



**Fathers' Involvement in Early Years Settings:
Findings from Research
(Executive Summary)**

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Section 1: Executive Summary

The Pre-school Learning Alliance is committed to parental involvement in early years settings and sees such involvement as positive for both a child's and a parent's learning and development. The Pre-school Learning Alliance is a leader in the field of equal opportunities and a driving force for the inclusion and involvement of all children and their carers in early years settings. In the current climate there is a growing awareness of the important role that fathers play in their children's learning and development. Including fathers in early years settings and in their children's early years is in line with the inclusion agenda advocated and implemented by government and other organisations and agencies. Fathers' involvement is a fundamental component in the inclusion agenda and has been the impetus for the current research project examining the involvement of fathers in early years settings and addressing ways of furthering fathers' inclusion. This report brings together the findings from the two strands of the research: quantitative data from questionnaires and qualitative data from focus group interviews with staff/volunteers and fathers.

Currently men are playing an increasing role in the care of their children in the private sphere and according to Fisher *et al.* (1999) this has increased "*at a much faster rate than the increase in time that women spend with their young children*" and they are now "*responsible for around one third of all child-care activities*". However, this increase of involvement is not reflected in a growth in the number of men in the childcare workforce. In fact, according to the Daycare Trust, the number of male nursery nurses has remained at around 1 per cent for the decade up to 2001 (Daycare Trust, 2003). Furthermore, according to the Sure Start Unit, the number of male staff in playgroups and pre-schools is 1 per cent (Sure Start, 2004a) and in day nurseries and other full daycare provision is 2 per cent (Sure Start, 2004b). Pre-school Learning Alliance figures from the 2004 Group Membership Questionnaire indicate that male staff in Alliance settings is greater at around 5 per cent (Pre-school Learning Alliance, 2004) and perhaps this is due to the importance that the organisation attaches to inclusion and equal opportunities.

It appears from observational evidence that when men set foot in early years settings as fathers, their role is often restricted to 'gender appropriate' activities such as 'doing jobs' around the setting or being involved in outdoor games and construction play. However, evidence suggests that children do better educationally,

psychologically and socially when their fathers are involved with them (National Service Framework for Children, Young People and Maternity Services, 2004; Lewis, 1997). Research has also indicated that it is not just the amount of time that the father spends with his child that is beneficial, but that the quality of interactions are of central importance (Lamb & Tamis-Lemonda, 2004).

Although there is limited evidence of the effect on children of fathers' involvement in family service agencies, the evidence suggests that those interventions that involve fathers in public service agencies "*may be more effective in enhancing parental sensitivity and children's attachment, than [those] involving mothers alone*", (Bakermans-Kranenburg, 2003). Furthermore, research evidence suggests that such benefits may have a long-term impact (Fagan and Iglesias, 1999).

In order to examine the extent to which fathers were involved in early years settings, the current project explored:

- 1) the extent to which fathers are involved in early years settings, and in what capacity;
- 2) how settings were involving fathers and how successful they were;
- 3) the ways in which settings would most like to work with fathers in the future and the support needed to undertake this work; and
- 4) the funding received by settings for inclusion work with fathers.

A questionnaire was sent out to a 10 per cent sample (around 1,400) of early years settings that are members of the Pre-school Learning Alliance in order to elicit data on the aims detailed above. The response rate was 23 per cent and is representative of an average return rate. The key findings that emerge from the research are as follows:

- Fathers are involved in 40 per cent of early years settings. However, a higher proportion of parent and toddler groups (57 per cent) had fathers attending.
- When fathers attended a setting, three quarters of them stayed for less than 30 minutes. However, those fathers that visited a setting infrequently (less than once a month) were more likely to spend over one hour in the setting than fathers who visited more frequently.
- Over half of the settings identified *an awareness of the importance of fathers in their children's development* as the main motivation for involving fathers.

- Two-thirds of settings were in favour of involving (more) fathers by encouraging them to get involved in general activities (open to both mothers and fathers), whereas only 6 per cent favoured activities specifically aimed at fathers.
- 45 per cent of settings had set up one-off, irregular activities to attract fathers, while 9 per cent had set up regular activities. The type of activity was unrelated to how successful that activity was perceived to be by settings.
- The two most significant factors impacting on increasing fathers' involvement in early years settings that were identified by practitioners were fathers' reluctance to be involved (42 per cent) and fathers' work commitments (28 per cent).
- Almost two thirds of settings would be interested in a 'what works' leaflet with practical tips, while almost one quarter of settings expressed interest in training sessions on 'what works'.
- Just under 2 per cent of settings had applied for funding to support work for including more fathers.

The findings from the first strand of the research raised a number of topics that were not addressed by the questionnaire. For example, fathers, like other marginalised groups, are not a homogenous group. An implication of this is that individual settings will need to adapt any strategies that they adopt toward involving (more) fathers to the local social and economic circumstances.

A handful of settings stated that they did not feel that they should do anything more to attract fathers over and above a general invitation to all parents to get involved. However, this approach has only succeeded in involving a minority of fathers and it appears necessary that something over and above an open invitation to all to effectively involve (more) fathers will be needed. Such invitations are likely to require both a general positive welcoming attitude towards all fathers as well as practical strategies to make activities/events available to fathers at times when they are around and based on ways in which they feel they would like to engage with their children in an early years setting.

The findings from the first phase of the study indicated that it is valuable to directly elicit fathers' views on their perceptions of fathers' involvement in early years settings, the factors impacting on their further involvement and the types of

activities/events that they would like to be involved in. These areas were addressed in the second strand of research which comprised four focus group interviews with fathers of children attending early years settings and four with staff/volunteers working in settings. The latter elicited views from staff and volunteers with the aim of increasing the Alliance's understanding of the issues connected with fathers' involvement in early years settings for staff/volunteers.

The key findings from these focus group interviews are as follows:

- Fathers and staff/volunteers agreed that the primacy of fathers' economic roles – as breadwinners – and the culturally determined gendered nature of staffing and parental involvement in early years settings were key factors that limited fathers' involvement in their children's early years settings.
- Female staff and volunteers attending the focus group interviews were unanimous in wanting to involve more fathers in their setting, while a minority of fathers expressed an ambivalence about being involved.
- Fathers tend to be content to see themselves as supporters to their partners – where they have one – who are usually primary carers and are also more involved in their children's early years settings.
- Fathers and staff/volunteers suggested a number of different actions that settings can take to involve fathers more in settings' activities. These fall into the following categories:
 1. Encouraging a greater presence of males (staff, students, volunteers) in settings.
 2. Organising activities at times when fathers can attend, such as on weekend mornings, with the express aim of targeting fathers.
 3. When publicising activities that aim to include fathers, to use language that appeals to fathers and ensure that fathers know that settings are specifically keen on their involvement and not just mothers'.
 4. Organising events specifically for fathers.

Drawing together the findings from both strands of the research, the project concludes:

- The vast majority of respondent settings (80 per cent) support father involvement primarily because they recognise the importance of fathers to their children's development. They also acknowledge that local initiatives need to take into account local circumstances (e.g., high unemployment or a

high incidence of fathers living apart from their children) and the particular needs of local fathers.

- The quantitative data suggests that the involvement of fathers in settings is constrained by fathers' reluctance to get involved (42 per cent) and fathers' work commitments (28 per cent). Although one of the key findings from the qualitative data – that the female-dominated nature of settings was a major constraining factor – may appear to conflict with this, it may be that fathers' reluctance to participate (the main constraining factor from the quantitative data) in settings is to a great extent dependent on the predominantly female nature of early years settings.
- As a result of fathers generally only becoming involved in settings on an irregular basis, they are generally unable to develop a more comprehensive/holistic understanding of their child and their child's, particularly social, development.
- Settings need to recognise both that it can be effective to use the gendered interests that many fathers may have (such as sport and other outdoor activities) as a way of attracting them into settings while also considering the findings that some fathers may not share these same interests.
- The quantitative findings indicate that few settings would consider opening at the weekend and only a minority would consider activities specifically for fathers. However, both staff/volunteer and father participants in the focus group interviews see the value of offering father-only activities – perhaps on a Saturday morning when more fathers are available. – as a way of involving (more) fathers.
- Although the quantitative data did not find that the presence of males in settings (e.g. staff, students) encourages the participation of (more) fathers, the focus groups suggest – in line with other studies on other marginalised groups – that the presence of males (their own kind) will help fathers feel more relaxed in predominately female early years spaces.
- Mothers' gatekeeping role in the caring for children was highlighted by the focus group interviews. It appears likely that the active support of mothers (gatekeepers) can contribute significantly to the involvement of fathers in settings.
- The broader issue of gendered appraisals of parenting contributes to many fathers lacking confidence in their own parenting skills and must be

challenged as part of a strategy for encouraging greater father involvement in early years settings.

The report concludes by acknowledging that the task of involving fathers in early years settings may be daunting, principally with regard to the cultural and historical barriers that militate against it. However, the apparent desire and willingness to encourage father involvement in early years settings – as evidenced in the responses to the questionnaire (with 80 per cent having considered encouraging fathers to get involved) and in the data elicited in the staff/volunteer focus groups interviews – illustrates that many practitioners view the inclusion of fathers as a crucial and somewhat delayed development.

Based on the findings from the research project we propose the following recommendations:

- Develop programmes and activities that are:
 1. Sensitive to the local context in which fathers reside.
 2. Sensitive to fathers' schedules and their economic roles.
 3. Sensitive to fathers' interests.
 4. Effectively marketed and advertised.
 5. Supported by mothers.
- Develop new terminology/language
- Gender awareness training
- Address the gender imbalance in the early years sector
- Develop father-friendly government policies
- Funding work with fathers.