

## 1.0 Connecting the Gender Issues

The Pre-school Learning Alliance is committed to gender equality. We believe that it is important to take action to increase male involvement in caring for children in early years settings by focusing on engaging fathers in settings and increasing the number of men working in childcare. We recognise that both these issues impact on each other and that they are likely to play an important part in helping to ensure that boys' needs are fully met in their early years setting.

We also believe that as more boys are cared for by males in the home or at the early years setting, this will affect their attitudes, expectations and beliefs about who they might be and what they might do in their adult lives. The result of this could be that they are more likely to be involved in the future in caring for their children and be more open to considering childcare as a realistic career option. If boys and girls see men involved in caring, then boys will grow up to expect (and want) to be active carers, and girls too will expect this of their future male partners in particular, should they have one, and of men in general.

We recognise the reality that women are disadvantaged in many spheres of life: they are grossly underrepresented as political leaders, there is a significant gender pay gap in men's favour and the majority of people at a senior level in most businesses are male. Women also continue to be expected to carry out most of the caring, not only for children but also for elderly people, as well as other domestic duties. As a result men take on a secondary role as carers.

Things are changing in the home though. The amount of time that fathers in Britain are devoting to caring for their children has increased eight-fold in the last generation<sup>1</sup> and a 'good father' is now expected to play a hands-on role in the care of his children, as well as maintaining the 'traditional' role of being a

breadwinner. However, many fathers still remain at the threshold of the early years setting rather than entering and participating in the setting, whereas a larger proportion of mothers feel comfortable doing so.

There is a body of evidence that shows that children do better across a whole range of measures when their fathers are involved; they are more likely to:

- Have better relationships throughout their lives.
- Be happier.
- Do better at school and in their exams.
- Be less likely to be involved in crime.<sup>2</sup>

As a result of such evidence, over recent years the Government has introduced a raft of policies to encourage family and education services to become more accessible to fathers, recognising that in the first instance services need to be more father-inclusive rather than just perceiving fathers as 'hard-to-reach'.

Common factors such as practitioner training, whole team involvement and senior management support have been identified as being required for a setting to develop successful father engagement initiatives. Often these initiatives seem to only take place where an individual has a particular interest in making father inclusion a reality<sup>3</sup>. We will discuss these factors further in Chapter 2.0.

In contrast to the fact that fathers are taking on more of the caring for their children in and around the home, the number of men who work in early years childcare has not increased for some 20 years. This is despite governmental intentions to raise the proportion of men in the profession to 6% from between 1% and 2% where it has stubbornly remained<sup>4</sup>, and a number of successful local projects that have focused on increasing the number of men working in early years childcare. However, the 6% target fell into disuse as the numbers of men in childcare did not increase. This is part of a wider picture that has seen a decrease in the proportion of men working as teachers in primary schools. It seems as if

men are keen to get involved in caring for their own young children but are reluctant to see a career in the care and education of young children as an option.

One of the reasons often given for wanting to increase the number of men working in childcare is the importance for children to have 'positive male role models' in their lives, particularly at a time when a growing number of children are living in single-mother households and are thought to have little or no contact with men in their family lives (and this concern is particularly with boys). There are a number of problems with these issues which are discussed in more detail in Chapter 3.0. Then there are the issues that are thrown up for the female practitioners, as a number of male childcare workers have talked about the challenges of being the only male member in a female team. They are often asked to lead on outdoor play activities or sports, play with the children or carry out physical tasks around the setting such as changing light bulbs or doing the DIY. The presence of more men in the childcare workforce will actually complement the overwhelming female representation in the workforce as it is currently composed and can help to challenge such unhelpful notions.

There is another, possibly connected, debate about the underachievement of boys. Popularly this sees boys as underachieving in all subjects right up to university level, and reports from bodies such as Ofsted suggest that the gender gap between girls and boys is already in place by the time they start school. However, although girls on average achieve better across the curriculum than boys - and as we look to what we can do about this, we can easily get caught up in the nature-nurture debate - it is perhaps more useful to focus on those groups of boys who are underachieving most significantly. Groups that are often highlighted are white working-class boys and boys from particular ethnic groups, such as African-Caribbean boys. The links between underachievement and socio-economic disadvantage have repeatedly been made and are reflected in the figures for boys' underachievement. However, in

the early years, the gender gap is often discussed without reference to the fact that class and ethnicity have a big impact on the differences in achievements of boys and girls.

Boys are, of course, as welcome as girls in their childcare setting, and at the same time there is a growing recognition that the kind of play that many boys are involved in - war, weapons and superhero play - has been (unintentionally) undervalued, and even in the past forbidden, in settings. So, although boys themselves are welcome, some of their play, the way in which they learn and their general behaviour have not been. These issues are further explored in Chapter 4.0.

The Alliance believes that the three separate issues of engaging with fathers, men working in childcare and boys underachieving are connected. *The XY Factor* focuses on the benefits of greater engagement with fathers for their children, regardless of their gender. Our concerns would particularly lie with those children who do not have father-figures when they are growing up. We recognise the importance of children seeing men active in caring roles, both as fathers and as childcare workers. This is key to contradicting the misperception that caring is women's work rather than human work.

We also recognise that while men and women bring the same human qualities to caring work and should essentially not differentiate between who does what, a man may be more able to empathise with boys' learning and development from the fact of having been a boy himself. This male perspective can be of particular assistance to female colleagues, as the whole workforce attempts to increase achievement by boys in general, and by the most disengaged and underachieving boys in particular.

We may choose to take action on one of these points of the gender triad, but if we choose to intervene at all three, the likelihood for change increases.