

The Contribution Of Adult Males In Early Childhood Services: What Current Literature Implies For Rural Children's Services

Keiran Arthur

Men can contribute to early childhood education in many ways. Men can become involved in early childhood education as an employee, a student, a parent and as a community member. This article will look at the contributions of men in rural early childhood settings, the positive and negative aspects of male inclusion, and suggest some future policy development. While the contributions of male community members involved in committees and interest groups of early childhood services are recognised, this article will focus on the contributions of male employees, students, and parents.

The early childhood field is one that prides itself on providing caring environments that cater for the needs of children and the community. The field is also committed to providing a supporting environment for all participants (Clyde, 1987). There seems to be a general acceptance in the early childhood field that the contributions of men in early childhood settings would be beneficial. However, the field does not seem to be aware that changes to gender based attitudes must be made before males can contribute equally in the early childhood field. The early childhood field seems unable or unwilling to accept the fact that it is biased against male practitioners. Therefore the early childhood field could be seen as guilty of unfair behaviour. (Lambert 1992, p.100).

In a research project conducted in a rural district by Hardy (1999), four male childcare professionals were interviewed to discover their thoughts and experiences on working in the early childhood field. Hardy's research brought several interesting findings. All four participants expressed their beliefs that social stereotypes and negative media attention play a major role in determining how people react to a male working in the early childhood field (Hardy, 1999). The four participants all believed that the main benefit of the employment of males in early childhood services is the provision of a balance between male and female role models.

Early childhood professionals must become aware of the gender specific behaviours they apply in their work with children so that it is possible for early childhood professionals to alter these gender specific behaviours to combat gender stereotypes in the workplace. If this were the case, children would be provided with positive role models that are not gender related, therefore creating little difference between the role behaviours of male and female early childhood professionals.

Young children do not necessarily choose a role model of their own gender. What seems more important is the gender appropriate behaviour of the model. Men do not need to show masculinity to be a positive role model but show themselves as an early childhood professional promoting behaviours and values suitable for both boys and girls. All early childhood professionals, whether male or female, should model the promotion of positive values and behaviours (Lambert, 1992).

Lambert (1992) states that "...young children will learn that men can be nurturing, loving, and understanding - just as women are perceived to be...The blending of both conventional masculine and feminine traits into one personality, encapsulated in the androgynous adult has the psychological freedom to engage in whatever behaviour seems most relevant at the time" (Lambert, 1992, p.103).

In contrast to this view, Prendergast (1990) argues that while the male childcare professional is a role model, he is only one of many males a child will see and learn from in their life. The fact that an early childhood professional is male does not mean that the experience for children makes up for any lack of male role models in a particular child's life (Prendergast, 1990).

In a study conducted by Sumsion & Lubimowski of male early childhood students, 7 of the 13 interviewed participants saw their role in early childhood education as being a compensation of masculinity to that of their female colleagues "...providing a 'blokey' perspective through activities such as carpentry, kicking balls, and 'rough' play" (Sumsion & Lubimowski, 1997, p.77). The remaining 6 participants saw themselves in the androgynous role explained by Lambert (1992).

Sumsion and Lubimowski argue that as long as males have the appropriate skills, knowledge, attitudes and qualities to be an effective early childhood professional, it shouldn't matter in which of these roles they see themselves. Men and women might behave differently with young children. Both still contribute valuably to their role of meeting the children's developmental needs (Sumsion & Lubimowski, 1997).

Prendergast (1990) suggests that employing a male in early childhood settings it is more a novelty to adults than children. If children see a man working in an early childhood setting they quickly accept this as normal and the gender of the worker becomes irrelevant. Prendergast (1990) explains how adults are more aware of the lack of males working in early childhood settings and therefore see the male as a novelty more so than a talented and committed early childhood professional (Prendergast, 1990).

While there are benefits in the employment of males in early childhood settings, services should be careful not to reach out and recruit any male applicant. The applicant should be regarded as the best applicant for the position. If men were employed solely on the basis of their gender, there would be an emphasis of the quantity rather than the quality of male early childhood professionals (Evans, 2000).

Evans (2000) added to this by stating that "...it is important in providing men with access to children, that it not be done in a way that disempowers or categorically displaces women who have been caring for and educating young children for years" (Evans, 2000. P.18).

An awareness of the types of roles that are given to a male staff member is also important. Cunningham (1999) said that "...men will stay in an environment they feel is equitable, safe, values men, and supports them in personal and professional growth...If you have a man on staff make sure that the roles are equitable" (Cunningham, 1999, p.68). Male staff members may willingly take out the garbage and lift heavy objects, but they may resent being expected to do these tasks all the time merely because of their gender.

When an early childhood setting has employed a male for the first time, staff need to become aware of how they treat the male staff member. To truly accept and value the contributions of a male staff member, staff at early childhood settings must also challenge their own perceptions and conceptualisations of gender roles in daily practice.

Female colleagues must be aware of what they talk about in the staff room. A male staff member may feel uncomfortable or socially isolated from the rest of the staff if the conversations are that of gossip, period pain, and bra sizes (Cunningham, 1999). The relevance of these topics in the workplace should probably be challenged even if there were no male on the staff.

The issue of male contribution in early childhood settings is not an issue that necessarily needs to be dealt with by males, it is more an issue that needs to be addressed by firstly the professionals involved in early childhood field, and secondly, by the wider community. The issue of men working with and caring for young children is only prevalent because of society's perceptions of what a caregiver should be. When these gender based conceptualisations are challenged by professionals in the early childhood field and the community in conjunction with men choosing to enter the early childhood field, a greater acceptance and valuing of male contribution in early childhood settings may be possible.

The main argument against men becoming employed in early childhood settings is the potential for these men to sexually abuse children. An article by Skelton (1994) addresses this argument. Skelton explains the view that screening processes are not enough to stop men likely to abuse children from becoming employed in early childhood settings. Male sex offenders may not have a criminal record and may slip through the system (Skelton, 1994).

The early childhood profession often requires staff to be in close physical contact with children. Skelton (1994) recognises the difficulty of determining if a male is likely to abuse children through the process of a job interview. Questions asked of males in the job interview about close physical contact with children, are not only at risk of breaching equal opportunity and discrimination laws,

but also places the male candidate in a 'no win' situation. If the male candidate answers favourably to fulfilling all aspects of what is expected in the position (including close contact with children), he may possibly be seen as unsuitable. On the other hand, if the male candidate answers negatively, he may be implying that he will not fulfil all the requirements of the job and therefore create extra workloads for other staff members. There seems to have been a lack of open discussion surrounding an acceptable role of male practitioners in the area of close physical contact with children (Skelton, 1994). I see the need for open discussion about these issues to be paramount in the view to changing the perception of child sex abuse in rural early childhood services. With open discussion, both employers and male early childhood professionals would all have the same understanding as to the level of close physical contact expected of a male early childhood professional.

Skelton (1994) explains that all men are capable of sexually abusing children but only some men actually do (Skelton, 1994). I would argue that all women are also capable of sexually abusing children. Some women actually do. In order to combat the perceptions of males working in the early childhood profession as potential sex offenders, early childhood staff, parents, and community members must become aware that anyone can abuse children, male or female.

It would be in the best interests of early childhood education if child sex offenders could be totally excluded from early childhood services. The involvement of males in early childhood settings may have contributed to concerns about sexual abuse in early childhood education. The existence of these concerns illustrates parents, and early childhood professionals' commitment to the protection of the children in their care. It is important that concerns towards sexual abuse are not restricted only towards male employees in early childhood settings. A false accusation could end the career of any early childhood professional. Therefore, if men are often suspected of sexual abuse based on their gender, the likelihood of such false accusations may be increased. The increased risk of being falsely accused based on gender, may be enough to discourage some males from becoming involved in early childhood services at all

Early childhood education programs such as those studied at tertiary institutions provide the training for early childhood professionals. As is the case in the early childhood field, there are very few male early childhood education students participating in these tertiary courses. Powderly & Westerdale (1998) looked at the statistics of male and female students enrolled in the Associate Diploma of Social Science (Child Studies) at Wagga TAFE over a five year period between 1992 and 1996. The results of this research found that there were five men involved in the Associate Diploma course over the five years. This was compared to 745 females. The outcomes for the five men who participated were quite different. Three of the men remained in training, one withdrew from the course, and one graduated. This illustrates the uneven distribution of female to male graduating students in early childhood education courses (Powderly & Westerdale, 1998).

Sumsion & Lubimowski (1997) conducted a research study of thirteen men enrolled in an Australian early childhood education program. This research involved surveying the men about their experiences as student teachers. The findings of the study gave insight into how male early childhood students perceive their choice of study in a female dominated course, and their prospective career choice. It is not clear the demographic location of the thirteen men involved in this study although the findings reflected similar responses to those of Hardy (1999).

Sumsion & Lubimowski found that from the time men decide to enter the early childhood field, they must begin a process of questioning, negotiating, and reconstructing personal and cultural perceptions of masculinity and femininity. This process is most likely to be challenging, stressful, and confusing. Teacher training can be stressful and can cause anxiety. For male early childhood students, the addition of reconstructing perceptions of themselves and social stereotypes, can place enormous extra pressure not felt by their female colleagues. This would suggest that male early childhood education students are a vulnerable group. Sumsion and Lubimowski found that the participants of their research thought it necessary for male support programs and workshops dealing with male early childhood professional issues, to be included in early childhood education programs.

With support programs, male early childhood students may be supported in dealing with issues, while female colleagues may also become aware of the feelings, discrimination and equal

opportunity problems surrounding male involvement in the early childhood field. With an increased awareness, female colleagues could enter the early childhood profession well equipped to support and promote the contribution of men in early childhood settings.

Recently there has been changing social expectations in terms of the ways and the extent to which men should be involved in the lives of their children (Evans, 2000).

There are social expectations for fathers to become more involved with children, but when fathers do they can be sometimes viewed suspiciously by other parents. It can be similar to the social stigmas faced by male early childhood professionals (Evans 2000).

In the past, fathers have traditionally been involved in the programs of childcare centres and preschools. Their role however, has generally been in the construction of the building, and in the maintenance of the building and equipment. Fathers, in the past have not seen their role at an early childhood setting to be involved directly with the children.

In rural Australia, most men seem to attempt to fit a social stereotyped role of a rugged, hard working man of the land. This social stereotype has often passed through many generations. Working on farms and other rural industries can be physically tough, demanding long hours. Therefore the majority of caring responsibilities in rural families are more likely to be fulfilled by the mother.

It would seem that the more fathers become involved with their children in early childhood services, the more accepted this aspect of their role, as a father, will become in society. With this view, staff at early childhood services must become aware of the ways in which their service encourages fathers to become involved and the way in which they respond to the involvement.

McBride (1999) explained the barriers he faced when trying to improve male involvement in early childhood settings in America. McBride stated that "I observed how program staff often addressed only the mother of the child, especially when it came to educational issues. If the staff talked to the man, they focussed on the weather or sports rather than substantive issues important to the child. They were sending the message that you're really not wanted here" (McBride 1999, p.1).

McBride (1999) also explained that several good quality early childhood services only had a female toilet. Aspects of a setting such as this may contribute to the sending of negative messages to fathers and other men in the children's lives. To make a centre more 'male friendly' involves a commitment by staff to consider the program, interactions, and physical environment from a father's point of view and make positive changes.

The Australian government has put in place legislation and policy of equal opportunity to men and women in the workplace (Equal Opportunities Commission Report of Inquiry into Complaints of Discrimination, 1997). The legislation and anti discrimination laws have been put in place under the United Nations Convention for on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women, September 3, 1981.

It would seem that the main political reason for introducing anti discrimination and equal opportunity legislation, was a form of social justice to allow and assist women into the workplace (Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women, 1981; Equal Opportunity for Women in the Workplace, 2000). These laws under this UN convention can help males entering non-traditional or female dominated occupations by encouraging equality between men and women. The legislation and convention information tends to be mainly based on providing equal opportunities for women in male dominated workplaces.

With a political emphasis on affirmative action towards women as a minority group in the workplace, it would seem that male minority groups might have been forgotten about or ignored in government programs. It would seem that the programs designed to help women in sex discrimination and equal opportunity could also help males working in early childhood settings.

The Australian Federal Government Department of Family and Community Services recognises the changing roles of gender roles in families (Commonwealth Department of Family and Community Services, 2000). This acceptance and recognition by the government can assist in forming conceptualisations of male and female roles in the care of children in Australian society.

The Bay Area Male Inclusion Program is one of many programs in America designed to increase the contribution of men into early childhood settings (Browscome, 1999). This program is an example of affirmative action towards men in the early childhood field, and the many fathers who have an interest in their own child's care and development.

There are similar programs in operation in Australia such as the Males in Early Childhood Network Group located at Lady Gowrie Child Care Centre in Sydney (Job 1999). The Australian programs are not as common as in America. It would seem that in order to help men to become actively involved in early childhood services, more programs such as these would be needed. Male inclusion programs in early childhood education settings may help develop community awareness of the issues of including and encouraging male contributions in early childhood settings.

The NSW Department of Community Services (DoCS) provides regulation guidelines and legislation to ensure that children are protected in early childhood settings (NSW Department of Community Services, 2000). The regulations enforced by DoCS include staff/child ratios that assist not only in safety issues, but also in the prevention of sexual abuse within an early childhood service (Children and Young Persons (Care and Protection) Act, 1998. (NSW)).

Male contribution in early childhood settings can bring to light inappropriate gender based practices in settings. If policies need to be changed merely because of the involvement of men in early childhood settings, then these policies probably needed changing anyway.

Future considerations of policy development could involve the inclusion of support groups of males involved in the early childhood field both at tertiary institutions and in the community, workshops for early childhood education students, inservice courses about involving males in early childhood education, and looking at ways in which the media portray males in non-traditional roles. Individual settings could look at policy development in the areas of interactions with male staff and fathers, male inclusion tactics, and advocating the positive contributions of males in early childhood settings to the community.

Future research focussing on the contributions of men specifically in rural early childhood settings could provide valuable data to explore this issue further. Most of the information gathered for this article was general to metropolitan and rural settings.

All of these could help to develop an awareness of the contributions men can bring to early childhood settings. To fully value males in early childhood education would require the restructuring of the gender role conceptualisations prevalent in society. This awareness initially needs to be made by the early childhood professionals and then advocated to the wider community.

Men involved in early childhood settings can contribute as a role model not only to children but also to others in society. Males in early childhood offer their own promotion of early childhood as a rewarding and enjoyable profession to other men just by being involved and committing themselves for the good of the children and for the good of the early childhood field as a whole.

References

- Browscome, R. (1999). We say we want men in children's centers. Published in *the Bay area involvement network newsletter*, 3, Mar. 2000. (online). <http://www.bamin.org/hews3.html#wesay>
- Clyde, M. (1987). Men in early childhood centres. *Australian Journal of Early Childhood*, 12 (3), pp. 39-41.
- Commonwealth Department of Family and Community Services. (online) (28, Mar. 2000). Retrieved via Netscape. <http://www.facs.gov.au/>
- Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women, 1981 (online) (28 Mar. 2000). Retrieved via Netscape <http://www1.umn.edu/humanrts/instreet/elcedaw.htm>
- Cunningham, B. (1999). Hiring and retaining male staff. *Child Care Information Exchange*, Jan/Feb 1999 (125), pp. 66-69.
- Equal Opportunity for Women in the Workplace. (online) (28 Mar. 2000). Retrieved via Netscape. <http://www.eowa.gov.au/>
- Equal Opportunities Commission Report of Inquiry into Complaints of Discrimination. (1997). (online). (28 Mar. 2000). Retrieved via Netscape. http://www.hreoc.gov.au/pdf/h5_6_2.pdf
- Evans, J. L. (2000). Men in the lives of children (online) (29 Feb. 2000). Retrieved via Netscape. <http://www.ecdgroup.com/cn161lead.html>
- Hardy, A. (1999), Men in early childhood services: their thoughts & experiences. B Ed (Early Childhood) research report, Charles Sturt University.
- Job, F. (1999). A most manly pursuit. *Bedrock*, 3 (1), pp. 15-16.
- Lambert, B. (1992). *Changing faces: The early childhood profession in Australia*. Australian Early Childhood Association: Watson, ACT.
- Lubimowski, G. & Sumsion, J. (1997). Male early childhood student teachers: Their hopes, fears and aspirations. *Australian Journal of Early Childhood*, 2, pp. 70-81.
- McBride, B. (1999). *Obstacles exist for men in child rearing* (online). (17 Oct, 1999). Retrieved via Netscape. <http://www.ag.uiuc.edu/news/extension/template.html>
- NSW Department of Community Services (online) (28 Mar. 2000). Retrieved via Netscape. <http://www.community.nsw.gov.au/>
- Powderly, K. & Westerdale, W. (1998). Should men be included?. *Every Child*, Spring, 4 (3), p. 9.
- Prendergast, L. (1990). Males in early childhood services. *Rattler*, Spring, 15, pp. 14-15
- Skelton, C. (1994). Sex, male teachers and young children. *Gender and Education*, 6 (1), pp. 87-93.

LEGISLATION:

Children and Young Persons (Care and Protection) Act, 1998. (NSW)

