

Winning out?

What impact do male practitioners have on the design and delivery of Physical Development? *Dr Lala Manners* shares the findings from a series of interviews with early years practitioners

Men in childcare and the status of Physical Development (PD) as a Prime Area are current hot topics. In a small-scale qualitative study, I aimed to investigate issues surrounding men who design and deliver physical activity sessions across a range of settings.

Twenty participants were chosen: 12 male and five female practitioners, and three female heads of settings. Each was given four questions in advance; in-depth interviews then took place over a two-month period and all were recorded in full. Participants were encouraged to email after the data gathering to discuss any issues further. Here are the findings.

QUESTION ONE

Do men have a unique role to play in supporting children's PD?

What the women said...

'I think men working with children physically brings about a "gear change" and diversity to the dynamics of a setting. They tend to be more physical with the children anyway – and they aren't scared of boisterous play... I think in practical sessions they are much more robust about whiney behaviour and have a much more get-up-and-go attitude.'

'I think children need experience of strong boisterous play – and men are generally really good at this. The children have confidence in them in this way.'

'What is really interesting – and I have observed this over time – is that they seem much more able to "follow the child"... and pick up on their ideas and react positively immediately. They don't get so worried about the paperwork and sticking to a plan. They seem much "freer" when they are working physically with the children... they aren't fussing about planning and safety all the time.'

What the men said...

'Our sense of humour is quite different and we don't have any hang-ups about getting stuck in and having a laugh. I find it really easy to access my four-year-old self... I don't think they [female colleagues] do as much.'

'We're not so bothered about making fools of ourselves or the noise level. I think men are perhaps less gentle generally – we don't faff around so much and just get on with it.'

'I think our energy level is different and children pick up on that. They can tell that we really enjoy working with them in this way – that we're confident and know what we're doing.'

'I feel very connected to them and get a lot of personal satisfaction from working with them physically.'

'I feel very free when I'm doing something physical with them – I feel I can be more "me"'

'I really enjoy working with them like this – I feel very close to them and seeing them develop is great.'

'I really like being down on the floor with them. I find that women

talk a lot more, which confuses the children. They are always explaining stuff to them... I just get on and do it.'

QUESTION TWO

What do settings gain from men delivering physical activity sessions?

Two distinct themes emerged here: first, what influenced women's participation levels and second, the 'role model' issue.

What the women said...

'I feel women don't participate nearly as much as they should because historically, it's always been left to the men – that they are perceived, rightly or not, to be "better at sport", that they are predisposed to be more interested and competent, that it's a "boy thing" to do. It's a bit unfair, as I'm sure there are just as many men who don't like the physical stuff as women.'

'I don't think PD is taken that seriously yet... it's not monitored nearly as much as other areas, and this makes practitioners nervous. They don't really know what they are doing... there are

FINDINGS AND IMPLICATIONS FOR PRACTICE

Findings

- The lack of stringent curriculum guidelines for PD gave men the freedom to be 'more themselves' and deliver active sessions that played to their strengths.
- The lack of formal guidance made women anxious. They were used to a higher level of information, as in other areas of the curriculum.
- The men did not support the level of importance that women attached to the 'role-model' issue and questioned how and

why it warranted such status without significant evidence to support this.

- All the men enjoyed working physically with children but cautioned against this becoming an assumption and excuse for female colleagues not to engage.

Implications for practice

- Personal issues relating to physical competence should be acknowledged honestly and addressed. It is never going to be everyone's area of expertise, but everyone can
- play a role in supporting PD – the possibilities are many and varied.
- Embrace and enjoy the lower level of formal PD guidance, which is clear, simple and manageable. You may be as creative as you like, even if you are not yet confident to deliver a session independently. Supporting PD requires collaboration and everyone has something to offer.
- Watch and learn – observe children moving in a variety of environments. What do they enjoy and respond to?



Some men said they find it easy to connect with their four-year-old selves

no pats on the back for producing any work and nothing to show the parents.

If there was a way to "prove" PD, I guess that would help.'

'I think we are so over-cautious about paperwork and planning – we completely overdo it, and then panic when things go wrong. We just don't seem to be able to re-group so easily if a plan doesn't work out, so we get disheartened and opt out if possible.'

'I think information overload is a real problem. There is just no confidence in the subject and what training is available just doesn't equip us with the skills to deliver effectively... we get very confused with what to buy, and spend money on stuff we really don't need.'

'Sometimes I think we have a very negative attitude because our own experiences were not positive – we also rarely wear the right clothes! I think we often worry about what we look like too much.'

The men's perspective of the 'male role model'...

'It's such an adult – and female – perspective. What has caused the idea that a male role model is needed anyway? I can see the benefits to dads, but I never asked to be a role model. I am one because I'm good at my job promoting PD, not because of my gender.'

'It's so alienating to be seen as the token man. I do this because I love working with children in a physical

capacity. I'm not here to redress a perceived imbalance.'

'What is important is looking the part – wearing the right kit, being enthusiastic, energetic, knowledgeable and healthy – male or not. Lots of settings actually ask for a female coach because they want a good role model for their girls.'

'Being professional is way more important. I'm really keen this doesn't become yet another excuse for the women not to engage.'

'Honestly, I think it suits them [female colleagues] to play this up. It seems so old-fashioned – they just keep saying it makes such a difference, but where's the evidence? It's just really convenient for them to hide behind this. They big it all up so they don't have to do anything. It's so annoying.'

QUESTION THREE

What do children gain from men delivering physical activity sessions?

What the women said ...

'I think when they get to about four years, they really like more organised activities. Maybe they are not so good with the really little ones, but when they (the children) get older, they like that male energy going on... and they have such a laugh.'

'Physical contact is so good for their emotional development – that sense of trust and touch... also helping each other and appreciating how they develop their individual

MORE INFORMATION

The www.activematters.org website will be creating a 'learning hub' so initiatives, research, articles and resources may be shared by colleagues here and abroad. Submissions are welcome

movement skills. It's really good to see men being involved with this.'

What the men said...

'I think when they get to about 3.5 years to four years, it's great to have men actively involved in developing their physical skills. They get much stronger at this time and can be a bit aggressive – men seem to be better at channelling this energy, particularly with the boys.'

'The difference is in the way sessions are delivered. We have very little patience with the whingeing and whining – and a much more get-up-and-go attitude, which is really important.'

'Socially, it is really good for men to work physically with children – that somebody big and strong can also be with them on the floor and join in and be silly.'

QUESTION FOUR

What do parents gain from men delivering physical activity sessions?

What the women said...

'We have to deal with a lot of cultural issues including PD in our practice. Having men delivering active sessions really helps with our minority dads – they can put the case better for using time to do physical stuff... they can relate better to concerns that we are just wasting time.'

'It's a real help with our young dads to have a man on board doing the physical bit – we can get information about health etc out there much better. They will listen to them and ask questions about their children. They don't feel so intimidated.'

What the men said...

'Having a man delivering sessions definitely encourages the parents to get more active themselves – they get more engaged on all levels. It's a way in for them to be more involved in all aspects of their child's life.'

'At parents' events, the dads always gravitate towards us. We may start just chatting about their own interests, but I can usually steer it round to more relevant stuff to do with what we do with their children and encouraging their support.' ■

'Having men delivering sessions encourages parents to be more active'

In future, a wider study may be conducted and quantitative data included. My thanks to all those who gave their time and input in this study.

Dr Lala Manners is director of Activematters