

3.1.1 Questions for reflexion for the ECEC team around issues of ‘male ECEC workers’, ‘corporeality’, ‘gender images’ and ‘generalised suspicions of men’

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Introduction

Experience reports by ECEC centre staff as well as studies on the topic of ‘Male ECEC Workers’ (see, among others, Aigner and Rohrmann 2012; Cameron, Moss and Owen 1999; Cremers, Krabel and Calmbach 2010) underline the degree to which the generalised suspicions of male professionals impact the ECEC centre as a field of work:

Parents, provider programme directors, ECEC centre administrators, female ECEC workers and sometimes even male ECEC workers themselves repeatedly (mentally) associate male teachers and trainees with child sex abuse. Even if this mental association does not affect the widespread desire for male ECEC workers among parents and ECEC professionals, (latent) suspicions do affect the work in ECEC centres: ‘And I had great difficulty in the beginning even allowing myself to get close to the children [...] And there was something in me, where I consciously worried that somebody might take it the wrong way’. Male ECEC trainee, 21 years old¹

This generalised suspicion can lead to insecurities among (young) men working in ECEC centres, or already during their training and studies. Thus many male ECEC workers and students develop individual strategies for dealing with the (often quite subtle) suspicions in the ECEC centre. For example, many make sure not to leave the door closed when they change children’s nappies or sit them on their laps, not to hold them too long when they are comforting them or not to accompany them to the toilet. Not just male teachers but also parents, ECEC centre administrators and female ECEC workers have different ways of handling the general suspicions of men. This is expressed in various ways. For instance, some parents do not want a male ECEC worker to change their child, or administrators or female team colleagues do not (want to) allow male staff or trainees to perform certain tasks that involve touching children’s bodies, out of a diffuse feeling of insecurity.

A few female ECEC centre administrators and teachers are fundamentally opposed to hiring male team members.

The generalised suspicion of men working in ECEC centres thus cannot be ignored and demands that provider programme directors, ECEC centre administrators and teachers deal with it on the levels of organisational and personnel development as well as pedagogical practice and arrive at their own stances and ways of handling the matter. If they fail to do so, male staff may not be able to do their work with the necessary professionalism and will be restricted in their agency.

Physical relationships and care activities involving body contact are obvious components of pedagogical work with small children. Excluding male workers in ECEC centres from

activities that involve touching children's bodies is thus a problematic measure in regard to their relationships with the children and their pedagogical professionalism more generally. Suspicions and insecurities also place a burden on cooperation in mixed-gender teams and ensure the perpetuation of gender-stereotypical divisions of labour in the workplace: In this case, female workers are responsible for comforting and male workers for imposing sanctions on difficult boys. Moreover, a generalised suspicion of male workers and the attendant gender-stereotypical division of labour in ECEC leads to male workers feeling insecure or uncomfortable and thus more liable to quit the field of ECEC or not be hired in the first place.

To that extent, it proves essential for those who work in ECEC centres to confront the generalised suspicions of men and the associated gender stereotypes on the one hand, and to find a clear and professional approach to corporeality, sexuality, closeness and boundaries on the other.

What is the situation in the individual ECEC centre, though? Do the male workers and trainees (actually) feel insecure? Do female staff members treat their male colleagues with mistrust or are they generally open to male ECEC workers? What gender images do male and female professionals have in their minds, and how do they affect everyday life in the ECEC centre? Does the facility have clear guidelines for dealing professionally with corporeality as well as closeness and distance? Do these guidelines apply to all professional staff and are they conveyed clearly to parents? The following questions for reflexion are meant to help you find the answers to these and other questions and to discover whether there is any need for action.

Questions for reflexion

What are the team's experiences with generalised suspicions of male ECEC workers ? Does this influence pedagogical practice?

As a rule, an initial team analysis and discussions of experiences of and ways of handling (presumed) suspicions lead to ECEC workers bringing in examples of how they deal with this issue individually or which strategies they have found to be successful. Thus one ECEC worker noted that he had found it helpful in his job interview when interviewers asked him about his fears of possible accusations. Such best practice examples should be worked out as part of team reflexions.

- >> How do male and female ECEC workers deal with physical closeness to children? Do male and female teachers perhaps deal with it differently? If so, why is this?
- >> Are there certain intimate tasks performed exclusively by female ECEC workers? If so, which ones are they and why is this?

- >> Have ECEC workers ever felt that parents were accusing them of encroaching, transgressive or violent conduct? If so, how did they react?
- >> Have male ECEC workers had the experience during training or their work in ECEC centres of parents or female colleagues forbidding them or wanting to forbid them from performing certain intimate tasks? If so, in what situations did this occur and how did they react?
- >> Have ECEC centre administrators and female ECEC workers ever experienced parents forbidding or wanting to forbid their male colleagues from performing certain intimate tasks? If so, in what situations did this occur and how did they react?
- >> Are there clear provisions for how ECEC centre administrators and workers should respond when parents (or teachers) want to forbid male workers from performing certain intimate tasks? If so, what are these provisions? If not, what might such rules of speech and conduct look like?
- >> Can parents insist under certain circumstances that their children not be cared for or changed or something else by male ECEC workers? Must parents justify their attitude or is this stance generally accepted? Does the ECEC centre have clear rules regarding whether and if so under which circumstances parents have a say about whether their child can be changed etc. by a male ECEC worker? If so, do all ECEC workers agree with this?

Does the organisational and personnel development of the ECEC centre provider or ECEC centre help to counteract sweeping suspicions of male ECEC workers?

The more ECEC provider programme directors and ECEC centre administrators make it publicly clear that male professionals are a self-evident part of the ECEC centre team, perform the same tasks as female workers and that their facilities have concepts in place to protect children, the greater is the chance that parents will perceive male workers as (perfectly normal) ECEC teachers and not as potential abusers. What is the situation in the ECEC centre? Are male ECEC workers still viewed as exotic creatures or are they seen primarily as professionals?

- >> Is the employment of male professionals or of a heterogeneous team formulated as a concrete objective in the provider's or ECEC centre's concept?
- >> Do provider programme directors and ECEC centre administrators indicate that male workers are welcome, for instance in public relations materials (flyers, websites, etc.) or in discussions with parents?
- >> Do ECEC centre administrators communicate to parents and the whole team that male and female workers are responsible as a matter of principle for the same tasks?

- >> Does the ECEC centre provider have a contact point for female and male workers who feel discriminated against on the basis of gender (including generalised suspicions), ethnic origin, religion or belief system, disability or sexual identity? If so, is it made clear that this contact point is responsible for men and women equally?
- >> Do the ECEC centre's self-presentations and publicity materials (flyers, websites, photo documentation) also show male ECEC workers performing intimate tasks (e.g., changing nappies)?
- >> Does the ECEC centre have a child protection concept? If so, which elements / building blocks does it include? Does it encompass a sex education concept, for example, or an active voice for children?
- >> Are parents informed about the various building blocks of the protection concept? Does this reassure parents that the ECEC centre is a safer place for their children?

What gender images exist among female and male ECEC workers?

'Well, you still pipe up when the men from our class say: Yes, I had the intention from the beginning and I'm going to work in a crèche. Myself, since I'm completely familiar with the subject, I always think: Yeah, okay, I've got to get used to the idea that you're going to work in a crèche. Although of course I'm absolutely sure he'll manage fine.' Female ECEC student, 22 years oldⁱⁱ

Generalised suspicions of male ECEC workers are based, among other things, on stereotypical notions of gender according to which maleness and nurturing are apparently mutually exclusive. Those who have difficulty seeing men as competent and nurturing caregivers for small children soon become mistrustful of men who work with them. What is the situation on the team like? Which images of gender or masculinity do individual ECEC workers have? Do these images affect pedagogical practice?

- >> Which qualities and character traits do you especially like in men and women, respectively?
- >> Are there behaviours in men and women that you do not like?
- >> Are there men in your family or circle of friends who bear the main responsibility for childrearing, care for family members or do the housework? What feelings and images does this evoke in you?
- >> Can you understand why people sometimes make fun of or even feel animosity towards men who are nurturing? Have you witnessed this personally? If so, how did you respond?

- >> What gender stereotypes are you aware of (and familiar with)?
- >> Are there stereotypical ideas about men and women that you (privately) agree with?
- >> Do you believe that women and men are equally competent at pedagogical work with children under the age of three?
- >> Do male and female ECEC workers bring the same abilities to pedagogical work with children or do they have different skills?

Does the ECEC centre have clear guidelines for dealing professionally with closeness and distance?

‘Well, when I accepted this job I always had this fear. I come from a different culture. We love kids. We hug them and cuddle with them. [...] But here? Sometimes I watch TV. Then ... a male ECEC worker did something, I mean with kids and that really bothered me. And then sometimes I ... I talk with my wife all week. I’m so afraid. The kids come to you, kiss you and so on. And you say, keep your distance. But they need that affection.’

Male ECEC workerⁱⁱⁱ

In order to meet (potential) accusations head on and in advance, it can make sense to explain clearly to parents that physical contact is fundamental and indispensable to interactions between children and adults in ECEC centres. This begins with intimate caring activities such as changing nappies, bathing, dressing and undressing as well as going to the toilet. But it also includes the expression of feelings like affection and responding to emotional needs with cuddling, caressing, calming, comforting or rocking children to sleep.

Furthermore, a preoccupation with ‘generalised suspicions’ shows that particularly male (but not only) ECEC workers feel insecure about what degree of physical contact and closeness is appropriate in pedagogical work with children, especially small children. In everyday encounters with children, however, it is not always easy to distinguish what degree of physical closeness is (still) desirable for all participants. This makes it all the more important for the team to keep communicating about how they handle physical closeness and its limits. Potential (physical) boundary violations need to be perceived and reflected upon independent of the gender of those involved. This exchange should, however, occur in the mutual recognition that male and female ECEC workers are also allowed to make mistakes. (One-time) boundary violations can happen, but should be analysed professionally and respectfully (see Fobian and Okeke 2013). ECEC teams could reflect on the topics of ‘corporeality’ and ‘bodily boundaries’ by developing guidelines for

dealing with them in relation to body contact and physical closeness. This could also be done together with parents at a parents' evening. The following questions are suitable entry points for such reflexions:

- >> Does the ECEC centre have rules or provisions for staff that make it clear what kind of touching is allowed and what is off-limits?
- >> What kind of touching is appropriate between children and ECEC staff and what is not? Where are the grey areas?
- >> How can one distinguish pleasant from unpleasant closeness? How do children express it when they find (physical) closeness unpleasant?
- >> In what situations do children overstep the (physical) boundaries of other children?
- >> Does the ECEC centre have rules or provisions for children that make it clear what kind of touching is allowed and what is off-limits?
- >> In what situations have I or my colleagues overstepped children's or colleagues' (physical) boundaries? How did the children or the staff members react in these cases? What reactions or behaviours proved effective or useful?
- >> How do I personally deal with boundaries and boundary violations?

Closing remarks

Dear ECEC centre administrators and ECEC centre workers,

We at the Coordination Centre 'Men in ECEC' hope that the questions for reflexion offered here have been able to promote communication within your team. Since we are very interested to learn whether our discussion guide is useful in practice, we would be pleased to hear about your experiences with it.

Please send your experiences, suggestions or criticisms by email to:

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Literature:

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ⁱ Interview conducted as part of the study 'Männliche Fachkräfte in Kindertagesstätten', Cremers, Krabel and Calmbach (2010).

ⁱⁱ Interview conducted as part of the study 'Männliche Fachkräfte in Kindertagesstätten', Cremers, Krabel and Calmbach (2010).

ⁱⁱⁱ Interview conducted as part of the study 'Männliche Fachkräfte in Kindertagesstätten', Cremers, Krabel and Calmbach (2010).