

Men battle prejudice in childcare: As 'New Dads' face sexist backlash, Labour pledges to treble number of male carers [GB] ^[1]

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EXCERPTS

Men who want to work with children are being held back by sexist women, according to a new report. The claim comes as more men are considering careers in childcare in the wake of the 'New Dad' revolution.

Hands-on fatherhood at home has become increasingly fashionable, thanks to role models such as footballer David Beckham. As a result, one in four men would now consider a job in a nursery or as a childminder for other people's children, rising to nearly four in 10 among those who are fathers, the research, to be published tomorrow, found.

But just as women breaking into male-dominated professions may fall victim to an old boys' network, research found that some male carers complained of being patronised by female colleagues. Others feared that their sexuality would be called into question if they worked with children, or that they risked accusations of child abuse: one man was banned from cuddling his charges because it was not 'expected' of men.

'Some men complained that they were excluded from some tasks but were expected to do others, like rough play or fixing anything that got broken,' said Charlie Owen, senior researcher at the Institute for Education at the University of London, and author of the report 'Men's Work?'

A small study, by the institute's Thomas Coram Research Unit, of men working in nurseries found some had been told not to touch children or change nappies in case parents objected.

One complained of being 'cut off' by a female colleague who would interrupt him when he talked to parents, while another two men reported that women colleagues 'would "jump in before a possible problem could occur" or would assume they couldn't do some things with the children properly'.

The man banned from cuddling said that, when he complained, 'they changed the whole ruling and they said they didn't want anybody to cuddle the children'.

The report concludes that recruiting more men would be good for children and reflects parents' wishes for male role models. The Government will promise this week to treble the number of male professional carers over the next year.

'Lots of men look after their own children, and so there's no reason why they shouldn't be paid to look after other people's,' said Alan Johnson, the Employment Minister, who will address a conference on the issue on Tuesday.

Recent research by the Equal Opportunities Commission showed that fathers now do about one in three hours of the childcare undertaken by parents. Even the Prime Minister, Tony Blair, has claimed he got up in the night when his children were small while his wife slept on.

A Mori survey for the charity Daycare Trust, which is also to be published tomorrow, showed that 84 per cent of parents would let a man look after their child, while seven in 10 wanted more male carers. Male nannies are becoming increasingly popular, particularly with single mothers who want male role models for their children.

It also found that 27 per cent of men would consider working in a nursery or out-of-school club, rising to 38 per cent of men who were fathers themselves.

'We are seeing some kind of beginning of a cultural shift,' said Stephen Burke, director of the Daycare Trust. 'Now what we need to do is support men who want to go into this career.'

However, 57 per cent of those asked identified fears of paedophiles targeting children as the main barrier to male child carers - even though only one man has ever been convicted of sexual abuse in a British nursery.

Burke said fears could be tackled by proper vetting of nursery staff, since, when parents trusted the management, they were inclined to

believe their children would be safe around the staff.

-Reprinted from The Guardian [UK]

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