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Men's work?

Changing the gender mix of the childcare and early years workforce

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We are used to the expectation that men will take a greater part in the upbringing of their own children – as fathers. But the idea that men should play a greater part in taking care of other people's children – as a job – is less familiar. The Government's 1998 Green Paper, 'Meeting the Childcare Challenge', neatly encapsulated the issue of male workers in childcare: 'Working with children is seen as a predominantly female occupation. Yet male carers have much to offer, including acting as positive role models for boys - especially from families where the father is absent.' (DfEE, DSS and Ministers for Women, 1998)

There is an official commitment to increasing the number of male childcare workers, as shown by the target for Early Years Development and Childcare Partnerships of 6% male childcare workers by 2004 (Department for Education and Skills, 2001). However, changing the gender mix of childcare staff is more than a question of setting targets. To change the gender mix requires understanding why childcare work is as gendered as it is.

This paper starts by referring to some recent research on fathers and their relation to childcare. It then considers four broader issues: gender equality, the labour market, the needs of the children, and child protection. This is followed by some views and experiences of childcare workers themselves – both men and women – and of parents. Finally the paper considers policy options and ways to move the agenda forward. It will suggest elements of a strategy to increase the number of men working in childcare. These include pay, image, training, recruitment and support. The key conclusion is that if there is a serious intention to have more men employed in childcare, then responsibility has to be taken for leading and implementing the strategy.

Men in the childcare workforce

The extent of the gender polarisation in childcare work is shown in figures from the UK census for 1991. The census classified occupations using the Standard Occupational Classification (SOC), which had three childcare occupations: nursery nurses, playgroup leaders, and other childcare workers. This last group would include childminders, nannies, crèche workers and some play workers. Table 1 shows the numbers of men and women estimated to be in each occupation in 1991. There were thought to be almost 57,000 nursery nurses, and just 600 of these were men: a little over 1%. More recent data from the Labour Force Survey (LFS) for 2001 and 2002 confirm that the position has not changed since 1991. The Standard Occupational Classification has been slightly modified, but there are still three childcare-related occupations. As Table 2 shows, while the number of male nursery nurses appears to have more than doubled, to 1,430, so has the number of female nursery nurses – so that the percentage of male nursery nurses has stayed at 1%. (These figures need to be treated with some caution because of the small numbers of male childcare workers actually interviewed in the LFS. When the figures from the 2001 census become available, they will give a more robust estimate.)

THE PERCENTAGE OF MALE NURSERY NURSES HAS STAYED AT 1%

The fact that those employed in childcare are almost exclusively women serves to highlight the gendered nature of care in general and childcare in particular. While it is generally accepted that men should play a greater part in the care of their own children, men being employed to care for other people's children is much more controversial. When men enter this most archetypal female occupation, their motives may be thought suspect and their sexuality called into question. While many potential benefits have been cited, the most common being the importance of role models (as in the Green Paper), there is a concern over the potential danger some men may pose to children.

CHILDCARE BY FATHERS

Nowadays, mothers are increasingly likely to be in paid employment (Brannen, et al., 1997), with more than half of mothers with pre-school-aged children having a paid job. A necessary quid-pro-quo is that fathers should take on greater domestic responsibilities, especially for childcare. And this has been happening, with big increases in the amount of time British fathers spend on childcare. On the most recent figures, 'time spent by fathers with children accounts for about one-third of total parental childcare time ... those fathers working long hours tend to compensate with more childcare at weekends'. (O'Brien and Shemilt, 2003)

However, Gardiner (Gardiner, 1997) has reviewed a number of studies to show that even when men do take a greater share of the caring, it is still seen as predominantly the woman's responsibility, and that they are just helping out. As she put it: 'Men perceive themselves as a back-up for their wives.' This same finding was echoed by 'Dads on Dads': 'Fathers may let their partner take the lead in childcare because they feel less confident or less capable than her at looking after the children.' Another complaint – usually from mothers – is that fathers only get involved in play and entertainment with the children, not the drudgery: 'Their role may include providing a distraction while the mother gets on with the work of cooking, cleaning, and other day-to-day household tasks, but they tend not to be heavily involved in such tasks themselves.'

The expectation that men will take part in the care of their children in the home is not translated into an expectation that men will care for other people's children, as a job. When they do, just as with fathers, they are likely to be viewed as less competent than the women, and assisting them or doing just the 'fun' bits of care, and not the more demanding bits. The expectation is still largely that childcare – as a job – is women's work.

Almost all children in Britain attend some form of childcare and early education before they start school. However much their father – or other male carer – may take care of them at home, as soon as children leave home and enrol into a childcare setting, they move into an almost totally female-staffed environment. When they start school, things do not change much: 84% of teachers in nursery and primary schools are women. Of the male teachers, 26% are heads (compared to 11% of the females), and so may have relatively little contact with the children. In secondary school 54% of teachers are female (Department for Education and Skills, 2003). (Figures refer to March 2002.)

Fathers Direct has compiled a useful summary of recent research on fathers, which is available from their website (Fathers Direct, 2003.) The Equal Opportunities Commission (EOC) has also summarised two new reports called 'Working Fathers' (O'Brien and Shemilt, 2003) and 'Dads on Dads' (Hatter, et al., 2002), also available from their website (Equal Opportunities Commission, 2003).

TABLE 1: CHILDCARE OCCUPATIONS BY GENDER, 1991 CENSUS

SOC	OCCUPATION	MALE	FEMALE	MALE %
650	NURSERY NURSES	600	56,380	1.1
651	PLAYGROUP LEADERS	56	18,430	0.3
659	OTHER CHILDCARE	1,640	184,140	0.9

TABLE 2: CHILDCARE OCCUPATIONS BY GENDER, 2001-2 LABOUR FORCE SURVEY

SOC	OCCUPATION	MALE	FEMALE	MALE %
6121	NURSERY NURSES	1,430	136,220	1.0
6122	CHILDMINDERS AND RELATED	2,610	116,010	2.2
6123	PLAYGROUP LEADERS/ASSISTANTS	3,570	58,410	5.8

Issues around men working in childcare

BEFORE LOOKING AT THE EXPERIENCE OF NURSERY WORKERS, THIS PAPER EXAMINES A NUMBER OF ISSUES AROUND MEN WORKING IN CHILDCARE THAT HAVE WIDER IMPLICATIONS. THESE ARE THE ISSUES OF GENDER EQUALITY, THE LABOUR MARKET, THE NEEDS OF CHILDREN, AND THE ISSUES OF RISK AND CHILD PROTECTION.

GENDER EQUALITY

Much work – particularly by feminist writers – has addressed the inequalities of gender in all aspects of life. This includes in the domestic sphere, where the traditional detached role of fathers has been challenged. Some argued that, 'to involve men as well as women in the care of young children ... is an important strategy for gender equality' (Segal, 1987). Deliberate and visible encouragement of men's caring would, it was argued, assist in the realisation of 'equal opportunities (for both men and women) to be both breadwinners and carers' (Burgess and Ruxton, 1996). More equal sharing of childcare between men and women for their own children has now become part of the ideological consensus. However, the expectation is still largely that childcare – as a job – is women's work. It is the absence or presence of men in early childhood services that contributes to or challenges the dominant ideologies about gender roles and relationships in society.

LABOUR MARKET

Occupational segregation by gender has been increasingly challenged as women move into traditionally male occupations. However, there has been less movement the other way, with fewer men moving into traditionally female occupations. The traditionally male-dominated occupations tend to be those with more status, power and pay. Female-dominated occupations, on the other hand, are more likely to be low status, lacking in power and poorly paid. It is sometimes argued that the only way to raise the status and pay of these occupations is for more men to be recruited. However, where men have entered female-dominated occupations, there have been new concerns, that the men were 'taking over' or taking all the top jobs, and still leaving women at the bottom of the career ladder. The recruitment of men is not a solution to occupational inequalities, but it may be a necessary step (Crompton, 1997).

THE NEEDS OF CHILDREN

It is often argued that children need 'role models' of both male and female behaviour. As far as childcare is concerned, it is argued that children need to see both men and women in caring roles - to challenge the stereotype that caring is women's work. However, it is not always clear what role models men are meant to be. Is it simply about enabling children to spend time with both men and women? Is it that male role models are meant to counteract the stereotypical male, by showing that men have a caring side? Or is it that men are meant to counterpose more stereotypically masculine characteristics in an almost exclusively female environment? In a study of male workers in family centres, Ruxton noted that, 'the vast majority of the staff recognised the importance of positive male role models which help to challenge the stereotypical view of men as "breadwinners" alone, and to validate their role as "carers" (Ruxton, 1992: 25). On the other hand, Murray, in a study of childcare staff, found that 'in the childcare environment men are often sought after as workers because of the perceived need to have male role models for children', models which were seen as 'doing truck play with the boys' (Murray, 1996: 374). In both cases, a single man was seen as able to represent 'men' as a category, and to simultaneously represent and challenge traditional masculinity. This ambivalence about what that role should be is difficult for men, because they are usually a lone man in a staff otherwise composed solely of women. There has to be recognition that there is not a single masculinity that each man can model in its entirety, but that there are multiple masculinities and that men will vary in how they perform their masculinity (Connell, 1995).

RISK AND CHILD PROTECTION

Employing men as carers of young children raises questions about men as potential sexual abusers. This perception needs to be challenged. Dominant media images of men are as dangerous to children. These are images of violent

where men have entered female-dominated occupations, there have been new concerns, that the men were 'taking over'

partners and fathers, sinister residential care workers and predatory strangers. These images reinforce the prejudice that men are dangerous to children – as well as to women and to each other. Associated with the concern over paedophiles is a homophobia which questions the sexuality of any man who wants to work in childcare. The message is that men who want to look after children must be gay and that gay men will abuse children.

There has been a lot of media attention on paedophiles and concern that they may target places such as nurseries where they can have access to children and the children are unlikely to make any complaints, because of their age. However, only one man has ever been convicted of sexual abuse in a nursery in Britain. Of course, absence of evidence is not evidence of absence: it may be that there are many cases that are not known about. American research on sexual abuse in children's day care (Finkelhor, et al., 1988) found that 40% of known abusers in childcare were women. Of course, the other 60% came from the tiny minority of men who worked in the nurseries or from other men: only two-thirds of the male abusers were workers – either childcare workers or peripheral workers, such as drivers or cleaners – the rest were predominantly young male relatives of family day carers (what in Britain would be called childminders).

There are two clear messages from this research: (1) most men who work in childcare are not involved in abuse and (2) not all the abusers are men. It is clear from this study that eliminating all men from childcare work would not eliminate the risk, but would deny the children contact with men as childcare workers. Childcare settings need procedures to protect children, and not just from men. As Keith Pringle has argued, 'Public policy on men's involvement in professional childcare may well be at a crossroads. Unfortunately, that debate might develop into a polarised argument on whether more or fewer men should be in childcare work. That is, however, the wrong question. Instead, the real question is: what strategies can we devise to involve men in childcare in ways that will maximise the safety of children, and indeed women?' (Pringle, 1998), and, it should be added, of the men too.

The experience of men working in nurseries

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To study the experience of that small minority of men who do work in a nursery, a team from the Thomas Coram Research Unit conducted research in nurseries where at least one man was working (Cameron, et al., 1999). One aim was to compare the experiences of the men with those of women in a similar position, so we also interviewed female nursery workers with similar length of experience. The sample consisted of eleven men and ten women. We knew that in some other countries, such as Denmark, men working in childcare enjoyed popular parental support, so we also interviewed parents in the sample of nurseries.

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DECIDING ON CHILDCARE WORK

What makes anyone – man or woman – choose to become a childcare worker? Do men and women have different reasons? Half of the women had grown up with the idea that they would work with children, and had decided to enter childcare work while still at school. Typical comments were: 'I always knew I wanted to work with children' and 'I think it was children or animals'.

None of the men grew up with the idea of wanting to work with children. Two knew they were interested while at school, but never had an opportunity to do childcare courses: 'They had a childcare course at school ... but it was open to like the girls basically'. Six men decided to try childcare while they were unemployed. Three men had worked in related areas – one residential social worker and two teachers. Two of the men had been primary school teachers, but wanted to work with younger children.

Men, more than women, were likely to enter childcare as a 'second chance career', but not exclusively so. The choice was also related to education and qualifications, to the support of family and friends, and to personal ambition.

QUALIFICATIONS

All the workers we interviewed had some form of childcare or related qualification (eg teaching or social work). However, the

men who knew they wanted to work with young children tended to obtain a teaching qualification rather than an NNEB or BTEC qualification, which are the standard professional nursery qualifications. The difference is that NNEB and BTEC are available at 16 with few GCSEs, whereas a teaching qualification requires A levels for entry. None of the men had begun an NNEB or BTEC on leaving school and entered childcare in the way that women did. A teaching qualification gives access to higher paid and higher status jobs than the nursery qualifications.

SUPPORT

The women all got strong approval for choosing childcare. For the men support was patchy. None of the men entered the field with the committed backing of parents, partners and friends that the women had. The terms used by the women to describe the response from their families about their work choices included 'pleased', 'proud', 'happy', 'appropriate for a girl', 'supportive' and 'completely behind me'. There was a strong sense that childcare was an obvious and appropriate choice for women, even if they had done something else first. For men, the reaction was more likely to be one of surprise, confusion and ridicule. The consistent support women get with their choice of childcare work helps them to feel comfortable with it. The men, on the other hand, lack that support and can feel isolated and uneasy.

THE FUTURE

We were interested in how settled the nursery workers were and what career ambitions they had, so we asked them what they thought they would be doing in five years time. Seven of the women and four of the men saw themselves doing much the same as their present job. Six men and three women, on the other hand, saw themselves as moving into more specialist posts, becoming nursery managers or owners, or qualifying for a higher status profession (eg to social work or psychotherapy). Contentment and ambition thus had gendered aspects: overall, the women were more likely to be content and the men to talk of ambition. The expectation that men, in traditionally female occupations, will tend to take the senior posts or move out is a common finding (Williams, 1993).

THE WORKPLACE

Men and women had different perceptions of the division of labour in the nurseries. All but one of the women believed that jobs were shared out equally. Men, on the other hand, knew that they were asked and expected to do practical jobs about the building, such as fixing things and changing light bulbs. This discrepancy – between the female workers' belief about the absence of a gender division of labour in the nursery and the men's experience of it – says something about the gendered construction of childcare work. It may be that the women are not aware that men are doing these practical tasks, because that has traditionally been their role in domestic settings. And this is taking place

in an environment where women are engaged in their traditional role of caring for children. In this way, the nursery environment tends to reflect the domestic one.

Male workers reported ways in which female staff acted which effectively excluded them: for example, one reported being 'cut off' by a female member of staff when he was talking to parents. He said that she would interrupt him and repeat what he had said, leaving him feeling embarrassed. Two men reported that they felt their women colleagues were needlessly overprotective. They would 'jump in before a possible problem could occur', or would assume that they couldn't do some things with the children properly. Women were more likely to say there were no gender-based differences between the men and the women in the ways they communicated or acted with the children, and that any differences were due to personality.

ROLE MODELS

As we have seen, one of the arguments for recruiting more men into childcare is that they provide 'role models', but that there is some ambiguity about what type of role model the men are supposed to be, either conforming to male stereotypes in an otherwise female environment or challenging them. The importance of role models also came up in our interviews. Mostly the men saw themselves as challenging the male stereotype: after all, they were working in a uniquely non-stereotypically male occupation. As one man said:

I don't know if it's important what sort of role model you are... I'd like to think that I'm a role model that questions the way men have to be ... but I don't consciously go out to do that, maybe I'm rejecting the old sort of stereotypes and role models that I had... by default that means I'm something else... and their role models sometimes... they might want a guy to play football.

The men accept that, merely on the grounds of their gender, they have a particular role to play with the children and families, but that role is not clear. Their gender, in the particular context of the nursery setting, is a constant challenge to predominant ideas about what men do. The role is apparently to embody notions of masculinity, as well as to challenge those notions. There is the additional burden, as most of these men were the only man in their nursery, of one man representing all men, when there are many ways of 'doing' masculinity.

THE PARENTS

Having had some experience of their children attending nurseries where men were employed, by far the majority of parents said they were in favour of men workers: 85% of both mothers and fathers. One clear reason why parents supported men working with young children was concern for the boys: for example, one mother of a six month old boy said she 'was keen for there to be a male role model ... I felt strongly there should be a male contact for him as he

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got older'. This view was expressed especially for lone mothers. A father noted: 'It can help with certain stereotypes about men and childcare. And boys think men shouldn't do that work.' A mother of three sons added: 'I like my boys to have male role models ... It was one of the positive things about the nursery, for my boys to be able to interact with men and women.'

There was less agreement about the advantages of male workers to daughters. Only two mothers and one father referred to positive benefits for their daughters of being cared for by a man. Most were more neutral, but three mothers expressed some caution. Nevertheless, for both sons and daughters, there were seen to be advantages to having both men and women working in the nursery. However, when asked how the male and female nursery workers differed in their behaviour with the children, most parents tended to say there was no difference. Where differences were noted by parents, their descriptions tended to follow fairly stereotypical gendered lines. Men, it was said, were more likely to play football, to do things outside and to 'muck about'. They 'let the kids get on with it' and 'are not inhibited by risk'. Women, on the other hand, were seen by parents as providing the substantive, consistent parts of caring. Women workers were referred to as providing a 'maternal role', 'more in-depth caring and nurturing'. In this way, the differences noted by the parents reflect the observation that men in the home do the 'fun' childcare and women do the routine nurturing: the women are described as providing the essential care while the men are 'helping'.

RISK AND PROTECTION

Both parents and staff were aware of the debate about sexual abuse and male workers, but parents trusted the managers to recruit suitable workers, regardless of gender, and saw this as an essential safeguard. As might be expected, the risk was not seen as equally involving men and women, but was seen as almost exclusively

coming from the men. Differences were seen in what is thought appropriate for men and women to do with the children in their care. Take, for instance, touching and cuddling. One woman nursery worker said: 'If they fall over and hurt themselves ... I mean you know I cuddle a child if they come up to me or if they come and try to give me a kiss ... I feel fine about that.' Some men workers had experience of being told not to touch children, or felt their position was vulnerable to accusations of misusing touch. One man reported that, in a previous nursery, he was told not to cuddle the children, as that was not 'expected' of a man. He said: 'The other carers, it wasn't a problem, they'd all cuddle and that sort of thing ... I kicked up quite a stink about it ... and in the end they changed the whole ruling and they said they didn't want anybody to cuddle the children.'

Most nurseries had policies for intimate care. Nappy changing tended to be the one part of personal care that was marked out for policy attention. The assumption here is that nappy changing is a discrete area of childcare practice which potentially offers opportunities for intimacy and privacy with children, and so opportunities for sexual abuse or misinterpretation of staff behaviour. Some centres explicitly excluded men from personal care. However, the male workers were not all happy with such policies: as one said, 'everyone accepts a woman ... an actual issue [is] made about having a man' changing nappies.

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Getting more men into childcare

What are some of the deterrents to men becoming childcare workers? For a start, pay. Pay has been shown repeatedly to be one of the major discontents of childcare workers, and one of their main reasons for leaving the sector (Rolfe, et al., 2003). It is especially a problem for men, who, on average, earn more than women, to work in a job that is low paid even for women's work. Another deterrent is the name, 'nursery nurse'. As one of the men we interviewed said, 'you say you work in a nursery and they assume it's something to do with plants'. With the development of combined children's centres, family centres and extended schools, the roles of childcare workers will change and expand. Another policy paper in the Daycare Trust 'Facing the Future' series has discussed the need to re-examine the whole organisation of childcare and early years work (Moss, 2003), so this could be a good time to revise our terminology.

The Government has set a target of 6% male childcare workers by 2004. However, even this very modest target seems unlikely to be achieved. Setting a target is an important first step, but there needs to be a strategy to recruit more men into childcare. This strategy has to tackle images of childcare workers, training, recruitment and support. The need for a strategy, and what it might include, were the subject of an international seminar convened by the Thomas Coram Research Unit. Along with the pioneering work of the European Commission on Childcare (Jensen, 1996), the papers from that seminar still give the best introduction to a strategy (Owen, et al., 1998).

IMAGES

When images of children and childcare are produced, it is important that they include men, to consistently challenge the stereotype of childcare as women's work. There have been a number of recruitment campaigns recently for recruiting more childcare workers, but how many of them have included images of men? The Sure Start website is a positive example:

www.childcarecareers.gov.uk. In childcare settings too, posters on the wall have to include images of men with children.

TRAINING

It is important to recruit more men into childcare training. We know that staff in colleges who provide childcare training are keen to have more men on their courses, but that generally there is no strategy to recruit them. Consequently the percentage of men in training for childcare is much the same as the percentage of workers (Cameron, et al., 2001). Colleges need to think about how they market their courses and how they recruit onto them. Our research has shown that men are more likely to go into childcare after having done some other job, so they are less likely to come into training as school leavers, unlike women. Even prior to that, schools need to make sure that courses on children and childcare are equally available to boys: one of our male childcare workers remembered that such classes were only available to girls in his school.

RECRUITMENT

Wherever jobs and recruitment are being considered, childcare should not be ruled out as a possibility for men. This includes the careers service, Connexions, the New Deal and JobCentres. However, we know that these services tend not to suggest childcare as an occupation to males. Training for those involved in recruitment and careers guidance would seem to be a priority. Again, the images shown of childcare workers must always include men: this applies at every stage. Burly ex-steel workers who now work in the Sheffield Children's Centre go into schools to see if the children can guess their job: no one does.

SUPPORT

Because there are so few men in childcare, those who do work in a childcare setting are likely to be the only man there. This can be very isolating and dispiriting. It is therefore important to provide support for male childcare workers. There is a National

Men in Childcare Support Network based at the Sheffield Children's Centre and Men in Childcare based in Edinburgh (www.meninchildcare.com). Such organisations need to be well supported and publicised.

STRATEGY

Many of the tasks that would form part of a strategy have been developed and tried out. There are good examples in Britain, such as the Sheffield Children's Centre (www.earlyexcellence.org/sheffieldchildren.htm), Pen Green Centre (www.btinternet.com/~pengreen) and Edinburgh's Men in Childcare. There are also examples from other countries, particularly the Scandinavian countries (Owen, et al., 1998). The European Commission Network on Childcare developed a detailed strategy almost 10 years ago (Jensen, 1996). That strategy is summarised below.

To encourage and support the employment of more men in childcare requires a wide-ranging and detailed policy. It needs to involve organisations at many levels: central government, local authorities, voluntary and private organisations, individual childcare centres, the training system, the careers service, Connexions, job centres, etc. The policy must express commitment, specify objectives, identify criteria, define priorities and set a timetable. There needs to be an action plan that will set targets for training and recruitment, identify measures to achieve these targets, specify who has responsibility for which measures, ensure an effective framework for co-ordination, define the resources to be applied in implementing the measures, and monitor progress.

This strategy puts responsibilities at different levels, from central government to individual childcare centres. At each level, there will need to be an action plan which specifies in detail who does what. While the total strategy will require co-ordination between levels, action can be planned and implemented at each level

without waiting for the grand strategy. So, for example, an individual college can set a target for the number of male childcare students, identify how it will recruit to that target, specify who is responsible, and commit resources to achieve the target. Or, to give another example, a childcare centre can create training places for men and develop a strategy to recruit and support

those men: such a step would need to be discussed within the centre first, including with parents, so that everyone was clear about the aims of the policy.

Targets alone are not sufficient: there has to be discussion and agreement as to what is needed to meet those targets, resources need to be identified and people

need to be given responsibility. Most of all, there has to be commitment to the goal of increasing the number of male childcare workers. This commitment cannot be imposed, but needs to be discussed and agreed. A key lesson from countries that have increased the number of men employed in childcare is that someone has to take responsibility for the strategy.

Creating change

This paper began by considering the very small number of men working in childcare and the Government's target of increasing the current 1% to 6%. Men are taking a greater role in the care of their own children, but when children leave the home and enter some form of childcare, they enter an almost exclusively female-staffed environment. Clearly, increasing the number of men working in childcare has ramifications beyond the work itself. It has significance for gender equality in society, for gender divisions in the labour market, and for the needs of children.

Because of this wider significance, increasing the number of men working in childcare is not easy. It can disrupt strongly held views about masculinity and femininity. Challenging those views might make people uncomfortable. There are examples of good practice and strategies have been developed. To bring about change requires commitment and public acknowledgement of the need for change. Childcare has to become men's work.

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Daycare Trust is the national childcare charity, campaigning for quality affordable childcare for all children aged 0-14 and raising the voices of children, parents and carers. We advise parents and carers, providers, employers, trade unions and policymakers on childcare issues. This paper is the sixth in a series of Daycare Trust Facing the Future policy papers.

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