

Men at work

In Glasgow, an 'Approved by Dads' training programme is getting men – many of them fathers – into the childcare profession, to the benefit of participants, settings and children, finds *Annette Rawstrone*

Entering a female-dominated profession can be challenging for men, but a new programme in Glasgow is successfully targeting dads and training them in early learning and childcare with life-changing results.

The programme, developed by Experiential Play in partnership with Glasgow City Council, was named 'Approved by Dads' by the participants, who were fed up of seeing notices in shops and on products stating 'approved by mums'.

Targeting dads meant that they already had experience of being with children, and Maureen McKenna, executive director of education at Glasgow City Council, believes it is important to have an all-male cohort in order for them to learn together in a 'supportive, positive way' and enable the course to be tailored to their particular needs.

'We need to make a career in early learning and childcare more attractive for men, and to do this we need more positive role models,' she says.

The men were recruited to the programme following a meeting with the heads of early years settings in Glasgow, where the scheme was explained and they were encouraged to recruit one dad each to join.

Sessions for interested dads followed before an application and interview process.

Five men – one of whom was previously dissuaded from a career in childcare after being told at school that it wasn't a job for a man – have completed their SNVQ2 training in eight months, rather than the anticipated 12 months. They are now confidently embarking on Level 3 in mixed gender groups with the support of their male counterparts, who have become friends.

The men will be guaranteed job interviews for roles earning £22,000 a year once they complete their training. 'These guys have no com-



prehension of what that will mean for them. Some of them have been on benefits all their lives,' says managing director of Experiential Play Alice Sharp.

'There are only 19 male childcare workers in Glasgow at the moment, so next year we'll give them another five. In the next three years, we hope to double the capacity of men in childcare in Glasgow.'

NEW TEACHING STYLE

The content of the course – involving being placed in a local authority nursery and undertaking a day's

The aim is to double the number of male childcare workers in Glasgow over the next three years from the current 19

training each fortnight – is the same as others delivered to childcare students. However, Ms Sharp says, the approach is 'more informal and very responsive', with the emotion and character of each student taken into account and a much more practical teaching style used.

Their trainer, Marie Richardson, explains, 'Some of the men didn't have good experiences of education so we had to build their trust, support them and meet their needs. It's been a learning curve for me too and I've evaluated my approach and learnt that praise, support and approval are very important.'

She was intrigued by how the men tackled practical sessions, including a block play workshop, in a different way from women. 'They tend to be more hands-on and physical and use more technical language, different terminology and techniques with the children,' she observes.

Along with convincing the dads to participate, Ms Sharp felt it was difficult to get the nursery heads to



Participants of the Approved by Dads course in Glasgow



MORE INFORMATION

- 'Approved by Dads' will form part of our masterclass, 'Boys' learning: rethinking gender and early years practice', at the Nursery World Show in London on 2 and 3 February 2018. With recent research challenging gender stereotypes, Saturday's masterclass will reassess the nature/nurture debate and provide best practice advice on helping boys and girls to flourish. **To see the full seminar and masterclass programme, visit:** www.nurseryworldshow.com/london

The men 'tend to be more hands-on and physical', their trainer reports

buy into the programme at first, and that perhaps too much was expected of the men initially. 'Because the men are mature, I think the standards that were expected of them were too high. We had to get them to have belief in themselves and before they could scaffold play they had to understand what play looks like and how to plan,' she explains. 'Wives and partners can also be a challenge because they can be jealous, especially if they don't work, and phone or text constantly which can put pressure on their partner.'

The speed at which the men completed their Level 2 training shows how dedicated they were to the programme, along with all of them exceeding the commitment to undertake a minimum of 12 hours placement per week. Some of them also had their benefits cut in order to

participate – and one became homeless during the course but still attended college.

'The model is successful because we have invested time and effort into making it bespoke for dads,' says Ms McKenna. 'We have learnt a lot from the dads and so have been able to tailor the support to meet their learning needs.'

'We need to have a more balanced workforce and this will help us – hopefully, in the future we won't need to develop bespoke programmes because a career in early learning and childcare will be seen as a positive option for men, in the same way as nursing is now.'

CONFIDENCE BOOST

Participation on the programme has led to the men being more confident – with one dad negotiating with

B&Q to get free resources for his placement nursery – and resilient.

'Their prospects are all very good, but another plus is that every one of them has said that their parenting skills have improved immensely, leading to stronger families. One of the dads has a 15-year-old daughter who has always been surrounded by unemployment, and now he says her attitude has changed because she has seen what he has done,' says Ms Richardson.

'Our nurseries also benefit,' adds Ms McKenna. 'They are bringing in positive male role models for our children, many of whom don't have that in their lives. It is also better to have a more gender-balanced working environment.' Glasgow City Council will be running Approved by Dads again in September, and East Renfrewshire Council is also considering the model.

The dads went on a trip to visit a school on the island of Iona in the Inner Hebrides to celebrate the completion of the course.

'The teaching staff are male-dominated so it's an interesting place to go. Some of the men have never left Glasgow before and we felt it was good to go away at the end of the qualification and do something significant,' says Ms Sharp. 'I found myself sat on the beach on Iona having a pedagogical dialogue with the guys. When I compare them now to where they were at the start, it's mind-blowing.' ■

CASE STUDIES

Scott McGonigle

The father of four girls, Scott was a young carer, left school with poor qualifications and became a dad at 16 years old.

'I've thrived on the course and it's been a big eye-opener for me. I've never worked, so it's my chance to get a qualification and see how good I am at the job. The tutor said that she can see me becoming a nursery head, and I'd love that,' he says.

'Being an all-male class made it easier for me. We all share our experiences and understand what it's like to be in a female-dominated workplace. One practitioner made me feel like I was wrong to share books and activities with the girls and would move them away. I put up with it for a few weeks before speaking to the head. Now it's resolved and I feel like one of the team.'

'It's really fulfilling to be able to teach young minds and give to children what I lacked as a child. Some kids are desperate for a male role model and are constantly trying to be with me. Going to Iona and spending time with a girl with Down's syndrome was very touching and humbling. She showed me sign language and I taught her a rainbow song in Makaton. It's very rewarding work and I can't wait to complete my training and get stuck in.'

Thomas Cairns

Thomas is helping his mother to raise three of his nephews and nieces.

'People have often commented that I'm good with children and I enjoy being with them. I was working in a call centre when the head of my niece's nursery put me forward for the course. She had seen the way that I interacted with my niece and her friends,' he says.

'I was worried about the stigma of being a male childcare worker but, touch wood, it's not something that I've come across. In fact, I've been amazed by the positive response from parents and staff. Many of the children wanted their photo taken with me at their recent graduation.'

'I've enjoyed the placements and even found the classes fun as well as informative. I'm amazed how much I've learnt, especially about child behaviour, and bringing my own experiences to the course has helped. I liked that it was male-only and that everyone is there voluntarily, rather than for the money. We're all very committed and are there solely for the qualification and the job.'

