

where's Dad?

Is your nursery father friendly? The Pre-School Learning Alliance's **Tim Kahn** suggests how you can benefit from encouraging male caregivers to attend your setting...

Forty years ago my mum considered my dad to be a good father because he could kick a ball. That wouldn't get him very far nowadays. Today, fathers are expected (and want) to get involved in the hands-on care of their children. Walk down the street and you'll see fathers pushing prams, going to the park and playing with their young children. In fact, evidence shows that fathers have increased the amount of time they spend with their children by 800% since the 1970s. They're no longer just kicking balls!

Because of the huge social and economic changes that have taken place over the last few decades, fathers are now spending much more time caring for their children in the home environment. Practitioners report that they see more of them dropping off (or collecting) their children, but they are still reluctant to get involved in educational settings, particularly settings with young children which are traditionally places full of female staff and mothers. Lots of fathers are happy to leave such involvement up to their children's mothers despite growing attempts over the last decade to involve them more in these services.

So why do anything? Well, evidence not only tells us that it is what parents do with their children at home that makes the key difference to their learning and development, but also that children do better in many areas of their lives when their fathers are involved with them – both when they are young

and as they grow older. The father-involvement argument runs as follows: services have supported mothers in their mothering; now services need to adapt so that they can become father-inclusive and similarly support fathers in their fathering. You may say, "We've tried to involve the fathers of our

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children, but they're just not interested", but many fathers will tell you that not only are they interested, they also want to know what more they can do to support their children's learning and development. Therefore services owe it to fathers to become places where fathers feel welcome and want to participate.

Father-involvement in practice

There's a really interesting project in Milton Keynes called 'Pushchairs in the Park'. Every month, a group of early years practitioners pick a different park in Milton Keynes and set up a 'toddler-friendly trail', which is followed by about 100 parents and their young children – and of the 50 parents and caregivers

who come to each session, about one-third of them are male.

When the project started, the local branch of the Pre-school Learning Alliance (which runs the project) did not target fathers, but they still came in large numbers. The Alliance has concluded that they come because they feel comfortable in the park and do not have to hurdle any barriers, such as entering the female space of an early years setting.

Here's another example: Peter Pan Pre-school is committed to involving fathers, so they ensure that all letters home are addressed 'Dear mothers and fathers', rather than 'Dear parents'. They recognise that fathers are more likely to be shown any letters if they are addressed

specifically to them, and that 'Dear parents' letters may be filtered by the majority of mothers who only show fathers the letters they think will be of particular interest to them. Peter Pan Pre-school also invites all fathers and mothers (by name) to introductory sessions for the parents of new children and makes a point of telling all parents how important fathers are to their children's development. About one-third of fathers attend these introductory sessions, and the pre-school continues to involve fathers whenever it can. Other initiatives at the pre-school include an annual fathers' week, during which fathers are invited to participate in a play session with the children, at a time when at least one other father will be there – so that they will not be the only male adult present.

Get crafty

It is also important to think about the activities you run in your sessions, particularly baby and toddler sessions, if you want to involve mothers and fathers. A 'traditional' craft session where you are making flowers and butterflies may not initially appeal to fathers, but rocket-making may – and it may be of particular interest to boys too. Messy play attracts some fathers, as do projects involving photography and sports and outdoor play. Use such male 'comfort zones' to engage fathers in the first instance. Once they are regularly involved, fathers are as interested in general play with children as mothers are. The challenge is to get them into the setting in the first place.

Father involvement is unlikely to happen overnight; there is a long tradition of services being especially for mothers and children, and it may take time to change this perception. Particularly if you run a baby and toddler group and you want to involve mothers and fathers with their young children, you may need address structural issues – for example, is there a gents





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toilet, and are the baby-changing facilities accessible to men (as well as women)?

Have you talked in your staff meetings about engaging fathers? There are many issues to address here:

- Reflect on your local community – are there many unemployed fathers living locally or fathers living apart from their children?
- Identify who your local fathers are and address them and their needs with any activities you plan in your setting.
- It can be a challenge, particularly for female practitioners, to interact in a relaxed and welcoming way with fathers. Talk with colleagues about how to increase the skills and confidence of your whole team in engaging with fathers.

A team effort

Of course, you may already have some fathers involved in your setting's activities. If so, then you could reflect on ways of involving the fathers you never see.

A 2008 report from the Department of Children, Schools and Families identified that successful father involvement took place where an individual was committed to making it happen and had the support of senior management. A fathers' champion, senior management support and the recognition from the whole team that father involvement is everybody's issue – and not just the fathers' champion's – seem to be necessary

ingredients to making father involvement work. In addition, the report also highlighted the training of practitioners and managers in engaging with fathers. I would argue that staff training and talks within staff teams are key to keeping father involvement on the agenda.

Over the last few years a growing number of settings have had particular success in offering 'specialist' activities for fathers, such as running clubs for fathers and young children, often on a weekend morning. They have been given names such as 'Men Behaving Dadly', 'Who let the Dads out?' and 'Saturdads'. While such father and children activities have been successful in moving forward the whole father engagement agenda, the current economic climate and the reduction in funding across the board for services is likely to mean that there will be less money for father engagement activities. Thus, a new focus may develop on the more cost-effective option of embedding father involvement into the everyday running of the early years setting – hence the focus in this article on the attitudes and actions common to both kind of initiatives,

Further reading

YOU CAN EXPLORE MANY OF THE ISSUES RAISED IN THIS ARTICLE BY VISITING THE FOLLOWING WEBSITES...

www.pre-school.org.uk/fathers – the Pre-school Learning Alliance webpage, dedicated to engaging with fathers. In particular take the Dad Challenge audit.

www.think-fathers.org – a website to help your setting think through the issues of father engagement. In particular, rate your service with the Dad Test.

recognising that this is the likely way forward.

It is important that staff are constantly aware of the fathers' agenda so as to ensure that parental involvement in practice means the involvement of both fathers and mothers, and does not by default return to focus on engagement with just mothers.

Tim Kahn is Inclusion Officer with the Pre-school Learning Alliance with particular responsibility for encouraging father involvement in Early Years services.

Be environmentally friendly

Some settings keen to engage with fathers have thought about whether the environment they provide is attractive to male caregivers. Ask fathers what they would like to see, and ask yourself the following questions:

- Are there pictures on the walls of men with young children – as well as women with young children?
- If you have a parents' area with, say, magazines, have you thought to have magazines of male interest as well as female interest? By doing such you are not acting stereotypically; you are just recognising the likely spectrum of gender interests.
- If you have a parents' notice board, have you considered dedicating a section of it just to fathers? Being public about your wish to involve fathers can help to make it a reality.

findoutmore

You can get hold of *Where's Dad? A guide for Early Years Practitioners on how to engage effectively with fathers*, which expands on the ideas contained in this article, from the Pre-school Learning Alliance shop <http://shop.pre-school.org.uk>

