



The Lone Male

Steve Maas is the only male employee at The Children's House in Traverse City. Here, he's pictured with his physical education class.

By Heather Johnson Durocher

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Watching a 4 year old as she learns to tie her shoe, a 5 year old realizing he can read a word — these are moments of pure joy for educator Steve Maas.

"There's always something new with small kids. They're so excited about everything," said Maas, who has taught kids for the past 16 years at the Children's House in Traverse City.

He's experienced many heart-warming moments such as these during his years as a preschool instructor for the independent Montessori school. Most recently, as the school's physical education teacher, he finds the experience of helping keep the school's 223 students active and healthy in daily gym classes equally as rewarding.

"I love what I do," said the 45-year-old Maas.

Still, as the school's lone male employee, Maas recognizes his passion isn't all that typical for his gender. Indeed, according to the National Education Association, the number of men teaching in elementary schools nationwide has declined steadily since 1981, when male teachers made up 18 percent of the staff. As of 2002, that number had halved to 9 percent. The NEA cites relatively low teacher salaries as a key factor in deterring men from entering the education field, along with the dated idea that teaching is "women's work."

Maas admits to having pondered his career choice.

"There have been times I have thought I should get out of this and have a different career. I've thought, 'Is this what men should be doing?'" he said. "But I love it. You have to do what you love to do, and I am lucky enough to have found that. It's just fun to go to work. I tell people, 'I get to go to work and play all day.'"

Having children see men in more nurturing roles is important, said Maas, who has a son in college as well as one who attends the Children's House.

"Over the years I have had a few little girls (in class) who have been apprehensive at the beginning, having this big man, and I tend to be louder than the female teachers they've had," he said. "It's always fun when I can overcome that. They can see: 'Hey a man can be this person whose lap I can go sit on and read a book.'"

As a gym teacher, Maas is excited about encouraging students to focus on personal best and fitness. The Children's House incorporates physical education for all students — kindergarten through sixth grade — into the curriculum every day. The staff there believes the school is the only elementary school in the region to do this.

"Our physical education program is integral to our 'Healthy Living' program," said Michele Shane, Head of School at The Children's House. "It's part of our commitment to helping parents raise well-rounded, exceptional children."

Maas said regular physical education not only bolsters a child's health and confidence, but also opens their mind.

"Scientists are telling us that the mind can actually be made stronger through physical education — that certain types of exercise actually enhance brain development in children," he said.

While the average time spent on physical education in schools is just two days for a total of 60 minutes per week, The Children's House meets the National Association for Sports and Physical Education's goal of 150 minutes each week for the entire school year.

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"I say all the time, 'I don't want you to do better than your friend. I want you to do better than you did yesterday, or last week.' I happened to love PE when I was in school, but a lot of people I know didn't have that experience. I tell my students it needs to be fun to exercise. If they're not having fun, I tell them to come find me and we need to figure out how to make this fun."

Contributing writer Heather Johnson Durocher is a Traverse City-based freelance writer specializing in health and psychology, relationship, parenting and retail/business topics. She's written for *Redbook*, *Woman's Day* and *Parents*, among other publications. Contact her at www.heatherdurocher.com.