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Bryan G. Nelson

Men Gather Every Year at Retreat to Learn and Play

IN THE MORNING, in a circle on the floor, the men recite a series of children’s rhymes. Later, in the afternoon, they go outside for a rough-and-tumble game of broomball. The action resembles other winter games men play in northern climates, yet when one of the men is knocked down, all the other players stop to ask, “Hey, are you okay?” If the man says yeah, the play continues.

For almost 20 years, a group of men who work with young children and families have been gathering to learn new nursery rhymes, play broomball, and talk about the importance of men in the lives of children and families. The Men in Child Care and Elementary Education Winter Retreat is held every February at a resort near a frozen lake in northern Minnesota. Men from all over the Midwest come together to talk about their lives and their work in early and elementary education.

The number of men varies each year from 12 to 30. There are bus drivers, professors, cooks, teachers, and administrators. They all share something in common: they love working with children. For instance, there’s Kenneth Warmsley, a father and grandfather and a bus driver for Parents in Community Action, the Head Start program serving the metropolitan area of Minneapolis. He says, “I love what I do. The kids just respond so well to me. They really need what men bring to the program.”

Another participant, Glen Palm, a professor at St. Cloud State University, says, “This retreat helps men reflect on why they chose to be in this field and to appreciate the good men who are committed to early education. It also provides a feeling of camaraderie and support for the choice that you have made. There are so many mixed messages about men being in early childhood that it is essential for men in the field to come together and talk honestly about the rewards and limitations of being a man in a female-dominated field. Affirmation from other men has a different meaning and value than the support that men typically receive from women in the field.”

How it started

Back in the early 1980s a group of men hosted a workshop at the Minnesota State AEYC conference. Twenty participants—men and women—discussed ideas for recruiting and retaining men in early care and education. One idea was a retreat just for men. Every winter since then (except for 2001 when a

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blizzard shut down the retreat site), men have been meeting and talking about children, families, and their work.

Because the men come from all over the Midwest, the retreat begins at 8 P.M. Friday. The entire evening is devoted to introductions and getting to know each other. Most men who work with children love to play, so the introductions involve name games and activities with breaks in between for an evening snack.

The next morning the group brainstorms topics for discussion. The list is usually long, covering a variety of subjects: developmentally appropriate discipline, homophobia, being a father and a teacher, being the only man in a center—even which is the better football team: the Minnesota Vikings or the Green Bay Packers. The topics are listed on a chalkboard and each man is given three votes to select the topic he wants to discuss. Votes are tallied. Any topic that doesn't make the top pick can always be discussed at a mealtimes or during breaks. The brainstorming process reveals who the men are and what they're interested in. The men become so engaged that, once a discussion begins, it is often difficult to stop.

Steve Weber, a special education teacher at the Mille Lacs Indian Reservation Head Start, has been attending the winter retreat for more than 15 years. He says, "These retreats are a break from our work life where we are a minority. It gives us a chance to talk about the challenges of working with children. And to find out what other men who work with kids think. We don't always agree on things, and the discussions can get pretty heated."

Stephen Onell, who works with fathers and families in a suburb of Minneapolis, says his favorite retreat time is "just hanging out with the guys. The socialization and conversation are all great ways to learn from each other and to have a great time doing it."

In the afternoon on Saturday, the men have "choice time": they can hike in the woods, go ice fishing, try cross-country skiing, play cards, or just talk over a cup of coffee. After supper, they gather for more talk and even continue the conversation in the swimming pool and sauna. Discussions often continue late into the night.

Sometimes one of the men will begin teaching some children songs or rhymes. That's when everyone ends up on the floor in a circle. Musical instruments are brought out and songs are exchanged.

Lowell Johnson, a first-grade teacher in Whitebear Lake, Minnesota, says, "Connecting with old friends and meeting new guys in the field helps keeps me in this profession. The intellectual, social, and emotional connections made at this retreat are inspiring and unparalleled in my professional networking." He pauses for a moment and adds, "And it's a great place to pick up some great ideas for my classroom!"

Wrapping it up

The last day is used to talk about recruiting and organizing men in the profession. During the morning session the men hear a report on the Minnesota State AEYC conference and generate ideas for future activities for recruitment and retention. In the past, men have generated ideas for brochures, bumper stickers, and handbooks. The retreat ends at noon Sunday to allow participants time to drive the long distances back home.

Keeping the connections

The men share addresses and telephone numbers so they can continue the conversations and friendships they've developed. Over the years, several men have consistently attended and developed strong friendships. The time together talking about the important work of caring for children helps keep men in the profession.

Bruce Sheppard, a special education teacher from the Salem, Oregon, area, and one of the original organizers of the retreat, says, "I love the discussions, the free time, the chance to renew old friendships and make new friends." He goes on to say, "The biggest reason to have the retreat was to bring together men in the profession, who in their normal course of work, would have little or no contact with other men. The incredible support of just being in the presence of so many other male early childhood education professionals was a big deal in and of itself. After almost 20 years, I am still friends with many of the guys I met at the retreat!"

How to Organize a Retreat for Men

A one-day event or a weekend retreat is an excellent opportunity to bring a group of men together to talk about early and elementary education. The main purpose is to give men who work with children an opportunity to meet each other and share their experiences. Because of the diversity of backgrounds, everyone who attends can contribute something to the weekend.

Locate and reserve a site

Find an affordable site for your retreat. Start small, with 5 to 25 men. Too large of a group becomes too difficult to manage. It's useful to have a site that is comfortable and provides meals. Set your fee high enough to collect funds for scholarships if some men need the financial help. And make certain that you have an early bird discount to help motivate participants to register early.

Recruit participants

The most effective method for organizing a retreat is to recruit on a one-to-one basis. Ask everyone whether they know of any men working with children. Don't limit your recruiting to just teachers. Invite drivers, professors, cooks, administrators, and aides. If you create a flyer, distribute and advertise in your local AEYC bulletin. Many programs will pay for the cost of attending. In some instances, by talking with a university or community college instructor, you can arrange continuing education credits.

Use the first evening for long introductions

Because this may be the first time some of the participants have met other men working with children, provide ample time for the men to greet and meet each other. Asking a few questions during introductions begins the process of men finding out about each other. For example, "How long have you been working in the profession?" and "What made you decide to work with young children?" An activity for learning each others names helps the men become more comfortable with each other. For example, try the animal name game. Use the first letter of your name and think of an animal—for example, Bryan Bear. Then as each man says his name, he names the previous men's names and animals: Ramone Rabbit,

Bryan Bear, etc. Continue around the circle until every man has had a chance to say all the others' names.

Brainstorm topics of discussion

Following an explanation by the leader, the men can divide into pairs to take turns thinking out loud about the different topics they want to discuss. Emphasize that there are no restrictions on topics, giving everyone the latitude to bring up difficult issues that often aren't talked about in mixed groups. It helps to have one man facilitate so that everyone has a chance to contribute. Sometimes the quietest fellow can offer the most insight. At one retreat, a cook, who was quiet for much of an evening, told us about how he helped raise his 8 children and 18 grandchildren.

Include lots of fun activities

It's especially important to provide games and activities. Most men who work with children do so, in part, because they love to play. By learning new activities and games they can use them in their classrooms. In addition, the activities can help participants relax and really enjoy themselves. At our retreats, we bring a bag full of foam balls to toss around the room at break time between discussions.

Present information and plan for the next event

A crucial goal of a retreat is developing ideas for recruiting new men and retaining those already in the profession. Reserve a time to generate action ideas for the group to pursue. It's useful to brainstorm without restrictions. Once a list is generated, select one or two actions. Remember, it takes agreements to participate and agreements to lead.

Setting up a next meeting date is essential. A closing in which everyone shares their highlights of the weekend gives everyone a chance to acknowledge the event and look forward to another. Certificates of attendance and lists with addresses, telephone numbers, and e-mail addresses help perpetuate professional and personal friendships. Finally, remember to reserve the retreat site for next year.