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play • learn • grow
dechrau'n deg • flying start

Cardiff Flying Start

FATHERS AND FLYING START SERVICES

A RESEARCH PROJECT

MARCH 2009



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Mark Ball
March 2009

INTRODUCTION

In recent years, there has been a perception that fathers are now more involved with the day to day care and development of their children than has been the case in previous years. Evidence tells us that the involvement of fathers has increased by eight hundred percent between (800%) 1975 and 1997, as cited in The Fatherhood Institute's *Maternal and Infant Health in the Perinatal Period*. However, it is clear that in the relationship between the home and childcare/early years services it is still predominantly mum who takes the lead in service engagement.

There is a wealth of information to support this; however, we wanted to hear from men in Wales and in particular in Cardiff's eight Flying Start catchment areas to find out whether they feel there are barriers preventing them from engaging with Flying Start services.

The Flying Start programme is an initiative funded by the Welsh Assembly Government across all local authorities in Wales. It is aimed at children pre-birth up to the age of three years and eleven months and their families living in specific school catchment areas.

There are four main elements to the Flying Start programme and in Cardiff these include:

Enhanced Health Services

These services include:

- a dedicated health visiting team with Flying Start Health Visitors with average caseloads of approximately 110 children;
- Family Health Workers
- Speech and Language Therapeutic support,
- Dietitians and Community Food Workers.

Parenting Programmes

These include the Parent Nurturing Programme, the Neo Natal Behavioural Assessment Scale (NBAS) and Parenting Positively. They are delivered both within the local neighbourhood community or in the home.

Childcare

This service offers a free part-time childcare place, where one is available, from the term after the child's second birthday until the end of the term in which their third birthday falls. Each placement is for two and a half hours a day, five days a week for forty two weeks a year, provided at a local playgroup or with a childminder.

Language and Play (LAP): These are fun courses delivered over a six-week period which children and parents attend together to improve communication between parent and child.

Catchment Areas: Defined by postcode. If a child officially lives in a certain set of streets defined by the catchment areas below, the children are entitled to the Flying Start programme's services. The catchment areas in Cardiff are:

Glan-Yr-Afon Primary School, Llanrumney
Greenway Primary School, Rumney
Adamsdown Primary School, Adamsdown
St Mary the Virgin Church in Wales Primary School, Butetown
Mount Stuart Primary School, Butetown
Herbert Thompson Primary School, Ely
Windsor Clive Primary School, Ely
Trelai Primary School, Ely

Executive Summary

Flying Start is a Welsh Assembly Government (WAG) initiative which came into existence in 2007 in an attempt to address some of the issues surrounding economic deprivation and its subsequent impact on the lives of young children. The first of the Assembly Government's seven Core Aims for children and young people, based on the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, is a commitment to ensure that all children have a flying start in life. This is to be achieved through an intensive programme of services, thereby creating a more level playing field before those children enter full time education. Flying Start is committed to equal opportunities and social inclusion, and it is with that in mind the report has been undertaken.

Cardiff Flying Start has highlighted the need for greater father involvement with its services and this piece of work aims to promote this. The report attempts to capture the underrepresented voices of fathers in Cardiff with qualitative data.

The main focus is directed towards identifying the barriers faced by fathers that prevent greater engagement in an attempt to reduce the impact of those barriers, as identified by fathers themselves. Alongside the voice of fathers within Flying Start catchments, the report also captures valuable insights from the professionals who work with Flying Start families. The report further aims to identify an overall baseline figure of fathers engaged with Flying Start in Cardiff at this time.

Current thinking is that fathers are spending increasingly more time in the home and with their children. They are likely to attend most scans and the actual birth of their child. However this is not reflected in contact with early years and childcare service providers. This report will clarify some of the reasons for this.

Barriers identified:

- The clearest message articulated in this study by dads is that **work** is the greatest barrier to engagement – although it is indicated that what fathers say conflicts with the statistics
- Some fathers believe that **fathers themselves** are a barrier in terms of their willingness to engage for a variety of reasons
- Some fathers believe that a **lack of information** is a barrier
- Some fathers believe that **lifestyle choices** such as substance misuse and criminality are a barrier
- Some fathers believe that **ex partners** are a barrier
- Some fathers believe that **gender issues** are a barrier

- Some fathers believe that a ***lack of amenities*** is a barrier

Other messages:

A number of the barriers are further identified. Where fathers are not working, and this is perceived as a barrier, this contributes to the lowering of self esteem and job hunting taking up a significant amount of time. Some fathers saw “old fashioned attitudes” used as an excuse for not doing more with their children whilst others felt that some dads lacked confidence in themselves and it was this that prevented them from being involved.

The overall baseline number of fathers identified by professionals across the programme as engaged with their service is five percent (5%). There were one or two notable exceptions where some Flying Start practitioners were working with larger numbers of fathers. However these were very much the exception rather than the norm. Low levels of engagement of fathers affect the father too it would seem, for instance in terms of bonding with their children

Added to this there are ways in which services themselves unwittingly exclude fathers by being female focussed and unwelcoming in their approach, despite the fact that all the dads believe – as do the majority of professionals – that fathers have a positive impact in their children’s lives. Both girls and boys perform better socially and educationally when a male role model is present. (The Father’s Institute, 2008)

A clear message from the Health Visiting Team in Trelai was that economic deprivation was the primary barrier to engagement and that this was gender irrelevant. Nevertheless vulnerable children from disadvantaged backgrounds tend to gain even more from strong father-child bond relationships. (The Father’s Institute, April 2008)

There is a possibility suggested that the non engagement of both fathers and mothers might be a consequence of them feeling rejected by educational institutions as a child. It would seem that statistically it is the educational underachievers who have become the hardest to engage (Tony Ivens, 2008)

Right across the range of differing paternal biographies, fathers involved with the study realise the importance of play, the fathers involved in this study feel that their relationship with their own father affects how they parent their children and how likely they are to engage in play activities.

It appears that feelings of depression experienced post natally are not exclusively female; dads reported feeling more stressed in terms of their partners’ health, some felt an increase in financial pressures with the addition of a baby, some felt an increase of stress now being the sole wage provider. One dad felt that he was now trapped and isolated in his job because he could no longer leave if he wanted to; leaving him feeling powerless.

Some Statistics: (see the Conclusion on page 35 for further in depth statistics)

95% of fathers interviewed identified that their role as a dad is 'very important'

66% said that their health visitor had spoken to them as the father

25% reported no contact - 5% of these said they had had no contact at all due to work

Almost 25% stated that changing the hours of practice of FS would help them be more involved

24% of fathers reported that they did not know what Flying Start is and a further 24% reported that they only had 'some idea' about Flying Start

20% reported it as unlikely or very unlikely that they would attend a play group

Almost 20% of participants already attend playgroups for dads

14% asked for more free child care

10% said that they could not or would not attend regardless of it being specifically for dads or not

The Way Forward:

Further research needs to be undertaken around the following:

- Teenage dads
- Dads that are young offenders
- Non residency of dads
- Ethnicity
- The gender bias
- Lifestyle choices and status challenges
- Mothers as gatekeepers between Early Years services and fathers

Services can become more father friendly by:

- Making an explicit attempt to engage the father
- Not marginalising non resident fathers
- Increasing numbers of male staff
- Taking advice from fathers regarding positive images and welcoming environments in all settings
- Considering developing elements of services for fathers only and publicising these widely
- Recognising that fathers are sometimes viewed with suspicion and working to address this

- Acknowledging cultural constraints and working to challenge them
- Recognising that mothers are often the 'gatekeepers' to services
- Being available to fathers outside normal working hours

LITERATURE REVIEW

There is an increasing wealth of information available regarding the positive effects of involving fathers in their children's lives and education. Michael Lamb (*The Role of the Father in Child Development*, 2004) highlights four areas of positive results when a dad is involved with his children;

- increased cognitive competence
- increased empathy
- less stereotyped beliefs
- more internal locus of control

“Positive father involvement has now been demonstrated to contribute to a range of better outcomes for children and young people. These include better peer relationships, fewer behavioural problems, lower criminality and substance abuse, higher educational attainment, higher occupational mobility relative to that of their parents’, and higher self esteem.” (Tony Ivens 2007)

In their early years, children spend more time with their parents than with anyone else and therefore their potential for influence is at its greatest. The majority of childcare service staff, early years professionals and teachers are female; consequently, a father or father figure within the home offers access to a population group otherwise excluded.

Ghate et al (2000) point out that many services unwittingly exclude fathers from their services, therefore potentially further excluding an already marginalised group. It is with this in mind that Flying Start initiated this report. Vulnerable children from disadvantaged backgrounds tend to gain even more from a strong father-child relationship than those children in more affluent families and to suffer more when this is lacking (*Fathers Direct 2006*). As Ivens points out “we are doing our children and young people a disservice if we do not involve fathers in our work with families.” (See *Flying Start Fatherhood Guidance: A Literature Review* (2007) for a more detailed discussion).

AIMS AND OBJECTIVES

Cardiff is a culturally diverse European Capital. This raises the question of whether or not Black and Minority Ethnic (BME) communities are excluded from mainstream services by barriers such as culture or language. This report will investigate if, and how, this is represented within Flying Start services. Cardiff is also an economically diverse city; with areas of deprivation, we aim to explore the barriers within these areas.

It is generally widely accepted that the role of the father within the family is one of great importance; this has been supported by current literature and is held across cultures and professional disciplines. However, as indicated above, there is a gap between the father's involvement within the family setting and early years services/settings.

The primary aim of this research is to explore this gap locally and to capture the voices of fathers in Cardiff's Flying Start catchment areas - in particular the potentially silent voices of:

- teenage dads
- dads from Black and Minority Ethnic (BME) Communities
- mothers' attitudes to the fathers of their children

As well as the perceptions of:

- Flying Start professionals from a range of disciplines

In doing so we aim to:

- identify barriers to the engagement of fathers with Flying Start (FS) services
- identify the settings in which the father's find themselves
- determine the barriers to their engagement with those settings
- reduce the impact of the barriers to engagement with fathers and, consequently, family life

Recommendations will be made to suggest how the Flying Start programme in Cardiff can take forward these discoveries in order to offer more father-sensitive services. The aspiration is that this will increase the numbers of Flying Start fathers who are meaningfully engaged in the services being delivered to their children and families.

METHODOLOGY

Semi-structured interviews

After considering a number of approaches, it was felt that the most effective way of collecting the type of data required was to use semi-structured interviews. The primary objective was to compile qualitative data regarding barriers to engagement identified by dads in relation to Flying Start. The interviews mixed open-ended questions and enquiries with a scaled response in order to capture some quantitative data alongside the qualitative data.

Fathers taking part in this research were identified in the following ways:

- Health Visitors who were previously engaged with specific dads sought the permission of the fathers to pass their details to Mark Ball. This was followed up with telephone calls and visits in order to explain the purpose of the interview, to ask whether the fathers would be prepared to take part in this research, and to undertake the interviews
- Health visitor baby clinics were attended and fathers attending were spoken to, as well as some mothers, to identify whether or not their partner would be prepared to be contacted
- The Dad's Group at the Ely and Caerau Childrens Centre was attended and fathers there were encouraged to take part
- Colleagues from the Dietetic Team discussed the project with families and asked whether fathers would take part. This was also followed up

Semi-structured interviews encourage exploration of perceptions rather than recording initial emotional responses. It is well documented that interviewees can at times seek to please the interviewer; it was with this in mind that the questions were open-ended and no time frame was placed on interviews. Some interviews lasted for twenty minutes, while the longest continued for two hours and twenty minutes. The flexibility of the interviews enabled perceived barriers to engagement to be highlighted.

During the interviews there was no explicit approval or disapproval of comments made, hopefully allowing for an honest exploration of the participant's real beliefs. The majority of interviews took place in the participant's home.

Detailed session notes of the interviews were taken during the interview and immediately written up afterwards to ensure reliability.

Informal conversations with staff

The report was assisted by informal conversations with staff including health visitors, play workers, parenting programme staff, managers, and external experts. These conversations were not recorded but provided some useful insights.

Focus Group

A focus group was established to assist in the further exploration of the barriers identified during the semi-structured interviews. Data gained from this is given in Appendix 4.

Sample

The sample in this study consisted of twenty one individual fathers aged between twenty one and fifty two. There was an almost equal representation of employed and unemployed men. All participants resided in one of the eight catchment areas of Flying Start, six of whom were members of BME communities. The Focus Group was a blend of fathers who had been interviewed individually and fathers who were comfortable in a group situation but were not prepared to be interviewed individually.

Limitations

Given time restraints, the sample size is smaller than we would have liked, yet the findings are nevertheless significant. The report's aim to identify barriers to engagement with Flying Start as perceived by the dads themselves, has been achieved with those consulted. While it would be unwise to make sweeping generalisations, the voices of individual fathers within the Flying Start catchment areas have been captured and reported.

What is clear is that further work needs to be undertaken with harder to reach fathers. This would mean a significant period for identification, engagement and positive persuasion to enable them to recognise the value of their perceptions and be empowered to express them.

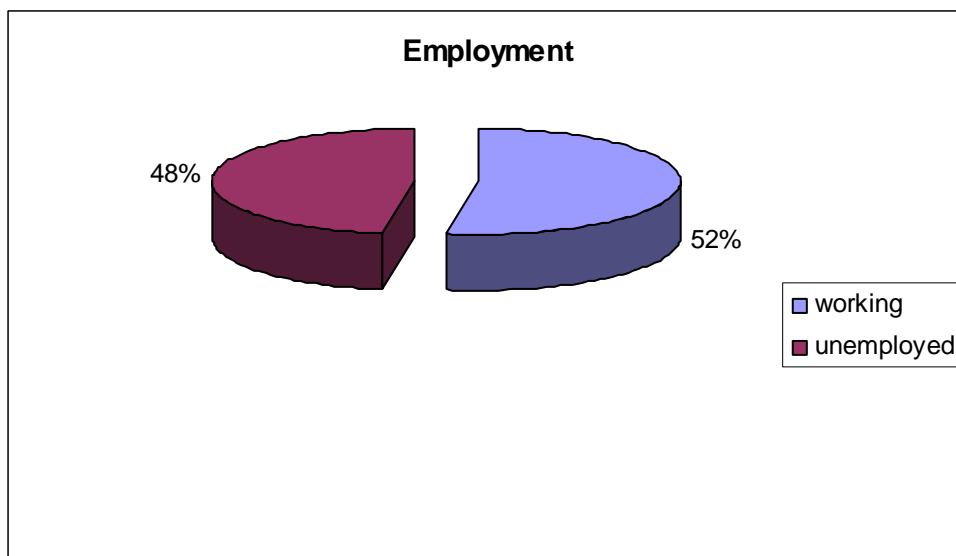
A group of young fathers from a local community centre within a Flying Start catchment area were approached to engage with the research. Although they were prepared to chat 'off the record' none were willing for any of their comments to be included in this report.

SURVEY ANALYSIS

The survey analysis is based on twenty one in-depth, semi-structured interviews with fathers living in the eight Flying Start catchment areas of Cardiff. Given the short time span for this piece of work, the fathers who took part were keen and willing to engage. As identified in the previous section, we are aware that the harder to reach families are less likely to be reflected here.

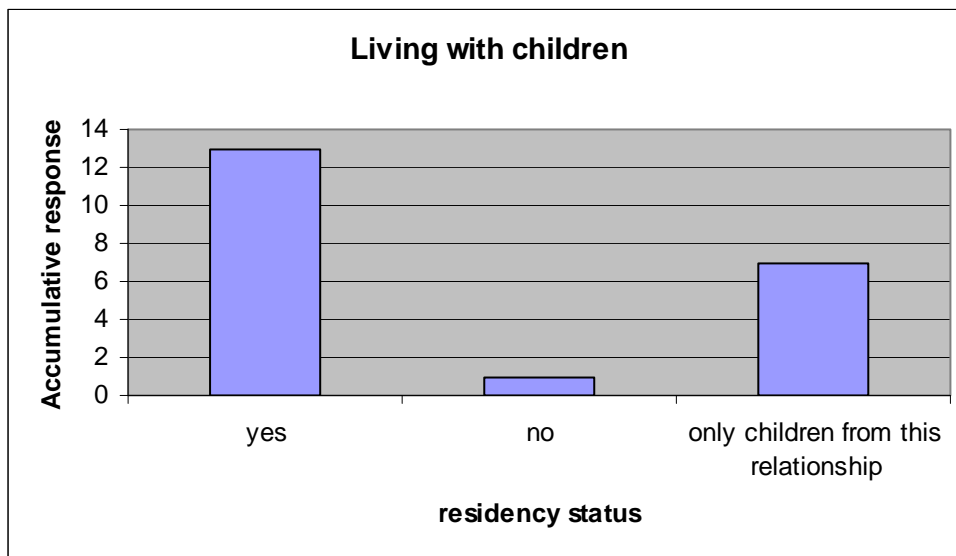
Employment

Roughly half the men who took part in this study were employed. This does not reflect employment statistics of Cardiff as a whole (7% unemployment of those of working age). However, high unemployment rates was one of the indices used to determine which catchment areas would most benefit from Flying Start during its inception. It is logical; therefore, that a study conducted in these areas reflects this high rate of unemployment. This number was also influenced by the fact that these fathers were, on the whole, available during office hours and therefore more accessible for interviews. The employed fathers' jobs ranged from bus driver to structural engineer. Almost 10% of the participating dads were unable to work due to a disability.



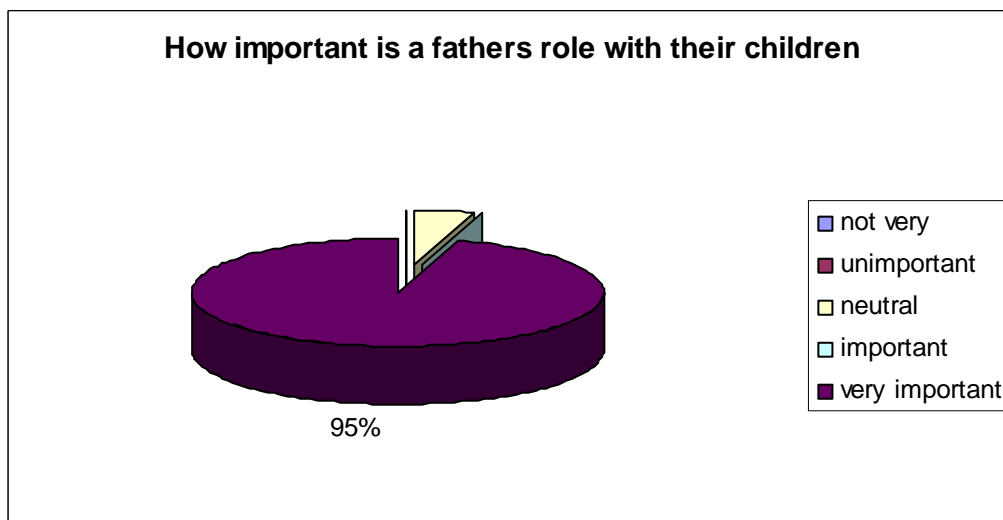
Residency/non-residency

Sixty-two percent (62%) of the fathers interviewed lived with all their children and only had children from one relationship. Thirty-three percent (33%) of interviewed lived with children from their present relationship but reported that they had other children from a previous relationship that they did not live with. Five percent (5%) of the fathers interviewed reported that they did not live with any of their children. The engagement of those fathers with their biological children is also interesting because it reveals some insight into relations between non-resident fathers and their children, possible the only insight we have.



Importance of dad's role

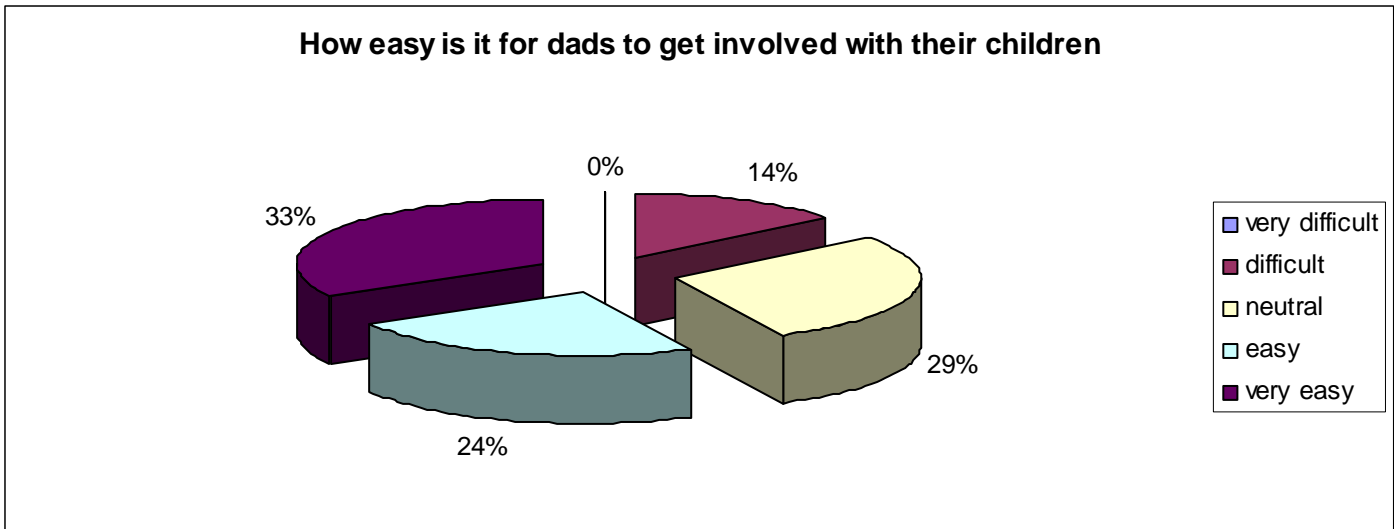
Significantly, ninety-five percent (95%) of those interviewed reported that they believed a dad's role to be "very important" with their children, with the other five percent expressing neutrality on the subject.



Involvement

Thirty three percent (33%) of the dads interviewed expressed the view that it was very easy to get involved with their children. It was neither easy nor difficult for twenty-nine percent (29%) of those interviewed, but fourteen percent (14%) found it difficult to become engaged with their children. In addition, twenty four percent (24%) felt that it was very difficult. Thus we can

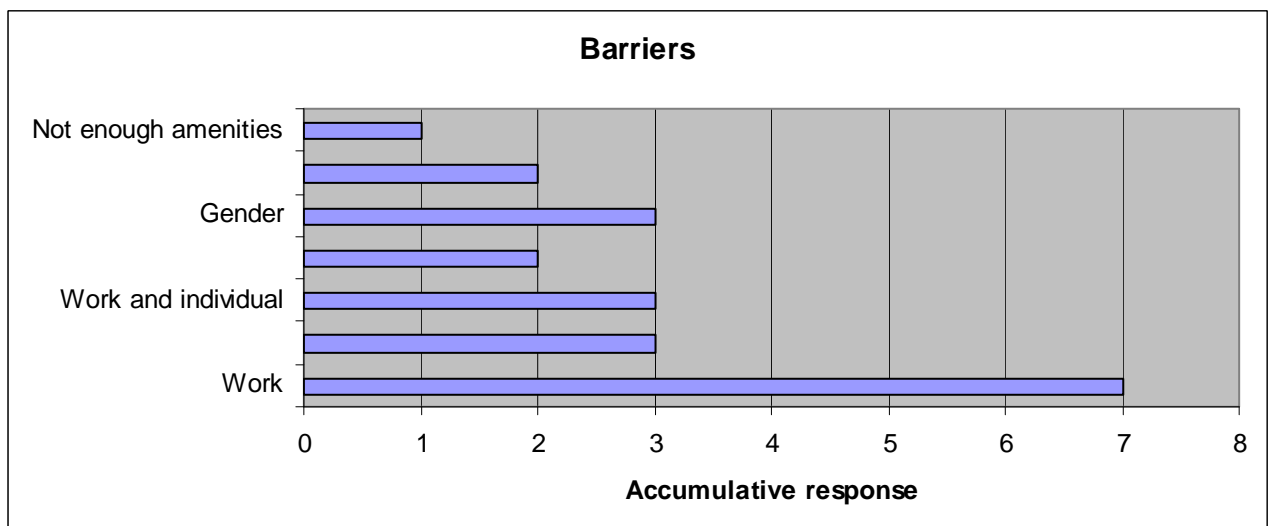
see that almost fifty percent (50%) of fathers asked were either neutral or found difficulties in getting involved with their children.



What gets in the way?

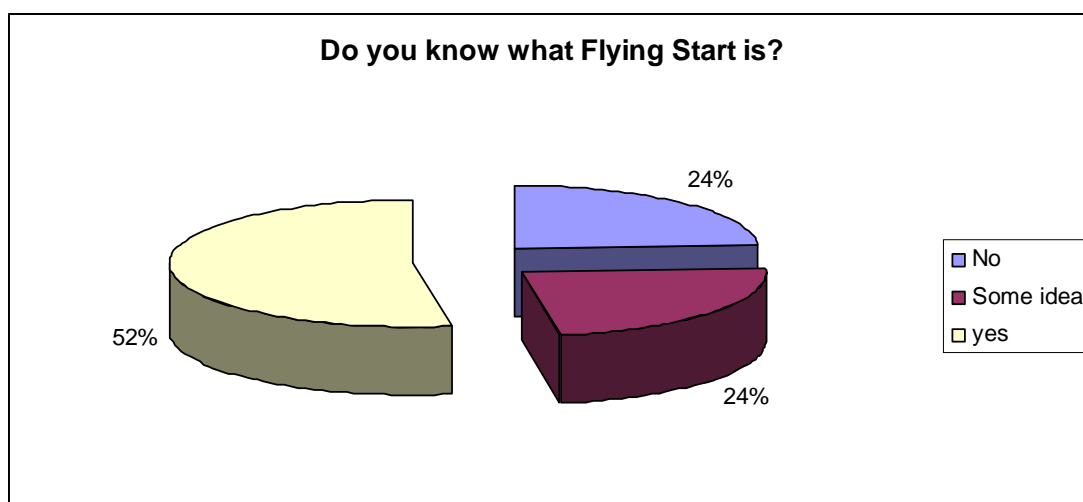
Participants were asked to identify what they saw as being a barrier to their involvement with their children. The question was open-ended, so that participants were free to identify their own perception of barriers. Thirty three percent (33%) of those asked identified work as a barrier between themselves and their children. Another fourteen percent (14%) believed that the fathers themselves are the barrier due to a lack of effort where their children were concerned. Fourteen percent (14%) of those interviewed explained that they saw both work and the individual as a barrier, i.e. although working hours are a hindrance it is up to the individual father to make time for their children. For them, it is a mixture of the two variables.

Lifestyle choices such as substance misuse, alcohol consumption, gambling and crime were identified as a barrier by ten percent (10%) Partners from previous relationships or gender-related issues were highlighted as a barrier between dads and children by fourteen fathers, making sixty six per cent (66%) of those that participated in the study. This is clearly a significant issue. Ten percent (10%) indicated that lack of information stood between themselves and their children, with an additional five percent (5%) identifying lack of local amenities as a barrier.



Do you know what Flying Start is?

When asked, twenty-four percent (24%) of participants responded that they did not know about Flying Start. A further twenty-four percent (24%) were recorded as having some idea after offering a brief interpretation. The remaining fifty-two percent (52%) responded that they knew of Flying Start and were able to offer a reasonable amount of detail in their response. This is clearly significant given the route through which fathers were identified to participate.



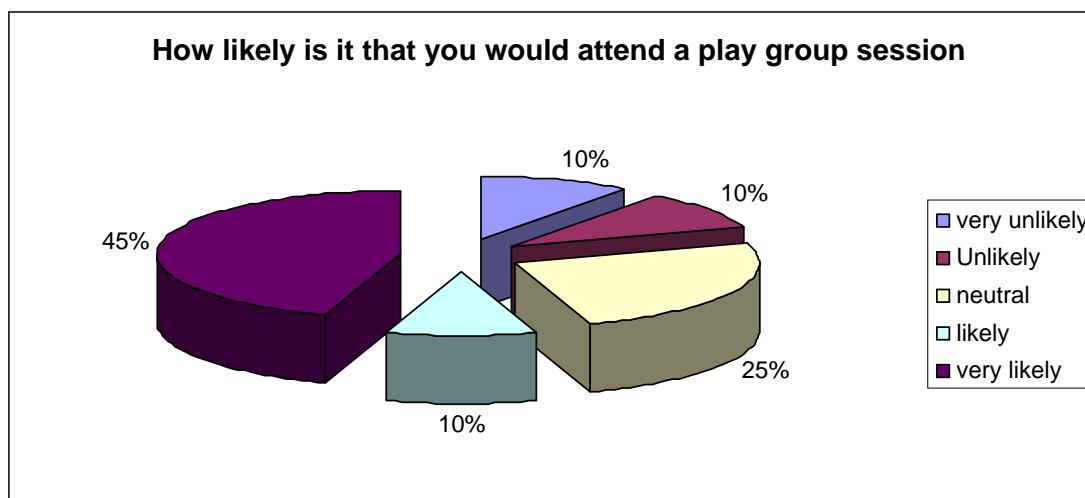
Engaging fathers early

The participants were asked if their health visitor had spoken to them, the father, directly as well as to their child's mother. The question was open-ended and the participants free to respond in their own way. The responses have been categorised into four groups. Sixty percent (60%) responded with an affirmative yes. A direct no was the reply from twenty five percent (25%) of the participants. Five percent (5%) of participants reported "yes, but only in the absence of my partner". Another five percent (5%) reported "no contact at all due to work commitments".



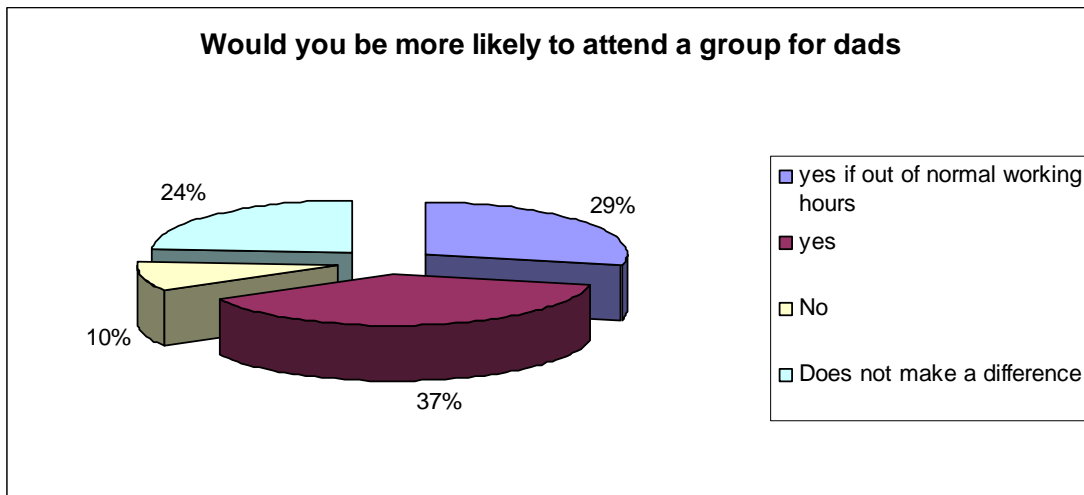
Play group and “Stay and Play” sessions

Forty five percent (45%) of all the participants that took part in the study anticipated that it would be very likely that they would attend a play group/stay and play with their children; almost twenty percent (20%) of participants already do so, with an additional ten percent (10%) anticipating it as likely. However, twenty-five percent (25%) saw the possibility as neutral while another twenty percent reported it was either unlikely or very unlikely.



Just for dads...

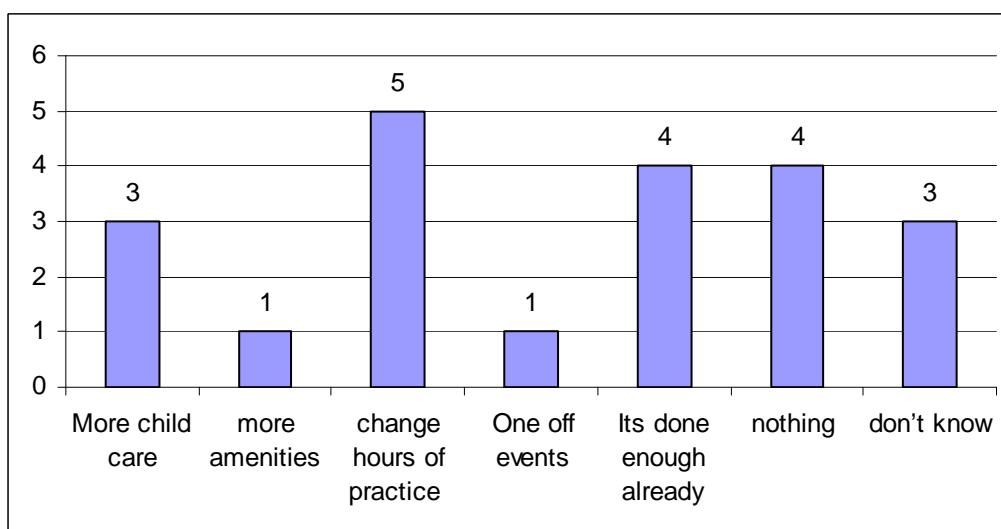
Participants were asked if they would be more likely to attend a play group/stay and play session if it were exclusively for dads. Participants were free to comment in any way. Twenty-nine percent (29%) reported that yes they would if such a group was organised – outside of normal working hours. Thirty-seven percent (37%) responded with a positive yes on grounds of it being exclusively for dads. Twenty-four percent (24%) reported that it would not make a difference regarding their attendance if the group was exclusively for fathers or not. The final ten percent (10%) stated that they either would not or could not attend whether it was a fathers-only group or not.



What Could Flying Start Do For You

Participants were encouraged to respond freely when asked what Flying Start could 'do' for them. Almost twenty five percent (25%) of those interviewed stated that they would engage more easily if service delivery took place outside normal working hours. Nineteen percent (19%) replied that it had done enough already; a further nineteen percent (19%) replied "Nothing"; finally, fourteen percent (14%) said that they did not know how Flying Start could assist them.

Fourteen percent (14%) of dads asked for more childcare with another five percent (5%) asking for more amenities. Five percent (5%) requested one-off events and the remaining twenty four percent (24%) asked for the hours of service provision to be changed to better accommodate their availability.



DISCUSSION

The discussion will refer on occasions to anonymised extracts of the session notes made during and after each of the twenty one semi-structured interview sessions; informal conversations with young dads; informal conversations with Flying Start staff and to research of the subject matter.

Class, economic self determination and poverty

The clear message that came from a meeting with the health visiting team in Trelai was that economic deprivation was the biggest barrier to engagement with Flying Start services. For instance, a health visitor reported that many mums would not come to the Ely and Caerau Children's Centre (ECCC) because it was perceived as a middle-class establishment and 'not for them'. "If you're sitting there listening to one Mum talk of holidays and such things and you're struggling to survive on benefits then are you likely to come back?" (Anonymous).

This could also pose some interesting questions, such as: is there a possibility that non engagement of parents might be a consequence of them feeling rejected by educational institutions as a child? If any individual grew up feeling that they failed at school (or that school failed them) then how likely is that individual to engage with school-like environments as a parent? We know that the lowest educational achievers are young males. Until recently, it was males from BME communities that were statistically the lowest achievers, but more recently white males from economically-deprived backgrounds are now achieving less than the general population. It seems more than coincidental that it is these groups, as adults, that we are now struggling to engage.

Men who may have been amongst those that consistently underachieved are the parents we are now trying to reach. Whilst this report cannot address these specific issues in detail, it does suggest that they require more research. It is also worth noting that it is not merely fathers who do not engage but some mothers also.

Family breakdown and poverty are intertwined. Family breakdown and emergency intervention co-occur particularly in areas identified as being in poverty. Emergency intervention services, such as social workers, are the only sustained contact that some have with childcare professionals. Emergency intervention services are not seen in a positive light by many who live in areas of economic deprivation. This may create a barrier to engaging with Flying Start childcare professionals, who are potentially seen in the same negative light as social workers. These difficulties came to light during a conversation with health visitors.

Can engaging fathers help break the cycle of poverty?

Evidence suggests that the presence of a father figure improves the educational achievement of boys, but how does this affect girls? Recent evidence seems to imply that the presence of a male role model also has positive effects on the educational achievement in girls; both boys and girls

perform better socially and educationally when a male role model is present, teaching them to relate to both men and women in adulthood and improving their chances of successful relationships in the future (Flouri & Buchanan, 2001).

Although the Welsh Assembly Government (WAG) have identified the need to reach out to fathers and improve service provision, we may need to consider what exactly fathers understand as their role when it has largely been identified in the past by early years services as mothering? Perhaps it is time to re-define the role of the father, and agree within Flying Start the meaning of the word?

Consideration of Survey Analysis

Do you know what Flying Start is?

The report felt the need to ascertain whether dads knew what Flying Start was. Encouragingly fifty two percent (52%) of dads responded with “yes” and a further twenty four percent (24%) answered that they had some idea. Twenty four percent (24%) of the dads asked responded with “no”. Below are samples of responses to the above question:

“To help parents get off to a good start with their kids.”

“To get my kids ready for nursery”

“I think they can give us a nursery place or something”

“Other than the health visitor I don’t know”

“To help kids who come from poverty”

“No not really”

“No not really just this sort of thing (HV clinic)”

“To get kids ready for nursery”

“Not all of it, they give advice and some child care I think”

“To help kids from around here to get a head start in school”

The Health Visitor Team

Statistics show that the earlier services for children engage with a dad, the more likely he is to stay involved with other agencies. It is with that in mind that Flying Start recognises that the health visiting team must encourage dads to feel part of the parenting process in relation to services. Over sixty percent (60%) of the dads that took part in the study reported positively when asked about contact with the health visitor.

This research cannot comment on fathers not interviewed. Nevertheless, information from Flying Start health visitors indicates that only approximately five percent (5%) of fathers are engaged with their service. This was further reflected by Flying Start colleagues in other service areas. The Flying Start Programme acknowledges that there is still a great deal of work to be done, although we must also appreciate that these findings are reflected not only in our programme, but in Early Years services across the board in Wales.

During an interview with one dad, it became apparent that his experience with the health visitor was positive. As far as he was concerned the health visitor treated him and his partner equally: *“I asked questions and was answered,*

always". A similar message came through while speaking to another dad who was very positive about the health visitor, explaining that she spoke to mum and dad equally and spoke to dad on his own on several occasions; and furthermore that she gave "*good advice and was very nice*".

In relation to his experience with his health visitor one participant was extremely positive; he explained that during the first couple of weeks after his daughter was born, his wife was very ill and had to go to hospital; the health visitor supported them through this. She also gave them useful "*advice and encouragement crucial in their new role as parents*". She asked him questions about his daughter in relation to his new role as a father and told him about the fathers group. He said: "*we respected her advice and experience, and enjoyed her visits*".

Despite this positive feedback, thirty three percent (33%) of participants from BME communities spoke of their health visitor (and some of hospital staff) as only talking to their wife. There is work to do to address this, and the Health Team in Flying Start are keen to respond to findings and develop their ability to engage fathers more effectively.

What makes a good parent?

When talking to a father from a BME community, the subject of what makes a good parent was discussed. He explained that with parenting "*the more you put in the more you get out.*" And that "*being a dad came natural to me, but it's those who it don't come natural to that need the help*". Another father explained that he tried to be a good dad and that he liked to draw with his children.

From the interviews that took place it appears that fathers participating in the eight Flying Start catchment areas of Cardiff realise the importance of play in their children's lives, crossing the divide between residency and non-residency, and paternal father and step-father figures.

Effects of our own father

While conducting the interviews, one of the dads explained the effect of not having a father figure in his life; there was the occasional man in his mother's life but never for long. He had a very close relationship with his mum, who gave him all she could but he felt that he missed out on a father figure to teach him what it was to be a man. He is determined to break this cycle with his own children and to teach his son to be a responsible man when he grows up; to stay away from crime and know his own mind.

Our relationship with our own father more often than not affects our relationship with our children. One dad told me that he believed that dads were responsible for discipline and that he had learned this from his own father.

Another told me that some of his peers preferred to spend their time in the pub rather than at home and that this was learned behaviour from childhood and their relationship with their own father. Further to this, another dad

explained that he had very little contact with his father, with no affection shown, and therefore he was going to “*make sure*” that his children have what he did not. In relation to their own parenting, these fathers either wished to do their best to mirror their own childhood experiences, or recognised where it had failed them and endeavoured to ensure they did not do the same.

Identifying Barriers

Below is a discussion of the barriers identified by fathers, taken from the session notes made after the semi-structured interviews.

Work as a barrier

Thirty-three percent (33%) of dads identified work as being a barrier between them and their children, the same number that reported work as a barrier to their engagement with Flying Start services.

The clearest message articulated in this study is that hours of work are the biggest barriers that fathers face to engagement with their children and with early years services, including Flying Start. While talking to one dad he explained that the barriers are “*circumstantial*”. For instance he had been working away, which created a huge barrier to his engagement with the services and with his children. He felt levels of engagement very much depended on work situations.

Low levels of paternal engagement evidently affect the father too. One young dad explained that with his first child he was working a 60-70hr week, and that he simply did not see his son; he said that this had affected their “*bonding*”. Another young father explained that he also saw the predominant barrier faced by dads was work, and felt that service providers’ hours should accommodate the working hours of the dads to make it easier for them to be involved. As far as he was concerned, “*dads miss it all*” when they work.

During another interview it became obvious that the dad felt as though he was missing out with his children too, but due to the current economic situation he had no choice but to work long hours (sometimes 60 hours each week).

Another dad pointed out that not working can also be a barrier, for many reasons. He described his self esteem going down as his absence from work prolonged. He also advised that looking for work was a full time job in itself, and left him without the time or energy to engage with his children. Thus unemployment is also potentially a barrier to engagement with both children and Flying Start. Khan’s Fathers’ Involvement in Early Years Settings (2005) study identified work as a barrier for twenty-eight percent (28%) of those taking part.

Dad as a barrier

Fourteen percent (14%) of dads reported that dads themselves are a barrier in that some fathers adopted a “*traditional view*” and that childcare services “*were not for them*” (cited in: A Review of How Fathers Can Be Better Recognised and Supported Through DCSF Policy).

Khan (2005) finds the figure much higher; his study revealing the individual as a barrier standing at forty two percent (42%).

In conversation, one father suggested that it is dads themselves that are a barrier, explaining that Flying Start was *“too like school”* for many other dads in the area. Another father felt that some dads just couldn't be bothered to get involved with the programme. One argued that *“old-fashioned attitudes”* were used as an excuse both for non-engagement and for not doing more, but countered: *“you both made it so you both have to take responsibility for it”* (referring to the child). Another dad spoke of his peers not caring about their families, just themselves. However, another dad pointed out that it was more a matter of dads *“lacking confidence in themselves”* and their ability than not caring and not engaging; continuing that the best way for them to improve their confidence was to get involved, breaking down the barriers themselves.

Currently there is research being conducted into the effects of parenthood on men's hormonal balance (reduced levels of testosterone, etc) and increased feelings of depression. While talking to a father he explained the additional stress he felt during and after the pregnancy. He explained that he was worried about his partner's health, the increased financial stress of a child and the increased pressure of now providing the sole income. He explained that he felt isolated and trapped. He worried what would happen if he lost his job. *“If I don't like my job I cannot leave. I am more reliant on this job now and therefore my position is weaker”*. He explained that this all added up to feelings of powerlessness and created the potential for feelings of depression.

Experiences such as these are likely to lower self esteem and therefore make rising to the challenge of new parenthood less likely. Low self esteem means that any father is less likely to do a good/effective job and therefore increase mum's potential to experience the need to “gate keep” (explained further below). These findings would benefit from greater in-depth consideration and analysis with further groups of fathers.

Dads and work as a barrier

Another fourteen percent (14%) of dads felt that it was a mixture of work and the individual that created barriers, arguing that yes work can get in the way but it is up to the individual to make time, one dad stating that he had to *“make time”* because he did not *“want to miss out”*.

Lifestyle choices as a barrier

Barriers such as criminal activity, imprisonment and substance misuse were recorded as lifestyle choices for the purpose of this study. Obviously, the term “choice” is used in its broadest sense here, for many such barriers do not involve “choice” but (a perception of) necessity. Ten percent (10%) of dads reported “lifestyle” as a barrier. One dad explained that his *“peers drank too much, were involved with substance misuse to differing degrees, gambled money that they could not afford to lose and were involved in criminal activity”*. He confided that he too used to live a similar lifestyle, involved in criminal activity and substance misuse. However, once he had a child he likened his experience to “St Paul on the road to Damascus”, he realised that this sort of

lifestyle would end with him in prison and that he must change. He reported that being a father had changed his life. We may never see or hear from the dads that fail to experience this realisation but who share the experiences.

Another dad offered a similar experience as an example of the barriers faced, he had had a *“tough life”*, with his own mother being in and out of prison and misusing substances for as long as he could remember. It was his mum who gave him drugs for the first time and until recently he had been misusing substances and drinking heavily. He reports that it was having children that made him realise that he was going down the same road as his own mother, and he managed to get counselling at the Community Addictions Unit and is now on the road to recovery.

A dad from the west of the city also identified crime, drugs and prison and consequent poverty as a barrier that was more prevalent in areas such as Ely; *“you won’t find many dads to talk to around here because they are all in prison”*, he suggested. Many dads expressed negativity about the area they lived in, seeing it as a barrier to engaging, explaining that it was a negative influence on men’s lives. Leaving them not much choice in avoiding crime, drugs and violence. He explained that it was not safe after dark and that this created two kinds of psychology: one of violence and the other of avoidance of violence. There is a sense in which, for some fathers in these areas, engagement with services would be viewed negatively by their peer groups, and this too is potentially a barrier to engagement that Flying Start does not have the power to address. If a father has ‘status’ within the community and his peer group, he may not wish to risk that dubious position by being seen as ‘weak’ in some way if he engages with his child’s health visitor for instance. There is a strong message here.

It will take an enormous amount of effort to engage the fathers alienated by these circumstances, but if we wish to address the cycle of cultural deprivation and give the children of these fathers a Flying Start, then we would need to invest in developing work with them and sustain it. At the same time, we must be realistic regarding what is within our power to influence and what is not, as well as what is a reasonable level of investment for outcomes that may not be easy to measure.

Gender differences as a barrier

Issues based on gender roles and gender differences were identified as a barrier by fourteen percent (14%) of dads. These issues were multicultural and irrelevant of age. One dad felt that mum and dad have different roles, stating that a women’s role in life is to care for children and that the man’s is that of provider. However, he believes that each of these roles are of equal importance.

One dad commented that Flying Start catered more for women and that he felt that some child care staff did not *“take the man seriously”*. Although this is one of the more extreme views on the subject of gender, thirty-seven percent (37%) of those interviewed stated that they would be more likely to attend a play group specifically for dads. Therefore, gender is a barrier to engagement

for over thirty five percent (35%) of the participants involved with this study. Khan (2005) found the figure to be much higher at forty-two percent (42%)

Most of the participants have a traditionally male role of “provider” within their family nexus, but it appears more from necessity and work commitments than choice in many cases. For example, one dad explained that a father’s role is of equal importance to that of a mother, and that this presents a united front for the children and therefore provides stability and balance. Mums and dads have different skills to offer but it is this mix of skills that give a child the best start in life.

The issue of “gate keeping” is identified as a barrier by Sarah M. Allen and Alan J. Hawkins (1999). “Gate keeping” is the situation where the mother experiences reluctance to relinquish responsibility. Family matters are part of her identity so that by relinquishing control she feels as though she is giving up part of her identity. Khan (2005) identifies similar findings; the focus groups in his study highlighted mothers “gate keeping” as a constraining factor alongside that of the female-dominated nature of the childcare settings. This type of situation poses questions relating to the participation of men generally. It is possible that a lack of male participation reflects female reluctance to relinquish control rather than a gender bias in childcare skills. The report feels that this too is an area for further investigation.

Lack of information as a barrier

Ten percent (10%) of dads felt that it was a lack of information that was a barrier between fathers and Flying Start. One dad disclosed: “ *I would go if I knew what it was about*” when discussing stay and play sessions. This is reflected in the fact that forty eight percent (48%) of dads had no idea or only some idea of what Flying Start is. Again, this is of interest given the route through which fathers were identified to engage in interviews.

Issues of non-residency and housing as a barrier

Fathers are often only visible by their absence. In addition to the obvious pressures of being a non-resident father, there is the unreported pressure on non-resident fathers of state benefits. Housing Benefit will only pay for one bedroom rate for men regardless of whether or not he has regular contact or even shared custody of his children and regardless of the ages and sexes of these children. Current housing legislation (LHA) states that a single male is only entitled to a one bedroom council flat or will pay Housing Benefit for a one bedroom property if he is in private rented accommodation. Effectively this means that if a non-resident father is unemployed and on state benefits, he cannot have his child(ren) to stay overnight with him unless either he or the child sleeps on the sofa.

Thirty-three percent (33%) of dads in this study had children that they did not live with as well as children with whom they did live. This is a barrier to engagement on many levels. Of these fathers, sixty two percent (66%) saw those children on an irregular basis (once a fortnight or less). Those fathers are unlikely to be engaged with services relating to those children. To clarify, thirty three percent (33%) of the children indirectly involved in this study saw

their dads irregularly. Only thirty eight percent (38%) of dads involved with this study had regular contact with their children that did not live with them. This number will inevitably be much lower on a wider level or when looking at dads without children from a new relationship.

One dad explained that he has two children from a previous relationship that he sees every two weeks, and that this had implications regarding his engaging with services and the children as far as he was concerned. Another dad identified marriage breakdown as a problem for fathers engaging with services and their children, and where dad was not a resident it made spending time with children harder, and potential engagement with services almost impossible.

The “ex effect” as a barrier

Many of those fathers with children that they did not reside with identified their ex partner as a barrier to engagement, explaining that they were prevented altogether from seeing their children.

BME communities and barriers...

As Bhatti, cited by Syed Razwan (2002), points out: *“for those parents who did not go to school in Britain the education system is shrouded in mystery”*. The experience of the education system, of those parents, might also have an effect on the way they view modern early years services. Twenty-one percent (21%) of the dads in Razwan’s study came to Britain aged between 8 and 16. Of these, none achieved any qualifications and many reported being subjected to racism and a negative experience of school life. As Razwan underlines, many parents from BME communities are afraid to speak of services in a negative light in case it has negative effects for their children.

One father in this study explained that there is an added pressure of living in a western culture and being from Arabic origin, and that there can be tension where such differing cultures mix. For example, at the GP surgery, there is often a high level of tension between members of BME communities and staff due to cultural differences; although this didn’t bother him to a great extent, he had made at least two complaints but as far as he is aware nothing had been done. The researcher sensed that this tension was experienced in other situations but that the father did not want to admit this.

Another father, of Afro-Caribbean heritage, talked about additional pressures from his peer group and from society as a whole. He explained that higher levels of unemployment led to lifestyles that were not conducive to being a positive role model for children.

Notably thirty three percent (33%) of those interviewed from a BME community reported that their child’s health visitor did not speak to them at all. Given the multi-cultural nature of some of the Flying Start catchments, there is a need to ensure that the programme is working to combat any evidence of institutional racism. There could undoubtedly be further investigation into this issue.

Play Group and BME community – Barriers?

Does being from a BME community affect the likelihood of attendance at play group/stay and play? Fifty percent (50%) of the dads from a BME community reported that they would be at least likely to attend a play group or stay and play session and that traditional issues such as unrelated men and women mixing would not prevent their attendance. However the other fifty percent (50%) reported that their attendance would be at best unlikely. Fifteen percent (15%) of those suggested a fathers group would be more appropriate.

Barriers within Play Group

With regard to play groups/stay and play the fathers' comments are expressed below:

"I would go if it benefitted my daughter"

"I would go, no problem"

"It doesn't matter if it was all women, I wouldn't care. If you want to go you go"

On the other hand:

"I'm not sure, that (play group) is more for women"

"It's not likely, it's not for me that, I don't mix well any way. I wouldn't go to tell you the truth"

"It's very unlikely I would attend because I work all the time"

Dedicated Fathers Group

The report intended to identify whether a group specifically aimed at fathers would increase the likelihood of more dads attending playgroups/stay and play sessions. Below are samples of responses to the question: Would you be more likely to attend something specifically designed with fathers in mind?

"Of course if it was outside of working hours, the welfare of my child comes first"

"Yes, if it was on the weekends or something like that, or maybe one off days so I could plan and book time off"

"Yes a fathers' group would be a great way to improve things with your kids and score brownie points"

Ely Fathers First Group

Any report conducted about fathers in Cardiff cannot fail to mention the achievement of the Fathers First Club in Ely. The club was established about a year ago as collaboration between Ely and Caerau Children's Centre (ECCC) staff and a few fathers. It survives in the face of a lack of funding on the strength the staff's commitment to engaging fathers, and the willingness of

the fathers themselves to be part of their children's lives. The Flying Start Programme has also sought to support the group.

A founding member of the Fathers First group was extremely encouraging about groups specifically designed for fathers, listing many points about the benefits of dads having one to one time with their children, such as: "*it being crucial to your child's psychological development*" and that it "*develops fathers' confidence*".

All of the dads who were interviewed are very proud of what has been achieved at The Fathers First Club, stating that it is an outstanding opportunity for fathers and a superb club. "*The fathers' group is great,*" one dad explained, because it promotes dads involvement with their children. He also explained that now several of the dads meet regularly as friends and thus the group strengthens and promotes community as well as individual support networks.

Teenage dads

It is a commonly held belief that parenthood at a young age poses additional problems to maintaining the family as a whole unit and achieving economic self determination. Teenage parenting figures are rising again. The perceived and actual lack of career opportunities, magnified by the current economic climate, increases the likelihood of separation from the mothers. Young people more readily associate "*being a man*" with "*having a job*" and "*defending the family*" than "*being a good father*" according to Lewis (2000). A rise in unemployment figures increases the likelihood of living on state benefits. Under current housing legislation (LHA), under twenty five year olds are only eligible for the single room rate (£56), which renders it almost impossible to rent even basic accommodation. The current situation makes it particularly difficult for teenage dads to be present in their children's lives, despite the fact that there is a direct link between absent fathers and the need for crisis intervention at a later date.

The report conducted several semi-structured interviews with young fathers but none specifically with teenage dads. Although the report had contact and some discussion with teenage dads relating to the barriers they faced to engagement, not one agreed to be recorded. It appears as though the maxim "Fathers are often only visible in terms of their absence" rings true based on this experience, especially in the case of teenage dads.

Beliefs vs. data

The majority of fathers believe and identify work as the predominant barrier to engagement with Flying Start. However, the data recorded does not support this belief. Fifty two percent (52%) of dads interviewed were working yet sixty six percent (66%) have had contact with their health visitor. Additionally, nineteen percent (19%) of dads have already attended a play group, with seventy five percent (75%) of those being in employment. Therefore even though it is the fathers' belief that work is the predominant barrier to engagement with Flying Start, the data in this report does not reflect this conviction.

Thirty-seven percent (37%) of dads said that they would be more likely to attend a play group/stay and play session exclusively for fathers, which was more than double the number of dads that identified gender as a barrier. Here again the data does not seem to reflect the beliefs of the dads and it is apparent that gender is more of an issue and consequentially more of a barrier than participants recognise. Although there is a wealth of information that explores this, the report feels that it is an area that requires further investigation, particularly in Flying Start's eight catchment areas.

Thirty-three percent (33%) of participants reported that they have children with whom they do not live. The largest number of those, thirty-seven percent (37%) reported "*not often*" seeing these children. Here the statistics support the view that "fathers are often only visible in terms of their absence". The figures for this report state that thirty seven percent (37%) of that thirty three percent (33%) of non-resident fathers do not see their children regularly.

We must also consider that there is a much larger cohort of fathers who were not seen and did not take part. It is likely, based on anecdotal evidence that non-resident fathers make up a significant percentage of Flying Start fathers. It must be remembered that fathers who took part in this research already had a significant level of involvement in the Flying Start programme (despite so many of them saying they were not well informed about the Programme). They will therefore already be engaging with their children's upbringing on some level.

Non-resident dads without children in their current relationship are entirely under-represented. The chances are slim of capturing their attitudes in this report, linked as it is to early years services. This highlights the need both for further research and the development of fathers' engagement.

CONCLUSION

On analysing the data gathered during this research project, the figures lead us in a number of directions.

- The largest number of dads (33%) identified “work” as the main barrier to engagement
- The father’s role was identified as “very important” by 95% of dads
- The majority of dads (57%) identified it as either “very easy” or “easy” to get involved with their children
- The largest number of dads (45%) said that it would be “very likely” that they would attend a play group/stay and play session (although when these are offered they generally don’t attend)
- The largest number of dads (37%) said that they would be more likely to attend a group exclusively for fathers. This is more than double the number (14%) that identified gender as a barrier to engagement
- The majority of dads (52%) said that they knew about Flying Start
- The majority of dads (62%) reported that they lived with their children
- However, many dads (33%) had children from a previous relationship that they did not live with
- The largest number of dads (37%) reported that they saw the children with whom they did not live “not often”
- All dads reported to have attended the majority of the scans
- All dads reported that they attended the birth

In conclusion, the importance of fathers’ involvement and its benefits are generally accepted throughout childcare services; a view held both by professionals and parents alike.

The report has highlighted that the dads in the eight Flying Start catchment areas of Cardiff believe that a father’s role is very important. Some dads felt that they missed out on a father figure during their childhood and therefore were determined that their children had paternal support.

This report reiterates the widely held view that dads are a marginalised group, inhibited by:

- Early Years services themselves
- Their current and/or ex partners
- Their own beliefs and behaviours
- Peer group pressures
- Problems with work/life balance
- Housing

Many barriers to engagement have been identified, work being the most commonly reported. Interestingly in Khan's study (2005) the percentage of those identifying work as the predominant barrier is very close to our own (twenty eight percent (28%) and thirty three percent (33%) respectively; however, with Khan's study it was childcare services staff that were identifying barriers).

The report concludes that:

- There are additional barriers faced by dads from the BME communities in the form of cultural differences and language barriers
- Teenage dads face additional barriers in the form of housing law, potential lack of maturity, and under-representation, as well as economic disadvantages
- Non-resident dads again face additional barriers in the form of housing law as well as under representation
- The above marginalised groups suffer from a generalised lack of facilities specifically for them, or indeed even of services designed to promote their engagement rather than to obstruct it

The fathers spoken to revealed that gender issues are a barrier to their engagement but stated that this could be addressed by employing more male staff and using images of real dads to create a more father-friendly atmosphere in Flying Start settings.

We feel that this report has gone a long way towards successfully identifying barriers to engagement as seen by the fathers themselves alongside barriers highlighted by professionals. Furthermore, it is clear that within the eight Flying Start catchment areas, both dads and staff alike acknowledge the importance of a dad's role in their children's life and education.

AREAS FOR FURTHER RESEARCH

Whilst conducting the study, several aspects requiring further research were highlighted.

Teenage dads and dads that are young offenders

The Fatherhood Institute asserts that young fathers are among the most “invisible, marginalised and vulnerable parents in the UK” (The Fatherhood Institute, April 2008), highlighting the need for early years services to identify and actively seek to engage these young men. Fathers who are also young offenders are even more peripheral. These young men would benefit from support around parenting, even where they are non-resident. Time and resources aimed at them at this younger age would undoubtedly reap future benefits, as they are likely to have more children in the future. This report feels that this is an area that urgently requires further research.

Issues of non-residency as a barrier

This report spoke to fathers that live with at least some of their children, many of them being fathers of other children with whom they are non resident. This does not touch on those who are non-resident fathers of existing Flying Start children, and who are not in a subsequent relationship where children are involved. We would therefore recommend that it is essential to actively seek these dads and conduct further research.

Ethnicity

One third of the participants taking part in this report from BME communities spoke of their health visitor (and some of hospital staff) only talking to their wives. Flying Start needs to ensure that all staff are sufficiently aware of the potential dangers relating to institutional racism, and whether enough is being done to address this. We would recommend that this is given further consideration, although we are aware that all staff receive training on issues relating to diversity.

Gender Bias

The issue of the female parent, or mother, being seen as the “gate keeper” to early years services has a potential effect on levels of male participation and engagement. This raises the issue of whether or not a lack of male participation reflects female reluctance to relinquish control rather than a gender bias in child care skills. Although this is touched upon, the report feels that it requires further attention

The Welsh Assembly Government has identified the need to reach out to fathers and improve the services provided. Given the conclusions detailed above, there are wider issues to take into consideration regarding the role of each parent and how fathers understand their parental role when certain activities have previously been identified by childcare services as “mothering”.

The effects of unemployment on fatherhood and the identification of 'work' as a barrier for unemployed as well as employed dads is a contradiction which will require some analysis. Work as the primary barrier is the belief held by the largest number of participants in the report. However, the statistics do not support this. Motivating working dads to engage in their free time is an area that requires further attention.

There is an almost equal split between those participants that stated a clear yes to knowing what Flying Start is and those that had some idea or no idea. This needs to be addressed and therefore further attention is required.

Appendix 1

A Brief Flavour of Five Semi-Structured Interviews (anonymised)

DAD 1 aged 35 (Alan) from a BME Community

Alan is a stay at home dad with an eighteen-month old son, whose partner is training to be an accountant. During the course of the session the researcher witnessed him engaging with the health visitor in a very positive manner.

He and his son were observed to have a very close relationship with lots of love and affection shown. The flat was clean and tidy with safety precautions in place in relation to his child. He talked about the additional pressures of being a father of Afro-Caribbean heritage experienced from his peer group. He explained that higher levels of unemployment led to lifestyles that were not conducive to being a positive role model for children. Alan states that many of his peers drink too much are involved with substance misuse to differing degrees, gamble money that they could not afford to lose and are involved in criminal activity. He confided that he previously lived a similar lifestyle that involved criminal activity and substance misuse.

However, once he had a child he realised that this sort of lifestyle would end up with him being in prison and that he must change. He told me that being a father had changed his life as he began to imagine how his son would perceive his peers and the kind of influence they would have on him. He explained that he would walk to the shops or playground with his son and hear “*yes bruva*” from old associates and ask himself: “*are you my brother? What will my son think if I call these people brother? What effect will this have on his future?*” It was then that he realised he must break all ties with his past.

This father believes that your children are your ultimate responsibility in life. He also explained the effect of not having a father figure in his life; there was the occasional man in his mother’s life but never for long. He had a very close relationship with his mum, who gave him all she could but he felt that he missed out on a father figure to teach him what it was to be a man, and how to be a man. He is determined to break this cycle with his own children and to teach his son to be a responsible man when he grows up; to stay away from crime and know his own mind.

He also explained that his wife is ten years younger than he is, and he therefore encouraged her to have a social life and go out when it was possible, “*I’m more than happy to stay at home and save money, I’ve had that life, going out and that, but she hasn’t, so I don’t mind staying home. When I think of all the money I’ve wasted on partying it’s painful.*”

DAD 2 aged 52 (Ben) from a BME Community

Ben lives in Butetown and is not working at present. He lives with his two children, one aged two years and the other a baby of 4 weeks. The researcher observed him with his children and Ben gave the appearance of a

very proud father with lots of love for his family. A pleasant man who engaged well with the health visitor and the researcher.

Ben felt that mum and dad do have and should have different roles, stating that a woman's role in life is to care for children and that the man's is that of provider. However, he believes that each of these roles are of equal importance. His wife did not speak English and he translated what the HV was saying and the mums responses to this. He identified work as being a barrier to dads getting involved with their children. As far as play groups were concerned he was "*not too sure to be honest*", but may attend, but thought that this was more the women's role, although he did teach Arabic to young children himself. If the play group was exclusively for dads and presented as a chance for dads to take their children out and meet with other dads then he would be more inclined to attend.

He explained the added pressures of living in a western culture and being from Arabic origin; there can often be tension where differing cultures mix. He described the often high levels of tension in the doctors' surgery, for example, between members of BME communities and staff due to cultural differences. Although this didn't bother him excessively, he had made at least two complaints but nothing had been done. The researcher deduced that this tension was also experienced in other places, but he did not want to say this. However, on the whole he answered the researcher's questions honestly and understood them.

DAD 3 aged 44 (Chris)

Chris felt very strongly about professionals undervaluing the male role within child birth/care. He felt that he was excluded throughout his partner's pregnancy and does not have much faith in this improving when the family comes into contact with early years services. He told me that at antenatal scans he was not addressed and that the professional actually had their back to him. At The Heath Hospital consultant-led unit he felt that he was removed physically to the side lines and found himself thinking: "*do they not realise that it takes two to make a child?*" He explained that he was completely left out and that he learned more from the internet and magazines than from staff. He also felt that he was discriminated against and made to feel that it was too much trouble, because the baby was conceived by In Vitro Fertilisation (IVF). Due to the pressure on resources, there was internal conflict, from which he suffered negative consequences. He was, on the other hand, positive about his health visitor.

DAD 4 aged 28 (Dom)

Dom is a working dad who has a busy life but he puts his daughter as his highest priority. He stated that he believes that the question is not a matter of what would make it easier for dads to be more involved, but rather a matter of the fathers' own self-confidence. The best way for dads to improve their confidence is to get involved with the existing amenities available in the area to them and their children. Dom believes that it should be fathers making extra effort not staff.

However, this father believes it is not easy to integrate into the fathers group in ECCC because the group has been running for almost a year now. The fathers who attend have been there from the start and it is now a tight knit group. He has noticed that when new dads have come in it has only been for a couple of weeks and that they did not really mix but stayed on the margins of the group. This could be improved he believed if there was an allocated greeter that ensured the new dads felt included rather than letting them find their own way in.

In relation to his experience with his health visitor, Dom was extremely positive. He explained that during the first couple of weeks after his daughter was born his wife was very ill and had to go to hospital and the health visitor supported them through this. She also gave them useful “advice and encouragement crucial in their new role as parents”. She asked him questions about his daughter in relation to his new role as a father and told him about the fathers’ group. He enthused: “*we respected her advice and experience, and enjoyed her visits*”.

Dom was extremely encouraging about groups specifically designed for fathers, listing many points about the benefits of dads having one to one time with their children, for example: “*it being crucial to your child’s psychological development*” and “*develops father’s confidence*”. He identified average work patterns as being a barrier to engagement with Flying Start and believed that if transport costs were shared for low-income dads then this would make attendance at the Fathers First club more likely. “*I would also make sure that events are well publicised*”.

DAD 5 aged 37 (Ezra)

Ezra has unfortunately recently been made redundant and is therefore experiencing a high level of stress. Although in theory he has more time at home, he explained that finding alternative work is a full time job and that it is very stressful and therefore gets in the way of his family relationships.

Ezra believes that all children need both parents and that parenting experienced as a child affects later life as an adult. The researcher asked if he felt that our own relationships with our parents ultimately affect the relationships we have with our children. He agreed but stated that “*as an adult you are free to change and not make the same mistakes that your parents made*.” He had some idea of what Flying Start was but had no real contact. When asked how easy it was for dads to get involved with their children he explained that he felt it was “circumstantial”; he had previously been working away, which made it very difficult to engage with his children. Levels of involvement very much depend on work. Ezra attended a parenting programme which he found very helpful. Again lack of publicity was identified as getting in the way of involvement, as well as busy lives.

Appendix 2

Case Study – (Michael)

Michael is from the West of the City and is the father of two adult children from an earlier relationship. He is married with a baby on the way, due in late March. He has regular contact with his adult children and is very much looking forward to becoming a dad for the third time.

Michael is a qualified carpenter, but has recently given up his job. His wife has had a very difficult pregnancy and he has needed to take time off work to support her with regular doctors' appointments. He explained that every time he needed to take his wife to see the doctor this caused tension at work, even though he was making up the time. As the pregnancy progressed related difficulties became more complicated, and therefore the tension at work grew. Eventually Michael felt his position was no longer tenable and he handed in his notice. He feels that his wife needs him and this takes priority over work.

The couple had been trying to conceive a child for many years but had been experiencing difficulty. They used many holistic approaches before trying IVF. Several attempts failed before the first time they conceived; unfortunately this resulted in miscarriage. This also happened a second time and they decided to stop because it was too painful for them. They both considered adoption, but came to the mutual decision that this was not for them. After some years passed they decided to have one last attempt with IVF and conceived. This is the resultant pregnancy.

During the time spent with Michael, the researcher could sense his utter disappointment with the way in which he and his partner had been treated by staff at the Heath Hospital. In the midwife-led unit, pre-assessment unit and the consultant-led unit Michael felt his role as the father was completely undervalued. He explained that he was "never addressed directly" and at one time physically removed to the sidelines. At one appointment he desecrated the doctor turning his back on him and continuing the conversation exclusively with mum; Michael explained that he felt "*as if there was only one parent there not two*" and that he was completely left out.

Michael also felt disappointment at the way non-medical staff treated his wife and himself. He explained that he believes they were treated differently because their baby was conceived through IVF as opposed to a natural conception. He felt that non-medical staff acted as if they had been given enough time already due to the IVF treatment and that there was obvious 'internal conflict' between the IVF clinic and the birthing units. He feels that in addition to being male, this complex situation led to him being totally undervalued and discriminated against.

When asked about his contact with the Flying Start health visitor, Michael responded positively and stated he felt "*encouraged as a father*". Until meeting the health visitor, Michael explained that "*he learned more from magazines, books and the internet than (from) staff*".

When asked how easy it is for fathers to get involved with their children Michael responded that *“your salary dictates the level of involvement with your children”* as far as he is concerned. *“If you earn good money then you don’t have to work as much, but if you get an hourly rate then you have got to put in more hours to get a decent wage”*.

When asked to identify the barriers, as he saw them, to engagement with Flying Start he responded that it was *“down to the attitude of the fathers, low education and drugs and drinking that stops engagement. It’s all down to the individual. It’s to do with the attitude of the dads round here, preferring to go get some weed than take an interest”*.

The previously-stated statistics support this and also show the beneficial effects of dads’ involvement with their children both socio-emotionally and educationally. Michael feels that if we want dads engaged with Flying Start we have to involve them at the earliest opportunity and constantly encourage this involvement. He reported that it would be very likely that he would attend a play group/stay and play session and that although he would appreciate a fathers group he *“would not be bothered if the group was all women, he would attend anyway”*.

Clearly it is fathers like Michael who should not be allowed to be ignored or made to feel undervalued in any way.

Appendix 3

And mums...

Mum 1

Mum 1 attended a stay and play at the ECCC. The researcher asked if she had any opinions as to why fathers experience barriers in engaging with Flying Start staff. Her response was that she believes it is a lack of confidence or low self-esteem or a mixture of both when dad is not working. Due to the typical socialisation of men within society and their ascribed roles, the majority of men do not have the personal skills or confidence that would be needed to feel comfortable in a play group setting for example. This would be heightened where the father was younger, from an economically-deprived background or where education had failed.

Mum 1 believed that the primary reason was due to working hours; there continues to be an ethos in which the man goes to work and the mum stays at home, or if she does work then she still has the responsibility for any issues relating to children. She cited the current economic situation as leaving men working longer hours or unsociable hours and therefore further reducing the likelihood of dads having time to engage with said services. Her response to a query about the fathers' group on Saturdays was that if a father has a Saturday free then he often wants to rest. She suggested that if there was a mother and father group that this may increase the number of dads attending and would address the issue of dad wanting to spend time with mum and the children on the weekend as a family.

She agreed to ask her partner to complete a questionnaire and return it to the playgroup.

Mum 2

Mum 2 reflected Mum 1's opinions. She mentioned confidence and embarrassment as standing in the way of fathers. She also stated that the primary barrier was working hours: *"on Saturday its family time, maybe a mixed parent group would better. A dad's group prevents the family being together on the weekend, the only time they have together."*

Mum 3

Mum 3 mentioned work, social skills, education, confidence and self-esteem as barriers. She believed a culture of macho-ism still prevails in society and this too serves as a barrier.

Appendix 4

Focus Group

A focus group was established to discuss some of the findings so far and to explore three questions:

1. What makes a good dad?
2. Does gender matter?
3. How can we improve our services to include more fathers?

The group consisted of five dads whose ages ranged from twenty eight to thirty five. Four of the group were employed. Three of the five reported having divorced parents with no father figure themselves and that this was their motivation to be the best dad they could be. Although a structured opening was planned for the session the group went straight into a discussion of gender related issues, (which was going to be question two), and the facilitator felt no need to bring the group back to do an opening and therefore let the conversation flow taking notes and using a flip chart to note the areas being highlighted. For the benefit of the report the order of the session notes have been documented in the order of intention rather than order of occurrence.

Group Discussions

What makes a good dad?

The group felt that primarily being a good dad involved 'being there' for your children. One dad described how his own father would turn up every Saturday to watch him play football regardless of how busy he was. He explained that since his mother was disabled, as well as being the financial provider his father was also primary carer for the family. He explained that he felt as though his dad was always 'there' for him and that he aspired to do the same for his own children.

The rest of the group reflected this opinion; one dad explaining that he felt that he never had a dad to teach him how to be a man in the world and it was with this in mind that he intended to 'be there' for his children as much as he could. The group also felt that it was not enough just to be available for your children but also your partner. To be a good dad "*you have to muck in even when your tired*" being "*support for your kids but also your wife*".

Passing on your genes had nothing to do with being a dad as far as the group was concerned "anyone can be a father, can father a child. But to be a dad you have to nurture your kid." One dad explained that he had a son that he was not the biological father to but had "nurtured" since the child was eighteen months old. The group felt that indeed he was the dad and the biological father was not much more than a sperm donor due to his total lack of involvement.

Providing emotional support was identified as more important than financial support. However, providing financial support is also very important whether a resident or non-resident father. The group felt that only those providing financial support for their children should continue to have children.

Finally, the group felt that to be a good dad: “you should be a role model to your kids, give them something to look up to”. The general consensus was that fathers should lead by example; this may not always be easy or even possible but it should be a father’s intention and motivation.

Does gender matter?

The group progressed into a discussion of gender related issues in childcare services without any prompt. There was a very powerful message that came through from the group as all of the fathers present felt that they had been an “object of suspicion” when attending “parents” activities at some stage.

One dad talked of taking his daughter to baby swim classes and feeling as though he was viewed as a “pervert” for being there; being the only dad he managed to go twice before feeling so uncomfortable that he did not go again, not because he was the only dad but because responses towards him made him feel uncomfortable. He felt this not just from the mums who were in attendance but also from the staff. He developed this conversation and explained that there appears to be a “climate of fear” that exists in society and it is fear of being seen as a “weirdo” that prevents more dads getting involved and going to various groups. He believed that this influences staff too, and any dad that wants to be involved is treated with suspicion. The majority of the group empathised with this sentiment.

Another dad explained that his wife had a “rough time” in her post-natal period and was finding breast feeding “really difficult”. He found a group that was advertised as a family breast-feeding group and that dads were “apparently welcome”. However, when they arrived he saw “looks of horror” on the faces of the organiser and the other mums. He was asked to come in for a while and told: “then maybe you can go and wait outside”. His wife was in tears and he asked why he needed to go outside if it was a family breast-feeding group. He reported “feeling frustrated and very angry” and that his wife “was even more upset than before they went”. Every member of the group appeared to have had negative experiences of a similar kind.

The group expressed the idea that some mums and even certain staff members were ‘threatened’ by a pro-active dad. The facilitator introduced the concept of female “gate keeping”, which was felt to be “very real” by the group, some reporting experience of this with their partner.

The facilitator offered some of the findings of the report so far, in particular: fourteen percent of dads identified gender differences as a barrier. The group felt that this was unrealistic and that in fact gender differences were much more of a barrier.

How can we improve our services to include more dads?

Primarily, the group felt that society needed to improve significantly in its attitude to fathers before they could become more involved. The group felt that staff needed to be more carefully selected with higher levels of education required for staff. The group also felt that male staff would help dads feel more welcome and make their attendance easier.

In relation to groups for fathers, the group felt “that dads don’t know what to expect”. A way to combat this would be to establish “a website as a first point of contact for dads that could be interested”, “run by dads for dads”. They felt that this would hopefully ease the anxiety of attending for the first time.

The group felt that a male “greeter” at groups would make it much easier for dads to attend and create a much more male friendly environment. In terms of play group just for fathers the group felt that if dads were the committee members for such a group it would be therefore specifically designed and run by dads for dads. Publicity for such a group is of paramount importance as far as the group was concerned.

One dad came up with the idea of giving flyers about groups for fathers or parents to children. He felt that information for such groups coming from their children would be more effective than coming from staff, *“If the kids are keen then its more likely you’ll go”*.

The facilitator introduced the subject of images of men with their children and the potential of this creating a more male friendly atmosphere and asked the group if they felt that this held true. The group responded unanimously that yes this would make them feel as if it was a more male friendly atmosphere but *“they would have to be pictures of real dads not hippie tofu-weaving crystal-wearing men that are the typical images of dads”*. Although this sentiment was expressed with humour it was felt by the group to be at least partly true.

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