

## Men in Early Childhood Education

**The Green Room at Rainbow Riders daycare center** is literally a green room. With green walls and green floor tiles, it is a typical preschool classroom. The morning buzz is random and joyful. Kids are running around, twirling, playing with blocks and beads or reading in bean bags. At the writing table, Mr. Benjamin is on one knee helping Kate with a drawing when Ethan pushes into his leg and leans in for a cuddle. Mr. Benjamin continues to help Kate while Ethan reaches up and tugs Mr. Benjamin's ear. Mr. Benjamin is not Ethan's father, he is one of two preschool teachers in the Green Room, the other teacher is Miss Emma. With over 100 employees at two locations in Blacksburg, Virginia, Mr. Benjamin is one of only three male employees at Rainbow Riders. Without missing a beat, Mr. Benjamin snuggles Ethan into his lap and explains to Kate that the letter W is written with the strokes 'down up down up.'

When it comes to male professionals in early childhood education, Rainbow Riders is like any daycare you would find in your hometown. Their 3% male employee rate is on par with the [Bureau of Labor Statistics 2014 report](#) that found that only 2.7% of preschool and kindergarten teachers were men. Early childhood education is dominated by women, and their dominance will likely continue. In fact, despite efforts to educate, recruit and retain more women in Science, Technology, Engineering and Math (STEM) and the expansion of job opportunities for women in STEM, medicine, business, and the arts, the [Consortium for Policy Research in Education \(CPRE\) reports](#) that the teaching profession is MORE female dominated now than it was in the 80s. Despite the diversity of job opportunities now available to women, they continue to seek employment working with children while men don't. The CPRE reports that in the future, many preschools and elementary schools will have no male teachers at all. An extensive body of research has proven that children need men in their lives for healthy development. The earliest years are the most formative years, and teachers have a profound influence on a child's growth and development. What impact will the absence of men have on the teaching profession? And more importantly, what impact will the absence of male teachers have on the development of children?

**The most famous early childhood educator is a man, not a woman.** Fred Rogers, better known as Mister Rogers, launched the TV program *Mister Rogers Neighborhood* in 1968 and went on to broadcast 895 episodes. A winner of the Presidential Medal of Freedom, Mr. Rogers was famous for his respect for children and childhood. Men are stereotyped as rough and tumble male role models. Mister Rogers, however, was loved for his gentle demeanor, slow cadence, and direct communication style. Like a pro-athlete, Mr. Rogers was a famous male mentor who achieved worldwide recognition for his contributions to early childhood education, yet men do not pursue jobs in early childhood education. For the rare man who does choose to teach early childhood education, what compelled him to swim against the tide? I decided to go to Rainbow Riders and ask Mr. Benjamin.

**When I arrive at Rainbow Riders for my interview, I walk through a locked vestibule with windows on both internal walls.** On my left, a daycare administrator is working at her laptop. She looks up and smiles at me through the window. On my right, another administrator is on the phone and we make eye contact. Together, they 'man' the daycare's entrance, admitting only parents and staff who have a key. I scan my key, the door clicks open and I enter the daycare. The lights are off in the entire building,

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including the lobby. Mr. Benjamin scheduled our interview during the center's naptime. As he greets me, we pause to look at the wall of photos displaying the center's staff. He points out himself, Sean and Josh, the three men who make up the 3%.

"I never saw myself as a preschool teacher." Mr. Benjamin explains. Before joining Rainbow Riders, he was a manager at a local coffee shop, and saving up money to open his own independent coffee shop. But after the massacre at Virginia Tech on April 16, 2007, the coffee shop he managed failed and Mr. Benjamin found himself without a job and without his savings. A friend of his who was working at Rainbow Riders invited him to play guitar for the kids and after volunteering there he was hired as a substitute teacher. He noticed that he was much happier working with children than he was working with college students at the coffee shop. When Rainbow Riders opened a second location and his friend encouraged him to apply for a permanent teaching position, Mr. Benjamin thought the idea was "crazy." Unlike the bubbly and perky women who he worked with at the center, he was a shy, calm, introvert, and this did not match his idea of what a preschool teacher should be. But after interviewing against a candidate pool that included women with early childhood experience and graduate degrees in K-12 education, he got the job. It wasn't his minority status as a man that got him the job, but his answers to interview questions that showed his ability to "care, think about and respect children," Mr. Benjamin explained to me.

Mr. Benjamin tells me that it is clear that "parents LOVE having a male teacher in the classroom." Like Mister Rogers, the 3 male teachers are beloved by children and parents alike. I ask Mr. Benjamin why so few men enter early childhood education, despite the love and accolades they receive from the children, their families, and their employer. Mr. Benjamin cites two elements, a poor salary and social stigma.

**"Men are regarded as the breadwinner, and that is not possible on this salary,"** he says. The [BLS reported that in 2012](#), the median pay for preschool teachers was \$27,130 per year. And when it comes to social stigma, many people view early childhood education as women's work and/or simply babysitting, and men who do so are pejoratively called 'mannies.' While Mr. Benjamin tells me that he has never been personally insulted for his choice in careers, he chooses not to reveal his profession in some social situations. I ask him what people say when he does reveal his occupation and he replies that the most common response is "Oh! I could NEVER do that."

**One morning I visit the Green Room at Rainbow Riders and notice it is unusually quiet.** About half the preschoolers are gone, sent home for an outbreak of lice. Miss Emma, Mr. Benjamin's usual co-teacher is also at home with lice and there is a substitute teacher in her place. As I survey the calm, Mr. Benjamin enters the room sporting a brand new buzz cut. Unlike Miss Emma, he has shaved his head to stave off the easily contracted lice. It is in this one moment that I understand how exceptionally unusual this one male preschool teacher is. Love is in the hair. I rush out the door for fear of the lice spreading to me as Mr. Benjamin calls the preschoolers to the snack table.