

Edinburgh is switching the world on to daddy daycare [GB]^[1]

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EXCERPTS

As you walk into the foyer of Gilmerton Dykes Child and Family Centre, in Edinburgh, your eye is caught by a street map of Kraków, Poland, pinned to the wall. It's not a holiday souvenir but a symbol of European interest in an Edinburgh-based initiative which is leading the way in recruiting men for that most traditional bastion of "women's work" - child care.

In 2000, the centre's manager, Kenny Spence, then based in the city's Pilton area and conscious of being one of a mere handful of men working in early- years care, launched the organisation, Men In Childcare, with the aim of significantly altering the male-female imbalance in what he calls "one of the most gendered professions".

Five years on, as the Government calls for more men to consider working with children, Men in Childcare has already put 500 men through its courses and yesterday held its fifth conference, which was this year moved from Edinburgh to London due to the extent of international interest. Hence the map of the Polish city, where MIC is working in partnership with a local agency.

Fifteen years ago, Spence, now 50 and with a nine-year-old daughter of his own, switched from working with adolescents in residential care to the almost exclusively female-dominated field of early child care because, he says, "I thought that working with early-years could perhaps have more impact and influence than working with troubled teenagers". He started addressing child care conferences to emphasise what he saw as a crying need for more male input into the field.

His concern was not just to spare his own blushes at being virtually a lone male in a women's domain. "If you take a family, 50 per cent of that is male, if you go into a secondary school, there will be a large number of men working there, for a long time it was the same in primary schools, but in early years there is a complete dearth of men.

Because no-one else seemed to be taking action, he coaxed funding from the Pilton Partnership where he was working, while Telford College offered places on its National Certificate in Childcare and Education course. In January 2001, funding from the Edinburgh Childcare Partnership and the European Union enabled him to appoint a full-time project co-ordinator, Colin Chisholm.

Men in Childcare, he says, has proved "a phenomenal success". To date, 500 men have come through their full or part-time courses in colleges in Edinburgh, Glasgow, Falkirk and Dundee and the organisation is about to run more. "We've had 50-60 guys already applying for the courses in Edinburgh and a similar number applying for courses at other centres across Scotland. So we're likely to have another 150-200 people starting training in September." The ripples created reach much further afield than Scotland, however. Yesterday's conference, entitled Imagine, boasted speakers from Hungary, Poland, Norway, Sweden, Denmark and Belgium, where the project has established partnerships with child care organisations.

"It's one of the most successful initiatives in Europe in terms of recruiting men into child care," he believes.

In terms of numbers of men currently working in child care, however, Norway and Denmark are considerably ahead of Scotland, where the average percentage of males is still one per cent - "except in Edinburgh". MIC's Scandinavian partners have warned them that, if they slacken off in promoting the issue, the number of men joining up will drop off, which is why an important part of MIC's policy is advertising.

It was reading such an advert which prompted a career about-turn for one of Spence's assistants Derek Thomson. On his way to the bakery where he had worked for 16 years, Thomson, now 33, saw it in his newspaper and made a life-changing decision.

"It's a lot more satisfying than working shifts in a bakery, and certainly different," he says. "Working in the centre here, you feel you're making a difference in people's lives."

The biggest shock, he recalls, was after he'd done the initial training in the all-male environment of MIC and went into a college class where he was the only man in about 50 students. "They used to sound me out about it," he recalls. "Why was I doing this?" And, in an age where - rightly or wrongly - headlines about paedophiles have made us wary of men working with young children, have he or Spence received any adverse reactions, quite apart from surprise, to their presence in a child-care centre?

"Nothing like that," says Thomson. "In fact, we're having the opposite effect, in showing people that men are good at caring, that we're good with kids. Why should a small minority affect that?"

So far as fathers are concerned, he adds, they seem to appreciate being able to come and discuss issues easier than if they had been dealing with women. And, so far as any prejudice, real or imagined, is concerned, Spence says: "This project would never ever succeed unless women support it, and I've had nothing but favourable feedback from women saying that what they want is good men coming in who can provide a balance in terms of care.

Nevertheless, in Scotland the average male percentage of the workforce remains one per cent - except in Edinburgh, where the Gilmerton Dykes centre boasts six men within its staff of two dozen and in a few other centres such as Craigmillar where the gender balance is being altered slightly, largely through MIC training schemes.

In June, David Blunkett launched National Child care Week, expressing the Government's anxiety to recruit more workers - including men - into child care. "Only 2 per cent of those working in child care are men," he said. "Yet there is much they can give to the profession and that it can give to them."

Back in the playground at Gilmerton Dykes, Spence is greeted with affectionate toddler cries of Kenny! and is immediately button-holed for a carry, while another member of staff and MIC graduate, 50-year-old Gordon Kidd, enjoys a kick-around with a diminutive winger.

- reprinted from the Scotsman

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