



GenderEYE



Toolkit

Welcome to the GenderEYE Toolkit

Gender EYE (Gender Diversification in Early Years Education: Recruitment, Support and Retention) was a study by the University of Lancaster Department of Educational Research and the Fatherhood Institute, funded by the Economic and Social Research Council.

Our research aimed to identify the obstacles that stand in the way of greater gender diversity; to learn about possible solutions (including those developed overseas); and to use this knowledge to produce practical resources that can help the UK diversify this vital part of the education sector.

In this Toolkit we present the key findings from our research, alongside new resources developed to help early years organisations address the obstacles and challenges involved in recruiting and retaining male staff.

We have organised these resources into four separate chapters, each focusing on one of our four key findings. Within each chapter you will find a mixture of:

- Data from the study – including key statistics from our surveys, and quotes from our participants illustrating findings from the qualitative interviews and focus groups
- Ideas for how to address the issues thrown up by our findings, in your setting or organisation
- Exercises to help you think things through and develop your own solutions.

To help you make best use of our ideas and exercises, we suggest in the Introduction, a **3-step approach** to managing the gender-diversification of your workforce. This is intended to offer a broad framework to develop your own thinking, strategies and action plans as you work your way through the rest of the Toolkit. We hope you find it useful.

If you have any brilliant ideas of your own, want to give us some feedback on the Toolkit, or would like to discuss a possible partnership, please email Dr Jeremy Davies at j.davies@fatherhoodinstitute.org.

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Introduction

Step 1: Assess your starting position

In the table below we present four descriptors indicating levels of progress towards the goal of becoming a fully male-inclusive, gender-sensitive early years organisation – each relating to one of our key findings.

Think about which of these describes your setting best. This can be a helpful start as you set out on your journey – and you can reassess your position on the spectrum whenever you like, to take account of the changes you make in response to our (and others' ideas).

Themes from our key findings	Level 1: Anti-male	Level 2: Accepting	Level 3: Active	Level 4: Advanced
Developing a recruitment strategy	No effort is made to recruit or retain male staff	Minimal and/or piecemeal efforts are made to encourage male applicants and support existing staff	Individual managers and practitioners may develop localised strategies for attracting men to the workforce and/or supporting male staff – but these are not developed into transparent, systematic processes	A clear, defined (written) strategy for recruitment and retention of men is implemented, which includes regular workforce gender data collection and analysis; outreach with parents; external networking to influence the wider culture; and 'positive action' methods to support men as an under-represented group

Supporting men's early years careers	Men are considered too risky to employ	Men may be accepted onto the team, if they happen to apply and meet the job criteria	Male staff may be valued and supported as individuals, but there is little or no attempt to systematically create a gender-flexible team	Men are viewed as an essential, equal partners in the organisation's diverse, mixed-gender team. They are valued holistically as skilled practitioners, and supported to draw and reflect on their gendered selves and experiences in delivering a gender-sensitive curriculum
Unravelling gender in the team	Gender stereotyping in the team is routine and goes unchallenged	'Positive' gendered stereotypes about men may form part of rationale for accepting male staff, and/or may underpin daily practice	Individual managers and practitioners may undertake to challenge gender stereotypes when they crop up, but this is not embedded in training and systems	The organisation creates routine opportunities to challenge gender stereotypes and gendered task allocation, and has systems to support all staff to work and reflect on this agenda
Towards a gender-sensitive curriculum?	There is no space in the pedagogy for challenging gender stereotypes, and practitioners avoid any such approaches	Individual practitioners may challenge gender stereotypes ad hoc but only in response to children's comments or behaviours; and they do so without	Practitioners and managers recognise the potential damage gender stereotyping can do, and managers would generally support practitioners to challenge them	Disruption of gender stereotypes is systematic and built into the everyday life of the setting; practitioners receive ongoing training and support to do

		setting- or organisation- wide support	– but only on an ad hoc basis	‘gender work’ with children
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Step 2: Develop a clear rationale

Our data suggests that a key enabling step towards an advanced male recruitment strategy, is having a clear rationale for recruiting and retaining men. This may sound obvious but actually seems like a stumbling block that prevents many organisations from making good progress.

If you don't know why you want men on your team – or if you know why, but your reasons are underpinned by gender-based assumptions and stereotypes, you are probably less likely to make a success of attracting and retaining male staff.

Several years ago David Wright, owner of PaintPots nurseries in Southampton and a long-time advocate for men in early years childcare and education, created a charter to help organisations commit to bringing more men into early years education.

Since 2018 an updated version of the charter has been a key resource for the MITEY (Men In The Early Years) campaign, led by Dr Jeremy Davies, co-investigator on the GenderEYE study, and supported by a steering group that includes Professor Jo Warin (GenderEYE lead investigator) and David Wright.

A range of early years organisations are now using the MITEY Charter as a tool to help define and publicise their commitment to creating and supporting a mixed-gender workforce. The Charter steers away from recruiting men because they might bring special, masculine qualities into settings, and focuses instead on making the changes necessary to create and support an inclusive workforce.

The five statements that make up the MITEY Charter:

- We value men's capacity to care for and educate children, both within families and as professionals
- We value the benefits to children of being cared for and educated by a diverse, mixed-gender early years workforce
- We acknowledge that early years education should benefit from the talents of all, so we are actively seeking to create a workforce that includes men, women and people with other gendered or non-gendered identities
- We are committed to removing the obstacles that stand in the way of a mixed-gender early years workforce, including low pay and status, limited career progression and gender-discriminatory treatment
- We view early years education as a critical context in which to address gender inequality and stereotypes, for the benefit of children and wider society.

This is not the only possible rationale for bringing more men into the early years workforce, and it is certainly not the most regularly voiced. Calls for more men often come attached to ideas about men as role models or father-replacements. By working through this toolkit, we aim to help you develop your own (and your organisation's) thinking, so that the principles set out in the Charter can ring true.

Step 3: Create and follow a written strategy

Once you have assessed your current position and made sure you have a clear rationale for bringing more men into the organisation, the next step is to develop a strategy for how you are going to attract and keep them.

In our study we found that in many cases, innovation in this area was led by specific individuals. Sometimes leadership by individuals is vital, but novel thinking and practice tends to be more sustainable if there is a focus on changing processes and redesigning systems. It's also important to measure the success of new approaches – and to always be ready to redefine them if the evidence suggests they aren't working well.

Peppered throughout the rest of this toolkit you will hopefully find lots of ideas for useful approaches that might form part of your strategy.

On the next page you will find a blank template you could use as the basis for creating a written strategy. In it there is space to write your own plans under each of the four areas highlighted by our findings (Recruitment - chapter 1; Support – chapter 2; Gender in the team – chapter 3; and Gender & the curriculum – chapter 4), in your own words. There is space to identify who will take responsibility for each plan, and to set relevant deadlines.

We would recommend committing your ideas to paper like this, to help focus your mind and give you and/or colleagues something to measure your progress against. Like all good strategies, be prepared to revisit and update this document regularly, as you progress along the spectrum we described on page 2, and identify new priorities and approaches on the way.

Our strategy			
What's the plan?	What will we do?	Who will lead?	When?
Recruitment 1			
2			
3			
4			
5			
Support 1			
2			
3			
4			
5			
Gender & team 1			
2			
3			
4			
5			
Gender & curriculum 1			
2			
3			
4			
5			

Chapter 1

Developing a recruitment strategy

Part 1: What we learned from the study

The findings of our study indicate that there is no clear overall strategy to bring men into early years. For example, less than 1 in 5 (14%) of managers report having used specific strategies. It is often isolated individuals or settings that take small but significant steps towards recruiting men. This includes, for example, inviting men in for informal chats even when there are no posts available; using images of men in recruitment drives or on the nursery website. In the following section, a manager discusses one of their strategies for recruiting male practitioners:

Female Manager: *Our recruitment team know that an agenda we have is, any males you get in, let's interview them. Let's not just take them on paper value but let's see if we could take them on as unqualified and then upskill them to be you know an even better teacher than what we can see in them already. Because sometimes we'll get a CV through and it will just say that they've been a delivery driver and they've done a bit of retail. They haven't had childcare experience but there's obviously a reason why they're applying for this role within a nursery. So let's delve into that a little bit deeper... (H3/SE/FG1)*

Some managers try to recruit male practitioners by focusing on the values, personalities and life experiences of potential candidates rather than skills and qualifications, as the participant below describes:

Male Manager: *We're changing recruitment in general ... to look more as I said earlier about values and personality and what we can teach people rather than what they might have on paper. And even the interview questions and the way that we interview and the questions that we ask and the follow up questions are all very values based for male and female staff to try and get away from, someone looks great on paper therefore we only interview them, we don't interview that person. So it's about what we look for and what things we're looking for on paper. What kind of life experiences they've had so that we can strengthen our academy, strengthen our pedagogy team and then teach them all the skills that we have. So I think recruitment in general for us is taking a very different tack and approach to attract more of the people that we would want (H3/SE/FG1)*

There is strong recognition of an unconscious bias within the early years recruitment process, and the need for more diverse recruitment panels. On the whole, however, settings were very much aware of the low numbers of men employed in their settings

or applying for posts, and expressed uncertainty around how to rectify this. Settings also expressed concerns around positive discrimination and the impact of a gendered recruitment process on safeguarding.

Our study also identified gaps in careers guidance. The perception by early years professionals is that children receive careers guidance very late in their education and learning, for example in Years 10 and 11. By this time, children have established clear ideas around gender and career pathways, as the following participant suggests:

Male Practitioner: *When I was at school it was clear that the female courses were hairdressing, beauty and childcare and the male ones were construction and engineering, or mechanic. So, and for my group of friends as well, the females went into the female role, courses and the male did-, so it was just, it wouldn't have been natural for me to do early years. It never crossed my mind basically (H4/SE/FG2)*

Furthermore, changes in the provision of schools careers services, for example, the increasing costs around providing work experience and changing perceptions around the importance of careers guidance in schools have impacted on the quality and accessibility of this service for young people and children. The findings of our study also indicate that boys in school receive very little exposure to early years as a career. As a result, this area of work does not figure on their careers radar. There is an absence of both consideration and decision-making. These points are highlighted in the following extracts:

Funding Council Officer/National Government: *One of our colleges did quite a big bit of research amongst the schools in their region. They did a survey of twelve of their high schools and they surveyed boys who are 15 and asked them what they thought about a career in Early Years, and the pay aspects really didn't come up. What they did think was that this was just a job that they didn't know anything about. They didn't, they weren't told about it when they went to careers guidance. There was no interaction, and it's just, it's just something they've never come across. (S.I.3)*

EY Trainer/Advocate for Men in EYs: *Quite honestly, men will not come unless they're invited. That's what I think. Unless somebody's saying, come over here, this is a job for you they're not going to come, unless there's more of an effort...[.] We're attacking it the wrong way...[.] We're not inviting them in. We're not putting them off, they were never put on in the first place. They never thought about it! A lot of them never knew anything about it. Not because of any reasons, not because of the pay, not because of negative things, just cos they never thought about it (S.I.5)*

A further area to consider is the level of challenge provided by the careers services when helping young people choose a career pathway. The findings of our study suggest that careers guidance adopts a 'neutral' or 'user-led' approach in which advisors find out what children like and feel they are good at; and make suggestions accordingly. This encounter may be a conversation between a human advisor and

the young person or may involve responding to answers on a computer. A user-led careers guidance is often perceived positively and, in particular, as a way to avoid career stereotyping. However, the absence of interactions (either human or digital) which challenges the individual or helps them explore areas they wouldn't have otherwise considered means that boys do not choose, or consider, early years as a career.

Part 2. Ideas and exercises

Read the texts and complete the activities

Theme 1: Creating male-friendly recruitment materials

Most early years employers take a 'traditional' approach when recruiting staff, providing potential applicants with a job outline that emphasises the role requirements, usually centred on having a particular, essential qualification. Sometimes as an employer you may feel like you have no alternative but to do this: you need staff with a certain level of qualification in order to meet your qualified/unqualified staff ratio requirements.

But our data suggests that some organisations are moving towards 'values-based recruitment' – looking for people with the right skills and mindset, rather than focusing solely on possession of a particular qualification. This kind of approach may be easier if you are a big organisation, and especially if you have your own in-house training capability, but it may also be worth thinking about if you have 'unqualified' spaces to fill.

Values-based recruitment could have a major impact on your ability to attract male recruits – many of whom may lack formal early years qualifications but nevertheless have a lot to offer settings, drawing on skills and experience gained in other contexts. In the box below we give examples of what 'traditional' and values-based recruitment texts might look like, and how they might encourage or discourage male applicants.

Even if you are recruiting to a particular vacancy where you absolutely must find someone with a particular qualification, think carefully about the words, phrases and ideas you use in your job adverts, job descriptions, person specifications and promotional content. Try one of these job advert 'gender bias decoders', to see if any words you're using are implicitly masculine or feminine:

<https://www.totaljobs.com/insidejob/gender-bias-decoder/> or <http://gender-decoder.katmatfield.com/>.

'Feminised' job titles like 'nursery nurse' are old-fashioned and may be off-putting (or at least not encouraging) to potential male recruits. Are there ways you could re-label things to be more inclusive of men as well as women? 'Early years practitioner' or 'Early years educator' sound more professional and hold no implicit gender bias, for example.

Could you 'kill two birds with one stone' - using your job adverts to promote not just the particular vacancy you need to fill, but to also make clear that you are interested in hearing from people who don't fit the 'standard' profile but might have relevant skills and interests, and a willingness to learn?

Some managers told us that they invite potential male applicants in for an informal chat, to get to know them better, rather than just rejecting them because they seemed not to 'fit the bill' on paper. Some also said that they had brought men with particular interests or skills in, like art, music, drama or woodwork.

Please read the following advertisement texts, and our commentaries. Then try Exercise 1 underneath...

	Advert text	Commentary
A 'traditional' job advert	<p>We are looking for a Level 3 Nursery Nurse who is caring, willing and able to work as part of the team, as well as independently and are able to use their own initiative. Also to meet the children's everyday needs, and following the daily routines within the rooms. This person must be Paediatric Level 3 First Aid Trained.</p> <p>We are looking for someone who is enthusiastic and has a passion for working with children on a daily basis.</p> <p>We are looking for someone with an excellent knowledge of the EYFS who is able to plan and provide appropriate activities to support the children in their development, based on their individual needs and interests to help them reach their Early Learning Goals.</p> <p>We are looking for someone to provide high standards of quality within the nursery including the environment, resources and experiences offered to the children.</p> <p>We are looking for someone who has excellent safeguarding knowledge and is able to follow the correct procedures regarding any concerns about children and staff.</p>	<p>Within this first paragraph there are two qualification requirements, which are presented as compulsory. Anyone without a Level 3 early years qualification or first aid training knows immediately not to bother applying. Given how few men are likely to have such qualifications, the pool of potential recruits is narrowed to mostly or entirely women.</p> <p>The rest of the advert details further requirements but it would be clear to any potential applicant that without the qualifications listed upfront, there is no need to read any further.</p> <p>It is worth noting that even suitably qualified man may also be put off by this advert, because the employer has chosen to use 'Nursery Nurse' as the job title - conjuring up a picture of a traditional, female-only nursery.</p>

	<p>We are looking for someone to undertake a shared responsibility for health and safety throughout the nursery, and also to ensure the cleanliness of the nursery is kept to a high standard.</p> <p>We are looking for someone who is able to promote diversity and equality and has excellent knowledge of prevent duty and British Values.</p> <p>Job Types: Full-time, Contract. Benefits: On-site parking. Schedule: Monday to Friday.</p>	
A 'values-based' approach	<p>We are always looking for special staff who understand our passion and our vision to get more kids outdoors. Send in your CV with the subject Careers if you'd be interested in joining our team.</p> <p>We spend from 9:30am to 3:30pm outdoors, year-round, no matter the weather. We employ people with a zest for life, a love of the outdoors and a passion for the importance of kids playing and being outside.</p> <p>We welcome applications from practitioners qualified to NVQ Level 3 or above in Early Years childcare but also accept applications from non-qualified candidates who share our desire to reconnect children with nature. Any Forest School qualifications or experience are a bonus but not a requirement, as we train in-house.</p> <p>To show our appreciation for your dedication we pay above industry average. We offer an incomparably beautiful setting for your days. We guarantee you'll be working with incredibly friendly and like-minded colleagues. And we don't believe you should work on your birthday!</p> <p>Why work for us? We asked some of our team...</p>	<p>This advert uses strong words and phrases like 'special', 'passion', 'vision' and 'zest for life', that describe aspects of a potential practitioner's character. This helps create a sense that the organisation's focus is on the personal qualities of the individual candidate.</p> <p>Although a qualification level is mentioned, there is an explicit statement that people who have not taken that particular course of study – or any, in fact - are welcome to apply.</p> <p>The organisation also sells the attributes that mark it out as special: above-average pay and conditions, an outdoor setting and a focus on teamwork.</p> <p>At the end of the text is a link to a 3-minute video features a diverse range of male and female practitioners talking to camera, in their own words, about what they enjoy in their role.</p> <p>Any man interested in an early years career would feel welcome to submit an application to this organisation.</p>

Exercise 1. Getting creative with job adverts

Thinking about the job adverts you've just read, and bearing in mind our commentary, try to write your own 'values-based' advert for a 'standard' early years practitioner post (the one we've given you above is quite 'outdoorsy'...try to make yours less so!). What values, qualities and skills would you want your practitioners to have? What kind of person would you like them to be? What's special about your setting? How could you write all this in a warm, engaging way that encourages everyone to apply? If you're stuck for ideas, do some internet searches or scan some jobs pages of newspapers, to see how employers in other industries approach their recruitment advertising.

Exercise 2. Get the team on board

At your next team meeting, ask your team to help you define what characteristics they think new recruits should have. Ask them about:

- *the most important aspects of the job*
- *the qualities you need to do the job well*
- *what kind of person they think the team needs.*

If you have a mixed-gender team, see if the men and women come up with different ideas and talk them through.

If the team is female-only, get them to think of a man they know, who would meet the job description. If they can't, ask them to reflect on why, and what the organisation could change to change this.

Theme 2: Reaching out to the people you want

Imagery

If you want to create a mixed-gender team, show potential job applicants you're serious by presenting them with images of men working in early years settings. This helps normalise the idea that early years is a mixed-gender space. Ideally go for images that show:

- Men looking after children solo
- Men doing hands-on caring, rather than just 'male' activities like outdoors play
- Men who are diverse, representing different ethnic and religious backgrounds
- Men and women working happily together in teams
- Men engaging with girls as well as with boys
- Men drawn from, and representative of, your local community.

These days it's possible to take great quality photos with a smartphone, so if you have male practitioners and they're willing to have their pictures taken (plus of course you'll need parents' consent), get snapping. If not, we are in the process of creating a 'photo bank' for settings to borrow from, so watch this space!

Open days

Open days are a great tool if you want to attract people with little or no experience of early years work, allowing them to spend time observing some of the daily routines of your setting, and ask questions of managers and staff. This can help people build up a picture of what it might be like to work in early years education, and whether it feels like a 'good fit' for them.

Promoting widely

Apply the principle that it is up to you to 'go to where the men are', rather than waiting for them to come to you. So...make a list of all the places men in your community 'hang out', and work your way through them systematically, initiating conversations, handing out flyers and posters, inviting men to join your mailing list and so on. Here are a few examples of places you could try:

- Sports clubs and gyms
- Bars, cafes and music venues
- Churches, mosques and other religious centres
- Community centres
- Barbers' shops.

Involving existing male staff

In the same way that black and minoritised ethnic people shouldn't be handed the responsibility for engaging with their community on behalf of the 'white majority', don't just find the nearest man on the team and expect him to do all your male-engagement! Having said that, showing men that there are already (or can be) 'people like them' in early years education is a really important part of what you will want to communicate.

So, as well as showing the right imagery, invite the men you already have on your team to advocate for the cause, by:

- Sharing their experiences (positive and negative) to help you rethink the way you do things
- Speaking about their career journeys in open days
- Doing careers talks in schools
- Sharing their story in video clips that can be used online
- Being available as a contact person for men who are interested.

Exercise 3. Getting your male staff involved

Identify one action you could take under each of the four categories above (Imagery; open days; promoting widely; and involving male staff). For each action, decide who would be responsible, and how long they would need to make it happen. Think about what support the team needs to get this work done. Then add these plans to your written strategy.

Theme 3: Positive action

In many fields it is standard practice for employers to include a clear statement in job advertisements, that they welcome applications from people in underrepresented groups – usually women and/or people from black and minoritised ethnic communities.

In the UK this is permitted under the Equality Act, but while there can be little doubt that men are under-represented in early years education, it is almost unheard-of for employers in this sector to include such statements in their advertising.

‘Positive action’ statements are, on their own, unlikely to solve the problem of male under-representation, but making use of them gives everyone a clear message that you have acknowledged and are concerned by, the lack of men in the workforce. They may even in some cases be enough to persuade a man to go ahead and send in his application rather than convince himself not to bother. Here’s an example of what such a statement might say: *‘We particularly welcome applicants from men, as they are under-represented in our workforce.’*

Positive action does not need to stop at adding a line to your adverts. The Equality and Human Rights Commission says ‘positive action’ can include a range of steps to encourage people from groups who share a ‘protected characteristic’ to apply for job. There are nine such characteristics, according to the Equality Act: age, disability, gender reassignment, marriage and civil partnership, pregnancy and maternity, race, religion or belief, sex and sexual orientation.

In each case, you can use ‘positive action’ methods where you ‘reasonably think’ (in other words, where there is good evidence¹) that people who share the protected characteristic in question, have different needs because of it; have a past track record of disadvantage connected to it; or have a history of low participation.

You can take proportionate action to:

- enable or encourage the group in question to overcome or minimise disadvantage
- meet the group’s different needs, or
- enable or encourage participation among the group.

For more on this, see the box on page 9 – and here’s a link to the Equality and Human Rights Commission’s information for employers about positive action: <https://equalityhumanrights.com/en/employers-using-positive-action-address-workplace-disadvantage>.

¹ The evidence is clear that men’s participation in early years education is disproportionately low (their sex being the ‘protected characteristic’ that they share). Here are the figures, in case you need to cite them: in England & Wales only 3% of staff working in early years education are male; in Scotland it’s 4%. This is not the only ‘caring’ sector where women dominate, but it is the most extreme example. In nursing, the figure is 11%; in social work, 14% and in primary education, 15%. Source: MITEY <https://miteyuk.org/why-we-do-it/>.

So...how can you use 'positive action'?

Equality law allows you to take positive action **before** or **during** the job application stage. Steps you can take include:

- Encouraging the under-represented group to apply – this could include adding positive action statements to job adverts; holding male-only recruitment days or organising 'taster sessions' for men, to give them a chance to find out what the work involves
- Offering them extra help (like training or other support) not available to other applicants, to help them perform to the best of their ability at interview. This could involve giving detailed information about the kind of interview questions they might be asked and/or how to prepare; or coaching to help a man describe the relevance of his work experience gained in another sector, for example. It could be more structured input to bring men 'up to speed' by gaining hands-on childcare skills in a safe, supportive space (this is something the Scottish government has funded to great effect)
- Including men on recruitment panels (if you don't have any at your particular setting, perhaps you could 'borrow' one from another? Some settings also do this to provide peer-peer mentoring for new male recruits).

Equality law says that the steps you are allowed to take as part of positive action must relate to the level of disadvantage that exists, and not simply be for the purposes of favouring one group of people over another, where there is no disadvantage or under-representation in the workforce.

So you could not use positive action to attract female applicants for an entry level primary teaching post where women already made up 70% of the teaching workforce, for example. Such steps would not be being taken to overcome a disadvantage or under-representation, and so this would be unlawful direct discrimination.

You must also not have a blanket policy or practice of automatically treating people who share a protected characteristic better than those who do not have it, for recruitment purposes. You must still appoint the best person for the job, even if they do not have the particular protected characteristic being targeted by the positive action.

But you can, in a tie-break situation, appoint an applicant from a group sharing a protected characteristic rather than an equally qualified applicant who lacks it, if you reasonably believe this group to be disadvantaged or under-represented in the workforce, or if their participation in an activity is disproportionately low.

Although it is most likely that you would use the tie-break provisions at the end of the recruitment process, you could even treat an applicant more favourably at any earlier stage of the process (for example shortlisting a male candidate over an equivalent female one).

Norway has been using positive action as part of its strategy to boost its male proportion of kindergarten staff, since 1998; at 9% male, its workforce is the most gender-diverse in the world.

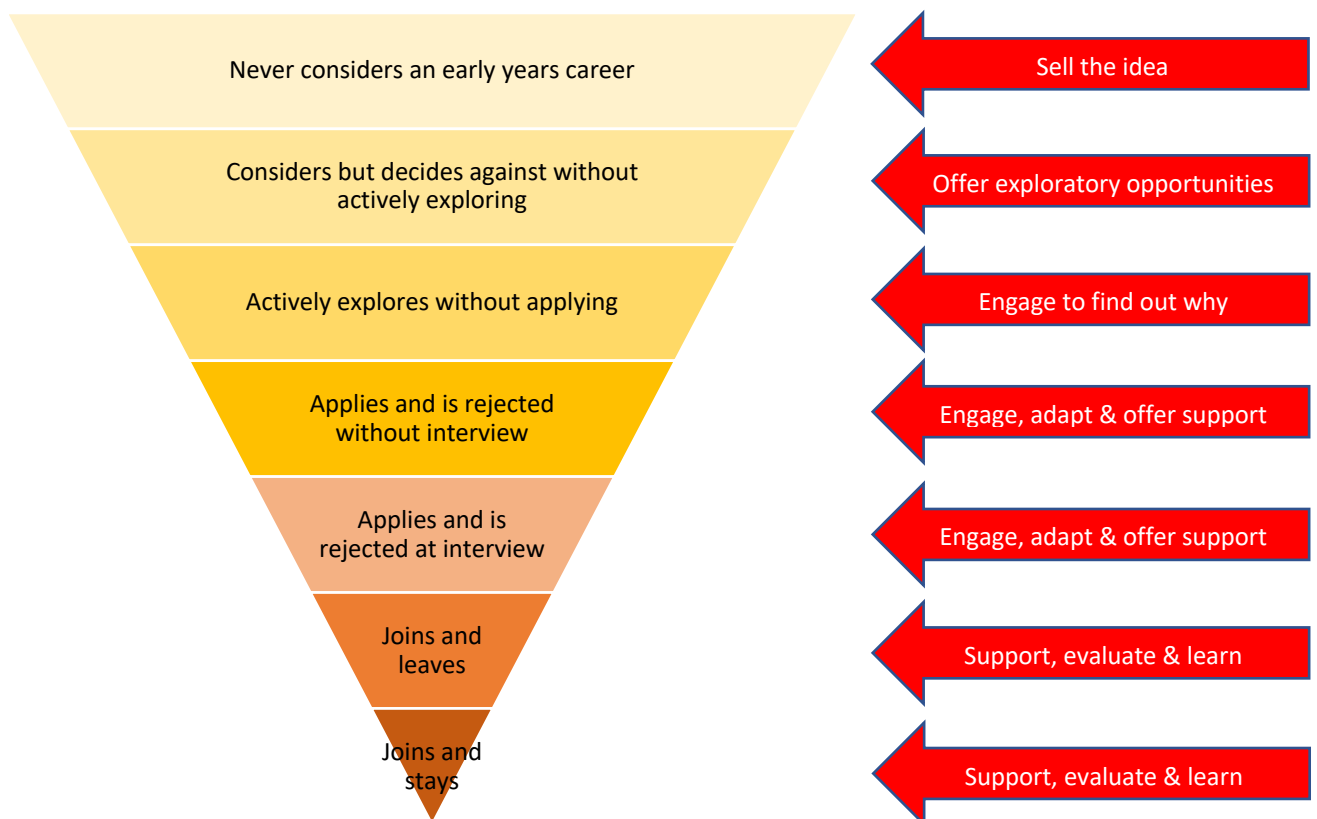
Theme 4: The male recruit's journey

Check out the diagram below, and think about whether or how your organisation addresses potential male recruits at each stage of the pyramid. The arrows on the right are suggestions for when and how you might intervene to suggest early years as a career, nurture their interest and, eventually, recruit – and keep - them.

Exercise 4. Reaching out

Try to be as specific as possible about processes you could develop to:

- a) *make sure you hear about and/or stay in touch with these men*
- b) *engage with them*
- c) *give them the right information and messages*
- d) *follow up with them.*



Additional reading for Chapters 1 & 2

Wright, D. and Brownhill, S. (2018) Men in Early Years Settings: Building a Mixed Gender Workforce. London: Jessica Kingsley

Warin, J. (2019) Men in Early Childhood Education and Care: Gender Balance and Flexibility. Palgrave Macmillan

Brody, D., Emilsen, K., Rohrmann, T. and Warin, J. (Forthcoming) Exploring Career Trajectories of Men in the Early Childhood Education and Care Workforce. Routledge

Chapter 2

Supporting men's early years careers

Part 1. What we learned from the study

The qualitative data shows that men experience a greater sense of precariousness within their careers than their female counterparts, and that men are more likely to move in, onwards and out of early years than women (either to new settings, posts or sectors).

Although male practitioners reported they were happy in their role as practitioner, and wanted to continue working with young children, many men looked towards moving into higher status role or specialising in key areas such as special needs education, music therapy or teacher training, as the following participants indicate:

Male practitioner: *I mean the money's fairly basic here and it's not the most well-paid work and I know I could get work that pays a lot more, so there is that. But I enjoy doing what I'm doing and my plan was to get my Level 3, maybe look to see if I could work in any special needs schools, maybe work in an infant school. Obviously, I need more qualifications but I could look into that once I've got my Level 3. So that's my plan really. So I know I want the career with young children, just not sure at the moment which way to go with it (H4/S1/Int7)*

Male Practitioner: *So I certainly want to stay in early years. I see this sort of environment and this way of learning as being a very productive and fruitful area in terms of supporting early years development and learning. I would like to be able to be in a position to make that more aware and bring that more to the mainstream if possible. So the potential in the future do more of the training side of it, because although I do very much enjoy the time I spend with the children and particularly in an outdoor setting, it's a very physically demanding job and I don't want to lose my enthusiasm for it but I want to also inspire that in other people as well (H3/S2/Int1)*

In some cases, male practitioners wanted to remain working in education but not in teaching, and although some men were unsure when, why or how they would move on from their current post, they expressed a strong sense that they would like to move on at some point. Although the low pay was a strong concern, this alone was not enough to consider leaving the profession. However, low pay combined with a number of other factors including lack of trust, change in leadership, long commutes and low levels of support did result in practitioners moving into new roles in other sectors.

Our study shows that support was key in retaining male practitioners. However, gendered support was viewed negatively by male and female practitioners, as the following participants describe:

Female Teacher (EYs): *Yeah I don't think there's any particular reason why one person would need more support. I mean obviously that support is individually tailored isn't it for everyone's needs. We're all at different points in our career. We're all at different points in our learning and our next steps but as a gender thing, no I don't think there should be separate support (H2/S2/Int1)*

Male Teacher (EYs): *I found myself being invited to the local Men in Early Years Network meetings which at that point was set up more as a support group and I found it quite strange that the need for that was felt. Just trying to think why that was. I think it's easy to make assumptions about men as a group and I think it's easy to, yeah make assumptions that men will require certain things for a career. And I think the issue of pay came up quite a lot if I remember rightly. But I guess beyond that I've always had a bit of an issue about men being treated as a homogenous group, because all of the men that I met on one of the various Network events were all very different and it was hard to say what we had in common other than the fact that we're men biologically (H2/S2/Int5)*

For many practitioners, male and female staff were viewed as 'the same' and therefore it was considered they should be provided with the same levels of support. Furthermore, male practitioners in particular expressed concerns around support based on men as a homogenous group. Although there is a level of gender blindness within some of the concerns around providing gendered support, it is clear that male practitioners may experience moments of vulnerability, as the following participant describes:

Male Practitioner: *I'm just really aware that I'm a man in this situation. So I'm kind of aware that a child sits on my lap maybe. If I'm alone in a room with a child, I don't know it's just more aware of, like that someone could raise a finger at me. I don't know, I feel a bit more under the watch. It's like, the middle ground between anxious and aware and I think mostly I can deal with it of just being aware. It doesn't necessarily make me super anxious...I think about stuff you know with handling babies and stuff where women maybe don't have to think about it, you know. How something to you looks from the outside or something I guess, because you know I don't want to, I don't know, because I'm a man I don't want to send any weird messages looking at me. I don't know, feel more just watched, yes. Maybe also more at the beginning when I started (H4/S2/Int5)*

The findings of our study show that tailored support (based on the principles of equity rather than equality) in moments of vulnerability is key to retaining male practitioners. Moments of vulnerability may relate to parents' concerns around nappy changing or not accepting male practitioners as key workers. It also relates to moments of change such as moving to a new room, or a new post; a change of leadership or concerns around how the practitioner is perceived by others.

Part 2: Ideas and exercises

Theme 5: Acknowledging men's different support needs

In our study we found that men's internal career journeys can be more precarious than women's, and that male practitioners can experience moments of particular vulnerability. This suggests that as a setting manager, you may need to work a little bit differently, if you want to do a really great job of supporting male staff.

It's not necessarily that your setting needs to do 'special things' for the men, and our data suggests that male practitioners themselves are often resistant to the idea of additional support. But **acknowledging** ways that men's and women's experiences can **differ** - and thinking about ways to respond to and, where possible, **close the gaps**, may help you develop a more open and trusting relationship with all your staff.

In her book *The Gendered Brain*, Professor Gina Rippon talks about how babies and young children act like 'gender detectives', searching for social messages to help them make sense of themselves and the world around them. In the following exercises, we pick up on this idea and suggest ways to help you detect, and develop your own responses to, the sometimes-dramatic, often-subtle effects that gender (and people's reactions to it) can have on your staff.

Exercise 5: Spot the difference

Listed below are some positive and negative aspects of working in early years education. Take a few minutes to think about how male and female practitioners you know (including yourself, perhaps), might have experienced each aspect. If you have never worked with a male practitioner, try to imagine how things might be for one.

Give two scores for each aspect: one for female staff and one for male staff.
Score as follows: 0 = no impact; 1 = small impact; 2 = significant impact; 3 = major impact

Aspect of early years work	Female	Male
Low pay		
Negative attitude from parents		
Praise/ positivity from parents		
Confidence in caregiving skills		

Lack of confidence in 'rough and tumble'/ outdoor play skills		
Lack of colleagues who share the same gender, for peer support		
Ability to shape young lives		
Ability to relax and 'own' space in the team		
Being stopped from doing aspects of the job, e.g. intimate care		
Flexibility to fit work in around family commitments		
Flexibility to fit work in around other work/ study commitments		

If you add up the figures for each gender you will probably find that the overall picture is similar for men and women.

*But that's not the point – what's important is that you will have identified some gendered differences – even small ones – and in doing so, you are seeing the **differential impacts that practitioners' gender can have on their careers.***

*Some of these might feel difficult or impossible to unpick, but you're **seeing them**, and that be a great first step towards changing things.*

Extension activity: *Why not create a staff survey, based on some of the themes we've highlighted here, and adding your own? That way you could find out what your colleagues really think...*

Theme 6: Seeing the vulnerability of male early years educators

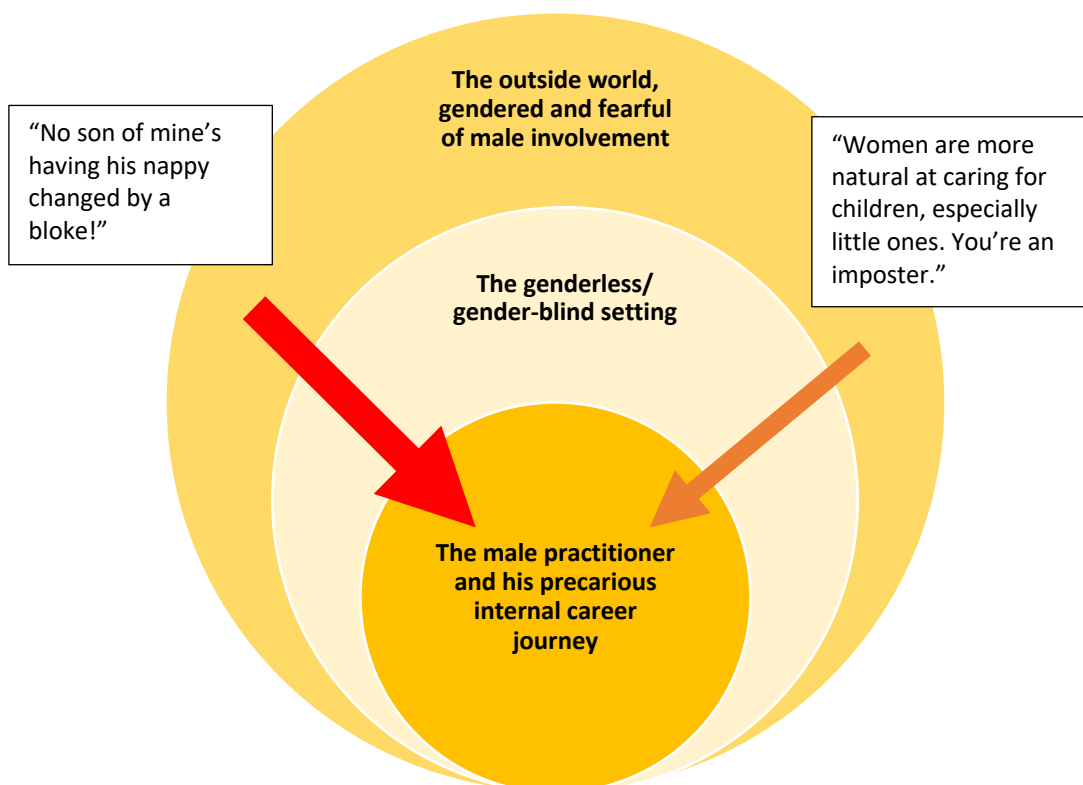
Read this text and spend some time looking at the diagram, then try the exercise underneath.

In this diagram, we have created a visual representation of how male practitioners may experience the moments of vulnerability that seem to be a recurring theme in their working lives.

The smallest circle represents the individual male practitioner, experiencing his own **internal career journey** (as explained in Part 1 of this chapter, this journey may be more precarious than his female colleagues’).

Around him sits a **genderless or gender-blind setting** (the middle, pale blue circle) taking as its starting point the idea that all early years practitioners, male or female, are the same.

And beyond – represented by the outer circle - is **the outside world**, full of gendered ideas and characterised by fear (among parents, the media and others) about male involvement in children’s education and care.



No matter much we might try to act as if gender is irrelevant in early years practice, sometimes the gendered fears and expectations from the ‘outside world’ can ‘slip in’. The arrows illustrate this: on the left, the red arrow represents a parent objecting to the male practitioner doing (part of) the job he’s trained to do (changing nappies); on the right, the yellow arrow is the male practitioner’s internal voice, repeating a mantra that he’s grown up with, and which has the potential to undermine his choice of

vocation. Each event could make him feel vulnerable, and in need of some additional support from his colleagues.

Exercise 6. The vulnerable male

Think about the following:

1. *How might a 'genderless' setting recognise and respond to these attacks from the 'outside world'?*

(The principle of the 'genderless' setting is that all staff must be treated the same, and no-one deserves 'special treatment' on the grounds of their gender.)

2. *How might a gender-sensitive setting approach the same challenges?*

(The principle of the 'gender-sensitive' setting is that men and women in the workforce may have different, gendered experiences and that these should be recognised, talked about – and may, where necessary, feed into gender-differentiated support.)

3. *In which of the two types of setting would a male practitioner feel safest and most able to vocalise the challenges he experiences in his internal career journey? What difference might this make – to him and to the setting?*

Exercise 7. How much support is enough?

In these two extracts from interviews for the GenderEYE study, we hear from a male apprentice (the only male practitioner in a rural setting in the north of England) talking about his recent move from the toddlers room up to a pre-school room (Extract 1), and the female room leader he had worked with before the move (Extract 2).

Read the extracts and answer the questions underneath.

Extract 1

Interviewer: *How has the move to the Pre-School room been?*

Male Apprentice Practitioner: *I don't really like it to be honest. I thought I would because that used to be my favourite age group, but I really enjoyed it when I first came. It's really different. It's not bad, it's just I know what I prefer now because I've been in both. I switched, but I know, it's just, I don't know, I don't feel like I'm in their team any more. Just feels a bit-, cos I knew all this, all the planning's different and in our room we had our own framework so we didn't really follow the EYFS. We wrote our own inspired by the EYFS. It's really different. No, I felt really, in toddlers it was really like close and family and we all like worked together but it just feels a bit strange in there {Pre-School}. So I do feel a bit, I just feel like I can't, what's the word? Like give my like full or, not my full potential like. I can't show what I can really do in there. Whereas next door like, it just felt like I was like up in the sky. I felt really good (H1/S1/Int7)*

Extract 2

Female Practitioner/Room Leader: *I think he [male practitioner] found it hard moving to the new room because he'd been in toddlers for such a long time. I think it was like 18 months he'd been with us. And he had quite a strong group of girls who he was quite close with and he was also allowed to be creative and do what he wants. And obviously because we've introduced something different to what the nursery school do, he found it very hard going back to that..[.] I don't know whether that's just because he's an apprentice. But he does try and do like creative things, but it's a different-, they have a different approach in nursery school to what we do and the layout's a lot bigger. We're a lot smaller so the staff are closer if you need help and you want to do an activity and you want to do this and you want to get someone else involved, it's easier to do that. In nursery school you don't have that closeness. You're working as a team but far away. When you're a little bit older, it's quite easy to do but when you're young it's quite a skill. It can be quite lonely as well. I don't know how he is now but I know it was something he was struggling with at first.*

Interviewer: *How did you know about his struggles?*

Female Practitioner/Room Leader: *Because he came in and told us, yeah because obviously we were who he worked with so he'd come into toddlers and say, I feel like I can't do this. He was very up and*

down. But just like he was when he moved into toddlers and this is what I kept explaining to him, you know you was like this when you moved in with us. Just give it time and you'll be fine. And I think he is more settled. I think he just wants to complete college and he does have wobbles about staying in early years. I think that's really why he didn't really want to take part cos he's still not decided. But we try and say to him, look it's something that you're very very good at and I kept saying to him, you know you have always got this to come back to. So I'm hoping he'll stay in early years.

Interviewer: *Is there an option to buddy him with another male practitioner or in another setting?*

Female Practitioner/Room Leader: *There isn't any nearby. This is the problem. He doesn't even go to college with any other boys which can be quite hard. (H1/S1/Int6)*

Questions

- 1. How well did the female practitioner/room leader handle this situation?*
- 2. Could the setting have done more to support this man? Should it have done so? If so, what approaches could it have taken?*

Theme 7: Support around intimate care

Now let's focus in on a particular aspect of early years work where there seems to be a clear difference in male and female practitioners' experiences: parents' responses to their involvement in intimate caregiving.

If parents object to men changing their child's nappy, so what? Why is this such a big deal? Well for one thing, the sense of discomfort around this issue seems to be having a major impact on men's careers. In our study we found that more than half (51%) of men have contemplated leaving the profession due to concerns around allegations of sexual abuse. The same was true for only 6% of women.

In the following exercise, we present a script based on a real-life exchange described to us in one of our interviews.

Exercise 8. Handling a parent's concerns

Read the script and then answer the questions underneath.

Mum: *Hi, I'm Nieve's mum. We spoke on the phone a few days ago. She might be starting here in September.*

Manager: *Oh yes, I remember. She's coming next week for a settling in session, isn't she?*

Mum: Yes, that's right. She's looking forward to it. But I've got a few questions. One question I wanted to ask, who changes the children's nappies here?

Manager: Erm.. well, where possible it'll be the child's key worker but if they're not available then it would one of the other practitioners. Is there something you're worried about?

Mum: Do the men change the children's nappies?

Manager: Yes, they do. We've got 4 male practitioners here and they all do personal care. All the staff here are DBS checked and our area for changing children, as you've probably seen, is an open space.

Mum: OK. But can you please make sure there's woman present if a male practitioner is going to change my child?

Manager: Erm..I'm sorry, that's something I can't do. I understand your concerns but as I said, all of our practitioners are DBS checked. We have some really great practitioners here and I would be going against my own staff if I was to say that's ok. I think if that's what's important to you then perhaps this is not the right setting for you.

Mum: OK. I'm just not sure it's the right thing for my child.

Manager: Why don't you bring Nieve to the settling in next week and then you can meet some of the practitioners, see how you feel then. We can chat again then if you want to.

Mum: OK, thanks.

Questions

1. How well did the manager handle this conversation?
2. Are there other things the setting/manager could have done to avoid/improve this exchange?
3. If this happened at a private setting and you were its owner, what might you feel about this exchange?

The frequency with which parents object to or question settings about men and nappy changing suggests that creating and proactively communicating a clear policy, should be a priority area within your gender diversification strategy. Hearing concerns from parents or, worse, receiving a false allegation – and/or feeling as if their employer didn't support them - may be enough to push male practitioners 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 allegation; you can read their story here: <https://www.bmiey.co.uk/our-story>. In Chapter 3 we revisit this issue, in the context of gendered allocation of tasks within early years teams...

Chapter 3

Unravelling gender in the team

Part 1: What we learned from the study

In terms of roles, male and female practitioners were viewed by staff in early years settings as 'the same'. They had the same 'job description', and thus it was considered that roles and responsibilities should be undertaken equally, as the following speaker highlights:

Male Manager/Practitioner: *Everybody is on exactly the same job description. Everyone's employed as an early years practitioner. Some have different accountabilities or responsibilities which they do. You know, like group leader or learning journals or that sort of thing. But no, everybody does everything (H2/S1/Int1)*

The job description positions the early years practitioner as a 'genderless role'. This means that staff undertake responsibilities according to their contractual duties and not in relation to or influenced by gender. Managers of settings place emphasis on the professionalism of the practitioner role and indicate that gendered roles do not or cannot exist within early years settings. The findings of our study indicate that although the 'genderless' job description is a valuable tool, it may however discourage managers from recognising gendered roles or activities within early years settings. This may mean that gendered activities are invisible.

Furthermore, although male and female staff were often considered 'the same' (roles and responsibilities), they were also perceived to be 'different' in terms of their interests, skills and personalities. Whereas some male practitioners adopted more traditionally masculine roles such as outdoor activities/ physical play, they also engaged in nurturing/caring tasks. Similarly, female staff engage in non-traditional female activities such as outdoor or manual work. Our observations of early years settings provided examples of practitioners working alongside one another and both engaged in cuddling, getting children to sleep, preparing food, cleaning up and tidying away, helping to get children ready for going out.

In spite of the above, our study showed that gender stereotypes slip into everyday practices and activities such as 'rough and tumble', physical play or being silly/ childlike were seen as 'natural', or easy for male practitioners to engage in.

Female Practitioner 1: *I can notice that in the garden with Mike. Boys like to play more roughly with Mike and they like that. They will play different to women.*

Female Practitioner 2: *Cos men never grow up do they, let's face it, they're always little boys and they always want to play don't they. I know my husband does with my Grandson, you know and Fred will come up and try and jump on me and I'm like, no leave Nana alone (H4/S1/FG2)*

Men's engagement in rough and tumble/physical play was perceived by some staff as a way for male practitioners to support children with absent fathers, particularly in settings with families from disadvantaged backgrounds. For some male practitioners, physical play was both an enjoyable task but also a concern. They expressed concerns about the safety of the children and also managing parents' and colleagues' perception of their skills and abilities as responsible and serious early years professionals, as the following participant describes:

Male Practitioner: *I think the only time I'm not comfortable is if there's absolutely loads of them and they're starting to hurt each other, and at the same time I get uncomfortable. I think another time is if a parent walks in and I've got like six, seven kids on top of me, then I feel a little bit uncomfortable. I'm not so sure why. I think it would be the fact that they come in and just see my laying on the floor, not really working. Not too sure, yeh (H4/S1/Int2)*

Male practitioners must manage the expectations of parents, colleagues and children in terms offering something 'special', novel or interesting, and being a good, responsible and trustworthy practitioner. In addition to this, physical play is an important element within the early years curriculum and male practitioners were perceived to be able to engage in this as a natural trait rather than a learned skill. This meant that training on how to engage in physical play with children was sometimes overlooked in relation to male practitioners.

In addition to the expectations around male staff and physical play, male practitioners were sometimes perceived to provide greater levels of risk-taking play, as the following participant describes how a male member of staff engages in forest activities with the children:

Female Practitioner: *I think there is a perception that they'd be more risk involved if there are men but it depends on the person. Felix is somebody that embraces risky play and it's not something I've personally seen from James for example. So you know there's a stereotype where at a previous setting, there was a guy but he wasn't an employed member of staff. They employed him for risk, to provide risk, he had a nickname. He was like Risky Pete or something. It was like a gimmick. So look at us, we've got Risky Pete. So on a Wednesday you'd get to spend the day with Risky Pete. Risky Pete had been in the SAS and like.... we had a fire the other day at nursery and I set it up and it was all done like that. He did a fire and he didn't manage it properly and a child was burnt. And then this big SAS guy was frightened to tell the parent so went to one of the female staff to get them to deal with that....Wouldn't take responsibility for it. He built the fire for the children to play, you know to sit around. But if you have a fire, if you've been trained in early years and how to do a fire, before you even set fire to anything you explain the rules. And that whole bit had not happened. It's just come to me, he was Dangerous Dan. (H1/S1/Int1)*

Risky play, similar to physical play, rough and tumble become naturalised qualities, inherent within particular forms of masculinity. Early years practitioner skills (understanding children, listening and learning, managing relationships) are downplayed in this event, which also reproduces ideas about men, women, nature, fire and risk. In settings with greater numbers of male staff, there were greater opportunities to observe a contrast between male practitioners and as a result, to undo associations between masculinity and physical play.

Part 2: Ideas and exercises

Theme 8. If we're all the same, why do we need more men?

In our research, when we asked people why getting more men in early years education might be a good idea, some of the most common reasons given drew heavily on gendered assumptions.

In the table below we list four such reasons, and in each case suggest some questions that you and your colleagues might find useful, to help you unpick them and move towards a less gendered rationale.

Why does this matter? Surely if enough people want more men on your team it doesn't really matter WHY they want them? If people in the organisation are promoting ideas about male participation based on outmoded gender stereotypes, this could have the effect of undermining your gender-diversification work.

On a practical level, if your rationale for recruiting and retaining men emphasises gender difference, this may also risk putting some men off, by loading expectations onto them that they feel unable (and/or unwilling) to meet. Why should male staff be required to measure up as 'role models' of a particular form of masculinity and/or make up for fathers absent from children's (especially boys') lives? What role modelling would you expect from a female practitioner? Shouldn't all practitioners have the freedom to just be themselves, and do their job as best they can?

Exercise 9. Unpicking assumptions

Thinking about each reason, by exploring the associated questions, could form the basis of a team discussion and help you develop specific plans as part of your gender-diversification strategy (see Introduction pp5-6).

Gender-stereotyped reasons for recruiting and retaining men	Questions to ask to help unpick this thinking	Relevant follow-up actions (these could be added to your strategy)
Men are better at 'rough and tumble' and 'risky' play	Which men? Which women are they 'better' than? How are you defining 'better'? Are some men better than other men? Are some	Consult with your team about their skills and confidence around 'rough

	women better than other women? Are any women better than any men? How are the men's and women's skills in this area being developed?	and tumble'. Any surprises? Develop/ commission a 'rough and tumble' training session
Men bring something different to the team	What do they bring? Do all men bring the same (different) thing? What's the other thing that the thing men bring, differs from? What's the impact of the difference they bring? How do you know? Do men also bring anything similar to whatever the other thing is? What impact does that have? How do you know?	Create a team map showing what everyone's interests and development needs are Think together about how gender affects these, and what you could do to ensure tasks are not gender-segregated
We need men because so many children don't have men at home	Which children? How do you know they don't have men at home? If they don't have men at home, where are the men? Do they have other men in their lives, just not at home? Which home are we talking about – maybe they have more than one? What about children who do have men at home: would male staff be helpful for them too? Could female staff support some of these men too? If not, why not?	Map out each child's family network: what adults do they have in their lives? If you don't know, find out. If you got everyone's contact details you could even do a parent survey to find out who's doing what at home Think about what staff are doing to connect, engage and support parents. How does gender affect this? How could you do better?
It's good for the boys to have men around	Which boys? Which men? Why? What about the girls: is it good for them to have men around too? Which men? Why? Is it good for the boys to have women around? What about the girls?	Invite team members to think about which children they spend most time with and what they do together. Think about what part gender plays in this, and whether the balance is right.

Theme 9. Risky business

Research tells us that in everyday life, fathers seem to do more 'rough and tumble' and 'risky' play with their own children, than mothers do. This type of play is often portrayed in a celebratory way within western culture, as if it is a masculine preserve: it is one of very few areas of parenting where this is the case, in fact.

Our data suggests that a narrative of men being 'naturally better' at these forms of play is commonplace in early years education. Indeed, the potential for men to contribute to the life of the setting by leading such activities is often given as a key justification for male-focused recruitment efforts. This is another way that gender 'slips in' to the setting.

If this type of play is seen as a valued part of early years practice – as it is by those who assert that we need more men in the sector in order to provide more of it – we should be finding ways to break the association between physical activity and masculinity: rough and tumble and risky play are skills to be learned (by female and male practitioners alike)!

Exercise 10. Risky Pete/Dangerous Dan

Read the story of 'Risky Pete/Dangerous Dan' on page 30 above, then answer these questions.

- 1. Where did Risky Pete/Dangerous Dan go wrong?*
- 2. Where did the managers of the setting go wrong?*

Exercise 11. When enough is enough

Read the following testimony from a male practitioner, then answer the questions underneath.

Male Practitioner: *I think it's really hard for them to understand how difficult it can be for me sometimes, because girls are great at their job but the kids kind of always hover around me. So when I'm trying to do a one to one with a kid with Autism and I've worked for six hours, it's hard to do that when I've got seven other kids wanting to play with me, pulling up my T-shirt, shouting in my ear. That's when I need the support for other practitioners to take them seven kids away so I can spend time with my one to one. Not always do I get that. If I'm out in the garden so to speak and I've got all the kids jumping on me and chasing me around it would just be nice for the other practitioners to join in cos I can get out of breath very quickly. So I'm running around, my head is going, I've got to sit down, tell the kids I need five minutes, I need to catch my breath and then some of them will sit next to me wait til I catch my breath and they're like, right that's it then. I'm like calm down. So it's having that support when I'm absolutely knackered. Take over the reins, you do it. (H4/S1/Int2)*

- 1. How are the children responding to this practitioner? Is there a gendered element to their response?*
- 2. How are his colleagues responding to this scenario? Is there a gendered element to their response?*
- 3. What might a gender-sensitive response to this scenario look like?*

Theme 10. Men and the ‘soft stuff’

Our data suggests there can be tendency in early years teams for men to end up doing more of the traditionally ‘paternal’ tasks (from risky play to changing lightbulbs and moving furniture), while women end up doing more of the tasks that might be seen as mirroring a traditional maternal role (like nappy changing, comforting of upset babies, and cleaning up).

And just like how in many homes the gendered differences in the division of labour seem to just appear out of nowhere, we found that gendered task allocation in early years settings often appears to ‘just happen’.

Because of this, there is often little or no opportunity for the women or men involved, or those around them, to question or challenge the role of gender in the sharing out of tasks. Many early years practitioners view gendered task allocation as ‘natural’, helping cement the idea that women and men are fundamentally different.

To stop the everyday life of the setting becoming gendered in this way may require reflective practice, and conscious re-allocation of tasks by team members or leaders; otherwise, gendered imbalances may be interpreted as having the official ‘seal of approval’.

For example, it might feel easiest to leave the ‘naturally outdoorsy’ male practitioner doing all or most of the outdoors play (while the women get on with ‘the other stuff’). Or there might just be an underlying, unspoken perception that men do it better. Either way, it’s worth getting everyone together to explore their views and experiences and, where necessary, challenge the status quo.

Within this bigger issue of gendered allocation of tasks, sits **the thorny issue of men changing nappies**. There is a whole strand of work for early years organisations to do, to establish safeguarding procedures that protect children against the very small – but hugely important – risk of abuse (including sexual abuse); and to communicate with parents about this issue.

But once that’s done, what’s the best way to approach cases where parents object to male practitioners changing their children’s nappies or managing their toilet training?

The next two exercises are designed to help you work out the best way through this for your organisation...

Exercise 12. Men changing nappies – what’s at stake?

Read this extract from the MITEY Guide to Communicating with Parents about Male Staff, and answer the questions underneath:

“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 to the bodily aspects of early years education is important. 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.”

1. Do you agree?
2. Are there other areas where men are more likely to miss out on key elements of early years practice?
3. In our survey, 12% of managers said that male practitioners rarely do nappy changing; 13% said they rarely write reports or do learning assessments. How would you explain this?
4. What about women – what do they miss out on?

Exercise 13. Men changing nappies: where do you stand?

In our study, managers told us about four possible ways of approaching the situation of parents voicing concerns about/ objecting to a male practitioner looking after their children’s intimate care. Think about each strategy and write down how it impacts (positively and negatively) on the various people involved in the situation. Then decide which strategy is most likely to work best overall – and how you could reduce any negative impacts you’ve identified.

Strategy	Impact on setting	Impact on practitioner	Impact on female colleagues	Impact on parent	Impact on child
Remove practitioner from task					
Discuss with parent and practitioner, but remove practitioner from task					
Discuss with all parties, and agree to work with parent					

(including possibly removing practitioner from task temporarily while trust is built)					
Define, communicate and impose agreed policy and if parent does not agree, suggest they leave setting					

Extension activity: Use this template as the basis for a team discussion.

Chapter 4

Towards a gender-sensitive curriculum?

Part 1. What we learned from the study

The data shows that mixed gender workforces bring opportunities for gender awareness/sensitivity. Comments and discussions about gender come up frequently with both male and female practitioners and children in the early years classroom. In particular, children express ideas around what is appropriate behaviour for a boy or a girl, such as wearing dresses or having long hair. Practitioners demonstrated a positive attitude around children engaging in all activities, and highlighted the importance of other children accepting this. The presence of male practitioners sometimes provided new opportunities to challenge these ideas in, as the following practitioner demonstrates:

Male Practitioner: *One of the things I definitely felt in the early years classroom was that I was able to challenge gender stereotypes and assumptions in a way that was possibly easier than for my female colleagues. So, on purpose I would do things like wear pink ties because I knew pretty much every time that it would be commented on by a child and it would open up a discussion about clothing and gender, that kind of thing, which as I've discovered is still very deeply ingrained culturally (H2/S2/Int5).*

However, we also observed that male and female practitioners 'do' gender sensitivity through the rhetoric of the 'genderless child', suggesting that boys and girls are the same/can be who they want to be.

Male Practitioner: *It's allowing people to be who they are...[.] you know there might be a little boy who conforms completely to what the 'typical man' is-, you know and there might be someone who's completely against that. And it's about saying, both of them are ok and if you want to be what is seen as traditionally boyish then there's nothing wrong with that. But equally, it's fine if you want to wear a dress every day, which one little boy did every day. And there's nothing wrong with that (H4/SE/FG1).*

Through these instances, children - with the support of practitioners - learn that gender boundaries are/can be fluid, to the extent that (within the nursery setting), children are able to be who they want to be. But the data suggests that children's understanding of gender is not stretched so that they come to understand how gender works in other aspects of their lives (so, for example, indicating that boys can wear dresses but some people think they can't, and that outside of the early years setting this activity may be penalised in some way). It means that practitioners teach small children that the gender system does not exist.

Furthermore, as children grow older, and move through primary and secondary education, opportunities for crossing gender boundaries become much less. Children also learn that crossing gender boundaries may be perceived negatively. Gender sensitivity in early years should not only teach children that gender is flexible but also that in some contexts, this flexibility/freedom may be challenged or denied.

Both male and female practitioners experience tensions around gender either with colleagues or with parents, and it is often left to individual practitioners to manage these. Gender awareness/sensitivity is not part of the early years curriculum and is rarely explored systematically within training. Our quantitative data showed that less than a third (30%) of early years practitioners felt there were formal/ structured discussions about gender relating to staff at their setting. Less than 1 in 5 (16%) had participated in a gender-based intervention (e.g. gender awareness / unconscious bias training).

For some highly trained practitioners, there were opportunities to explore gender stereotyping (within children) more deeply during undergraduate degree training. However, there were few opportunities for exploring gender during lower levels of training (Level 1/2). In terms of gender and the workforce, training was sometimes based on essentialist ideas around men and women in terms of their skills and aptitudes, as the following practitioner describes:

Male Teacher: *I did my PGCE at the University of Cambridge and there were about 120 people on the course and about ten men within that. Two of them were on the Early Years programme and the rest of us were general Primary, and I think they'd identified early on that we were a vulnerable group that needed support. And at that point I thought, oh okay I wonder what that's about. I went along and what it really was, there were two strands to it really. The first one was about protecting yourself so there are no allegations made against you about being inappropriate and the second one was, we were told this. Men or boys, you are not as good at paperwork, so you'll be supported with your files. And I was thinking, right I will show you that my file is going to be the best [LAUGHS]. So but I was a bit taken aback then by the assumptions that were being made (H2/S2/Int5)*

Although in the above extract, gender was a component of the early years training, this was not effective or helpful. Specific areas such as abuse/allegations of abuse and disorganisation/mess were essentialised as male characteristics thereby reinforcing gender stereotypes. The study also observed a strong indication of 'gender blindness' within training as a way to prevent learners receiving any special treatment'; emphasis is placed on treating people equally or approaching learners as individuals rather than as men or women. Gender is viewed here as a discriminatory tool, and to consider the gender of individual learners (or to consider gender within learning) would be to place them at a disadvantage.

There is a need for both formal and informal training which can support practitioners on managing key issues around gender but also in creating a unified, embedded whole sector/setting approach on how gender should be explored in early years education., the data shows that there are gaps in gender awareness training in terms of a whole setting approach, as the following participant describes:

Male Teacher: *My hunch is that the Early Years team generally are pretty well attuned to {gender issues} and I don't know if that's because I've been there for four years or if it's just because it's something that comes up a lot at this early age and it's something that people are able to respond to. As a whole school I don't think there has been anything kind of whole staff training on gender and it's something that I did ask about recently about getting some kind of staff development on gender and LGBT issues, that kind of thing because it's something that's coming up more often I think with the children at the school ...] I think it's quite helpful if we have a common approach to that (H2/S2/Int5)*

Although staff in general are aware of and sensitive to gender issues, the participant above considers whole staff training to be valuable. It enables schools to promote a whole school approach which would support teachers when issues around gender arise. It could provide opportunities and space for staff to explore some of the more difficult areas around gender.

Part 2. Ideas and exercises

Theme 11. Making gender-work more visible

In our study we found plenty of examples of practitioners demonstrating high levels of gender awareness; and taking great care to support 'their' children to explore and cross gender boundaries.

They did this despite working in a field where understandings of, and approaches to, gender do not appear on the curricula of standard (Level 2 and 3) practitioner training courses; and where opportunities for continuing professional development are few and far between.

In many cases they did it also in the face of opposition or disapproval from parents, finding themselves in the unenviable situation of having to balance several potentially competing priorities: the child's choices and interests; the parent's wishes; and their employer's policies or preferences.

So our data suggests there is no lack of interest in gender issues among early years practitioners, nor their managers.

What **does** appear to be lacking, however, is:

- an explicit recognition that 'gender-work' in early years education is already being done every day, in all types of settings;
- an ongoing conversation (within settings and more widely) about who does this work, why, when and how; and
- a framework, curriculum and materials (within settings and more widely) to:
 - **define** the scope and nature of early years gender-work – setting out clearly and in an evidence-based way what support and learning around gender children should be receiving;
 - **enable** individual practitioners to continue, refine and expand on their 'gender work', through **initial professional training and CPD** and ongoing opportunities for **routine group-based discussion and support**; and
 - **communicate** effectively with parents about all this.

We very much hope that the findings of our study will contribute towards a growing understanding:

- of **the importance of gender sensitive early years education**;
- of the fact that practitioners with little or no gender awareness training are **already doing 'ad hoc' gender-work** in settings; and
- of the need for **funding to support the development** of this aspect of early years education.

Below we offer some suggestions for ways settings might better support individual practitioners' practice around gender, and develop more effective approaches, in the here and now.

Exercise 14. Recognising and building on existing 'gender-work'

Read the following extract from one of our observations, then answer the questions underneath.

In this session, the practitioner (a qualified male primary school teacher with more than 20 years' experience) introduced a 'circle time' activity to the children specifically around gender and care. Circle time was built into the teacher's everyday plan but activities around gender were not. It was clear however that this practitioner was comfortable in setting up and leading an activity with a focus on gender.

Observation notes

All of the children are sitting in a circle. Lee (male practitioner) leads on the circle time in the morning and afternoon. He places a black baby doll in the middle of the circle and tells the children to listen - can they hear the baby? "It's sleeping" the children say. The baby then begins to cry (Lee makes a Waaaaaaa sound).

"What shall we do"? he says.

There are different responses. "It's hungry" "Give it some food" "Pick it up" "Give it some milk"

And then more responses.

"It needs its mummy." "You're not its mummy"

"I can be mummy!" says Lee.

"It's hungry"

"What shall I give it? What does a baby need when it's hungry?"

"Milk!" say the children. Lee gets the milk bottle and gives it some milk. He places the baby back in the middle of the circle, sits down and there is silence. All the children are listening.

The baby continues to cry several times and each time the children suggest different responses (dressing the baby, giving the baby some food, a blanket, a teddy) to which the practitioner responds and carries out the children's suggestions. Eventually the baby stops crying and falls back to sleep.

The practitioner ends the activity with: "Listen – the baby is sleeping. We gave it everything it needs. We did it!"

(H2/S3/Ob6)

Questions

- 1. What do you think of this activity?*
- 2. Are there any ways it could be improved?*
- 3. How might a female practitioner run such an activity?*
- 4. Could this kind of activity be part of a 'standard' curriculum for EYFS children? What other activities could you recommend?*

Exercise 15. Disrupting gendered play

We found that practitioners often address issues around gender and/or sexuality ‘when they come up’ – which is commonly in response to children themselves voicing a clearly stereotyped view (“You can’t wear pink, you’re a boy”). Gendered play, for example where single-gender groups of children come together to play with gender-conforming toys, can be more difficult to disrupt – especially when this play is occurring peacefully.

On our visit to a kindergarten in Norway, at the start of our study, we found that there was a strong emphasis on ‘curating’ children’s play in ways that might help disrupt gender stereotypes. This included, for example, moving ALL the children through a series of set-up activities, rather than offering them choices – which can, and usually do, end up being limited by gender. This seems to be in contrast to UK early years practice, which tends to emphasise the importance of ‘child-led’ learning.

Questions

1. *Do you think the ‘child-led’ principle gets in the way of gender-sensitive practice?*
2. *How do you feel about challenging gendered play?*
3. *Are you challenging gendered play systematically in your setting? What could you do to make it more systematic?*

Theme 12. Men and their ‘special contribution’ to gender-disruption

Our data suggests that having men in the early years workforce can, in and of itself, contribute towards the disruption of gender stereotypes. Men remain a highly unusual presence within this sector and as such, they cannot help but embody a challenge to children’s, parents’ and others’ assumptions about who cares for children in their most formative years.

But just as gender stereotypes have a habit of ‘slipping in’ to the allocation of staff roles, they can slip in, too, to the ‘gender work’ we do with children.

To redress this tendency, remember that what practitioners DO, rather than the gender they embody, is what really counts – and build from there.

Our research participants (male and female) often referred to male staff as ‘role models’ for the children (especially the boys). They talked about male practitioners acting as replacement father-figures – a narrative which fits with a common assumption in early years and other family services that children, especially those from more deprived backgrounds, are growing up in lone-mother households. They also felt that men bring ‘something different’ to the team...this was not always clearly defined but sometimes seemed to relate to men being more playful and childlike, and bringing a physicality to the role.

In fact, none of these beliefs about men in the early years are strongly grounded in evidence:

- In terms of role models, children of both genders (or neither) choose a variety of adults (and other children) to look up to, rather than just from their own gender. So male practitioners may well be useful role models for children, but no more than their female colleagues.
- Research by the University of Wolverhampton and London Early Years Foundation suggests that children choose early years staff to accompany their learning not so much according to their gender, but by who is 'good at' the activity in question.
- The 'absent father' narrative doesn't hold up: most under-5s grow up in couple households and among those who don't, many will have involved fathers and/or stepfathers and/or split their time between households. Also, girls need their fathers too, so the suggestion that male practitioners are of particular importance for boys is problematic.
- As we explored in Chapter 3, some men may be more confident at physical play with the children. But by viewing 'rough and tumble' as a task for all practitioners to develop skills at – just as nappy changing is an activity one learns through practice – you can, slowly but surely, strip away its gendered connotations.

By moving away from simplistic gendered narratives, you can instead pay due attention to what the children **see male and female staff doing**: their sharing of traditionally 'female' and 'male' tasks, and the gendered dynamics within the team. If the women are always the ones who tidy up, serve food or change nappies, and only men do 'rough and tumble', for example, what does this say to the children about the paths open to them as girls or boys?

Our data suggests that some male practitioners make use of their gender as a gender-sensitisation tool for the children (see Exercise 18 below). It's worth thinking about what this means for settings that have no men on the team: surely responsibility for 'de-gendering' early years education shouldn't fall fully on the shoulders on the tiny minority of men currently employed in the sector?

Exercise 16. Making space for gender

Think about how your setting might create space for ongoing discussions about children's understandings around gender, and how practitioners are impacting on them.

Write down three ways you could make this happen in your organisation. We've suggested some ideas underneath, or you could write your own.

- 1.....
- 2.....
- 3.....

- A regular (how often?) team ‘check in’ meeting about ‘gender work’
- A ‘gender work’ focused Whatsapp group or private Facebook group
- A shoebox where staff can leave notes about ‘gender work’ (like a ‘swear box’), to be picked out at random at team meetings
- A mixed-gender special interest group that meets monthly – this could be for one setting, a cluster or district-wide
- A fixed 5 minutes for gender-related issues on the team meeting agenda
- Quarterly talks from gender experts/ innovators

Exercise 17: The ‘pink tie’ routine

Male practitioners sometimes use their own rarity value as a way of helping children see that ‘breaking the gender rules’ can be ok. One example of this from our research was a male practitioner who wore a pink tie to work, to prompt questions from children along the lines of “You can’t wear a pink tie, you’re a man”.

Questions

1. *What was the purpose of the ‘pink tie’ routine?*
2. *In what other ways might your male practitioners use their own gender as a tool to help children understand the limiting impact of stereotypes?*
3. *How might female practitioners use their gender in a similar way?*

Theme 13. Moving from individual to whole-setting gender-work

If the job of an early years practitioner includes helping young children make sense of the gendered world around them, practitioners of any gender should be sufficiently well-trained and well-supported to do that job well. This is too big a job to be left to individual practitioners to do alone.

Our data suggest three key areas where practitioners may need particular additional support from setting managers:

- Gender awareness training – to help staff reflect on their own experiences and prejudices, think about how gender impacts on children’s learning and development and feel more confident about developing gender-sensitive resources and strategies
- Setting-wide gender policies – there is a role for managers in developing and/or supporting teams to use/work towards using a gender-sensitive pedagogy for the children. This might include, for example, creating shared strategies around challenging gendered stereotypes in ‘standard’ books - building up a library of books that present more challenging narratives.
- Managing the parent relationship – alongside gender-sensitive pedagogies, managers should be promoting a gender-inclusive ethos across the organisation, including in its communication with parents and the wider world.

There is no magic wand that could be waved to solve all this, and the lack of gender awareness training currently built in 'as standard' in the UK early years sector – especially for Level 2 and 3 practitioners – makes the challenge especially hard. Our study is not alone in finding a lack of attention to gender-sensitive practice in practitioner training. In another recent study, Let Toys Be Toys found that only 19% of early years and primary teachers were advised, in their initial teacher training, to challenge stereotypes (see Useful links below).

There are some great resources out there for early years organisations and settings to use, and projects to learn from and/or collaborate with. We have included a list of those we are aware of below, and we would recommend that you draw on them (and others) as you develop more gender-sensitive pedagogies; create in-house gender-focused training sessions; and foster an ongoing philosophy of sharing, dialogue and reflective practice around gender issues.

Exercise 18. Book audit

With your team, pick 10 books at random from your children's library, and think about the following:

- 1. How are the male and female characters portrayed? Think about their personal characteristics and qualities, and their jobs/position in society*
- 2. How are families and relationships portrayed? Think about who lives with whom; who does what at home; what kind of 'emotional' work gets done, and by whom*
- 3. Choose a book each and suggest ways you might present the story, in order to challenge any gender stereotypes you found.*

Useful links

Background reading about children and gender

This [BBC Future article](#) gives a neat summary of Professor Gina Rippon's fascinating book [The Gendered Brain](#), which debunks the myths around 'male' and 'female' brains.

The London Early Years Foundation/ University of Wolverhampton report [Men in Childcare: does it matter to children?](#) reports on an innovative study into children's perspectives on gender in the early years workforce.

[Tying Pencils to Dinosaurs': Gender Stereotyping in Initial Teacher Training and Continuing Professional Development](#) reports on a Let Toys Be Toys survey of UK teachers' and educators' experiences of whether/how gender-stereotyping is dealt with in initial teacher training and ongoing CPD.

Innovative practice from Scotland

North East Glasgow *Gender Friendly Nursery* pilot [Evaluation](#) (2018) and [Support Pack](#) (2018)

Scottish Care Inspectorate/ Zero Tolerance report Gender Equal Play in Early Learning and Childcare (2018)

Improving Gender Balance Scotland report An action guide for early learning and childcare practitioners (2017)

Resources for developing gender-sensitive practice

Gender Loops Toolbox (2008) Toolbox for gender-conscious and equitable early childhood centres. The Gender Loops project, financed by the EU-Leonardo Da Vinci programme, was carried out by partner organisations from Germany, Lithuania, Norway, Spain and Turkey.

Let Toys Be Toys is a campaign asking the toy and publishing industries to stop limiting children's interests by promoting some toys and books as only suitable for girls, and others only for boys. It has produced resources for early years settings and was involved in the ground-breaking BBC TV series No More Boys and Girls: Can our kids go gender-free?.

Structured 'gender work' programmes

Gender Action is an awards programme and set of tools, designed to support schools and early years settings to work methodically through a programme of change aimed at becoming skilled and confident at challenging gender-based stereotypes. Find out more here.

Lifting Limits is a primary school-focused programme focused on challenging gender stereotypes; there is currently no early years equivalent, but the website has useful resources nonetheless.

YouBeYou is another primary school-focused intervention which early years organisations may also find interesting.

The Gender Friendly Nursery is an early years strategy piloted in Glasgow, which aims to support early years settings to promote gender equality and reduce gender stereotyping. Find out more and read the pilot evaluation here.