

It's child's play for men



Pre-school teachers Maick

Kenny and Anne Marie Doheny board children for a trolley ride in the playground at the Community Creche, Urlingford.



SHEILA WAYMAN

GETTING A job in childcare was, says Mick Kenny, probably the best mistake he ever made. He wanted to work with children, but it was school-age youngsters he had in mind.

In fact, the Kilkenny man had a “phobia” of little children – a neighbour’s small child was always bursting into tears at the sight of him.

After completing a childcare course in 1996, he applied for a job and it was only halfway through the interview that he realised they were talking about toddlers, not primary school children. He met friends for coffee afterwards and said: “I have a really bad feeling I got it.” He did – and quickly found he loved the work at the Early Years Project in Kilkenny.

Now, 15 years later, Kenny (36) is chairman of the Men in Childcare Ireland Network (MiC), which is trying to raise awareness about how children, as well as society as a whole, would benefit from having more men working in the sector. It is also intent on encouraging young men to see it as a career option.

With men making up less than 1 per cent of the childcare workforce in Ireland – believed to be the lowest participation rate in Europe – the network has its work cut out to meet its target of raising this to 5 per cent by 2020.

Countries with progressive early childcare programmes have a far higher number of men involved.

In Norway, for instance, it is heading towards 20 per cent. It is clear we should be encouraging more men into the profession, agrees Teresa Heeney, director of services at the National Children's Nurseries Association (NCNA). We also need to monitor the "over-feminisation" of the education of our children, she suggests.

"Children at the moment could experience no male influence in their education, from early childcare through to the end of primary school. That is not in the best interest of holistic education."

However, parents are still resistant to the idea of men in childcare, she says. While there are greater numbers of men working in after-school facilities, and parents seem happy with that, an attitudinal shift is still required to make men working with younger children more widely accepted.

It is a chicken-and-egg situation, with many childcare centres reluctant to hire men if they think there would be a backlash from parents who, in turn, are more likely to be opposed to the idea of men in childcare if they have never known any working in such a setting.

But is it really a good idea to have pre-school children in an all-female environment during those crucial years of early social and intellectual development? Do we want to perpetuate the idea, for yet another generation, that caring is women's work? I

It is nonsensical to champion men's greater involvement with family life in the home, yet exclude them from caring for children professionally.

Low pay was always regarded as a major obstacle to men in what is a traditionally female-dominated, and therefore under-valued, industry. Increasingly, though, any sector that offers employment, along with job satisfaction and flexibility for work-life balance, is not to be dismissed.

Robert Buckley, joint managing director of Cocoon Childcare which operates 15 centres in Leinster, says there are "great opportunities" for men in the industry. However, out of Cocoon's 300 employees, he says "unfortunately" there is only one male childcare worker. They welcome applications from men and, he says, "we always have jobs available". The single most important quality they look for when recruiting staff is a vocation for the care of children.

"If somebody is very interested in this sector, we can steer them in the right direction for getting qualifications," adds Buckley, who worked his way up through a family-owned creche before setting up Cocoon at the end of the 1990s. He was the first man to serve on the NCNA council.

Many of the arguments made for equal opportunities for women in so many other professions can be applied to men in childcare – such as the benefit of different perspectives and not writing off 50 per cent of the talent available.

One of MiC's visions is that children would grow up in a society where they think it is the norm to be minded by men and women. "Kids have no bias," Kenny points out. "They are so, so natural. But as they grow older, it is what they see and what they don't see – they think that is the norm."

The outpouring of stories in the media, in the wake of the publication of the Ryan and Murphy reports into abuse of children by another set of trusted men, undoubtedly stoked paranoia about men caring for other people's children. But one lesson learned from that is the importance of policies and procedures to protect children – and adults too. You need to know about anybody to whom you are entrusting your children.

"Just as to assume that because you're a man, you're a threat, it is quite dangerous to assume that because you are a woman, you are not a threat," says Kenny.

He thinks that, generally, parents are positive about the idea of male childcare workers. "Sometimes people have a knee-jerk reaction – why would men want to work with children? We put it out to them – why wouldn't men want to work with kids, it is such good craic!"

Kenny's day job is manager of Urlingford Community Childcare in Co Kilkenny where, for the first time in his career, he is working with another man out of a staff of eight. The centre took Mick Doran on through a Fás placement, for which he was the best applicant, stresses Kenny. He was a qualified childcare worker and had volunteered at the centre before, so they knew he was good with children.

Kenny enjoys running the centre but does miss continuous interaction with the children. "A treat to myself, if it's quiet, is to get down on the floor and have a mess with the kids."

Did becoming a father himself – to two boys, now aged four and six – alter his approach to work at all? "My attitude to parents have changed," he replies. "I can understand their lack of energy!"

When Damian Walshe (20) started work in the creche at the Clonmel Community Resource Centre, he says there was "initial shock" among parents because they had never seen a man in that role. Even in his own head then, he admits, he was "a man in childcare" – but now, "I am just another childcare worker".

As well as working part-time in the centre, he is completing a master's degree in applied social studies at the Waterford Institute of Technology, where he did the three-year degree course in early childhood studies. Out of the 64 students who embarked on that course with him, two others were male – one went on to further study, the other left for Australia after graduating.

Walshe has found childcare to be "a very welcoming environment" and has not encountered any wariness among parents.

While he agrees the low pay can be off-putting, "the way things are going I personally would rather be working all week and enjoy what I do and getting paid for that, rather than sitting at home and being on the dole".

Childminding at home is probably the area of childcare where parents would be most resistant to men's involvement. Out of Childminding Ireland's 1,116 registered members, only one is a man. He is Andrew Dineen (29), who is running a "pre-arranged drop-in service" at his home in Tralee, Co Kerry, for parents to use outside normal creche hours – in the evenings or at weekends. He combines this with a part-time job as a special needs assistant at a national school.

Long term, his goal is to run his own Montessori-based pre-school. "I wanted to test the water a little bit to see how people reacted to a man working for himself, rather than working in a centre," he explains.

Although people were very positive when he initially floated this "out-of-hours" minding, and he has six children registered to use it, "realistically the market isn't there", he says. "I would never make a living childminding in the home."

After studying Montessori teaching and completing Fetac level five in childcare, Dineen has worked in creches and pre-schools, including a spell in Sweden, which has been consistently judged by the Save the Children charity as the best country in the world for children to grow up in.

"When I came back from Sweden, I realised how much I had learned," he says. "Outdoor play is a major thing we really want to cop on about here."

Despite daytime temperatures going down to minus 14 degrees in Stockholm where he worked, the children would be dressed appropriately and outside nearly every day.

"It is so healthy and they learn so much out there." Whereas in Irish childcare centres, if there is any hint of rain, it's "Oh no, we can't go out today".

Obviously the primary importance is the safety of the child, he says, but at what expense? He found the system in Sweden more geared to holistic education. Here there is paranoia, created by the media, he suggests, and childcare workers are told they should not hug a child or have a child on their lap. "It seems a bit silly," he remarks.

The dearth of men and lack of outdoor play in childcare and pre-schools here are probably not entirely unconnected.

"Guys are more up for getting out," says Kenny. They tend to enjoy the outdoors more and can introduce new ideas because they are looking at childcare from a different point of view.

Although not wanting to stereotype men, other qualities they bring to the job include the ability to make fools of themselves, suggests Kenny.

The few male childcare workers he meets are generally very bubbly, use humour a lot and really enjoy their work.

Childcare is not all holding hands and singing songs, he stresses. "It is serious work, incorporating child development, assessing the child's needs, meeting the child's needs and supporting parents."

However, you are guaranteed that there is something that will make you laugh a couple of times a day.

“One complaint I usually get off my co-workers is that I am very messy,” he adds. “Guys have a natural talent of being big kids at heart and how better to work with kids!”

What mothers say: a welcome for more male involvement

In a quick “straw poll” of mothers who are either using or planning to use a creche for their children, the majority are in favour of men working in childcare.

“I would strongly welcome it,” says SUSAN, a mother of two boys in Co Louth. “My older son, nearly three, goes to playschool two mornings a week and in his room there is a male and female carer. My son likes both equally and I find both good at their job.”

“I think it is very important for small children to have good male and female influences in their lives,” says DOROTHY MANORAS, an engineer in Limerick. “As children can spend a significant amount of time in childcare, I would welcome more male involvement in the care of my children.

No one would dream of telling a woman there was a job she couldn’t do, she says, but there is a perception that men in childcare is a “no-no”, coupled with the inference that if a man were working in childcare it would be because of some sinister motive.

“I think it’s sad that because of such unfounded perceptions of men in childcare, there is not a greater number of men working in this sector.”

“I would strongly welcome it, but must admit that this is because my child is a boy and I know how much he enjoys playing ‘boyish’ games with my husband,” says ANNIE in Galway. “He loves creche but a little bit of testosterone would be a bonus!”

Among those who would have concerns, MICHELLE says: “I would worry about the potential risk of sexual abuse with a male childminder.”

Acknowledging that her thinking may be irrational, and that of course females can potentially abuse too, she continues, “However I believe most abusers are male”.

She would not have issues with a male teacher, “so perhaps it is what is seen as the norm which has influenced me. A male teacher is not unusual whereas a male childminder is.”

Another mother adds: “My creche has had men on placement and I have always been uneasy with it, but they are never unsupervised.”

Advantages of having more men in childcare

- * Children see both men and women in caring roles as the norm.
- * Men bring different perspectives and new ideas to the job.
- * Male childcare workers can be positive role models for children.
- * Fathers may find male staff easier to relate to.

* Gender balance in a workplace is generally recognised as a win-win situation for staff, customers and the organisation itself.