

Communicating with parents about male staff



DEAR MUM
AND DAD...

How do parents feel about male staff?

Evidence suggests that most parents are happy with the idea of men working in early years education. According to latest figures from the Department for Education¹, **79%** of parents support the idea. But that means **21%** don't (10% say they are neutral and 6% not sure, which leaves 5% actually opposed). And there is, of course, a difference between the 'in principle' answer a parent might give when filling in a survey, and how they might feel when faced with the real prospect of a man looking after their own child.

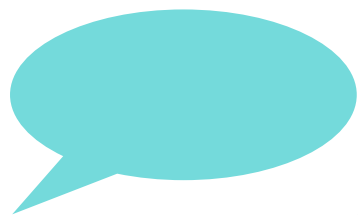
It's worth bearing in mind that while the vast majority of parents - **86%** - say male staff should have the same duties and responsibilities as their female counterparts, **8%** say they shouldn't, and **5%** are not sure.

Some parents will be opposed to, or feel unsure about, men changing nappies: many men who work in early years education have stories to tell about parents having objected to them being involved in looking after their children, and especially in intimate care such as helping with toileting.

When this happens, it is managers' role to support staff while also responding to parents' concerns. This can feel like a tough balance to strike.

How do male practitioners feel?

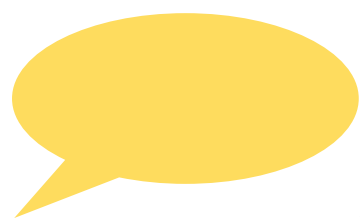
Here are some quotes from male practitioners we interviewed as case studies for the MITEY campaign:



Early on in my career there was one mother who made it clear she didn't want me changing her child's nappy. The management went along with that, and at the time I just thought that was how things had to be - now I would object. Interestingly, I've since looked after the same mum's younger children...I was nervous about it when I found that

¹ Department for Education's Childcare and Early Years Survey of Parents in England, 2019, p13. Online: https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/853358/CEYSP_2019_Report.pdf

out, but she's fine. So maybe she's got used to the idea, or maybe the management have dealt with it differently, I'm not sure - either way, she seems happy enough.



I've had three cases where parents have objected to me toileting their kids. The first was a police officer - but in the end the child dealt with it for me, because they would only ever settle with me, so in the end the guy could see what a good relationship we had, and relented.

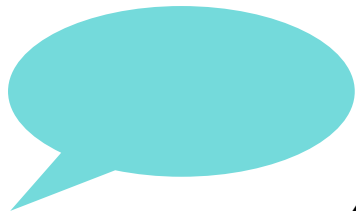


I think some parents find it difficult to comprehend their child bonding with a man as their key-worker. This is the minority rather than the majority. I had one parent who told our lead teacher that they didn't feel it was appropriate for their daughter to have a male key worker. The lead teacher was amazingly supportive of both myself and the parent and over time I won over the family. In fact, they told their neighbour that they recommended me! I have recently had parents request that male practitioners do not change or take their children to the toilet. I find this quite a tricky issue. Is it cultural? Is it a trust issue? Personally, it makes me feel like I am letting my colleagues down as I can't give the care that I am paid to give and end up handing children over to other practitioners that the child may not know (but are female!). I do however feel I have to respect these views and not take them personally.



Sometimes we need to be patient with them. Maybe they have never had a man before in the child's life beside the father, and sometimes the father doesn't even do their nappy, so why am I doing it if the father is not doing it? We need to let them get to know us, and see that we are professional people doing our job.

Some male practitioners respond to what they feel is negativity surrounding their presence in the early years setting, by changing their way of dealing with the children. Here's how one practitioner, who has since left the profession, described it:



As a male, I had to have eyes around my head, making sure that I was always visible to other staff, to protect myself. Many practitioners encouraged me to try to let go of my fear, but I wanted to be safe. When a child got hurt or cried, female practitioners were able to comfort them, give a kiss on the forehead, cuddle, place a child in need of comfort on their lap. Can you imagine a man doing that? When a child, with a strong relationship with me, wanted to sit on my lap and give me a hug, I had to avoid it. I used to say to children that I cannot do that due to sore legs or any other “white lie”. Just not to put myself in a risky situation where someone could accuse me of anything.

Handling concerned parents

We asked a group of early years managers with many years' experience of employing male staff (and a high proportion of 'Outstanding' Ofsted ratings!) for their advice on how to deal with parents who express concern about men in the workforce. They included, amongst others, David Wright, owner of Paint Pots Nurseries in Southampton, and June O'Sullivan, CEO at London Early Years Foundation.

We have summarised what they said into these five tips:

Tip 1. Accept that parents' concerns derive from an instinct to protect their child from harm. Respect that this is the core of the issue, and respond accordingly - don't try to belittle them or make them feel like they are 'anti-men'.

Tip 2. Understand that there might be different dynamics at play, depending on the family in question. A dad who is relatively uninvolved in hands-on caregiving for his own child might feel more threatened by the idea of another man performing such tasks, for example; a mum or dad who has been abused themselves might feel particularly attuned to protecting their child against such abuse. Different perspectives will call for different responses. Sometimes you may need to take some extra time and work sensitively with an individual parent and/or parent-couple - and be prepared to refer them on for additional, specialist support.

Tip 3. Focus on establishing the parents' trust, and key to that is helping them understand the safeguarding procedures you have in place at your setting, so that they know how well-

protected their child is when they are in your care, and can see that the 'men changing nappies' issue is set within a much wider, and well thought through, context. Emphasise how well-trained your staff are. Show them your safeguarding policy, which should set out all the things your organisation does to monitor and protect against abuse, and the procedures in place to ensure quick and decisive action if any evidence of such crimes were to be discovered. If you need to, explain that child abuse, including sexual abuse, can be perpetrated by many different types of people, and in all sorts of contexts; and that abuse in early years settings is extremely rare, but has been perpetrated by women as well as men.

Tip 4. Your organisation's employment policy should be crystal clear, and applied to everyone without exception. Suitable checks should be made on all staff, who must be fully qualified and vetted to perform the full range of duties and responsibilities required for the post they hold.

Tip 5. Remember (and explain to parents if necessary) that it would be both impractical and illegal (under the Equality Act 2010) for your organisation to impose limits on which tasks male and female staff undertook, on the basis of their sex. If you're in any doubt about this, here's what Susie Owen, Deputy Director of Early Years at the Department for Education, told the audience at the 2019 MITEY conference:

"We know that parents are generally happy for men to work with their children, however we also know that some parents can object to men looking after their children, particularly very young children. We know in this sector that there is nothing more important than safeguarding, and safeguarding is the core of the EYFS document. Where there are concerns about a child or allegations made about any member of your staff, we stipulate that your safeguarding policies and procedures must include an explanation of what action will be taken when there are safeguarding concerns, and that should be happening everywhere.

"However if you are required to respond to objections about a member of staff based purely on their gender then you should respectfully but confidently highlight your policies and procedures for safeguarding children, and be clear that you cannot pick and choose who undertakes different activities based on their sex, any more than you can choose based on a person's age, race, sexuality, faith or any other protected characteristic under the Equality Act 2010.

"We want you to all feel confident that you can do that, and we can bust those myths and really challenge those misconceptions where they appear. In addition obviously to highlighting your safeguarding policy you can hopefully encourage anybody with those kinds of negative or biased views, to be more knowledgeable and increase their awareness about men in the early years to help change their minds."

"Setting out the benefits of having male workers in your setting, setting out how your setting supports and promotes diversity in all its forms, displaying the MITEY resources on your walls and finding opportunities for parents to meet your staff and get to know how great they are."

Creating a safeguarding policy for mixed-gender teams

Central to dealing effectively with parents' concerns is the need for a clear safeguarding framework, where children's safety is placed at the heart of everything you do. Agreeing, communicating and applying guidelines rigorously becomes even more important when your workforce includes men, because of the extent to which men are viewed as uniquely dangerous around children; and because men may be disproportionately likely to offend (although it is important to note that definitive figures on this subject do not exist; that women do abuse children sexually too; and that female sexual abuse may be disproportionately more likely to remain hidden²).

We are unaware of any comprehensive study to confirm how UK early years settings are dealing with this issue, but we hear regularly of individual cases where managers have asked male staff not to get involved in changing children's nappies because a parent has objected to the idea of a man looking after this aspect of their child's care/ education.

Given how rare it still is for early years teams to include male staff, this suggests that a high proportion of settings may be pursuing policies (written or otherwise) which exclude men from such tasks.

² Mallett, X. (2017) Women also sexually abuse children, but their reasons often differ from men's,.The Conversation, 19 February 2017. Online: <https://theconversation.com/women-also-sexually-abuse-children-but-their-reasons-often-differ-from-mens-72572>

In Denmark, researchers found³ that early years providers were applying rules of three general types, in order to protect (and be seen to protect) children from potential adult abusers. These types were: 1) rules about managing visibility; 2) rules limiting adult-child touch; and 3) rules aiming to ensure staff were never alone with a child. In a significant minority of settings, special rules for men were applied.

It is clearly important not to dismiss concerns about child sexual abuse out of hand: we must recognise that the very small minority of men or women who are strongly motivated to abuse children sexually, will seek out opportunities to do so; and that individuals (again, men or women) with troubled histories may be physically or emotionally abusive towards vulnerable people in their care. The threat of child abuse must always be acknowledged and addressed powerfully and constructively; strong leadership, high quality training and rigorous procedures are required to protect against it.

If parents do allege criminal behaviour, you must of course suspend the practitioners involved while investigations take place.

Do we need special safeguarding procedures for male employees? The position of the MITEY network and campaign is that the answer to that should be 'no'. Here's why:

- We believe that having one rule for men (stay away) and another for women (be the trusted one) is legally highly questionable.
- Rather than putting limits on men's involvement, early years organisations should be developing effective, high quality and comprehensive safeguarding policies. Ofsted's guidance is a useful starting point⁴. To limit men's involvement in certain aspects of the job of being an early years practitioner is to undermine their capacity to care effectively for children. Changing nappies and soothing upset children are tasks that involve important emotional and physical work, and involve bonds of intimacy and trust between adults and children. It has been claimed that 'world peace starts on the changing table', and we support the recognition that underlies this quote, that attention

³ Leander, E-M., Munk, K., and Larsen, P. (2019), Guidelines for Preventing Child Sexual Abuse and Wrongful Allegations against Staff at Danish Childcare Facilities, *Societies* 2019, 9(2), 42. Online: <https://doi.org/10.3390/soc9020042>.

⁴ Ofsted (2019) Inspecting safeguarding in early years, education and skills settings: Guidance for inspectors carrying out inspections under the education inspection framework from September 2019. Online: <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/inspecting-safeguarding-in-early-years-education-and-skills>.

to the bodily aspects of early years education is important⁵. If only women are permitted to experience and engage with this element of the job, we set them up as the 'lead caregiver' and men as something lesser/different.

- We believe that excluding men from the 'dirty work' of nappy changing, and other traditionally 'nurturing' roles, positions men in the early years sector as more naturally suited to 'educator', rather than 'caregiver' roles; tasks which are also more highly valued. This leaves women to pick up the 'female' tasks that have been so undervalued for so long; we think that's deeply problematic, and needs to be challenged.

You may want to think about whether male staff need additional support, to help them navigate the isolation that comes from being the only male, or one of very few males, in the team. In this context, hearing concerns from parents or, worse, receiving a false allegation, may be enough to push them to leave the profession. One of the most active MITEY groups in Britain, the Bristol Men In Early Years Network, was set up in response to such an allegation⁶. There are support networks in a few other geographical areas (check out the MITEY website for a list <https://miteyuk.org/local-mitey-networks/>); if there is not one nearby, it could be worth your while to think about creating one.

Taking a proactive approach

By getting clear why we need men in early years education, and promoting a strong, confident vision of the benefits they can bring, you can respond much more effectively to any concerns parents may have.

Explain to parents that your organisation is actively and proudly seeking to be more inclusive of men; both in order to better represent the local community (which will include many hands-on fathers and father-figures, and other men in 'caring work'), and within a broader vision of developing a more gender-sensitive early education for children. See page 9 for some 'key messages' you could use in your communications with them.

⁵ This quote is from Dorothy Marlen, discussing the Pikler method, in an article published by [TeachNursery.com](https://www.teachnursery.com). A PDF of the article can be downloaded at https://www.dorothymarlen.net/sg_userfiles/Nurturing_Trust.pdf. For a wider discussion of the ideas raised in this paragraph, see Chapter 5 of Warin, J (2018), *Men in Early Childhood Education and Care*. Palgrave: Switzerland.

⁶ <https://www.bmiey.co.uk/our-story>.

Key messages for parents

- Gender stereotyping limits children's potential. By giving them male and female staff, we want to show that it's ok for men to care.
- Educating children is everyone's job - not just women's.
- We want a workforce that reflects our local community, and that includes people of different genders, ethnicities, religions etc.
- All our staff, male or female, are trained and qualified, many to degree level, as well as having all the necessary safeguarding checks.

Such messaging may or may not play well 'after the event' in initial conversations with parents who come to you with an objection to a male member of staff changing their baby's nappy. But it may help you 'head off' such objections in the first place, by allowing you to proactively 'set your stall out' with ALL parents (and staff).

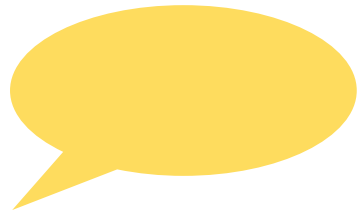
The **MITEY Charter** can be a particularly useful tool, which feels authoritative when displayed in your setting. Find out more and sign up here: <https://miteyuk.org/sign-up-to-the-mitey-charter/>.

Actively drawing parents' attention to the fact your organisation has signed up to the Charter as part of a 'letter home', or as an item for your website and/or newsletter, helps you communicate that you have a clear and consistent policy on recruiting male practitioners, even if numbers on your staff team are small.

It may have the effect of prompting more challenges from the small minority of parents who might object to their child having a male keyworker, but it also shows parents - and your team - that you are 'leading from the top', and have a progressive and forward-thinking vision for the future.

Many managers and practitioners say that parents' concerns alleviate, or disappear, once they have met male practitioners in person, and especially if they have seen them interact with and build a relationship with their child over time. So rather than keeping your male

practitioner/s hidden away, give everyone a chance to get to know each other. Here's what one practitioner told us:



Once parents get to speak to me they then learn that ok, this is a person who knows what he is doing. That's what I think a lot of parents are scared of initially... I think it is a trust thing because the parents don't know you and because they are not used to seeing males in our sector, so they don't know how to feel initially because you are seen as the anomaly. Like for a mechanic, when you go into a garage the majority are males but my mum, she was a mechanic; she knows a lot about cars and motorbikes, but would you go to her initially? You might feel a bit iffy about her because it's not seen as the norm, but once you hear her speak you are like "wow, this is amazing, she really knows her stuff". It shouldn't be like that but it is.

Knowing when to say no

Sometimes you will not be able to reach an agreement with a parent or parents, in which case you might need to respectfully suggest that they find another nursery, or a different type of childcare provision, for their child. Losing a family may mean reduced income for your setting in the short term, but standing by your well-qualified staff and rigorously imposed safeguarding policy, will result in a stronger, more successful business in the long term. Remember, there is no law that says a particular childcare provider must offer a place to every family.

What did you think of this report? Tell us here: <https://www.surveymonkey.com/r/56LDTW9>.

Citation for this report

Davies, J. (2019) The MITEY guide to communicating with parents about male staff. London: Fatherhood Institute

Need more support?

Book a MITEY Training Course, to share your challenges and ideas; hear about best practice in recruiting and retaining male staff; and work out a strategy for managing parents' concerns.

Find out more here: <https://miteyuk.org/mitey-training/>