

Myths About Men Who Work With Young Children

Male caregivers need acceptance and support

by Bryan G. Nelson

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There are many myths about why so few men work with young children. There are many more stereotypes about those men who do. These myths and stereotypes make it difficult for men to enter or remain in careers working with children. Consequently, most young children never experience having a man as a teacher or caregiver.

Myth: Men won't work with young children because of the money.

Truth: Men can be found working in

many low wage jobs such as the fast food industry, general labor jobs, and temporary or seasonal work (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2003). Men work in these low wage jobs because men are accepted in these settings and a number of other men also work there.

Another way of understanding this myth is to look at the number of men teaching in the primary and secondary grades. In school districts where teachers have similar levels of experience, education, and are represented by a union, the salaries are the same. In these settings only 18.3% of elementary and middle grade teachers are men compared to 44.8% of the secondary grade teachers. If money were the only reason men don't work with young children, there would be more men teaching in the elementary and middle grades.

Myth: Men do not apply for jobs to teach or care for young children.

Truth: Men do apply for teaching positions but are not hired. A survey of early education programs in Ohio found that center directors would not consider hiring a man without an early childhood degree even though they had hired women without degrees (Masterson, 1992). And in a national study of NAEYC members, 8 out of 10 Administrators/Directors indicated

that at some time men have applied to teach in their program. An owner of a child care program from a midwestern state commented, "Many women administrators will not hire men" (Nelson, 2002).

Myth: Men who teach children will leave the profession for something else.

Truth: Men want to stay in their jobs as teachers but face many pressures to move into administration (Sargent, 2001). Many men see administration, such as an elementary school principal position, as being something very different from teaching, and not something that they are interested in doing. Men, like women, also face pressures to move into another profession because the wages in early education are often at or below the federal poverty level (Child-care Workforce Study, 1998). When men and women leave the profession, it is because they cannot earn a living wage.

Myth: Men who teach young children are gay.

Truth: There is no information available about the sexual orientation of men who teach young children. Men who teach young children are a diverse group that includes men who are straight, bi-sexual, and gay — just like the population of women who teach young children. These men are performing a job that is traditionally considered more appropri-

ate for women. For men to do this, people often assume there must be something different about them. Women face a similar myth when performing a job that is traditionally considered more appropriate for men. In an inclusive profession that serves a diverse population of children and families, sexual orientation has no place in determining the appropriateness of a person to be a teacher of young children.

Myth: Men who work with young children will sexually molest them.

Truth: A child is safer in a child care program than she or he is in their own home. The most frequent cases of abuse of a young child is likely to occur in the child's home. (National Clearinghouse on Child Abuse and Neglect Information, 2002). In 90% of reported cases of child abuse, the perpetrators were parents or other relatives (NAIC, 2002). "Women also comprised a larger percentage of all perpetrators than men, 58% compared to 42%" (NAIC, 2002).

There is no question that our children must be safe from harm. But suspecting every man or instituting "no-touch policies" for only men teachers does not protect children. Actions rather than suspicions are what protect children — actions such as carefully screening, recruiting, and supervising staff and volunteers, providing staff with training on child abuse, designing the environment to control access by visitors and reduce hidden places in which abuse may occur, and building close partnerships with parents (NAEYC, 1996). These are the things that keep all children safe and allow all staff members to work in an environment without suspicion.

Myth: Men are not nurturing or patient enough to work with young children.

Truth: Men have been caring for children as fathers, uncles, brothers, and grandfathers for generations. The way men have cared for children has varied by culture and throughout history. Men also nurture in ways that are different than

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women. Fathers engage in more physical play, allow a greater degree of independence, and engage in more open forms of verbal interaction than mothers (Nord, 1997; Cox, 1992; Krampe, 1993). Studies of men teachers show they are also patient and nurturing, similar in their practices to women teachers (Seifert, 1992; Robinson, 1981). Also, there are many kinds of work that require great amounts of patience that have been traditionally done by men, such as being a counselor or a coach of a sports team.

Myth: Men who teach young children can't make it in other professions.

Truth: Many men who enter early education often do so after they have had successful careers in other fields. Men have become teachers of young children after careers in the military, insurance industry, banking industry, and law enforcement (Nelson & Sheppard, 1992). The men who work with children do so because they have chosen this career.

Myth: Men are not wanted or needed to work with young children.

Truth: Most people want children to have loving men involved in their lives. According to research, 97% of NAEYC members believe that it is important for men to work with young children. In another study, one respondent to a survey of licensed child care providers in the state of Washington wrote this comment about men teachers, "The children are really thrilled to have the attention, nurturing, and care of men. And we happen to know that the benefit of male influence is wonderful and critical" (Cunningham & Charyn, 2002).

Most people do believe that it is important for children to experience having men as teachers and caregivers. This is unlikely to happen until the myths and stereotypes about men teachers are challenged. When men are encouraged, supported, and accepted as teachers and caregivers of young children, only then will they enter and remain in early education.

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