

# Working with children: be a man about it

By JOHN LEWIS

IT is not often three blokes could be considered a luxury.

But in today's early childhood education sector, people such as Russell Ballantyne, Lyle Champness and Justin Naish are a rare commodity, because only about one in every 100 early childhood teachers is a male.

What makes them even more extraordinary is they all work at Early Education on Stafford in Dunedin.

The trio are on a mission to change perceptions about men in early childhood education and show it is a rewarding and well-respected profession.

Mr Ballantyne, who has been in the job for 25 years, said the highly publicised court case of convicted Christchurch child-care worker Peter Ellis in the 1990s might have contributed to the decline in the number of men in the profession. A fear of fostering relationships with children developed as a result.

"But the Peter Ellis case is part of the past. Early childhood education for males, we believe, is a very positive environment and men should be coming back to the profession."

The trio called on colleges of education to encourage more males to train in early childhood education, and centres to actively recruit men into the sector.

Many parents were now looking for centres which offered male and female educators because they wanted their children to be surrounded by both as role models, he said.

"Men and women have different interests and experiences. So having males in centres enhances the curriculum. Women do a great job, but men do things differently and that adds to the learning.

"Overall, it's teaching kids how to be tolerant of gender differences, accepting that



Just do it . . . Early childhood educators (from left) Justin Naish, Lyle Champness and Russell Ballantyne swing Esha Bulmer (4) at Early Childhood on Stafford. The trio are encouraging men to join their profession.

PHOTO: STEPHEN JACQUIERY

people do things differently, and it teaches them how to interact with people of different gender."

Mr Naish said he had been in the profession for 10 years and had found having males at the centre also encouraged dads to come down to the centre, spend

time with their children and talk about issues affecting them as a parent.

"It continues their involvement. It's easy for dads to be pushed out of their role by mums or teachers.

"Many husbands get disempowered unintentionally."

Mr Champness said he was a former deep-sea fisherman and decided to retrain as an early childhood educator. He has been in the job for about a year and said the rewards were immeasurable.

"You can sit with a child and you can have a conversation

with them. I value moments in the day when you make an emotional connection and we learn something about each other. Watching kids gradually learn how to forge relationships with each other — it's all very rewarding. It's a buzz."

• Ellis was convicted in 1993

of sexually molesting children at the Christchurch Civic Creche where he worked. Ellis, who has always maintained his innocence and is fighting to clear his name, served two-thirds of a 10-year jail sentence.

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