is comfortable with me, I feel I’ve got my own self-confidence at a high – I look forward to talking to parents at the end of the day. I’m really glad about the ‘one-to-one’ with parents, and I’m getting good feedback from the managers.”

(Male childcare worker, Centre A)

However, some of the remarks made by the male childcare workers show that they tend to see themselves as “different” from other men, because of their chosen profession, something not evident in the female childcare workers interviewed:

“...I don’t class myself as a ‘man-man’, I still feel like a kid.”

(Male childcare worker, Centre A)

Some see themselves as having special qualities and skills lacking in other men:

“...A lot of people have a lot of respect for you. They think you need a lot of patience. They think it’s a tough job. When I started, the lads laughed at me. But they wouldn’t last ten minutes in here.”

(Male childcare worker, Centre A)

3.3 Attitudes to male childcare workers

3.3.1 Attitudes of managers, staff and parents

The majority of respondents felt that male childcare workers were a positive asset to the childcare profession, as they provide children with a positive male role model. This was particularly true of the Centre managers:

“...I think they’re an asset to the Centre. There are a lot of lone parents. If not lone parents, there are parents with a sequence of different partners. It is important for children to have a really positive male role model in their lives.”

(Manager, Centre A)

“...I am very positive, wish there were more. They add a great balance to the team and to the role-modelling for children in the Centre.”

(Manager, Centre B)

The Manager of Centre A indicated that having male childcare workers was vital for the development of the children in the centre:

“...In this Centre it is key for the children. I have a strong feeling that you shouldn’t wait until secondary school before you see a male carer. It is very important for younger children to have a positive male role model from a young age ...most of our learning is within the first three years of our life and most of that learning comes from parents. How are you supposed to get your male learning in? It is also important for little girls.”

(Manager, Centre A)

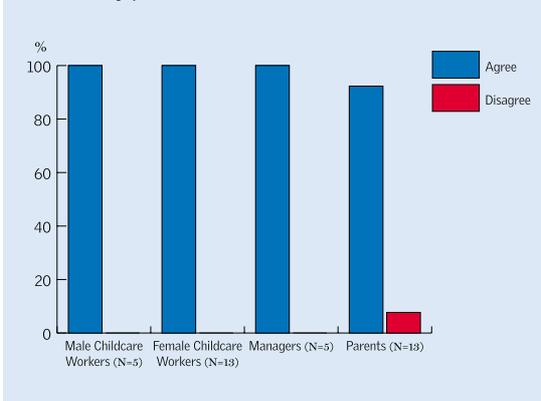
Female staff were also supportive:

“...I think it’s brilliant – so many of the children need it - male role models in their lives in general. Some of them have none and some have bad role models – living in this area – which is deprived.”

(Female staff member, Centre A)

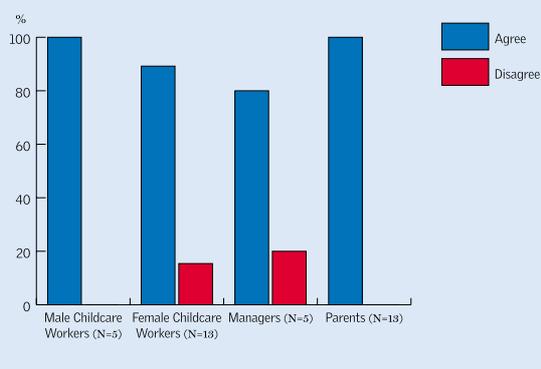
All of the managers strongly agreed with the statement “I approve of having men working in childcare because they provide a male role model to children” (see Figure 3.1). All of the childcare workers, male and female, also agreed with the statement; 12 (92.3%) of the female workers and three (60%) of the male workers strongly agreed, while one female worker (7.7%) and two (40%) of the male workers moderately agreed. Just one parent (7.7%), who attended Centre B, slightly disagreed with the statement while twelve (92.4%) agreed, six (46.2%) moderately and six (46.2%) strongly.

Figure 3.1: Percentage of agreement/disagreement with the statement “I approve of having men working in childcare because they provide a male role model to children” (N=36)



While the majority of respondents in each of the four categories appeared to agree that male workers provide children with a positive alternative male role model, some also believe they can provide children with a more traditional role model. The vast majority in all groups felt that “Having men working in childcare shows children that ‘manliness can include caring’”. All of the five managers agreed with the statement, four (80%) strongly and one (20%) moderately. Similarly, the majority of parents (69.2%) also strongly agreed with the statement. The remainder moderately or slightly agreed. The majority of both male (80%) and female workers (69.2%) also strongly agreed. However, two female childcare workers (15.4%), both of whom worked in Centre A, and one manager (20%) from Centre B, disagreed with the statement that ‘Having male childcare workers is especially good for families with single mothers as it gives the child a male role model’ (see Figure 3.2).

Figure 3.2: Percentage of agreement/disagreement with the statement “Having male childcare workers is especially good for families with single mothers as it gives the child a male role model” (N=36)



In addition to the role model aspect, the staff and parents were positive in general towards male childcare workers and wanted there to be more of them.

“...Definitely. It would be a big plus if we could have half and half, but we can’t so the more the better.”
 (Female childcare worker, Centre B)

“...Once they’re good with children, it doesn’t matter what gender they are.”
 (Parent, Centre B)

“... Yes, there should be more men, but it’s very hard to get men into childcare. The goal of recruiting men into childcare and this centre is pretty idealistic rather than practical.”
 (Female childcare worker, Centre A)

While parents and staff were positive toward male childcare workers, some admitted they were reticent at first:

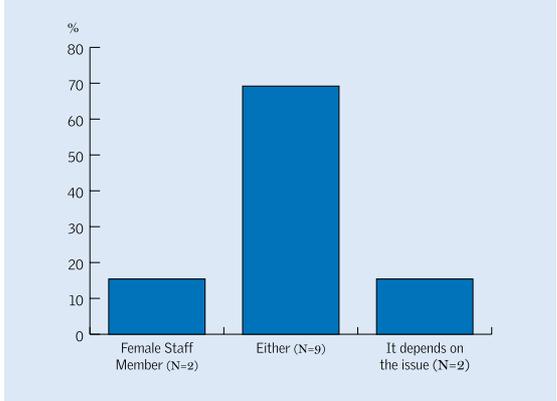
“... When Alan came at first it was unusual, but he was brilliant with the kids. There was a lot of stigma. People were initially nervous.”
 (Parent, Centre B)

“... When I heard there was a man here, I was a bit... what’s the word... surprised.”
 (Parent, Centre B)

“... When it first came about, people were slow to come around to the idea. It was a challenge to stereotypes... i.e. ‘only girls can look after kids.’ The mixture is good. Alan brought new ideas.”
 (Female childcare worker, Centre B)

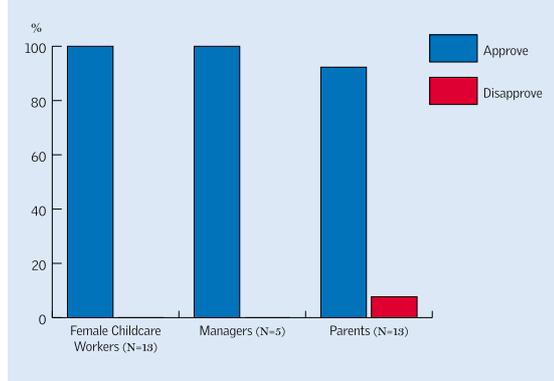
While parents had a strong overall sense that male childcare workers act as positive role models for their children, the majority (69.2%) did not differentiate between the capacity of male and female workers, stating that they would talk to either a male or female worker regarding their children (see Figure 3.3). Just two parents (15.4%), one of whom was attached to Centre B and one Centre A, would prefer to talk to a female member of staff and two (15.4%) said that it depended on the issue.

Figure 3.3: Preference of parents when talking to a member of staff regarding their children (N=13)



In general, respondents in all four categories had positive opinions about male childcare workers and felt that men brought a lot to the area of childcare. Just one parent (7.7%), who was attached to Centre B, disapproved of having male childcare workers in childcare centres in general, while twelve (92.3%) approved (see Figure 3.4). All thirteen of the female childcare workers approved, ten (76.9%) strongly, and four of the five managers (80%) also strongly approved.

Figure 3.4: Extent of approval/disapproval with having male childcare workers in childcare centres in general? (N=31)



3.3.2 Attitudes of children

Six children were interviewed in Centre A in an attempt to elicit their attitudes to their male childcare workers. These included three girls and three boys in the age group four to five years old. All of the children were in groups with both male and female childcare workers.

Children were given paper and crayons to draw as the interview progressed. This was successful in the case of four of the interviews, but in the case of two other interviews, other forms of play were more successful in drawing out the children, including making paper airplanes. Most of the children were shy and reticent in the interview situation; however, once they got comfortable with the interviewer through the medium of play or art, they became more forthcoming. Below are excerpts of the interviews with the children:

Tom in particular seemed very fond of Paul (the male childcare worker) and he mentioned him frequently and asked when they would be back in their class with him. Both Tom and another child in the group, Robert, were both excited about playing with Paul outside and continually came up to him and spoke to him during the outdoor play session.

The centre manager had mentioned that John, another child interviewed, had a very difficult home life and “has seen too much for a four- year old child”. John was in class with a female and a male childcare worker, Sarah and Danny. John had been very close to Mike (a male childcare worker who left the centre a few months before) and had not made the adjustment to the new male childcare worker very easily.

The interviewer started drawing pictures with John and trying to talk to him about the childcare centre and the teachers. Initially, John wasn't very interested in talking too much, but he opened up some as the interview went on. When drawing pictures, John used a black marker and made a big black spot in the middle of the page. He was a little bit agitated and more aggressive with the marker the more questions the interviewer asked about the childcare centre and his teachers.

However, John regularly calls Danny “the new Mike”, and asks when Mike will be coming back.

Carrying out art activities also proved useful in drawing out attitudes from other children:

Another child interviewed, Margaret, was more than happy to draw a picture and then did a drawing with each of the children's names from her class. She gave stars or arrows to those classmates that she liked. All the teachers, Danny included, were given both stars and arrows in the picture.

Claire, another preschooler, drew a picture of the childcare centre as a large circle. There were little circles within the big circle and also outside of the big circle. Each of these was a person. Claire herself was inside the circle, as were Gillian and Siobhán, both female childcare workers. Outside the circle was her Mummy, her Daddy, two other children and Paul, the male childcare worker. When asked what Gillian was doing, Claire said she was “cleaning up the toys” and “playing with the toys.” When asked what Siobhán was doing, she said “Siobhán is cleaning up the toys too” and “playing in the classroom.” When asked what Paul was doing, she said, “Paul’s working” and “Paul’s cleaning up the toys.” When asked if she liked Gillian she said yes, She also said she liked Siobhán and Paul. When asked who she like the best, she said “Paul.” “Why?” “Cause I do.”



Claire’s picture of the childcare centre

Amy, the sixth preschooler interviewed in Centre A, made a drawing of a single smiling green person within a box with a blue top on it. This was Siobhan, the female childcare worker ‘in Amy’s house’. When asked what Paul and Caroline did with the children, she said Paul plays “cards” with the children and he said “You put your cat away?”. “Siobhan takes you to the yard”. She likes Paul, Siobhan and Gillian. Said she likes “lots of teachers”.

Thus, it is clear that the children seem to like all of their childcare workers – male and female - and don’t particularly see them as carrying out different functions. It is



Amy’s drawing of Siobhan (childcare worker) “in Amy’s house”

also clear that some of the young male children have developed strong bonds with the male childcare workers and miss them if they are gone, indicating the positive effect these childcare workers are having in meeting the children’s psychological needs.

3.4 Skills men bring to childcare

A number of parents, managers and female childcare workers noted that men bring a different perspective to the children in the centre than female workers bring and that this was positive:

“Yes. It would be an advantage, definitely ...a corrective balance. The balance should be here and children should be brought up to see this. We didn’t have this growing up – we think it should only be women. It’s a changing time.” (Parent, Centre B)

When asked to describe what their job involved, the male workers tended to mention ‘play’ more than the female staff.

“... Well, we’d be messing around... entertaining the kids for the day, circle time, playing with colours, shapes, ABC’s.” (Male childcare worker, Centre B)

However, both male and female staff emphasised the importance of the caring role, and also ensuring that children in their care felt happy and secure.

“... We’re not only minding children, but educating them and caring for them.” (Female childcare worker, Centre A)

“...I’d help get lunches ready etc. Help kids who might have a problem. I’m there to be there for kids who need someone to talk to or play with.”

(Male childcare worker, Centre A)

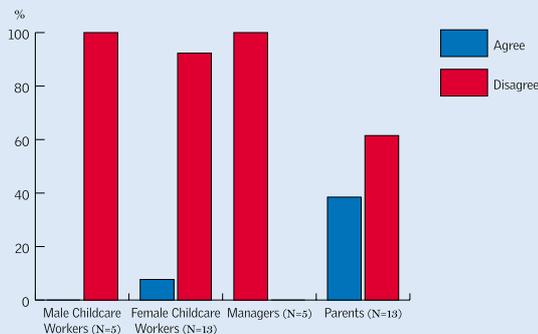
When asked if there were any differences between male and female childcare workers in terms of what they bring to childcare and their interaction with children, one male childcare worker replied:

“...Nothing majorly different. If they fall and hurt themselves you still have to give them a big hug.”

(Male childcare worker, Centre B)

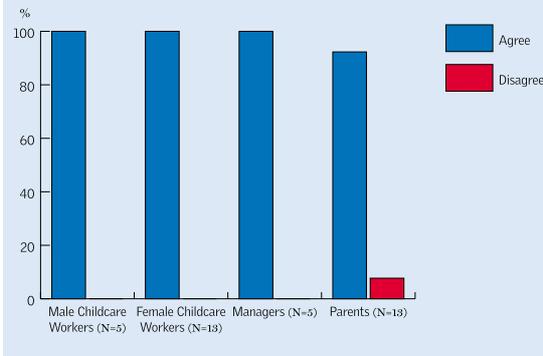
The majority of respondents in each of the four categories disagreed with the statement that “working with children is best done by women”. All of the managers and male childcare workers strongly disagreed with the statement, and just one female childcare worker (7.7%) (from Centre A) agreed with the statement, while the rest (92.3%) disagreed (see Figure 3.5). A large proportion of the parents (38.5%), most of whom were female, agreed with the statement.

Figure 3.5: Percentage of agreement/disagreement with the statement “Working with children is best done by women” (N=36)



However, all but one of the respondents, a parent from Centre B, agreed that “it does not matter what the sex of a childcare worker is, as long as they are kind and competent”.

Figure 3.6: Percentage of agreement/disagreement with the statement “It does not matter what the sex of a childcare worker is, as long as they are kind and competent” (N=36)



Indeed, almost all of the respondents agreed that in general more men should be employed as childcare workers (see Figure 3.7). All five of the managers, female and male childcare workers agreed with the statement, perhaps showing that they feel men are suited to working in childcare, and also that having a larger number of men working in childcare helps to balance the gender inequity inherent in childcare. Just one of the parents (7.7%), whose children attend Centre B, disagreed with the statement.

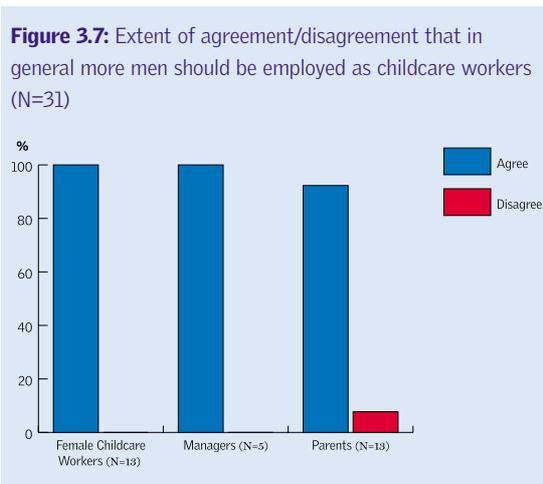
A small number of respondents, particularly male childcare workers, saw no difference between male and female workers, and felt that men should not be treated any differently than females in terms of recruitment and within the workplace:

“...There’s no difference. What’s the big deal?”

(Female childcare worker, Centre B)

However, the majority of respondents differentiated between the skills and abilities of male and female staff. Most of the respondents felt that male workers act as a positive role model, although they did not agree on the type of role model male childcare workers provide. Some of the respondents felt that male childcare workers are of benefit to children because they possess particular skills lacking in women, such as that of disciplinarian:

“...Since Danny started, Una has got much quieter – in a good way. He tamed her down an awful lot... And he can play football with the boys.” (Parent, Centre A)



Others felt that men provide children with an alternative role model, whereby male childcare workers challenge the traditional stereotype of men, and instead, act as a caring influence. One parent believed that the male childcare worker with whom she had contact was more in tune with the needs of the children:

“...I don’t know, men seem to have more patience with the kids.” (Parent, Centre A)

Another parent also indicated that one male childcare worker was more tolerant than female staff.

“... Women are more likely to tell kids ‘sure you’re grand’ and send them back on their way. Men would be sympathetic. It’s hard for a three year old in the centre all day. Men are good for sympathy and they help them when they miss their parents.” (Parent, Centre A)

Indeed, the variety in the comments made by respondents serves to indicate that each male worker brings a different set of skills and abilities to their job. While some are seen as caring:

“...He was calmer than other staff members. He just got on with it. He didn’t get bothered by anything.” (Female childcare worker, Centre B)

others are more likely to become involved in play and physical activities:

“...He likes to play football and rougher games, so it’s good. It’s also good for the girls, to see both sides of the scale. Males can be more sympathetic and nicer to the kids – they’re softer on them.” (Parent, Centre A)

Many of the staff working in both childcare centres recognised the need for children to have experience of being cared for by both men and women:

“... Well I might have had a question mark in the past. But through education I realise that gender balance is important in the life of a child - just as with my own children. When you see it, it’s much easier to accept it.” (Manager, Centre B)

3.5 Gender balance within the centres

One of the benefits of male childcare workers noted by some female childcare workers and managers was that the centre was more diverse, as it was no longer an all-female staff. Many of the staff felt that more men were needed to balance the gender divide even more. One of the male childcare workers also commented that he would like more men to provide him with support in coping with a female-dominated environment:

“... Yeah it was good when the other male childcare worker started as I didn’t feel so outnumbered... before that I was like ‘help, I need somebody else here with me!’” (Male childcare worker, Centre A)

Comments made by the male childcare workers show that, while all five appeared satisfied with the staff dynamics in their respective centres, being a lone male in a female-dominated environment has some drawbacks. It is apparent that there is a lot of pressure on male workers, as women are often more inclined to ask them for advice than other female staff.

“...I was a confidante to some of the women. There was a lot of backbiting. I never got involved in that but I got stuck in the middle of it.” (Male childcare worker, Centre B)

However, some of the male workers had no difficulties fitting into the female-dominated environment:

“No – I’ve been told I’m 99% a girl! I chatter a lot with the female staff – doesn’t bother me to talk about female issues.” (Male childcare worker, Centre A)

Many of the female childcare workers in both centres also welcomed male staff, as it provided them with some variety and an alternative point of view:

“... We (women) think about policies and procedures and the right way to do things - I just think that males would take the seriousness of it and turn it around to have more fun.” (Female childcare worker, Centre B)

Another female childcare worker agreed that men were easy going and fun, yet on the other hand, she felt they were taken more seriously by the children:

“...It’s nice to have more males for the staff and children. It’s good for children to have a male figure. Men are completely different . . . more easy going. It’s better fun with males... good craic. It’s not always like that with women. Kids take orders from men ‘more seriously.’ Kids like ‘to play rough’ and can do this better with men. It’s nice to have a mix. It’s nice to have a male figure in the crèche.”

(Female childcare worker, Centre B)

Female staff also welcomed male staff because they recognised that there should be equal opportunities in the area for both men and women:

“...It’s great! It’s good for the kids and the atmosphere and the staff. If they are qualified they have the same right to work in childcare.”

(Female childcare worker, Centre B)

“...Sixty females under one roof is not a pleasant scenario – there are too many hormones! Having men neutralises this and makes it more normal. And it’s more normal for the children to have men in their presence.”

(Manager, Centre A)

However, there was some tension between the male and female staff within both centres; some of the female childcare workers felt that the male staff were treated differently by the children, managers and parents:

“...Sometimes he can be overpowering with the kids. Sometimes I think he doesn’t know how to handle them – the kids who act up. I don’t know if this is because he is a man or hasn’t undergone training. It’s very annoying that he can’t take the kids out to change them. At the start when he was here he wasn’t allowed be in the room on his own with them - I think that’s changed now. It’s always ‘I’m going to get Danny’ – it’s used as a threat and the kids would go quiet – I don’t think that’s right either. He should be the same as us.”

(Female childcare worker, Centre A)

In spite of this, many of the male staff acknowledged the support given to them by their female counterparts. One male childcare worker even indicated that encouragement and advice from female childcare workers helped him to develop his skills, and to better manage the children in his care.

3.6 Safety, trust, responsibility

Comments made by many of the parents indicated that safety only became an issue of real concern when they became confronted with the possibility of males looking after their children. It appears that they only accept male workers once they are familiar with them. They tend to form their opinion of the male employees based partly on their children’s opinion, and that of the other employees in the centre.

“...I know him a long time, I know his wife. I have to go by what my child says and she loves him (i.e. this particular male childcare worker that works in this parent’s daughter’s class). They get on really well, so I’m happy. That’s all I can go by, when she’s happy, I’m happy.”

(Parent, Centre A)

Indeed, after one male childcare worker had left the centre for financial reasons, a comment made by one parent confirm that it takes some time before a certain level of trust can be built up.

“...Alan was very nice and pleasant with the children but his stay in the childcare centre was very brief and I would question that briefness.”

(Parent, Centre B)

Another parent was also wary about having a large number of male workers, perhaps feeling that female staff serve as protectors of children.

“...There should be a 1:4 ratio of men: women for the time being.”

(Parent, Centre B)

However, a number of parents indicated that male childcare workers may be more trustworthy than their female counterparts as they are able to communicate with the parents better about their children:

“...He talks out straight, he communicates well and is not afraid to tell you anything. Some people would hide things to cover up – the women might be afraid to tell you something. I think that parents should be told straight out if there is a problem.”

(Parent, Centre A)

It appears that both male and female childcare workers and managers are attuned to concerns parents may have with regard to male childcare workers. All five of the managers, ten of the female childcare workers (83.3%) and three (60%) of the male childcare workers agreed with the statement “I think that some parents are uneasy about having male childcare workers in the childcare centre” (see Figure 3.8). However, just two parents (15.4%) agreed with the statement “I would be uneasy about having male childcare workers in the childcare centre” (see Figure 3.9).

Figure 3.8: Percentage of agreement/disagreement with the statement “I think some parents are uneasy about having male childcare workers in the childcare centre” (N=23)

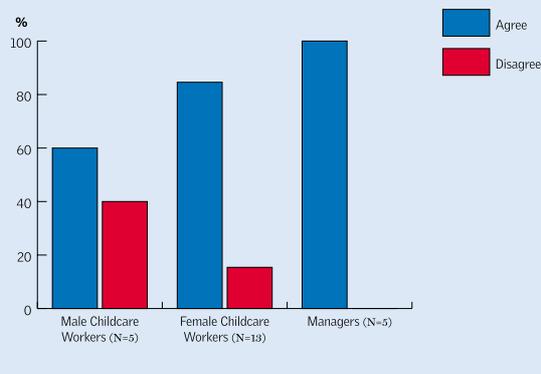
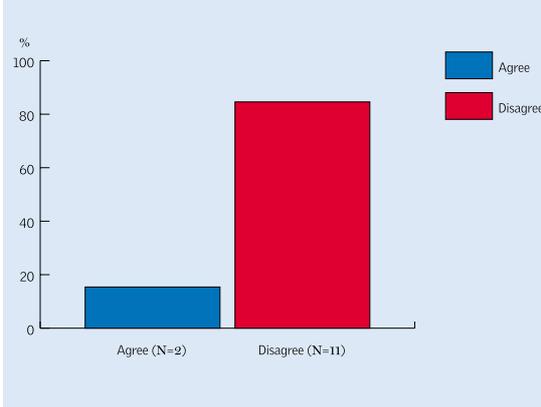
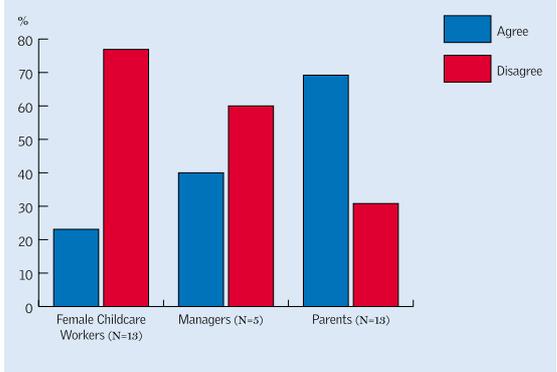


Figure 3.9: Percentage of parents’ agreement/disagreement with the statement “I would be uneasy having male childcare workers in the childcare centre” (N=13)



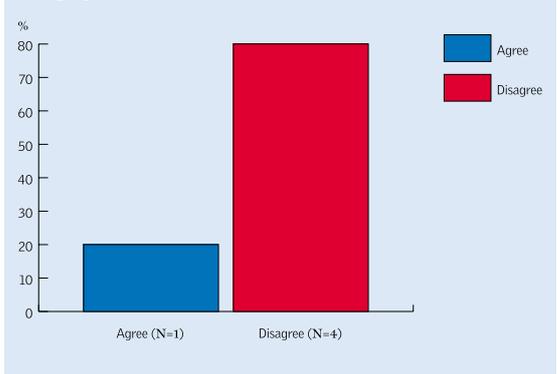
The majority of female childcare workers do not appear to have any concerns themselves about male childcare workers carrying out personal care activities; just three female childcare workers (23.1%) agreed with the statement “I would be uncomfortable with male childcare workers carrying out personal care activities such as changing nappies” (see Figure 3.10).

Figure 3.10: Percentage of agreement/disagreement with the statement “I would be uncomfortable with male childcare workers carrying out personal care activities such as changing nappies” (N=31)



Two of the managers (40%) agreed with the statement, suggesting that managers are aware that there may be problems around such a sensitive issue. A total of nine parents (69.3%) agreed, three strongly, with the statement. There were no differences in attitudes towards men carrying out personal care activities between the parents of the Centres A and B. In addition, just one of the male childcare workers felt he would be uncomfortable carrying out personal care activities such as changing nappies (see Figure 3.11). The other four male childcare workers (80.0%) disagreed with the statement.

Figure 3.11: Percentage of male childcare workers’ agreement/disagreement with the statement “I would be uncomfortable carrying out personal care activities such as changing nappies” (N=5)



The managers in both centres had taken steps to protect both the children and their employees:

“... We’ve chosen our staff very carefully. We know we can trust them. Once we show parents we have faith in them, then they have faith. Once the children show them they like having Paul and Danny, then they are comfortable.”
(Manager, Centre A)

“... We have a commitment to open practice which protects not only the children but also the staff.”
(Manager, Centre B)

One centre manager when asked about the strategies employed in her centre to maximize the safety of children, said:

“... We’ve put in place glass walls, open doors and we have ‘an open environment’, where staff and children can be seen... well-trained staff, good reference checks and garda checks, three reference checks – we’d telephone them and chat with them. We have good supervision. You need to show that you’re confident of them coming in – because of their aptitude of working with children. If you have that attitude it will go to the staff and the parents and the children. That person will have the child-centredness you are looking for. There are no actual rules barring men from doing things like changing nappies, taking children to the toilet, etc. But they are self selecting out because of their own comfort zone until they are used to the children. Even an adult wouldn’t be comfortable getting undressed until they knew someone longer.”
(Manager, Centre A)

Other centre managers re-iterated some of these points, particularly openness and transparency, visibility and background checks if possible. One manager emphasised that information to parents was very important, including regular communication to parents, such as through parent evenings. This manager in Centre B said that state run childcare centres can get garda checks but that centres in the private sector could not. He pointed out that the NCNA have commented on this and would advocate the greater availability of garda checks.

A parent also indicated awareness of the need for security:

“... Everything should be checked out - we need to know people’s backgrounds. Qualifications in childcare are important but background is extremely important. Cannot be just anyone who can get a job in a childcare centre.”
(Parent, Centre A)

The male childcare workers seemed to accept that precautions had to be taken when employing male staff:

“... I’d no problem with it. They just have to be thoroughly checked more than women. They checked all my references and did a garda check.”
(Male childcare worker, Centre A)

In fact, another male worker felt that not enough precautions were taken to protect both staff and children:

“I was shocked that there was no police check for staff. There should be stringent rules for people working with kids... they are vulnerable. You don’t know what goes on behind closed doors. I was told by management ‘it’s not compulsory for childcare’.”
(Male childcare worker, Centre B)

This illustrates the fact cited above in connection with the Manager’s comments, that garda checks are available for public childcare centres, but not for private ones.

It is clear that nappy changing is not the only issue about safety. There is also an issue around female staff carrying out personal care activities for some of the older boys. As one female staff member in Centre A remarked, when staff take the children swimming, it is important to have male staff member present to assist the male children in the changing rooms. Overall, the comments made by respondents suggest that men’s involvement in personal care activities of children is seen as more serious than that of women.

3.7 Perceptions of childcare

All of the managers and many of the childcare workers showed that they were aware of the huge responsibility attached to their job, as they were helping to formulate the personalities of the children in their care. It was clear also that the childcare workers got a huge amount of satisfaction from their job in childcare.

“...I think it’s a very worthwhile job - very demanding – but the job satisfaction is brilliant, ’cause you can see their reaction in their faces – that they’re happy. And you can see the parents’ reaction when their own children are happy and content. The atmosphere – being child-centred – is what makes them happy.”

(Female childcare worker, Centre A)

However, when asked how they felt people in general perceived childcare, they had many different responses. Some thought childcare was seen as a predominantly female profession, but others thought this was in flux:

“...It’s definitely seen as a woman’s profession.”

(Male childcare worker, Centre A)

“Times are changing. There is equality now.”

(Male childcare worker, Centre A)

Several mentioned that people admired them for doing the job that they did and realised how demanding it was. Others felt that the general public did not appreciate how demanding and important their job actually was and the lack of recognition made them feel undervalued and frustrated:

“...It can be viewed very negatively. I think we are underestimated: ‘Oh you’re just going to work and colour pictures all day.’ It really annoys me.”

(Female childcare worker, Centre A)

“I don’t think that they realise... there is so much involved in minding children – you deal with their physical, intellectual, language, emotional, social...and sometimes that can be tough. It’s looked on as only minding kids but its much more, very rewarding.”

(Female childcare worker, Centre A)

“...People don’t know what it involves... The perception is that it is an ‘easy option.’ We’re not well paid and this devalues it. The Government don’t support it and that’s another reason why people think it’s not important. They don’t realise the importance of the job. It’s not seen as a ‘proper job.’ We try to give kids education and values... people in the bank get more respect for handling money all day!”

(Female childcare worker, Centre B)

3.8 Career prospects for male and female childcare workers

Both male and female childcare workers saw prospects for career development and promotion in the field of childcare. However, the males were more likely see themselves in managerial roles, or even owning their own crèche in the future:

“...I think it’s an excellent profession. I’d recommend it to anyone. It can lead to being a teacher in a primary school or to special needs. You could run your own Montessori school or crèche. It can lead to many things.”

(Male childcare worker, Centre A)

The female workers, while also seeing the opportunities for advancement, were more likely to see this in relation to obtaining more qualifications. They were less likely to mention moving into managerial roles. In fact, one female childcare worker stated that she had left a managerial position:

“...I was one (i.e., a manager) for two years but I missed the interaction with children.”

(Female childcare worker, Centre A)

Several other female workers indicated that they were not interested in pursuing a career in management:

“...Yes, you could go into management, or consultancy work. I wouldn’t go into management – I don’t think I’m really the management type.”

(Female childcare worker, Centre A)

One manager also recognised that male workers’ careers tended to progress faster than their female counterparts.

“...You see more men at the top of childcare than at the bottom. Males sometimes have that drive to be the best.”

(Manager, Centre A)

3.9 Recruiting men into childcare

When the five managers were asked what their experience had been of recruiting men into childcare, all referred to the difficulty of finding men to apply. The problem begins with the fact that few men enter childcare training. This was attributed to the fact that childcare is not seen as a “male” profession. Also, the salaries are low and given that men are expected to be breadwinners, the salaries are not attractive enough.

“...It’s very difficult. There are not enough trained male childcare workers. Very few are coming out of the Colleges. I don’t think many males see childcare as a profession. The money has gone up, but it is still not a very well paid profession compared to other jobs, such as computers. Males are still seen as the main earners in this country. So childcare wouldn’t earn enough money.”

(Manager, Centre A)

“...We can’t get the candidates even to come forward for the interview. We don’t get the applications. Salary is a barrier to entry. Perhaps there’s an apprehension of going into an all female environment. Perhaps an apprehension of working with children. Males might not see it as the type of work a male should be doing. It’s similar to when there were no males as nurses and now it’s a done thing – it’s common.”

(Manager, Centre B)

In commenting on the salary issue, one manager remarked on the difficulty he found:

“...The reward you would like to give is far in excess of what they are paid. You’d like to pay them three times as much – but there are economic constraints of the market such that you can’t.”

(Manager, Centre B)

Another manager felt the low salaries reflected the value placed on childcare, particularly by the Government:

“...If you look at where our Government puts its money – it’s not into preschool education. The Government needs to see it as essential first – for society and life. Then they’ll get more males.”

(Manager, Centre A)

One of the managers pointed out that in public sector childcare the wages are higher: €19 – 20,000 – 21-22,000 starting, whereas in private sector childcare the starting salary was about €16,800. The factors contributing to this differential he felt were rent free buildings for public sector childcare and grants for staffing. Thus, the principal overheads are removed in public sector childcare. Centres in the private sector are mainly dependent on parents’ fees which is why the cost is higher. He said that “the true cost of childcare is €260-270 a week.”

3.10 Childcare policy issues

All of the respondents were asked for their views on current Government policy on childcare and their recommendations for the development of the childcare field in Ireland. Many of the respondents, particularly the managers, tended to focus on the national picture, and most emphasised the need for a more positive Government response to current childcare needs.

There was recognition that a good deal of progress had been made in recent years with funding from the Equal Opportunities Childcare Programme (EOCP), although many respondents felt that this had not gone far enough. Many felt that the Government’s current childcare policy was inadequate, and that better quality childcare and more funding were needed.

“...The EOCP funding is from Europe – it’s not funded by the Irish Government and the only reason they get it is because it’s under an Equality measure.”

(Manager, Centre B)

“...The Government here are going to have to face up to getting a proper framework – a plan for children. What the government is doing now is like a plaster. There is no sense of value or importance attached to children. It’s merely an annoyance or distraction from other economic issues.”

(Manager, Centre B)

There was also the feeling that, while much had been done, many recommendations of the Expert Working Group’s Report (1999) had not been implemented and that it should be re-visited.

One manager referred to the Swedish model, which went back to the 1970s “where they put together a proper strategy for childcare” and to the recent British 10-year plan for childcare recently outlined by the Prime Minister.

“...It’s only now that Britain is putting together a 10-year plan on childcare. Tony Blair was a surprise guest at the Daycare Trust conference in December 2004. He outlined the 10-year plan for childcare, which had a number of measures to support parents – tax credits, etc. We have nothing like that.... we just have the Expert Working Party’s Report which says we need to have 40,000 places by 2011, but all they’re doing is rewarding wealthy investors with tax breaks to build facilities.”

(Manager, Centre B)

There was also a sense, particularly among the managers, that there is a need for the Government to make preschool education a right for all children:

“... They need to make childcare recognised as an essential part of a child’s development – recognised by the State as an important part of the educational pre-school system. All children have a right to an early childhood education and people doing that job are key people for our children’s future and for our society’s future.” (Manager, Centre A)

“... Government should provide pre-school to all children at no cost, even if only for 20 hours a week.” (Manager, Centre A)

“... Everyone child born in the State should have equal access to early childhood care and education, regardless of socio-economic background - similar to the primary school system.” (Manager, Centre B)

Several of the parents supported this view:

“... It would be great to have a complete childcare programme from 0-4/5 totally sponsored by the Government.” (Parent, Centre B)

One manager, quoting Joe Duffy, who recently said at the launch of the Childcare Bureau one-stop shop, ‘we actually live in a society, not an economy’, indicated that the Government needs to prioritise the needs of children over those of the economy.

There was a widespread feeling among managers, childcare workers and parents that funding for childcare is inadequate and that the expense to parents is too high.

“... Childcare centres are fighting for funding on a regular basis. There are financial crises. ADM has recently been getting rid of more qualified staff. These are the advisors to the Minister. If these are their attitudes how can we expect our Ministers to know what to do? It’s not babysitting. It’s learning and education that’s going on. What the children are getting is just as important as getting the parents into employment.” (Manager, Centre A)

One of the managers in the private childcare centre recommended that the EOCP should subsidise fees in private sector childcare where childcare places already exist, rather than creating new places. He felt this would have the added advantage of encouraging the mixing of different socio-economic groups. This would then give the message that “everybody is equal.”

He also recommended that grant aid available under EOCP should be ‘streamlined’:

“... At the moment you can get up to €50,000 in grant aid, but it can take 8 months or longer.” (Manager, Centre B)

The EOCP grant is welcomed by the sector; however, it was pointed out that Local Authority charges (e.g., rates) and VAT are counter-productive in that they, in effect, serve to cancel out the value of the grant.

“... The high cost of childcare means that private childcare is not accessible to everyone. People from different socio-economic groups come here and look at the facilities and they say ‘I’d love to send my child here’ and when they hear the fee their face falls. It should be the fundamental right of each child to quality child care – that’s the hard part.” (Manager, Centre B)

Several parents said that they would like help with the fees, such as through a tax allowance or tax relief.

“... I would like a tax incentive for working parents. Childcare is so expensive. I would also like to see more community based childcare schemes.” (Parent, Centre B)

The financial stress parents faced was appreciated by childcare workers, who pointed out that even though parents paid too much, that this did not result in higher wages for staff. The need for more Government funding again was emphasised:

“... The Government should give more money for childcare- it’s too expensive for parents but workers get bad money. It’s not fair on parents- they may not be able to afford it. There should be more facilities and crèches.” (Female childcare worker, Centre B)

One respondent contrasted funding for childcare with that given to other public services:

“... There’s not much money given to it... I think if they took more interest in this and funded it... There’s so many roadworks... we spend millions on roundabouts! They ignore the important issues that are out there.”

(Female childcare worker, Centre B)

In addition to supporting the view that more resources needed to go into childcare, parents also emphasised the importance of childcare for their own career development and the need for reliable childcare.

“...I couldn’t do my course without help. I would have had to wait until the kids were ready to go to school. It was only because I got them a place in the centre that I could go to do the course and that’s without financial help.”

(Parent, Centre A)

“...The expense is why women are leaving their children with neighbours, which is not ideal. If the neighbour gets sick, it means the childcare breaks down.”

(Parent, Centre B)

One manager felt that there should be more financial support for parents directly related to childcare costs, but did not feel the Government should bear total responsibility for funding childcare.

“...I wouldn’t put the bill totally at the foot of the Government. What I think the best contribution of support would be is for parents to pay one-third, for the Government to pay one-third and for employers to pay one-third. Now it’s 100% the parents. Wouldn’t it be wonderful if each paid one-third? The only time the Government is going to react to this is when it becomes an election issue.”

(Manager, Centre B)

Many of the respondents felt that the lack of adequate resources resulted in lower standards within childcare centres. Two female childcare workers had this to say:

“...The Government should do more in terms of regulations and supporting centres and parents financially. They should provide more free childcare. This childcare centre is very good but many centres out there are horrendous – the standards are so low.”

(Female childcare worker, Centre A)

“...There needs to be better Government funding. Existing monitoring focuses on infrastructure with very little on the well-being of the children, which is actually the most important thing in a centre.”

(Female childcare worker, Centre A)

One parent also emphasised the quality of childcare and facilities. She felt that:

“...there should be the same standard whether you are paying €150 or €40 per week, i.e. regardless if whether it is publicly funded, private or community/NGO.”

(Parent, Centre A)

Other parents stressed that the times available should fit in more with parents’ needs. It was felt that there should be flexible hours for childcare since the times you were needed for work are not always easy to get childcare.

Many of the childcare workers referred to the low salaries of staff and indicated that this needed to be rectified in order to attract staff.

“...It would be good to give childcare a better profile to highlight the importance of childcare and give it more recognition as a profession.”

(Female childcare worker, Centre A)

The childcare workers also stated that there was a lack of recognition for the work being done by childcare workers, and felt that this needed to change.

“It should be promoted as ‘a profession’ and ‘a decent job.’”

(Female childcare worker, Centre B)

The need for greater status for the profession was linked to the importance of the work:

“...These kids, they’re going to be the future so I think they should be looked after.”

(Female childcare worker, Centre A)

There was clear recognition that training was of critical importance to the standards of quality, and it was felt that the sector had embraced this. While it was felt that advances had been made, including the national curriculum for preschool children, there was also a sense that this should be accompanied by greater recognition of the important work being carried out in childcare and that this should be reflected in appropriate salary scales.

“...I think that more people would be interested if the wages were better and if it was better funded. There should be more crèches. It’s too expensive for most people: single mothers couldn’t afford it.”

(Female Childcare Worker, Centre B)

Overall, while respondents considered issues such as training and regulations to be important for the development of childcare in Ireland, it was the broader picture that was seen as the problem under the current framework and so the lack of adequate funding and the need for the provision of preschool care for all children were considered to be of primary importance.

SUMMARY, DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATIONS

4.1 Introduction

The rationale behind the pilot project was to challenge stereotypical views of men and women, as a more equal gender mix among childcare providers can ensure that children are cared for in an atmosphere of gender equality, and also to show children that men, as well as women, can be caring. It was also hoped that the presence of male childcare workers would also benefit staff and parents, as well as contributing to equality in the workplace. Ultimately it was hoped that the children exposed to nurturing male role models in this context would develop attitudes about male and female behaviour which would carry over into their adult life. This has widespread implications for all household and domestic tasks and can potentially help to facilitate a more equal redistribution of these tasks between women and men. Children, and thus, in the long term, society, will benefit from more men working in childcare, as they will see that both men and women take responsibility for caring and will no longer be bound by traditional gender stereotypes.

4.2 Reasons for working in childcare

Cameron *et al.* (1999) believe that men enter childcare for philosophical reasons and Murray (1996) believes that the men she interviewed framed their work as intellectual and academic in nature rather than emotional - concluding that the men themselves have a very gendered concept of their own role. However, within the present study, this did not appear to be the case in relation to the male childcare workers. Almost all of the female childcare workers indicated that childcare was something of a vocation for them; many stated that it was something that they had always wanted to do. In contrast, almost all of the male childcare workers appeared to have stumbled across childcare, having tried out a number of professions previously. Once they began working in childcare, both the male and female workers were motivated by the interaction with the children and the opportunity to help them develop.



4.3 The male childcare worker as a "role model"

The majority of respondents felt that men acted as positive role models to the children in their care. Managers, childcare workers and parents alike felt that it was important for children to have a positive male role model from a young age. They felt that the male childcare workers brought new ideas and a range of skills to their respective centres, which benefited both the children and the centre. The children interviewed also viewed the male childcare workers in a positive light, and the male children in particular seemed to have developed strong bonds with them.

It is clear that there is a lack of consensus about the type of role model that a male childcare worker should be. Murray (1996) believes that male childcare workers tend to replicate their role in the family whilst at work. Cameron (2001) explores the possible ways in which a male childcare worker can approach his role: should he challenge stereotypes of men in the traditional family role, replacing the distant or disciplinarian father figure with a man who is more physically and emotionally involved in caring for the children (much like a mother)? Or should he be a "strong" and "firm" caring figure, who gives orders and plays in a rough, physical manner with the children? Should he help compensate children for the absence of their fathers? Will more men in childcare promote the notion that men can provide an alternative "masculine" model to women's ways of caring? Or do men care for children in much the same way that women do? Will men working in childcare challenge or reinforce male gender-role stereotypes? People want male childcare workers to set a good example to children but what exactly do they mean by "good"?

This controversy within the literature on the type of male role model a male childcare worker should be did not seem to be reflected in the findings of the present study. Parents and staff did not seem concerned that a male childcare worker was giving children the wrong ‘image’ of men. Rather, there was wide consensus that the male childcare workers were an asset to the centre in which they worked and enhanced the care given to the children overall, whether this was through playing with the children in a “rough and tumble manner” or giving them a hug.

In fact, talking about men who work in childcare as “role models” can often be problematic. For example, the phrase “role-model” is not often used when discussing female childcare workers. It may be unrealistic and essentialist to think of the men who work in childcare as one, big, homogeneous group. It is also unhelpful and unfair to expect male childcare workers to single handedly challenge stereotypical gender roles. This is an area of responsibility for the Government, employees, employers and society as a whole. Quite simply, male childcare workers are, like the women who work along side them, individuals who have chosen to do a particular job and as such will bring different qualities to the workplace regardless of gender.

4.4 Issues of trust

While none of the parents mentioned the word “abuse”, it was clear that some initially had reservations about male childcare workers, particularly with regard to personal care issues. However, several commented that they trusted the childcare centre to choose the best staff to look after their children and once they knew their children were happy, they were happy. The managers of the two centres also showed that they were aware of the parents’ concerns, and had taken precautions to protect both staff and children alike, such as using glass walls throughout the centre and ensuring that staff were chosen carefully.

The wider debate around men working in childcare is polarised and often contradictory. This may relate to a lack of consensus within society in general concerning men’s and father’s roles, especially in relation to children (Cameron *et al.*, 1999). This is manifested clearly when on the one hand we encourage men to work in childcare, whilst on the other we sometimes view them as a source of suspicion and question their motivation (Cameron,

2001). However, if more men begin to work in childcare, then more trust can build up between the parents and the childcare workers themselves.

4.5 Men entering female-dominated professions

Although the majority of the childcare workers felt that their job is important, given that they are involved in the development and education of the children in their care, many felt that some of the general public did not appreciate how demanding and important their job actually is. They also felt childcare was seen as a woman’s profession.

Cameron *et al.* (1999), found that there was some resistance on the part of female childcare workers and parents to the idea of men becoming childcare workers. They noted that this resistance was, in part, a product of the way people think of childcare as a “natural” occupation for women. By extension, it can be seen as an “unnatural” occupation for men. Research from other studies has shown that some female childcare workers feel that an increase in men’s participation in childcare in some way encroaches upon the domain that has traditionally been theirs. It is widely acknowledged that occupations dominated by women often tend to be less valued and in turn lower paid than those with a gender balance or dominated by men. There is also concern among female childcare workers that men entering childcare will do so at higher ranks; certainly it is widely accepted that males are disproportionately represented at management level in the childcare sector.

While both male and female childcare workers saw prospects for career development and promotion in the field of childcare, more of the male childcare workers were likely to see themselves in managerial roles than were their female counterparts. However, all of the managers stated that it was difficult to find male childcare workers as it is not seen as a male profession and is low paid.

However, in the current study, the vast majority of female childcare workers expressed good will towards the men they worked with as well as toward the notion of increased participation by men in the field. This good will should not be squandered. We appear to be at a point in childcare where we are in a position to make decisions which will create a positive, child-centered culture within the sector. This climate should be utilised in order to desegregate this gendered profession.

4.6 Promoting gender equality and equal opportunities

The Equal Opportunities Childcare Programme (2000 – 2006) was set up to facilitate parents, particularly mothers, to avail of training, education and employment opportunities through the provision of childcare places. Childcare then, can be seen as a tool which can be used by Government to promote and aid equal opportunity in the labour market. It is disappointing and ironic that the childcare sector itself is still very largely a single sex occupation, since varied examples of gender role behaviour are crucial, especially for very young children.

In a childcare setting, interactions that affect gender-role development occur frequently. The presence of different caregivers is one aspect that affects development (Chick *et al.*, 2002). The presence of male childcare workers can provide role models for children, especially boys, to support and reinforce the idea that caring is a basic element of manliness. Play also has a major role in the social construction of gender (Thorne, 1993) and at pre-school level, children begin to explore adult roles and role-play the adults in their lives (Pidgeon, 1994). Encouraging and increasing more men into childcare may not only change young boys' attitude to caring. The caring expectations of young girls can also be altered if they perceive that it is normal for men to care for children.

It was evident that the children seemed to like their childcare workers – male and female – and did not particularly see them as carrying out different functions. It was also clear that some of the young male children had developed strong bonds with the male childcare workers, especially in the centre located in a disadvantaged area, where there was a high incidence of single parent families headed by women. It was obvious that the male childcare workers were having a positive psychological effect on all of the children, but especially on the more vulnerable ones.

Desegregating childcare is not just about having a 50/50 split of the sexes. It is fundamentally about challenging the gender stereotypes which lead many women to expect to take full responsibility for childcare, and many men to believe that childcare is predominantly women's responsibility.

4.7 Implications for the development of childcare in Ireland

There has been widespread encouragement for men to consider childcare as a career as was made clear by the European Commission 1992 Recommendation (European Commission, 1992), which called on Member States to encourage and support increased participation by men in the care and upbringing of children. This theme was again stressed in the White Paper on European Social Policy, *A Way Forward for the Union* (European Commission, 1994), and by the European Commission Network on Childcare (1990). Despite the resounding support for increasing the number of men working in the childcare sector, the recruitment of men into the childcare field has not gained momentum. This was reflected during the recruitment phase of the pilot project and the attitudes reflected in this report. It is likely that the successful recruitment of a significant proportion of male childcare workers will only happen gradually, when the barriers which currently prevent them from entering into the childcare profession are removed, and more significantly, when childcare is given the status it merits by the Government.

It is evident from the findings presented in this study that there is a strong belief on the part of centre managers and centre staff of both genders that having more male child care workers is a very desirable as well as essential ingredient in quality child care. It is also evident that parents are supportive of this view and that children thrive in an environment in which there are carers of both sexes. While theoretical debates about the nature of the ideal role model may continue, it is nevertheless clear that children benefit from having both male and female role carers.

It is very likely that this will have positive effects down the road when these children are workers and parents and they are trying to achieve work-life balance. It is hoped that this kind of experience on the part of children will in the long-term contribute to more sharing of domestic and child care by men and women in adult life.

It is evident that males will not be attracted to the field unless the salaries increase. Indeed, many women will also be discouraged from entering the field with the salaries as low as they are. The salary levels in childcare give out a very strong message of the value attached to this work. It is clearly not seen as meriting a high salary. What does this say about how we value our children and their development?

It is clear that we must re-evaluate our priorities as a country. The Equal Opportunities Child Care Programme, under the National Development Plan 2000-2006 and funded at a level of €436.7m by the Irish Government and the European Union, is making available grants to increase the supply and quality of childcare throughout Ireland. In addition the Programme has established 33 County and City Childcare Committees throughout the country “to develop and implement co-ordinated strategic plans for childcare provision within their local area” (Department of Justice, Equality and Law Reform, 2003).

At the time this Programme was developed, the policy sought to address the childcare crisis in the short term by increasing the number of childcare places through the provision of grants and technical assistance. From an economic point of view, the issue was perceived as critical since labour shortages had been developing and IBEC had pointed out that provision of childcare would enable more potential workers to re-enter the labour force (IBEC, 1998).

While the focus on an increase in childcare places was necessary in the short term, there still remains the need for a comprehensive, integrated long-term childcare strategy (Fine-Davis, 2004a). Most of the funding allocated in the recent budgets has been going towards subsidizing existing private sector childcare providers, local childcare initiatives and community-based groups. However, because of the diversity of provision, there is still a need to put measures in place to ensure quality and consistency of quality. Quality means a focus on the child. Several commissioned reports and reports of working parties came to the same conclusions in the late 1990s (i.e., Goodbody, 1998; National Forum for Early Childhood Education, 1998; Department of Education and Science, 1999; Expert Working Group on Childcare, 1999). These reports concluded that:

- high quality pre-school education leads to immediate measurable gains in cognitive and social development which persist through adolescence and adulthood
- these gains are particularly significant for disadvantaged children but are also true for all children
- high quality childcare is characterised by high adult-child ratios, small group sizes, and well remunerated and trained caregivers
- investment in high quality early education pays off in terms of later social benefits and economic savings to society. In particular, improved levels of education lead to reductions in costs associated with unemployment, crime and health care.

The Expert Working Group on Childcare (1999) asserted that “The rights and needs of each child must be the first and primary consideration in the delivery of childcare (p.44)”. It stressed that:

society has an obligation to meet the fundamental needs of children and to provide assistance to aid the development of the child’s personality, talents and abilities. Therefore, a right of access for every child to quality childcare... should be guaranteed regardless of the status of the child. (Ibid.)

It is abundantly clear from our research and from the theoretical literature that “quality” in childcare must mean that there are not only trained care-givers, but that these should be of both sexes (Fine-Davis, 2004b). This has been acknowledged in a recent report from the National Economic and Social Forum (NESF, 2005).

While economic barriers to providing comprehensive childcare at a national level have been cited for more than 20 years (e.g., Working Party on Women’s Affairs and Family Law Reform, 1985), this argument is no longer relevant, as Ireland’s economic prosperity has grown to the point that Ireland is now one of the richest countries in the EU. Nevertheless its expenditure on pre-primary education is negligible and the lowest of all of the EU countries which the OECD examined, including less than some of the accession countries, including Hungary, the Czech and Slovak Republics and Poland and (OECD, 2004).

It is now time to plan a longer term more coherent strategy to ensure high quality educational childcare which is co-ordinated, consistent in quality, widely available, and affordable. The need for men in childcare can only be realised within the context of such a strategy.

Childcare is not just about finding places for workers’ children so as to facilitate the labour market. As one of the centre manager’s in the study pointed out, “This is a *society*, not an economy.” Consequently childcare must be about children’s needs and the long-term social effects for society.

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