

THE ROLE OF EDUCATORS IN SHAPING CARING MASCULINITY IN EARLY CHILDHOOD

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Abstract. The article presents teachers' attitudes towards the development of caring masculinity in preschool and their role in this process. It is revealed that by fostering caring masculinity in preschool, children begin to become aware of gender stereotypes and norms, acquire important skills such as emotional awareness, the ability to care for themselves and others, maintaining friendships, and empathy. By promoting caring as a norm of masculinity, teachers can help reduce the negative impact of traditional masculinity norms on boys' development and promote gender equality.

Keywords: masculinity, gender norms, stereotypes, expectations, sexuality, caring

INTRODUCTION

In recent years, the topic of caring masculinity has increasingly been addressed in European policy, academic studies and education. The first systematic survey of men and gender equality was carried out in all EU Member States in 2011-2012 (EIGE, 2012). For a long time, gender equality policies in Europe were focused on women, and men's role in this area indirectly reflected the general dominance of men in society. Gender equality was considered a concern for women and men – neutral. Gender mainstreaming and other policy measures helped to raise this topic. Men became visible and named in the context of gender equality: for example, in the conferences on men, masculinity and equality held during the Swedish (2001) and Finnish (2006) EU presidencies, or in EU programmes and strategies that encouraged men to take on care responsibilities and actively participate in gender equality policies. According to many authors (Hanlon, 2012; Scambor et al., 2014; Elliott, 2016), the focus is mainly on gender equality, a critical rethinking of traditional expectations for men and the already changing life practices of men. In order to change gender inequality, it is necessary to fundamentally change family and work policies, our patriarchal habits and discourses through various institutions that make up society: family, educational institutions, media, companies, etc. The results of research in countries participating in the international project ECARoM (2023) show that no country systematically implements gender equality-based pedagogy and attention to caring masculinity is rarely paid. Legal acts and policy documents discuss gender equality, diversity and caring issues to some extent, but they are often mentioned only in general terms, without providing any specific guidelines.

The Lithuanian research database contains few early childhood education studies and scientific articles that address the topic of gender and gender stereotypes. Although nurturing caring masculinity in preschool is an important factor in children's emotional and social development, teachers' attitudes and roles in this area may influence its effectiveness and implementation. Little is known about how teachers understand the concept of nurturing masculinity, what role they assign to nurturing caring masculinity in preschool, and how they integrate it into their educational practices.

EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION FROM A GENDER PERSPECTIVE

The concept of caring masculinity. Early childhood education in terms of gender is an important process aimed at shaping the concept of equal opportunities and equality from childhood, which has a significant impact on children's views of themselves and others and their opportunities in society. Successful education in this area can help reduce gender stereotypes, promote gender equality and create a more just and tolerant society in the future.

Caring masculinity is based on caring, not on fulfilling the role of breadwinner. According to Scambor et al. (2014), caring masculinity is increasingly implemented in men's everyday lives, but it is still an "alternative" masculinity that needs to be promoted by well-informed and knowledge-based policies.

Gracia, Garcia Roman (2015) emphasize that, having displaced the traditional family model, where the man was the breadwinner and focused on work, and the woman on care and family, today a new model prevails, where both family members work and take care of the family. However, this does not mean that the society in which these changes are taking place has achieved gender equality. Although women have increased their paid work hours and reduced their unpaid care time, and men have done the opposite, the differences still remain significant. The ageing of European society is leading to an increasing need for care, which is leading to a care crisis, which is manifested in the breakdown of the capacity to care. The social need is to achieve progress in equality, to reduce inequalities in the labour market and to increase and promote men's participation in care.

The concept of caring masculinity has emerged relatively recently. Nancy Fraser (1996) analysed the concept of care as a human norm, which responds to the concept of caring masculinity that obliges all areas. The concept of the

universal caregiver has been developed to highlight the value of care tasks and to encourage men to engage in these activities in order to achieve gender equality (Scambor et al. 2014).

Deevia Bhana et al. (2023) in her study of the gender distribution of caregiving roles found that hegemonic masculine ideals were based on the denial of childcare responsibilities, as the men in the study denied caregiving work, re-establishing gender hierarchies and placing the same responsibilities on women. She argues that calls for more men to work in European education and training institutions are sometimes based on the preservation of normative masculine ideals based on male role modeling. One aspect of the masculine role modeling discourse is the need for male teachers to restore boys' "failing" masculinity in school.

Gender norms, stereotypes, expectations. The term "gender" refers to the socially assigned roles, responsibilities, and opportunities associated with women and men, as well as the hidden power structures that regulate their relationships with each other. The study of gender norms, stereotypes, and expectations is closely related to the theoretical foundations of gender studies, sociology, psychology, and other disciplines. Within this theoretical background, several major theories can be distinguished:

- socialization theories – Emile Durkheim and Talcott Parsons examined the socialization processes in which people acquire gender roles and norms. They emphasize how society transmits gender roles from generation to generation;
- feminist theories – Simone de Beauvoir emphasized the importance of social equality for women and criticized traditional gender roles and stereotypes that encourage women to be only housewives and mothers, Judith Butler introduced the concept of "performance" equality, arguing that gender roles and identities are nothing more than social actions that an individual performs, taking into account expectations;
- cognitive psychology theories – Jean Piaget studied the cognitive processes by which children acquire adult gender norms and values. He explained how children learn about gender differences and how this influences their worldview;
- social constructionist theories – Peter Berger argues that social phenomena, such as gender roles, are socially constructed and depend on people's interpretations.

Despite recent progress, in most societies the rights and opportunities of women and men still differ significantly. Differences between men and women are related to opportunities for advancement at work, pay, and opportunities to participate in and influence decision-making processes. In reality, inequality between men and women is rooted in social norms and values throughout the world. According to Scambor, Holtermann (2023), gender norms and stereotypes are the basis of expectations that people have in their everyday lives related to gender, constraining and preventing the development of their interests and abilities. They develop the concept of caring masculinity as a counterpoint to dominant masculinity, because caregiving tasks require men to adopt values and caring traits that contradict dominant masculinity. They also emphasize that caring masculinities are a critical form of men's commitment to gender equality. These models of masculinity include values that stem from feminist care ethics, such as attention, interdependence, shared responsibility, support, and empathy.

The role and influence of teachers in incorporating caring as a norm of masculinity in preschool education. Teachers have an important and complex role in finding gender-sensitive educational strategies. When it comes to self-care, an important aspect includes learning empathy, recognizing and managing emotions, and understanding boundaries. Scambor, Holtermann (2023) argue that in order to change the hegemonic masculinity approach to relationships, it is necessary to develop self-care skills, promote self-reflection, teach not to be afraid to show joy, pain, and one's inner emotions. It is useful to promote activities that emphasize alternative masculinities and highlight the idea that boys are also sensitive to the environment and the world. Krišová and Polanková (2020) argue that gender-sensitive education is understood as education in which teachers are aware of gender inequality in society and the role of the educational process in gender socialization. This is an education in which teachers reflect on their own behavior patterns, teaching and communication methods with children, discuss the gender structure in society and create an environment in which everyone, regardless of their gender identity or gender expression, feels part of it. It is important that gender equality in the educational process is not only part of the educational content, but also an overarching principle that teachers follow when communicating with children. In preschool education institutions, children are encouraged to take care of themselves and others. Scambor and Holtermann (2022) argue that friendship is an important aspect of children's social, emotional and cognitive development. Children often prefer friendship with children of similar age, gender, ethnicity and social behavior. Friendships in young children are usually characterized by games. However, activities of caring and being close to each other also play an important role. Developmental psychologists Rose and Asher (2017) believe that at an early age, children play more with members of the same gender group and that children's friendships differ depending on gender.

Research focuses mainly on girls' friendships and their benefits, such as caring, helping, and conflict management. Boys' friendships are left aside and it is implicitly stated that they are less interested in friendships or are not good friends. However, boys' friendships can be just as valuable and stable as girls'. Active promotion and modeling of caring masculinity is important for both boys and girls, in order to ensure that friendships are not constrained by gender stereotypes. By establishing new friendships with members of the opposite sex, children learn to meet different needs and recognize them, expressing friendship through different activities and actions. It is important for the educator to support them in already familiar activities and show new ways of expressing friendship, caring, and emotions. The problem of violence and bullying, which manifests itself in aggression directed at another person, is increasingly common in preschool institutions. Legkauskas (2013) identifies one of the main reasons – lack of empathy. It is appropriate to start

developing empathy at an early age in order to reduce bullying in children in older age. According to Siegler et al. (2016), empathy describes the ability to empathize with another person's emotional state or situation. A prerequisite for the formation of this skill is the ability to recognize and understand other people's emotions. Already at an early age, children begin to worry about the negative emotions of other people, especially children. They do not necessarily suffer with others, but experience stress due to the suffering of others.

Empathy and emotions play a significant role in care work. They are also important when learning to understand the concept of caring masculinity. Understanding and empathizing with the situation of another strengthens the perception of the importance of caring masculinity and caring activities. Showing feelings, being empathetic, asking for help and providing it are gender-independent actions that everyone should cultivate.

By including caring as a masculine norm, teachers should be role models for children, demonstrating how men can be caring, responsible, and emotional and compassionate, because caring is not just a feminine trait, caring is an important, valuable quality for every human being. Teachers can create a safe and open environment in which children can freely express their feelings, regardless of their gender.

RESEARCH RESULTS

The aim of the study is to analyze teachers' attitudes towards the development of caring masculinity in preschool age and their role in this process.

To achieve the research objective, a quantitative research method was chosen, using the questionnaire survey methodology. This method allowed collecting systematic and structured information about the research object, thus providing the opportunity to analyze the obtained data quantitatively. The questionnaire survey was conducted in March-April 2024, and its target group was preschool teachers currently working in preschool education institutions. 113 respondents participated in the study: 109 of them were women and 4 were men, which reflects the prevailing number of women in this sector. Although the study sample is not representative of the opinions of all Lithuanian educators, it provides valuable insights into the main trends and problems characteristic of this professional group. The results obtained allow us to assess the general moods, attitudes and challenges faced by preschool teachers, thus contributing to a deeper analysis of this area and the formation of possible solutions. The results of the study revealed that 43 percent of the teachers who participated in the study have more than 10 years of work experience in the field of preschool education. This indicator allows us to state that the study was attended by educators who have accumulated significant practical experience and professional knowledge necessary for effective work with preschool children. It was also found that 35 percent of the respondents' work experience ranges from 1 to 5 years, which allows us to describe this group as educators who have already gained some experience, but are still developing their professional skills. A small part of the teachers who participated in the study, working in this field for less than one year, are most likely novice specialists who are just entering the field of preschool education.

When analyzing the work of educators with children of different ages, it was found that 21 percent of respondents work with children aged 3–4 years and 4–5 years. A significant proportion – 30 percent or 34 teachers – indicated that they work with children aged 5–6 years. Meanwhile, 27 percent of respondents work with mixed age groups, in which the age range of children is not strictly defined. These data reveal a great diversity of respondents' work experience and the age groups of children being educated, which provides a more complete picture of teachers' professional activities and the characteristics of their educational environment.

The results of the study reveal significant trends in teachers' experience with gender stereotypes in childhood, which may influence their attitudes and behavior in professional activities. Only one-fifth (20 percent) of respondents indicated that in childhood they were very often encouraged to choose certain behaviors, toys or clothes that correspond to their gender. This suggests that these teachers experienced a strong influence of gender stereotypes in shaping their understanding of gender roles. In addition, 35 percent of those surveyed said that they often encountered such encouragement in childhood, which suggests that almost half of the respondents experienced a strong influence of gender norms.

In contrast, 26 percent of the teachers participating in the study noted that these gender restrictions rarely occurred in their childhood. This suggests that this group was given more freedom to choose according to individual interests, with less restriction by traditional gender stereotypes. Even more interesting is the proportion of respondents who said that they were never encouraged to choose gender-specific behaviors, toys or clothing – this amounts to just over a fifth (21 percent) of all participants. These teachers may have grown up in an environment with fewer gender stereotypes and greater emphasis on individual self-expression (Figure 1).

These data reveal that teachers' childhood experiences with gender stereotypes vary. Some respondents grew up in environments where gender differences were strongly emphasized, while others experienced less or no pressure from gender stereotypes. This may have implications for their views on the formation of gender roles in educational institutions. Teachers who themselves encountered less stereotypical encouragement in childhood may be more inclined to apply inclusive, gender-stereotype-breaking educational practices. Meanwhile, those who experienced more stereotypical pressure may intuitively transmit these norms to their students. Thus, these results reveal not only individual experiences, but also possible links to pedagogical practice and the ways in which gender stereotypes are transmitted in educational environments.

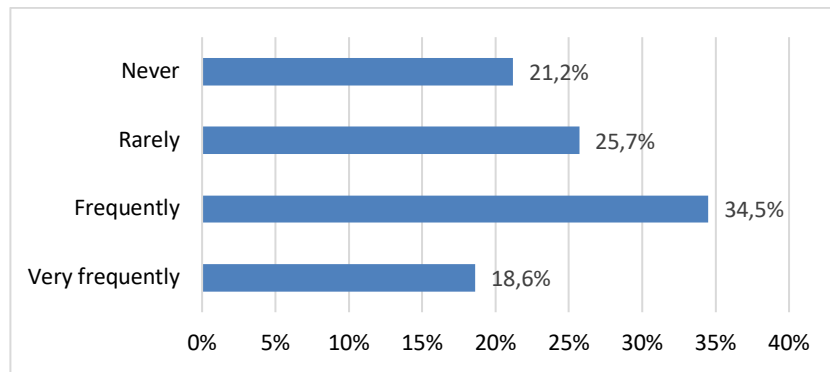


Figure 1. Promoting gender choices in childhood

The survey asked respondents whether they had encountered the term “caring masculinity”. The results showed that less than half (47%) of respondents said they had heard the term, while 53% admitted that they were not familiar with the term. These data suggest that the awareness of almost half of respondents about this concept reflects a growing interest and awareness of gender role diversity and flexibility. However, the fact that more than half of teachers have not heard the term highlights the gaps in this area. This may be due to limited information availability, lower personal or professional interest, or the influence of dominant gender stereotypes.

These results highlight the need to promote awareness of gender role flexibility by including this topic in curricula and teacher professional development activities. This is particularly relevant in the field of pre-school education, where ideas of gender equality and diversity can be integrated into educational processes from an early age. The concept of “caring masculinity” in question refers to men’s ability and willingness to care for their family and loved ones not only materially but also emotionally. It includes empathy, emotional availability, the ability to express love, understanding, and active participation in childrearing, family life, and community activities. This approach not only promotes gender equality, but also allows men to discover new ways of expressing themselves in various areas of life, contributing to the creation of an emotionally richer and healthier society.

Additionally, respondents were asked how they understood the concept of “caring masculinity”. Slightly less than half of respondents expressed agreement, neutrality or at least partial agreement with the statement that caring masculinity is the opposite of hegemonic masculinity. They acknowledged that this term encompasses the transformation of men’s roles from traditional breadwinner to active participation in family life and fatherhood. These responses indicate that most respondents tend to agree that masculinity can be understood as a dynamic relationship between traditional and modern values that emphasize emotional and social connection to family and community. This indicates that educators are becoming increasingly open to new approaches to gender roles, but also highlights the need to more actively disseminate these ideas in the educational context.

More than half of the respondents expressed a negative or partially negative attitude towards the statement that caring masculinity is associated with questioning traditional masculine values and norms that society applies to men’s behavior. This result indicates that some respondents are not inclined to associate caring masculinity with a critical attitude towards the norms defining masculinity or are inclined to view them sceptically. This may be due to the fact that traditional masculine values are still strongly entrenched in society, or to the view that caring does not necessarily have to be interpreted as a revision of these norms. However, this attitude also reflects changes taking place in society, which encourage the inclusion of more diverse and flexible norms in the concept of masculinity.

Most respondents (more than half) agreed or strongly agreed with the statement that caring masculinity includes understanding how to be a good father. This shows that caring is often associated with active participation in raising children and caring for their well-being. The largest part of respondents also expressed agreement with the statement that caring masculinity includes the ability to care for and support family members and loved ones. This view reveals that the role of men in the family is perceived not only through the prism of material provision, but also through the provision of emotional, social and psychological support. The ability to care for family members includes such aspects as emotional availability, readiness to provide assistance to loved ones in solving problems and overcoming difficulties. Caring is manifested by active participation in everyday family activities, including household chores and childcare. The ability to support family members emotionally, contribute to conflict resolution and create a harmonious family atmosphere is also important. These results indicate that caring masculinity is increasingly perceived as an integral, multifaceted form of masculinity that emphasizes not only responsibility for the well-being of the family, but also emotional connection with its members (Figure 2).

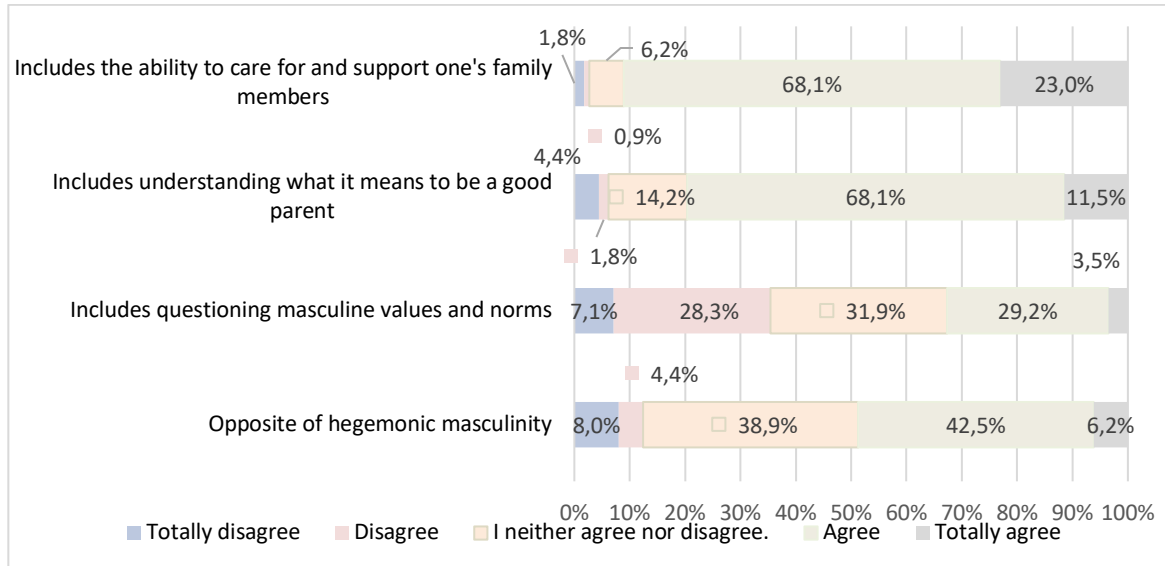


Figure 2. Perceptions of caring masculinity

Childcare can be seen as a first indicator of broader changes, gradually expanding forms of care and including them in various areas of life. As the study "Men's Role in Gender Equality" shows, changes in the division of care work between men and women are more likely to occur in the family environment than in the professional sphere. The level of male participation in the professional care sector has remained stable over the past decade, but low – in most European countries, men account for less than 15% of (paid) care workers (Scambor, Wojnicka and Bergmann, 2014).

Numerous studies confirm that quality early childhood education has long-term positive consequences. These consequences include better academic achievement, greater employment opportunities, as well as better social and emotional adjustment. Early childhood education, which is accessible and inclusive, is particularly important for promoting equality and reducing social exclusion and inequality. Given this context, the study asked whether preschools should be more actively involved in gender stereotype reduction programs (Figure 3). The results showed that the majority of respondents agreed with this idea: more than one in ten strongly agreed, and a significant proportion said they agreed.

However, there are also differences of opinion. Slightly less than half of the respondents (37%) chose a neutral position, stating that they do not have a clear opinion on the involvement of preschool institutions in gender stereotype reduction programs. This may indicate indecision or a lack of information about the effectiveness of such programs and their potential benefits. Meanwhile, a small part (8.8%) of the respondents expressed their disagreement with these initiatives, doubting their necessity, effectiveness or importance.

These results reveal that the question of why gender stereotype reduction programs are necessary and what methods could ensure their effective implementation requires more detailed scientific research. In-depth analysis could help formulate effective strategies and provide clear arguments that would strengthen support for these programs and the importance of their implementation. Such an approach could contribute to the promotion of gender equality and inclusion in the context of preschool education.

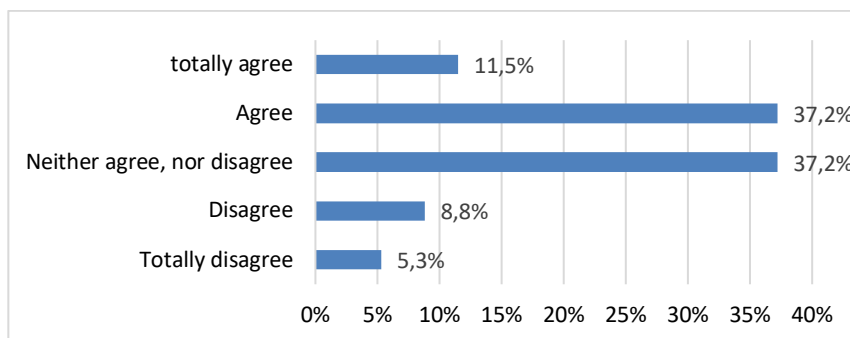


Figure 3. The role of preschool institutions in reducing gender stereotypes

The study aimed to identify three main aspects related to the development of caring masculinity in preschool age. Respondents were given the opportunity to choose several possible answers (Figure 4). More than half of the respondents indicated that it is extremely important to develop tolerance and understanding towards other people.

Early formation of tolerance and understanding provides children with essential social skills that help them communicate effectively with people from different cultures and backgrounds. Such qualities not only contribute to the creation of friendly and harmonious interpersonal relationships, but also reduce the risk of conflicts and misunderstandings in the future. This process is particularly important in order to promote social inclusion and develop a respectful attitude towards the differences of other people from early childhood.

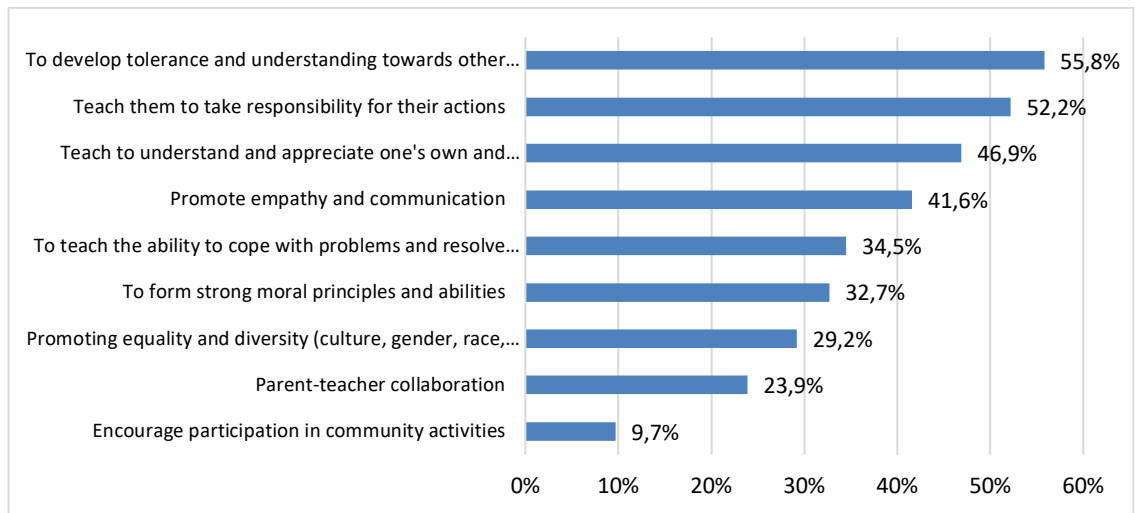


Figure 4. Aspects of caring masculinity

Tolerance, forbearance and mutual understanding are essential factors ensuring the well-being of both the individual and society. The results of the study showed that 52 percent of respondents agree with the statement that it is extremely important to develop the ability to take responsibility for one’s actions at preschool age. This indicator reflects the general perception that children must not only act, but also understand the consequences of their behavior. Developing responsibility promotes such qualities as honesty, self-esteem, the ability to solve problems and independence. When analyzing the respondents’ answers, it was noted that 42 percent of them emphasized the importance of developing empathy. Also, more than a third of respondents emphasized the need to teach children to constructively resolve conflicts and effectively cope with problems and challenges. Slightly less than half of those surveyed noted that it is necessary to form moral principles and skills. More than a quarter of the teachers participating in the study identified the promotion of equality and diversity (cultural, gender, racial differences) as an important element of education. The importance of parent-teacher cooperation was emphasized by 24 percent of respondents, while a small number of educators highlighted the need to encourage children to participate in community activities.

The study looked at specific strategies teachers use to reduce gender stereotypes in preschool education. The results of the study revealed that many educators choose gender-neutral strategies that promote cooperation and equality between boys and girls. More than half of the respondents use gender-neutral toys and books, create an environment suitable for all children, and encourage a variety of activities and interests that are not limited by gender stereotypes. 47 percent of respondents said that they always encourage children to participate in activities that are traditionally attributed to the other gender, but about 30 percent of educators never do this.

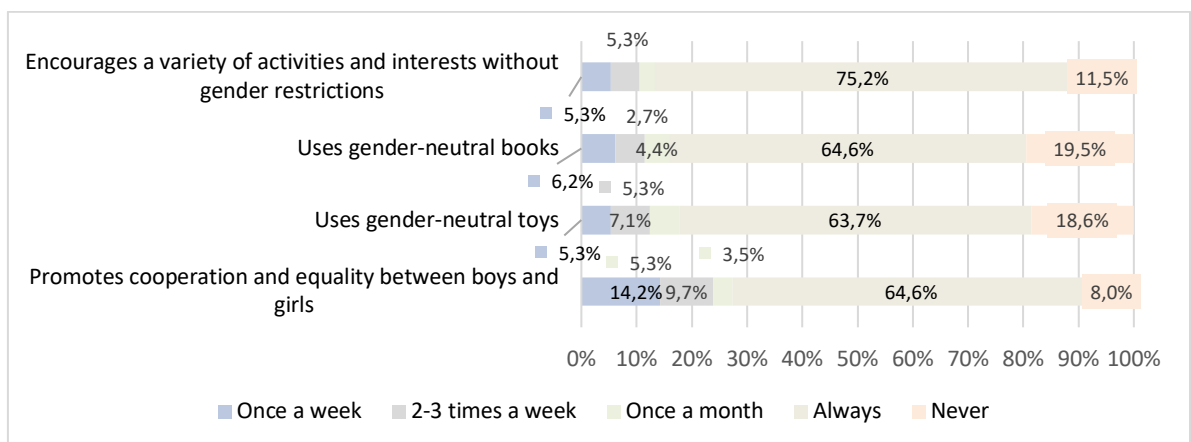


Figure 5. Strategies for reducing gender stereotypes

In addition, 58 percent of respondents indicated that they regularly include books, films and stories that promote the perception that any profession is achievable regardless of gender. About 54 percent of those surveyed regularly collaborate with parents to reduce gender stereotypes, but a third of educators (31 percent) do not undertake this activity. Parental involvement is particularly important because their role in raising children includes modeling gender equality, challenging rigid stereotypes, and promoting a diverse range of experiences and interests. This approach not only helps build respect and equality in relationships, but also contributes to the prevention of violence against women (Figure 5). During the study, educators were asked whether it is important to encourage children to play in groups other than one gender. The results showed that 24 percent of respondents said that it is very important, and 50 percent said it is important. Thus, the majority of respondents support this idea. Encouraging preschool children to play with friends of the opposite

sex is a significant factor in the development of social skills, as it helps children communicate and cooperate with different personalities, as well as reduce gender stereotypes, promote equality and understanding. The role of educators and parents in this area is extremely important, as the friendly and respectful behavior they encourage among children contributes to the creation of a positive social environment and reduces the likelihood of conflicts. However, 22 percent of respondents expressed doubt or neutrality on this issue, and only 4 percent indicated that it is completely unimportant.

The study also revealed that 59 percent of educators advocate that girls be offered to play with cars and boys with dolls, emphasizing that children should be given the freedom to choose toys according to their interests, regardless of their gender. Despite this, 41 percent of respondents said that they do not offer such activities.

Respondents were also asked about their methods of talking to children about care professions. 69 percent of educators said that they always use simple language that children understand, 22 percent said that they use such language less often (1-3 times a week or once a month), and 9 percent said that they never use simplified language. Many respondents noted that they include visual material, such as photos or illustrations depicting men and women working in care. This helps children understand and imagine these professions. In addition, educators often tell stories in which the main characters are male representatives of the caring professions, thus denying gender stereotypes about the distribution of professions and promoting awareness of the importance of caring.

Almost all respondents (98%) include interactive activities in the educational process that help children think actively, promote creativity and engagement. Only less than a tenth of educators indicated that they do not use such activities (Figure 6).

The results also revealed that the majority of educators organize creative activities during which children have the opportunity to express what they would like to be when they grow up. These activities are significant for the formation of children's personalities, as they help children to know their interests and aspirations and promote personal growth. Such involvement in the creative process not only develops children's self-expression, but also promotes their independence and confidence in their abilities.

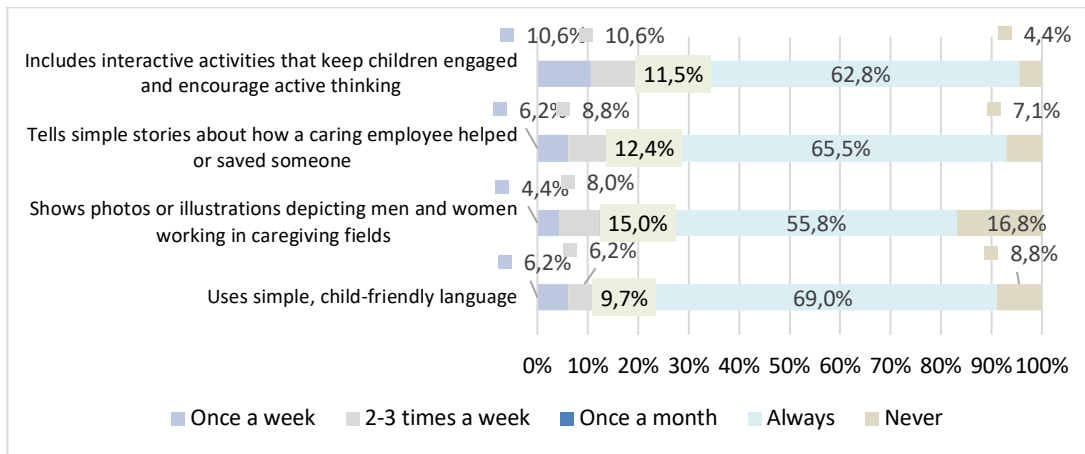


Figure 6. Educational tools used by teachers

The study participants were asked to indicate why it is important to develop caring masculinity skills in preschool age. They could choose to agree or disagree, maintain a neutral opinion, completely agree or completely disagree that developing caring masculinity skills at an early age increases children's self-confidence and confidence in others, children make new friends, reduce rude behavior among peers, better understand their own and others' emotions, and learn ways to resolve conflicts. From the answers provided, it can be assumed that the majority of respondents, about 85 percent, agree or completely agree that children's self-confidence increases, which can be associated with the opportunity to feel independent and confident in their abilities, trusting other people can help children communicate better and build relationships with others. More than half, 81 percent, of respondents, agree or completely agree that developing caring masculinity skills at an early age helps children integrate and make friends more easily, which indicates that these skills promote social interaction and integration into society. 84 percent of respondents agree or strongly agree that nurturing caring masculinity contributes to less aggressive or rude behavior among peers. The vast majority (78 percent) agree that it helps children understand how to resolve conflicts and problems, and even 91 percent of respondents agree or strongly agree that it helps children better understand their own and others' emotions.

The study sought to find out whether nurturing caring masculinity in preschool has a long-term impact on children's development and life. Analyzing the results obtained, it can be seen that slightly more than half, 53 percent, of all respondents who participated in the study agree that nurturing caring masculinity in preschool has a long-term impact on children's development and life, and 14 percent of teachers who participated in the study even completely agree with this conclusion. It is understandable that educators recognize the importance of this education and its long-term significance for children's lives. However, a significant proportion of respondents, 29 percent, who neither agree nor disagree with this statement, 4 percent, completely or strongly disagree with it. This shows that while many people agree with the importance of nurturing masculinity in preschool, there are still some doubts about this issue.

The question was asked what activities or methods teachers use to promote caring masculinity in preschool groups. Respondents could choose many possible options. The study shows that educators use various methods to promote caring masculinity in preschool groups. Less than a fifth of respondents say that they use group activities that promote cooperation and caring for others. Slightly more than a tenth, 12 percent, indicate that they use a method in which children participate in environmental care, promoting a sense of responsibility for the common space. Also, slightly more than a tenth of respondents chose reading fairy tales and discussions, during which the value of caring and empathy is emphasized. The practice of compliments and gratitude, which encourages expressing gratitude to each other, was chosen by slightly more than a tenth of the teachers participating in the study. In summary, it can be stated that these methods help children learn and understand the importance of caring and acquire skills that they can apply in their daily lives and relationships with other people.

The teachers who participated in the study were asked what comments or observations they would like to make about the development of caring masculinity in preschool. Respondents indicate the need for more methodological materials: *"maybe there should be methodological materials that would help organize such activities more easily, or recommendations for suitable fiction"*. Several respondents emphasize the importance of emotional education for boys, stating: *"it is very important to teach and educate that a boy is not only the stronger sex, for whom crying is a sign of weakness"*, *"the attitude that boys and girls have the same feelings"*, which shows that teachers see the need to develop empathy and emotional intelligence. Many teachers believe that the role of the family is extremely important, stating that *"children should see a good example in families"*, *"first of all, teachers themselves need to change their attitude towards different genders, then it will be easier and give up various phrases such as - you are a man, and men don't cry"*, *"it is important when talking to children not to single out what only men do, but children must first see caring masculinity in their own family"*. According to the respondents, teachers need special training: *"we need training for educators, more examples of activities"*, *"but first the mindset of the older generation of educators should be changed"*. It can be concluded that teachers feel the need for additional education and support in this area. Teachers support gender equality and freedom in games, stating that *"it is best when children can choose their own friends, without dividing them by gender"*, *"children should grow up and enjoy childhood, but they should not be bombarded with too much information"*. Some respondents who participated in the study believe that the development of caring masculinity should be included in educational programs. They state, *"in order for it to be included in the preschool education program"*, *"stereotypes still prevail in society that girls only play with dolls, boys with cars, so it is necessary to educate not only educators, but also the public on this topic"*. The respondents' answers show various opinions and approaches, because some believe that the existing measures are sufficient, *"I think it is enough that we adapt it and it is in your questionnaire"*, others see a greater need for education and information, *"this is new education in preschool age, so more information is needed"*. There are also opinions that the development of caring masculinity should not be artificially imposed, *"the development of caring masculinity in preschool age should not be artificially forced to ignore or deny the perception and assessment of traditional genders and roles"*. The study participants understand that this is a new and important topic in preschool education, but it also poses challenges. They emphasize that *"it is a new and very necessary topic"*, *"a very good choice of topic, especially relevant in modern society"*.

In conclusion, it can be stated that the development of caring masculinity in preschool is an important and relevant topic, a crucial step in creating an empathetic and equal society. This education promotes empathy, self-awareness and emotional intelligence, which are essential for healthy personality development. Boys who are taught caring are better able to understand and express their feelings, establish equal relationships with others and contribute to the creation of a less violent and more just society. The success of this education largely depends on the ability of teachers to integrate caring values into everyday educational activities and their personal attitude and understanding of gender equality. Teachers should not only teach, set an example, but also create an appropriate environment in which children can freely express their emotions and needs. The role of teachers in this process is very important, but they need appropriate training and tools to be able to effectively integrate these values into the educational process.

Successfully cultivating caring masculinity will help boys grow into more understanding, responsible, and empathetic people, capable of building positive and equal relationships with those around them.

CONCLUSIONS

- The concept of caring masculinity emphasizes that masculinity is not only traditionally understood as strength, independence or authority, but also includes empathy, emotional openness and responsibility for oneself and others, and these qualities are universal and necessary for the harmonious development of the personality and society. This concept invites us to abandon gender stereotypes and recognize that caring is an important dimension of masculinity, which can and should be developed from an early age. Traditional gender stereotypes that impose emotional coldness or masculine dominance through force on boys can be fundamentally changed through the conscious educational process of educators. Educators who inclusively teach that boys can be gentle, sensitive and caring help to develop healthy self-esteem and emotional maturity. They can do this through educational content and communication.

- Preschool children actively learn through observation and imitation, therefore the behavior of educators becomes the main tool in shaping children's attitudes towards emotions, empathy and caring. Educators who demonstrate these qualities in their daily work encourage boys to understand that caring is a valuable and gender-neutral quality. Caring for children, their emotions and physical well-being becomes a living example of how masculinity can include

tenderness and attentiveness. The results of educators' activities at this age have a long-term impact on boys' emotional and social lives. Preschool children are receptive to social habits and values, so the formation of caring masculinity at this stage helps to prevent the formation of toxic masculinity, promote harmonious relationships with peers and family members, and strengthen boys' ability to effectively resolve conflicts while maintaining respect and empathy.

• Educators' competencies and personal attitudes play a crucial role, as their approach to gender roles also shapes their educational practice. The development of caring masculinity requires educators to understand the modern concept of masculinity themselves, which includes empathy, cooperation and emotional openness. Workshops and training for educators focused on gender equality and emotional intelligence development can help them better fulfil this role. Educators, working together with parents, can reinforce the understanding that caring is a shared goal both within the family and in the educational setting.

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