

# A Manner of

# Speaking

by Bonnie Neugebauer

"Expect Male Involvement" reads the button Don Piburn gave to me at NAEYC. I felt honored that he knew I would be proud to stand behind this message. In a professional world where we know the power of expectations in shaping the development of young children, we may forget the power of expectations in building and training staff.

Many of the finest human beings I know happen to be men in early childhood — but there are so few of them. How strong and dedicated they must be to remain in a field where they are so undervalued, even unwelcome. There are many reasons (or are they excuses) offered as to why men do not choose early childhood as a career: low pay, poor benefits, limited opportunities for career advancement, vulnerability to accusations of abuse. But these are also issues for women, and yet women choose early childhood, both single women and women supporting families. If we are truly honest, we, as women who are directors, educators, teachers, parents continue to play a major role in keeping men away and perpetuating gender imbalance in our ratios. Just as women who are mothers sometimes hold tightly the ownership of parenting, women in early childhood have not always done what we can to welcome and support the participation of men.

Women have often sought power at the expense of men, rather than equal power and partnership with men. In our campaigns for a stronger society, a hopeful future, an empowered citizenship, we need to examine our own practices and beliefs, own up to our agendas, and take action for change. If we really believe that men play an important role in children's lives, that children need to be nurtured by men as well as by women — and we do know this — then it is time that we look at our programs and our classrooms and ask some uncomfortable questions.

## *Directors:*

Are there men in my program? If yes, how did I make this happen? What can I do to support the efforts and intentions of other programs to hire men? Do I give any priority to gender balance in staffing? Do I try to hire men? Do I make it possible for a man to choose my program? Directors tell us that using parent concern as a reason for gender imbalance is really an excuse. When these directors have expressed confidence in male staff and verbalized belief in the important role men play in children's lives, then parents, too, have supported men in the classroom. In other words, when directors expected parent support, they received it.

When I examine the policies and procedures for staff in my program, do I see different policies for men than for women? Can I justify creating different policies based on staff gender? Do these policies contribute to a disrespecting of men? Do I ask men to move furniture or lift heavy objects but don't ask other teachers to do similar work?

## *Teachers:*

Am I willing to welcome men into our community? Can I make a place for men both formally in the classroom and informally in the life and conversations of a classroom and program? Can I trust a man to do my job as well as I do it? Do I value the way men relate to children, and can I encourage this? Can I make enough room in our program so that we can build a community of men and a community of women and together a community of child care professionals, colleagues, friends?

## *Educators and Trainers:*

How does it feel to be a man in my classroom or training session? Are my expectations different for men than for women? What do I need to change about recruitment and about classroom procedures and atmosphere to support the participation of men? Can I contribute to building community among men in early childhood?

## *Parents:*

Do I value the role men play in nurturing the development of young children? Am I willing to trust a man to care for my child? If so, how can I encourage my child's program to recruit men as staff? If not, what do I need to do to enable me to trust men? What are the reasons for my fears? Can I overcome them? Who can I talk to about this?

We focus so fiercely on the importance of the early years in shaping who and how children will be as adults. But who will they be if they haven't experienced men as nurturers, men as role models, men as play partners?

It's time for us to open our minds, our hearts, and our doors and let the men in.