

Why aren't more men working in childcare? ^[1]

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EXCERPTS

The numbers of men working in childcare have risen by more than two thirds in Germany since 2006. But the proportion of men continues to be extremely small - and not only because of the modest wages.

Mehran Aghadavoodi estimates that there are now around 40 men working in family day-care in Cologne. When he did the family day-care training course 15 years ago, he was the only man. Originally from Iran, the 62-year-old has been working with small children ever since.

In light of current figures, Mehran Aghadavoodi can certainly be described as a rarity. Although there has been a steady increase between 2006 and 2016 in the number of men working in toddler childcare, levels remain consistently low.

In a recent study on skilled workers in early education, published by the German Youth Institute back in 2006, only 3.1 per cent of employees in day-care were male. In 2016 this had risen to 5.4 per cent.

Family women and working fathers

Miguel Diaz, specialist consultant at the coordination center that runs the program "Boys Day," as well as the network "New Paths for Boys," sees this increase as a fundamentally positive development. But the figures clearly show an age-old problem: the smaller the children, the smaller the proportion of men taking care of them. It would seem that old societal stereotypes still hold: Taking care of small children is women's work.

According to Diaz, this is also clearly evident in our use of language.

We use the term "family man," to describe a man's involvement with his family - but it would be rare to hear the term "family woman." On the other hand, we seldom use the term "working father," whereas it is common to hear the term "working mother." These are two examples that illustrate the prevailing attitude to the gender stereotypes in the areas of career and family. And these are attitudes that have proven to be very persistent.

"It's not about wages"

Mehran Aghadavoodi has trouble comprehending this attitude, given that most women in Germany are well educated. Aghadavoodi speculates that many men simply have not considered the subject of children's upbringing. He thinks they only have themselves to blame.

At the moment, Aghadavoodi takes care of five children. The youngest is 14 months old, the oldest is three years. The children are dropped off by their parents at 7 am and are picked up at 3 pm. At the moment the government pays him 5 euros per hour per child, explains Aghadavoodi. This money has to cover food for the children, toys and any repairs that are needed. Yet it is still not a bad salary.

Diaz agrees that it is not the issue of earning a modest income that holds men back from choosing to work in childcare. For example, a car mechanic does not necessarily earn any more than a geriatric nurse, yet for many young men, becoming a mechanic is a dream come true.

Boys' and Girls' Day: for more diversity in the workplace

"Choosing a career is much more than just a decision about what kind of job a young person wants to do in the future", says Diaz. In many cases young people also want to emphasize their own gender role, they want to come across as particularly masculine or feminine.

"If I choose to learn to become a builder specializing in reinforced concrete, this, of course, carries a different message than if I choose to become a kindergarten teacher, because early childhood education has very female connotations." The family still has a great influence over career choices, says Diaz. But so does the peer group.

The program "Boys' Day" and "Girls' Day" is supposed to encourage boys and girls to look for a suitable profession outside traditional patterns. The main idea behind this is to create more gender diversity. There is evidence that companies with more gender diversity are often better positioned than ones in which jobs are filled according to traditional stereotypes.

Playing silly games, doing arts and crafts, and getting read to

And where diversity has been shown to improve companies, such diversity in childcare also benefits children's development.

This is apparently not so much about the recently lamented discrimination against boys, who lack male role models in childcare and elementary schools, and who allegedly tend to get marked lower by their female teachers than by the few male teachers.

It has become apparent that a possible worse grade actually has nothing to do with the gender of individual teachers, says Diaz. Rather it is about boys and girls having a right to be educated in the most diverse way possible - by men and women.

It is a good thing if children have quite different caregivers, says Aghadavoodi. For example, "his" children experience different types of care. While he likes to do more active games, romp about, and make music with the children, his wife, who occasionally assists him at work, takes care of calmer activities, like reading to the children or doing arts and crafts. Whether this is due to her "being a woman" or whether it is due to her profession - she is an art teacher and art therapist - he wouldn't be able to judge, says Aghadavoodi.

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