

14 Working with fathers

The need to personalise services for fathers, male carers and other male relatives

All Sure Start Children's Centre services should be responsive to supporting fathers in their role as a parent and in their relationship with their partner or ex-partner, and more generally to promote the role of fathering. Managers need to make clear to all staff that this is essential for children's welfare and a core aspect of all their jobs – and offer support and training to help staff fulfil this responsibility.

Fathers matter to children's development; father-child relationships – be they positive, negative or lacking – have profound and wide ranging impacts on children that last a lifetime; particularly for children from the most disadvantaged backgrounds. Research shows that where fathers have early involvement in a child's life:

- ▶ there is a positive relationship to later educational achievement;
- ▶ there is an association with good parent-child relationship in adolescence; and
- ▶ children in separated families are more protected from mental health problems.

It can be a challenge to involve fathers and other males in children's centre services; fathers are not accustomed to using many of the services available; may be unaware of them or think they are not for them; and may lack confidence in coming forward – this is especially true of groups of fathers who are vulnerable and excluded such as young, minority ethnic and non-resident fathers. Barriers to fathers' involvement can include:

- ▶ services that are insensitive to fathers' needs, that do not adequately assess fathers or seek to strengthen father-child relationships;
- ▶ an overtly female focus and culture amongst staff and service users, and a lack of confidence to explain to female service users why it is important to engage with fathers; and
- ▶ underestimation of the significance of a father's involvement if he is not visible to the service, or not living with the child.

Appropriate services for fathers

Gathering information

Irrespective of the degree of involvement they have in the care of their child, fathers should be routinely offered the support and opportunities they need to play their parental role effectively. Children's centres need to develop effective systems to gather information about fathers in all the families they are in contact with. Data collection sheets should include space to record information about fathers and other male carers, and agencies should be encouraged to provide this information at the point of referral. A parent link or community outreach worker with a specific remit to engage with fathers will be most effective, but *all* staff should be encouraged to engage proactively with fathers at initial contact. This will include inviting fathers to be present at initial home visits, which should be arranged at times they can make, and following up to gain contact with fathers who are not present to begin with – unless there is a clear child welfare reason not to do so.

This approach should be followed for all fathers who have a significant impact on the child's welfare, whether or not they have parental responsibility or are living with the child. This is not always easy. All children's centre staff need the skills and confidence to engage with fathers and to work with mothers about the rationale for this approach.

Family support

Specific areas where fathers may require support include:

- ▶ as direct care-givers to their children. Some fathers lack confidence or strong cultural role models in taking responsibility for children's day-to-day physical and emotional needs. They may not have had much involvement with their own fathers but are often motivated to do a better job of parenting. Other fathers lack local facilities where they can take their children that are welcoming to men, and available at times they can access them;
- ▶ in understanding children's developmental needs; the value of play and how it can be used to help children develop socially, emotionally and intellectually;
- ▶ in demonstrating their emotional attachment to their children. Fathers who are able to show how much they care about their children are giving them a strong role model for future relationships;
- ▶ in developing and maintaining a positive, co-operative relationship with the mother of their children. This will generally be most effective if the centre engages with both mother and father around these issues;
- ▶ in developing their own support networks, for example by getting to know other fathers;
- ▶ finding work, training for work or learning opportunities to enable them to better support their families, and financial support for such learning; (See section 07 Employment support)

- ▶ help with benefits, child support responsibilities, and entitlements, including housing; and
- ▶ during times of exceptional stress, for example following separation or on arrival in the UK as a refugee.

Children's centres should offer a range of services to meet these needs, including one-to-one, couple and group-based support. Many fathers will only engage in such services after initially developing a strong relationship with a specific worker, whom they can trust and identify with – so centres need to be clear which worker(s) will take on this crucial role. Centres should also offer some services specifically for men – but must not assume that all men prefer male-focused services, or that such services can meet all their needs. Children's centres should signal strongly that they are places for men as well as women.

Services for men

Fathers generally appreciate some services which are designed specifically for men. They often involve services for fathers with their children, but may also include services where they can meet other dads, engage in activities together, and talk about their lives as fathers. Many fathers do not feel they are expert parents and an all male environment can enable them to feel more confident about interacting with their child and seeking advice. These services can also form a vital 'bridge' to other universal children centre services. Specific staff need to be identified to deliver these services, who are comfortable and skilled at engaging with men. They need to be well supported by other centre staff and have opportunities for training and peer support with other similar workers.

Traditional male interests can sometimes provide the basis for engaging with fathers, in addition to the opportunity for fathers to spend time with their children; access 'peer support'; one-to-one information; or advice and advocacy from a skilled worker. Ideas include:

- ▶ working together on an allotment;
- ▶ visiting a swimming pool or other sports facility (but the assumption should not be made that they will always be interested in sport);
- ▶ music or photography projects involving dads and their children;
- ▶ taking a group to the toy library on a Saturday morning;
- ▶ a weekly 'dad's breakfast';
- ▶ developing a play area;
- ▶ barbecues in summer; and
- ▶ men's health days – including smoking cessation (see section 12 Smoking cessation).

Fathers should be regularly consulted about the services they want, whether existing universal and specialist services are accessible and meeting their needs, and should have a part in planning them. Men-only services or sessions need to be timed appropriately, planning around working hours. Fathers' working patterns can include evening and night work, long hours or times away from the home. To reach men, a centre may therefore need to be flexible about when it organises activities or sessions for men. Often fathers collect children from centres at the start or end of the day (while the mother is at work) and this may be a good time to make contact.

Case study 14.1

Support for a Full Time Lone Father

A 33 year old father is divorced and looks after his small daughter full time:

"It had got to the point where I was stuck at home with her all day and I was starting to snap at her...you can't have an intelligent conversation with a two and a half year old".

He was introduced to an SSLP by a health visitor. The fathers' worker has been a constant support. "He came up to me and said 'I'll get you involved in this, I'll get you sorted with that'. I wanted to get on a course and he's arranged that, he's said bring her along to the playgroup and it's there. Everything told to me has reached my expectations. People are ready to jump in and help out, you know it's there. But you stand out in the street and ask most of the blokes who walk down here with a pushchair, most blokes will tell you – but they won't tell you in front of the missus – but they will tell you that they don't know how to cope."

Good practice in service delivery

Making fathers welcome

Centres should extend an explicit invitation for fathers to be involved in all children's centre services, and should offer services at times that fathers can attend. Centres will need a strategy to publicise all their services *to fathers specifically* (not just generic 'parents', which fathers will usually interpret as not including them), and to communicate why their involvement will benefit their children and themselves. Where fathers are not currently involved in services, staff should work sensitively in partnership with mothers (who will often be the first point of contact) to facilitate that involvement.

Fathers feel welcome where they are accepted and are free to participate without being judged. Staff in children's centres should welcome all parents who are visiting for the first time. They should greet fathers and help them to feel 'at home', making introductions to other parents and staff, and a fathers' worker if there is one.

Case study 14.2

Welcoming fathers in Thorpe Hamlet

The Sure Start Children's Centre in Thorpe Hamlet, Norwich, have been working to make their buildings more welcoming to men by implementing various changes to the service environment:

- Staff should avoid the building being seen as a 'haven' for mothers; the words 'mum and dad' rather than parent should be used wherever possible.
- Images displayed are made as attractive to men as they are to women; more images of outside environments and families playing football have been used. "When you come into the building there is a panel which is a kind of mosaic of photographs taken by our 3 and 4 year olds. We gave them disposable cameras and found that the child's eye view of the world included dad as much as mum. When you come into the building you see a broad picture of what the child's view of the world is – and that is not female oriented."
- The learning centre building has been tailored to be a more adult environment than that used for play sessions and drop-ins. "It's a far more adult environment. Men are much more comfortable sitting on proper chairs with the information around them. And I've found that once they've crossed that threshold, and felt comfortable, then they are much happier about entering the main Sure Start building."

For more information contact Liz Chapman on lchapman@surestartthorpeh.co.uk

Centres should develop recruitment and training strategies that ensure *all staff* are sensitive to the needs of fathers as well as mothers. This will challenge any negative attitudes staff hold towards fathers' ability to care for their children and about their involvement in services, inform them about the important role fathers play in their children's lives, and offer strategies for engaging and supporting them. All staff need to feel confident about and responsible for engaging with fathers.

Employing male and female workers

Both male and female staff can engage well with fathers; in fact some fathers find it easier to engage with a female worker. The skills and attitudes of a member of staff is the crucial factor; he or she must be approachable, knowledgeable, sensitive, reliable and positive about fatherhood.

Some centres have found that having a fathers' worker is a very effective way to coordinate services focused on fathers' needs. In some cases, a local father has been a service user and gone on to work in the programme. Centres can advertise specifically for male staff where they will be working with fathers, or explicitly encourage them to apply for all posts at the centre.

Male workers bring a particular perspective to the provision of services, and act as a male presence in an environment where the overwhelming majority of workers at front line level are female. This can help men feel the service is 'for them' and ensure that services are delivered in a way that will appeal to other men. This is important when designing services for men and will also improve the delivery of other, more general services. Fathers' workers could be involved in training colleagues about engaging with fathers, and working with mothers on their attitudes towards and relationships with the fathers of their children.

Case study 14.3

Fathers support in County Durham

Ferryhill and Chilton Sure Start, County Durham, have been very successful in engaging a significant number of fathers in their activities and events. The total number of male attendances at all activities increased from 354 in 2003 to 659 in 2004, a rise of 80%.

A crucial factor in achieving success in the area of fathers' work has been the close partnership working between Sure Start Ferryhill and Chilton and the voluntary agency Fathers Plus – a community project of the regional charity Children North East. The agency supported the appointment, training and management of a part-time Fathers Worker; and have also delivered extensive staff training – on the issue of engaging and working with fathers and male carers to the whole Sure Start team since the launch of services in 2001.

Men of different ages and from diverse family and employment backgrounds have been successfully involved in all levels of the work of Ferryhill and Chilton Sure Start – from attendance at activities, to membership of parenting groups and involvement in governing roles.

Important elements that have led to this successful working have been:

- ongoing and overt managerial commitment to the work;
- consistent use of a gender-differentiated approach;
- the skills and abilities of the dedicated female Fathers Worker, who has been vital in engaging men locally, strongly supported by a dual management structure;
- a cycle of consultation with fathers/male carers ensures that their needs and interests are met on an on-going basis; and
- the availability of specific fathers' events and the use of social marketing to attract men.

For Further information contact Carole Dawson – Sure Start Ferryhill and Chilton, cdawson@sedgefield.gov.uk or Roger Olley – Head of Service (Fatherwork Children North East), roger.olley@children-ne.org

Multi-agency working

Children's centres should build relationships with a range of agencies who can signpost and refer fathers to children's centre services, including: local maternity services; schools; employers; local community, youth and leisure groups and facilities; teenage pregnancy services; services for separating and separated parents; Connexions; and Jobcentre Plus.

Further information

- Fathers in Sure Start Local Programmes (2003) on www.surestart.gov.uk
- Guide to Working with Fathers and the Fatherhood Quality Mark (FQM) www.fathersdirect.com. Fathers Direct offers training and consultancy on all aspects of working with fathers, for individual staff and whole teams.
- *Project findings: The young fathers project to develop and evaluate a model of working with vulnerable fathers Trust for the Study of Adolescence (TSA)*, 23 New Road Brighton, BN1 1WZ (TSA website: www.tsa.uk.com)
- *Fathers' Involvement in Early Years Settings (2005)* and *Involving Fathers in Early Years Settings: Evaluating Four Models for Effective Practice Development (2006)*, reports by the Pre-School Learning Alliance, can be found on the research pages of their website www.pre-school.org.uk
- *Supporting Young Fathers: Examples on promising practice*, Dr Nigel Sherriff, Trust for the Study of Adolescence (TSA) – due for publication late 2006