

**Involving Fathers in Early Years Settings:  
Evaluating Four Models for Effective Practice Development  
(Executive Summary)**

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**July 2006**

Report prepared for the  
Department for Education and Skills

## Section 1: Executive Summary

The Pre-school Learning Alliance carried out the current study with the aim of exploring what appeared to be most effective in terms of increasing father involvement in early years settings.

### Background literature

There appears to be little evidence covering the topic of father involvement in settings (or in family services generally), perhaps because studies focus on parents' rather than fathers' involvement. Perhaps the main evaluation into father involvement in early years settings in England is the National Evaluation into *Fathers in Sure Start* (Lloyd et al, 2003). What the current project could investigate was whether the findings of the Sure Start evaluation would be replicated in all areas, not just Sure Start areas (the 20 per cent most disadvantaged areas in the country), irrespective of the level of economic affluence of the area where the early years setting was situated.

Another piece of Research from Texas, United States (Green 2003) concluded that there were a number of "*simple, yet effective efforts that appear to increase the likelihood [that] fathers will participate in their children's early years programs*". The current project wanted to investigate these – as well as other findings from research into work with fathers, both in family services in general and in the early years in particular.

### Approach and Method

29 settings were selected to participate in the project. Each setting chose to participate in one of four models relating to father involvement which were being tested to evaluate their relative effectiveness. **Inclusive Communication** focused on communication and offered ideas to assist settings to ensure that their communications to parents were framed in such a way that not only would fathers know that they were included but that they used language that specifically appealed to men. **Father Directed Activities** offered settings ideas on issues to think about in relation to organising activities that would appeal explicitly to fathers. **GenderTalk** encouraged settings to develop gender conversations among staff and also to encourage gender conversations with mothers and fathers using the setting, recognising that conversations about gender may need to take place as a pre-requisite for involving fathers in settings. This model included a training session. In the fourth **Leaflet Only** model participating settings were given a copy of the *Fathers Matter* leaflet, a leaflet for practitioners containing "*ideas and practical tips for*

*involving fathers in your setting*". In fact, all settings participating in the different models were given copies of this leaflet.

Settings were not given any further guidelines; they were just given some notes on their model. The project would then investigate whatever actions settings initiated and assess how successful they were in involving fathers.

Just over half the 29 participating settings were sessional daycare settings, and seven each were Parent and Toddler (P&T) groups and Neighbourhood Nurseries. Settings were categorised as 'rural', 'urban' or 'inner-city'.

### *Questionnaires*

Participating settings completed three questionnaires in September 2005 (at the start of the project) and again in January and March 2006 (at the end of the project). These questionnaires requested

- baseline information about the setting (September 2005);
- baseline information about father involvement in the setting (September 2005);
- information about activities organised for children which aimed to include fathers (all three questionnaires);
- the extent and nature of gender discussions among staff, and among fathers and mothers (September 2005 and January 2006);
- information about changes in the settings' practices around contact with children's fathers and mothers (January 2006); and
- information as to whether participating in the project had been useful and whether the setting had learned anything (March 2006).

Settings were also asked to complete week-long audits of fathers and mothers dropping off/collecting children from the setting and staying in the setting at the same times as they completed questionnaires.

In February 2006, fathers and mothers were asked to complete questionnaires which ascertained their views on different aspects of father involvement, and staff to complete questionnaires on the manageability of focusing on father involvement.

All the September 2005 and January 2006 questionnaires and audit forms were returned. All the sessional daycare settings returned their March 2006 questionnaires and audit forms, as did five of the seven P&T groups and five of the seven Neighbourhood Nurseries.

## **Findings and Discussion**

### *From questionnaires and audits*

Findings from the baseline questionnaire included the following:

- the majority of settings had discussed father involvement in the previous year. This included *all* Neighbourhood Nurseries and suggests that possibly father involvement is automatically on the agenda in Neighbourhood Nurseries. Perhaps the other settings that had not discussed it did not consider it to be of particular importance;
- fathers were more likely to attend parents' evenings and one-off events than to volunteer in settings or join committees;
- few fathers stayed in all types of settings but a significantly larger number (but probably still a minority, compared to mothers) of fathers dropped off/collected their children from sessional daycare settings and Neighbourhood Nurseries;
- in terms of gender discussions, there appeared to be a correlation in settings between the level of gender discussion among staff and the level of gender discussions among parents. It appeared as if staff took the lead in creating an environment in which mothers and fathers felt able to talk about gender issues;
- other than Neighbourhood Nurseries, the majority of settings did not have contact with parents living apart from their children. This may mean that practices and procedures in Neighbourhood Nurseries encourage such contact whereas contact is more patchy in other settings; and
- the majority of staff were enthusiastic about father involvement. However in four out of seven Neighbourhood Nurseries only some staff were considered to be enthusiastic.

Although the project originally set out to see which of the four models would be the most effective in increasing the number of fathers involved in settings, it appeared as if factors other than the models themselves led to the level of success that settings had in involving fathers. Thus the analysis of what settings did focused on these other factors and found the following:

- in relation to gender discussions, it appears that staff have a critical role to play in raising awareness of gender issues among parent users. However, settings may need some guidance as to how to constructively and sensitively address the question of gender in early years settings;

- in relation to addressing fathers explicitly, two settings gave examples showing that they had started doing this. This suggests that becoming involved in the project not only changed practice but also demonstrated how easy it is to change practice, in this area;
- similarly, one setting redesigned its registration form to take details of parents living apart from their children (usually fathers) with a view to contacting such parents in the future;
- in terms of the activities that settings offered that were aimed specifically at including fathers, it was not just the topic of the activity that might appeal to fathers, but that consultation with fathers (and mothers) could play an important part in affecting whether fathers chose to attend or not;
- from the audits it appeared as if a significantly higher proportion of fathers whose children attended settings in disadvantaged areas dropped off/collected their children than fathers whose children attended all sessional daycare settings. It was posited that this may be because less fathers in disadvantaged areas are in employment and thus more available to drop off/collect their children;
- forty per cent of the settings that had learned something through participating in the project indicated that they had learned the importance of addressing both mothers and fathers while 56 per cent indicated that they had learned that they needed to take into account the predominantly female environment of the setting to help fathers feel comfortable in it.
- in terms of success in involving fathers, 13 out of 14 sessions that considered themselves successful, identified the fact that the whole team supported father involvement. This suggests that whole team support is a critical ingredient for effective fathers involvement;
- when asked what materials would have helped them, 33 per cent of those who responded to that question favoured materials specifically for fathers. 21 per cent of settings requested materials to inform staff. However, all settings had been sent the *Fathers Matter* leaflet which does just that. This indicates perhaps that managers of settings need to ensure that information on father involvement (and possibly on other topics) is cascaded to all staff; and
- when asked what else they would have liked, 26 per cent of responding settings indicated that they would have liked designated funding for running activities for fathers. Certainly, funding is necessary for putting on activities for fathers, but it would be unfortunate if settings were to conclude that funding is

a prerequisite for father-involvement work – much can be done for little or no cost when inclusive attitudes are in place.

#### *Findings from Fathers' and Mothers' Questionnaires*

These were sent to settings in February 2006 and 102 were completed by mothers and 77 by fathers. In answer to questions about father involvement, responses were similar though mothers generally thought fathers were more involved than fathers thought they were – within a five per cent margin. The major difference in perception was over whether fathers saw letters that were sent home – only 68 per cent of mothers thought they did while 90 per cent of fathers thought they did. It is likely that the fathers overestimated the amount of letters that they saw – assuming that mothers as 'gatekeepers' did not show all letters to their children's fathers.

Also, one in eight fathers did not perceive the setting as successful in involving fathers. And similarly 5 per cent of fathers did not feel comfortable in the setting. These statistics are worthy of further investigation especially with a view to seeing whether settings could be doing more to help all fathers to feel that the setting is successful in involving them and helping them to feel comfortable in the setting.

#### *Findings from Staff Questionnaires*

Questions to staff focused mainly on the manageability of focusing on father involvement along with the day-to-day running of the setting. There was a range of responses on this issue from staff who rated it 'easy' to others who rated it 'difficult, including staff from the same setting. An interesting finding was that a number of settings commented on the fact that they do not see fathers either because they are out at work or because there are a lot of 'single mothers' using the setting. This highlighted the issue that father involvement can be beneficial for all children, especially those who do not have a male role model at home.

### **Conclusion**

The report drew the following conclusions:

- that further analysis is needed on the fathers and mothers questionnaires because of the rich data contained in them
- that it was generally factors other than the four evaluation models that impacted on whether settings were successful (or not) in involving fathers. It was the awareness that settings brought to father involvement in early years settings that primarily seemed to make a difference as to how successful they were in involving fathers; and

- that the factors that impact on a setting's success in involving father can be divided into three categories:
  - i) Setting factors:
  - ii) Staff Awareness and Sensitivity Around Father Involvement
  - iii) Local factors:

The report recognised that involving fathers in early years settings may not be easy but that the time may be right for developing initiatives to do so because a growing number of fathers are already playing a part in caring for their children at home, and similarly an increasing number of fathers are at least visiting the threshold of settings when they drop off/collect their children.

**Recommendations:**

- *Raising awareness of issues around involving fathers* possibly by articles and publications highlighting these ideas; training sessions to help people working in the early years field not only develop their awareness but also to create local action plans to involve fathers; and a booklet with case studies of 'What Works in Involving Fathers'.
- *Keeping details of, and contacting, parents living apart from their children.*
- *Addressing fathers and mothers explicitly.*
- *Engaging with fathers collecting and dropping off their children, especially in settings where this is the main and only contact point with fathers.*
- *Staff participating in and encouraging parents to participate in gender discussions.*
- *Materials directed at fathers (and possibly mothers) on involving fathers/gender.*
- *Support for managers on getting their staff on board.* Possibly managers need support, via diversity training for example, to ensure all of their staff know and understand the issues connected to father involvement in settings.