

# CHILDRENSWORK

Ideas, resources and guidance for Christian children's leaders

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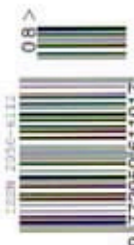
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# A FEW GOOD MEN.

Where are the men in children's ministry?

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## Have you noticed it too?

A glance at almost any children's ministry shows the involvement of a wealth of female leaders and volunteers, but few – if any – men. Where has this ministry trend stemmed from? How can we turn the tide?

**TWO EXPERIENCED CHILDREN'S WORKERS AND TRAINERS, IAN WHITE AND CAROLYN EDWARDS, TALK TO EDITOR SAM DONOGHUE**



**Carolyn Edwards** is an experienced children's evangelist and resource writer. She is deputy director of Oxford CYM → [oxfordcym.com](http://oxfordcym.com) and

author of *Slugs and Snails and Puppy Dogs' Tails - helping boys connect with God* (IVP, 2011)



**Ian White** lectures on children's and youth work at Cliff College → [cliffcollege.ac.uk](http://cliffcollege.ac.uk). He also heads up Micah 68 → [micah6-8.org.uk](http://micah6-8.org.uk), a

ministry across the Middle East

**SAM DONOGHUE:** *Working in children's ministry, I can't help but notice that I am very much in the minority as a man. What do you think might be behind this ministry trend?*

**IAN WHITE:** In my work I see that at best somewhere near 20% and at worst 10% of those working with children are men. Official statistics back this up: a recent survey conducted in the diocese of Southwell and Nottingham by children's ministry adviser Nick Harding showed that only 23% of people working with children in the church were men, and of those working regularly with under 5s, only 6% were male.

The problem I identify is the notion that children's ministry is a role best suited to women. And I've got a question about calling. It seems reasonable to assume that God is calling men into certain roles within the Church, but is there an assumption that God isn't calling men into children's work? I want to challenge how men respond to their calling, and focus on the things that stop them responding to that call.

**CAROLYN EDWARDS:** Having researched how we encourage boys to engage with and express their spirituality and faith, I've been struck by the important role of men – not just in faith development, but also in how boys construct their identity. For me the concern is the lack of men as role models in church.

I believe there is a great fear among men of having anything to do with children because of the perception of men who want to work with children and all the recent allegations there have been against men. But if the Church is called to be counter-cultural then we need to work out how to challenge these perceptions in a way that protects both our children, and our men.

**SD:** *How important is it that children have both male and female role models?*

**IW:** Carolyn's research has revealed that children develop better around men and women. That's not just a parenting issue, but wherever they are: whether in clubs, formal or informal education. Primary schools face the same problem: the teachers are mainly women and the occasional man teaches sports. It's not the most balanced diet for either girls or

boys, but especially for boys. What do they see as their model? It assumes that women are best to look after children and that says something about nurturing.

**SD:** *Are women better at nurturing children than men?*

**IW:** Interestingly, this issue doesn't exist in other parts of the world. Nurturing is not just left to one part of the family.

**CE:** There is an assumption that women are better at nurturing. There is some evidence that women are slightly better at empathising than men, but that men are good at sorting things out. But the statistics are so minimal in the research that has been done, that I think the differences are more cultural. Because we assume that women are better at nurturing, they become better at nurturing, and because we assume that men aren't nurturers they don't fight for the right to do that, or they lose the ability. It is really important that we challenge this stereotype because if we truly understand the father heart of God, then we can see that the ideal male has a loving, nurturing, caring heart for children.

**SD:** *Ian – in the past I've heard you talk about the 'feminisation of the curriculum'. What do you mean by this?*

**IW:** It seems to me that some of the activities that we do are far easier for women to deliver than men. So are we using the gifts and talents of men in the best way in our activities with children?

**CE:** A lot of our activities are shaped by the lack of space for children's ministry; activities are designed to keeping children quiet and out of the way. What's going to take the least amount of money, energy and preparation? So we end up with activities like 'colouring in', which have a feminine side to them. We also do a lot of 'sitting around and chatting' and while this is really good, we need to think about ways that we can use more masculine ways of engaging with Scripture, and with children, and with faith development, that will help us to give a much more rounded approach to children. Certainly the evidence from the research that I did was that there is no real gender bias in the way that children

There is no real gender bias in the way that children want to engage with their faith and build their relationship with God, but there is a gender bias to the activities that we give them



want to engage with their faith and build their relationship with God, but there is a gender bias to the activities that we give them. That means that we limit the opportunities that they have.

**IW:** I agree. The 'arts and crafts' approach might switch some men on, but the more active, team or sports based things are often the way to get the majority of men involved in children's work. I think we do have a problem with risk aversion that means that we avoid things that could be educational in terms of faith forming. So what does that mean for a man, where some of their own skills are not able to be used?

**SD:** *Let's return to the matter of how society sees men at the moment. I think of the Savile case. Has this compounded the problem of men around children?*

**CE:** Yes. It is a huge issue and there are similar stories appearing in the press all the time. I think this is theft: the right relationships with men and women are being stolen from our children. Yes, there are people who have perpetrated some dreadful things and we have to stop that, but equally the majority of men and women have no bad thoughts about children. They want to have a good relationship with them, and if we limit that we are limiting children's opportunity to relate to people of both genders. We do have to be careful; we do have to ensure that we have stringent child protection policies; that we take up references, and are very clear on our procedures. We need to find ways of running children's work that doesn't put the child or the adult at risk. Perhaps we need to be putting on more family events, where all ages and all genders are together, rather than putting a lone man in a vulnerable situation.

**IW:** I want to express the feelings that I have about this as a bloke, echoed by other men that I have chatted to. It's the sense that we are a little bit isolated. There's a kind of suspicion if men want to be around children, leading to the question: 'Why would you want to do that as a man?' That is hard sometimes to articulate or to be understood on, and I think that's why men start to back off. Why put yourself at that risk?

**SD:** *What can the Church do about this?*

**IW:** There are things that the church can do, but actually also things that women can do. One of these is encouragement. Men need to be encouraged that it is ok. They need to hear: 'We are happy that you are around our kids', 'We feel

safe' and also, 'We will protect you'. Men should receive the same scrutiny as any other worker, through the safeguarding and policies that Carolyn mentioned. It is imperative that we know that women of the church will protect us and make sure that we are not put in a vulnerable place, because women and families value us being around their kids.

**CE:** Women also need to avoid being over-protective about something they are involved in. I have seen situations where - because it is perhaps the key part of the life of the Church that women have been allowed to be part of - they actually want to keep men out. They see men as threatening and perhaps 'taking over'.

We need to take very seriously the remit that God has given many men to work with children - and respect, support and salute that rather than suggest that because you are male you don't have the ability to change a nappy, or lead a game, or even a craft activity for that matter.

**SD:** *Let's talk about this sense of children's ministry as the 'Cinderella' ministry: the ministry that is beneath adult ministry and under youth ministry. Does it therefore leave men feeling: why be part of that? It doesn't give them the credence that they want in the life of the Church or even the sense of leadership that they feel that they can offer.*

**CE:** We have a bit of a chicken and egg situation here, because the status of children's ministry is still as the poor cousin to youth ministry, which is the poor cousin to adult ministry. I believe that when the Church realises that children's ministry is one of the most important things that we do, and we raise its status, then we will see more men get involved. When we see more men involved, then the status of the ministry will rise.

When men do get involved in ministry to children they very quickly see how important it is, but that obviously doesn't attract them. The Church needs to take very seriously the call to children's ministry and the damage that has been done to the future of the Church by its failing to do so, as well as the obvious loss in the present situation.

**IW:** I wonder what children would say if we asked them what they thought about having men around? What would they say that men bring to their lives or their understanding of God? I am convinced that our children would see the involvement of men in their groups as a positive.

## QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

- How could you better encourage men into your children's ministry?
- What do men uniquely bring to children's ministry? Our answers may help us understand what we're missing.
- To what extent has your curriculum been feminised? Are there fresh ways that you could deliver your programmes, events or work with children and families that could better engage men?

## SHARE YOUR VIEWS

The authors of this feature are conducting a survey on men in children's ministry in conjunction with *Childrenswork* magazine, and would like to hear your views on the subject. Find the survey at → [childrenswork.co.uk](http://childrenswork.co.uk) and complete it before 31 August 2013 for a chance to win a box of the latest children's ministry resources.

## You said...

We asked the twitterati why so few men are involved in children's ministry...



The red tape is daunting, and litigation society makes it frightening, in light of terrible allegations  
[@lukegreen71](#)



Does our children's work attract men? Many men love football - is that part of our ministries?  
[@sjmawhinney](#)



Stereotypically it's 'women's work' and (hence?) comes with low-pay. Remember that committed men are a minority in church anyway  
[@tomdg13](#)



Because we don't directly ask them to get involved enough in the first place? Also because of the lack of mature male role models who are experienced children's workers. And craft activities don't necessarily appeal to men  
[@kidsworker](#)



It's the reason why so many boys drop out of church. They see it as too feminine  
[@SimonFutcher](#)

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