Fathers’ Involvement in Early Years Settings: Findings from Research

Tim Kahn
Pre-school Learning Alliance, London

Abstract

The research overviewed here aimed to discover the extent to which fathers and male caregivers in England are involved in early years settings and the factors that facilitate and/or limit their involvement. The degree of father involvement (both current and future) was gauged by means of questionnaires completed by staff (paid and unpaid) at 322 settings; eight focus group interviews were also held involving a total of 21 staff and 21 fathers. The results suggest that while staff recognised the importance of father involvement, fathers often did not feel comfortable in these settings. Staff from only six percent of settings believed that setting up activities exclusively for fathers was necessary. At the majority of settings (71%) activities were provided for parents in general and fathers were not specifically targeted. Interestingly, in the context of focus group discussions the idea of separate activities for fathers was viewed very positively by staff, suggesting a possible difference between practices of parent involvement in settings and staff views. A number of possible strategies for increasing father involvement emerged from the findings: (1) increasing the presence of men working in settings as paid staff, students on placement, and volunteers; (2) planning activities for fathers based on the interests of fathers within the individual setting; (3) understanding that different approaches may be necessary in different communities and with different groups of fathers; and, (4) staff needing to be aware that the language they use and the roles they assign to mothers and fathers and mothers assume (of being the primary carer) in the early years setting can be a barrier to male involvement. Recommendations from the research include: (1) providing staff with ‘what works’ leaflets and training; (2) staff training to raise awareness of gender issues; and, (3) addressing the gender imbalance in the early years workforce.

Key Words: Fathers, parent involvement, men in childcare/early years education

Introduction

Recognising that fathers have a central role in their children’s learning and care, the Pre-School Learning Alliance undertook research to investigate fathers’ involvement in
early years settings. The term ‘father’ includes fathers living in the same or different households to their children, stepfathers, grandfathers and other male caregivers. In England early years settings cater for children aged from birth to five years and include full- and part-time daycare settings, nurseries, playgroups, and baby and toddler groups. Members of the Pre-school Learning Alliance include all of these different forms of care. Settings may be run by local authorities (municipalities), by charitable, not-for-profit organisations and private businesses. According to the Alliance’s annual Group Membership Questionnaire (2005) completed by 2424 settings, 65 percent of Alliance member settings are charities and 22 percent are businesses.

In the private sphere of the home, men are playing an increasing role in the care of their children and, according to Fisher, McCulloch and Gershuny (1999), fathers who live with their children are “responsible for around one third of all child-care activities”. However, while there seems to be a shift by fathers towards greater involvement in their own children’s care and development in the private sphere, there is no evidence indicating increased father involvement in early years settings.

The UK government recognises that father involvement is good for children, as can be seen in the following statement in the recent National Service Framework for Children, Young People and Maternity Services (2004):

… positive involvement by fathers in their children's learning is associated with …. better mental health, higher quality of later relationships, less criminality, better school attendance and behaviour, and better examination results (p.69).

At the same time, the government recognises that policies and action are needed to increase the involvement of fathers in family services:

This National Service framework supports a cultural shift in all service provision to include fathers in all aspects of a child’s well-being (National Service Framework for Children, Young People and Maternity Services, 2004, p.70).

The involvement of fathers in early years settings needs to be seen within a context in which the overwhelming majority of early years staff are female. According to data from the Daycare Trust (Owen, 2003) between 1991 and 2001 the number of male nursery nurses remained at around one per cent. The latest figures produced by Sure Start (see Note 1) suggest that men represent under one percent of the workforce in playgroups and pre-schools (2004a) and two percent of the workforce in day nurseries and other full daycare provision (2004b).

Methodology

The research consisted of two strands. The first was to elicit information on the extent of father involvement and practices for encouraging such involvement in a large number of early childhood settings. A questionnaire containing 20 questions was sent to a
random 10 percent (around 1,400) of early years settings that are members of the Pre-
school Learning Alliance. The response rate was 23 percent (322 settings).

The questionnaire aimed to gain understanding on:

- The extent to which fathers are involved in early years settings, and in what capacity.
- How settings are involving fathers and how successful they are.
- The ways in which settings most want to work with fathers in the future and the support they need to undertake this work.
- The funding settings receive for inclusion work with fathers.

Analysis of this information led to the setting up of focus group interviews with staff and fathers to gain further insights into:

- What staff believe fathers’ perceptions of their early childhood setting are and what fathers’ perceptions are.
- What staff and fathers think of activities that aim to include fathers.
- How attractive staff and fathers think the activities provided by settings are for fathers.
- What staff and fathers would like to see provided for fathers in a setting; and how flexible staff and fathers think settings are in the activities offered for parents, and specifically for fathers.

This second strand involved running eight focus group interviews. Four groups were held with paid staff and volunteers. Three focus groups were held with fathers whose children attended these settings; it was their (female) partners who mainly brought their children to the setting. A fourth focus group interview was held with a group of fathers who all attended a father and toddler group: this was a parent and toddler group that was specifically for fathers and their children.

**Findings of Particular Interest from the Study**

**Recognition of the Importance of Fathers for Children**

From the questionnaire data, staff at 80 percent of settings had considered encouraging fathers to get involved in activities with children in the setting. Fifty-one percent of settings recognised that fathers played an important role in their children’s care and learning. This was echoed by staff in the group interviews with comments such as:

- It’s nice for children to see fathers coming. It’s different from just “daddy goes to work and then he comes home at night”.

- [Father involvement in the setting] is good for fathers and the whole family unit. … It would be much better for us [for fathers to be involved] and I think it would be better for the children because
obviously, [in such cases], we would know the whole family or the whole set up.

As a result of fathers’ limited involvement in their children’s early years settings, it is possible to conclude that fathers are not interested in their young children’s care and learning. However, the fathers who attended the focus group interviews had clearly made an effort to attend the evening group interviews, perhaps illustrating their interest in their children’s care and education. This viewpoint is backed up by their comments, such as:

It’s untrue to say we’re not involved in our children’s education because their education continues when they’re at home.

I think more blokes probably do want to find out what the kids are doing and have a look in at what’s going on and seeing what progress they’re making.

At the same time, in three of the four focus group interviews (excluding the group that catered solely for fathers and their children) the fathers gave reasons for their reluctance to get involved in the settings themselves. These were:

- Not feeling comfortable as the only adult male in a session, for example: “It felt a bit strange that you’re a bloke here and it didn’t feel immediately natural”.
- Being at work when early years sessions took place, for example: “There is nothing you could do to a toddler group on a Wednesday morning to get me to go [because I am at work]”.
- Being happy in the role of supporters to their partners in their involvement, for example: “[I’ve had time off work to look after [our second child]] so that the wife could come here. I viewed it as a way of giving my wife the chance to come here – because she needs the social interaction, to get out of the house, more than I do”.

This contrasted with the views of the fathers who regularly attended the father and toddler group (which met on a Saturday morning). Clearly they very much appreciated the availability of this group. Their comments included:

One of the reasons for going – particularly with [my son] – is that I didn’t know any of his friends, so I never saw him playing with other children, which was interesting and nice to see.

I work all week and I don’t see a lot of … [my older child] and it was a way of structuring doing that, knowing it was actually going to happen.
Practices and Beliefs Surrounding How to Support Father Involvement

At six percent of the settings some activities were provided exclusively for fathers to encourage and support their involvement. The majority of settings provided activities only for ‘parents’ (which in practice meant predominantly mothers and female caregivers). It is possible that staff completing the questionnaires felt constrained by the idea that all activities should be inclusive and thus open to all, even though this has meant that only a minority of fathers had got involved. Interestingly, in the focus group interviews the idea of separate activities for fathers was viewed very positively by staff; suggesting a difference between staff ideals and practices for parental (that is, mother and father) involvement in settings. Whether staff already believed that separate activities for fathers were needed (even though this had not been stated in the questionnaires) or whether their views on effective father involvement were changed by participating in the focus group discussion on involving fathers in early years settings is unknown.

Possible Strategies for Increasing Father Involvement

1. Creating Gender-Balanced Early Years Settings

Group interviews with staff suggested that the predominance of women working in early years settings and the female context of settings constrained father involvement. For example, staff said:

I think [fathers] feel intimidated because [the group] is all female.

It’s being with a lot of women – not the kids, they’re not the problem – it’s going into a setting where you’re being surrounded by women.

Well, I think [men] would be a bit daunted by staying in the session. They seem a bit worried that they’re not doing the right thing when they’re here.

This last quote suggests that it is not only the fact that fathers are vastly outnumbered by females in settings that could be difficult for them, but also their lack of self-confidence in their own parenting skills.

As stated above, fathers’ comments from three focus group interviews suggested that they were not particularly interested in attending settings for a number of reasons. One of these was that they saw settings as predominantly places for women (mothers and female carers, and staff). The father who said:

I’ve had time off work to look after [our second child] so that the wife could come here. I viewed it as a way of giving my wife the chance to come here – because she needs the social interaction, to get out of the house, more than I do.
I can honestly say that it never occurred to me that I should have the morning off and come [to the setting].

This contrasts strongly with views expressed in the fourth father focus group interview in which the fathers commented on how they valued their participation in the father and toddler group (see quotes above).

The evidence suggests that the presence of other men in the father and toddler group made it easier for the fathers to be involved. This is in line with other studies that have similarly pointed to the presence of males (whether staff or other fathers) being an enabling factor in encouraging (more) fathers into settings and becoming involved. For example, the Fathers in Sure Start evaluation stated as its first policy and practice recommendation:

Increasing the numbers and visibility of male workers at all levels to make the Sure Start environment more male friendly. Lack of male presence was identified as a key barrier to father involvement (Lloyd et al, 2003, p.63).

Fagan and Palm (2004) in their United States book, Fathers and Early Childhood Programs, state as the first of their Recruitment Principles:

First, we believe that program staff will be more successful if they recruit fathers to participate with a small group of men (p.188).

Further on they say:

We have decided that it is important to have male father advocates (i.e. coordinators of fatherhood initiatives) in early childhood settings. Male staff can be helpful in making fathers feel comfortable with the idea of participating in their child’s program (p.192).

More fathers may get involved in early years settings if there are more men working in these settings. In England there was a target of increasing the proportion of men working in the childcare workforce to six percent, but the target was dropped in 2004 as the numbers of men in the childcare workforce did not increase. However, without a new target the number of men working in the field is unlikely to increase. On the positive side, however, there are a number of projects underway (in England and Scotland), which aim to increase the number of men training in, and working in, early childhood settings.
2. Taking Account of Fathers’ Availability and Interests

From the Alliance’s Group Membership Questionnaire (2005) data on hours of early childhood setting operation, we know that groups typically open at 9am and close at 1.30pm, parent and toddler groups are usually the shortest in length from 10am to 12.30pm, and full daycare operates on average from 8am to 5pm. Only 1 percent of groups hold weekend sessions, representing only 21 of the 2,424 groups who took part in the survey. Further, settings were only likely to be open during term times in line with the school year.

Based on the above evidence it is likely that the majority of activities organised by settings in the present study took place during the hours of the setting’s operation and within the normal hours of the working week. A strategy to encourage (more) father involvement and for parent activities to be inclusive of fathers, who are typically more likely to be in full-time employment, would be for settings to arrange some activities outside ‘traditional’ hours. Staff in the focus groups recognised the value of offering father-only activities – perhaps on a Saturday morning when more fathers are available – as a way of increasing father involvement in early years settings. Comments included:

We’ve got a garden we have to maintain. We’ve had [weekend] working sessions where Dads have got thoroughly involved on the practical side.

It would be wonderful. [Fathers] would love it; they’d love it [a Saturday morning session for fathers and their children].

And one manager of a setting said:

If [a Saturday morning session] is going to involve more dads and get them in – make them aware of how important their involvement is – then I’d be willing to give [it] a go.

In planning to involve fathers, staff must also acknowledge the interests of fathers that attend. However, not all fathers, as men, can be assumed to share the same interests. In the questionnaires, settings reported fathers attending activities that were framed with their gender in mind (such as outdoor activities and sports), while others were more interested in general ‘non-gendered’ activities such as the Christmas nativity play. Other researchers, for example Auld (1999), have reported that offering activities that fit a father’s ‘comfort zone’ can make it easier for fathers to get involved in a setting for the first time. Auld interviewed 26 New Zealand fathers for insight into how to make parenting courses more attractive to fathers. She reported that the majority of fathers (24) thought that organising an activity for dads and kids only would be good, and one father commented that any activity should involve something that fathers are more likely to feel comfortable about such as kite flying, slot cars and duplo play with children. In Auld’s research, fathers suggested having activities at venues that they would feel comfortable in such as a rugby club, and to have male speakers, including prominent men in the community, talking about their fathering.
3. Being Sensitive to the Local Context

Fathers are not a homogenous group and thus their needs will differ depending on the local area, for instance, whether there is high unemployment, a high incidence of young fathers, fathers from Black and other minority ethnic communities or fathers in prison. So, for example, in the staff focus group in Horsham, one of the participants talked about a parent and toddler group she had been involved in, in the nearby town of Crawley. As she said:

If you went to Crawley the proportions are very different in Crawley. You’d probably find a lot more dads – with mums going to work. It depends on the area. … Blokes would be out of work … and you tend to get quite a lot of men [looking after children].

This is illustrative of the general point, that when it comes to including fathers – and other marginalised groups – in family services, local factors need to be taken into account. Jeffels (2004), in the recommendations that are included in her study for the Pre-school Learning Alliance Accessing Childcare Training and Careers: Including Black and Minority Ethnic Groups into the Childcare Workforce states:

Given that inclusion targets are impacted upon by … local factors – not least the demographic composition of the areas – inclusion targets should be context sensitive rather than generic (p.31).

There can be no ‘one solution fits all’ approach, although general principles may apply to attracting fathers from differing communities. Burgess and Bartlett’s guide to Working With Fathers (2004) and Levine’s Getting Men Involved: Strategies for Early Childhood Programs (1998) both underline the importance of consulting with local fathers so that any activities that are organised meet their actual needs.

4. Using Father-Inclusive Language

Mitchell and Chapman (2001) in their paper Researching with Men: Ideas and Strategies for Doing Better discuss the invisibility of men in the generic term ‘parenting’. As they say:

...as with all generic terms there is a danger that those people without a significant voice [in this case, fathers] become even more invisible (p.167).

This is the context for the suggestion that the term ‘parent’ is often read by mothers and fathers to mean ‘mother’ (see, for example, Burgess & Bartlett, 2004, p.19) Thus it would be useful for activities aimed at ‘mothers and fathers’ to be advertised clearly as such.
This viewpoint was backed up by two comments in the ‘father and toddler’ focus group interview where one participant talking of his experience in a ‘regular’ parent and toddler group said:

It’s the difference between not minding fathers turning up and wanting fathers to turn up … I felt very ‘tolerated’ when I went, not ‘wanted’.

Another participant, when talking about the need for parent and toddler groups (which normally meet on a weekday and are predominantly attended by female carers and children) to communicate to fathers that they are ‘wanted’ rather than ‘tolerated’, suggested that they could:

… have an invitation day where they’d invite all the dads along … maybe that group would meet on a Tuesday but then they decide, “This week we’ll meet on a Saturday and invite all the dads along as well, so that they can see what the group’s about”.

5. Understanding the Role Mothers (female partners) Play

From the focus group interviews with staff and with fathers an interesting finding was that mothers have a central influence in determining whether and the extent to which their male partners’ spend time in early years settings. As a father in one of the focus groups said:

I don’t think my wife would even let me get more involved [in childcare], to be honest.

Another father said about the Saturday father and toddler group he regularly attended:

Actually [it was] my wife who pushed me to go.

These quotes illustrate the fact that the attitude of female partners towards their children’s fathers to participating in setting activities influences the amount of contact fathers have with the early years setting. Thus any strategy that aims to include more fathers in early years settings needs to take into account the role that female partners play in enabling (or impeding) this. Settings will need to ensure that planned activities intended for all parents, or for fathers exclusively, have broad-based support from mothers and are considered by them to be important for their male partners and children.

6. Leaflets and/or Training to Develop Work with Fathers

Staff at almost two-thirds of settings (64 percent) indicated on the questionnaire that a ‘what works’ leaflet would be useful to provide guidance in improving their ability to include and work with fathers. Nearly one-quarter of settings (23 percent) wanted ‘what works’ training to be available for their staff. Written information and training alone,
however, are not likely to challenge stereotypes around the gendered nature of early years work, including attitudes and values as reflected in practices and interactions within settings, unless training in gender-awareness is provided alongside this. The need for this is not well recognised – only 11 percent of settings indicated on the questionnaire that a training session on gender issues would be useful. This suggests that settings believe that a leaflet or training course focusing on tips of ‘what works’ with fathers will enable them to attract more fathers – they viewed the provision of information on ‘what works’ as an immediate solution for a complex problem. However, evidence from this project and others (Cameron et al, 1999; Browne 2004) suggests that settings will need to actively challenge stereotypes around the gendered nature of caring and teaching young children as an essential ingredient to any programme in order to introduce lasting change.

Discussion

An underlying principle for the current research into father involvement in early years settings was to see fathers as a ‘resource’, rather than a ‘risk’. As Featherstone (2004) states, in discussing the involvement of fathers in family services:

[The] literature is usually set within a discourse which sees it as important to engage fathers. In particular the notion of fathers as resources for children and mothers is stressed and it is considered problematic that practice has, hitherto, not been based upon such a recognition (p.317).

Rather, it is the risks posed by violent and abusive men towards women and children that “has been a factor in the more general neglect of fathers by practitioners” (p.317).

It is perhaps the perspective that fathers were viewed as a ‘risk’, and concomitant fears of working with men, and the fact that family services have historically focussed on mothers and children that have meant it was not until the beginning of the 21st Century that major research into fathers’ participation in family services in England took place: a study by Ghate et al (2000) entitled Fathers at the Centre: Family Centres, Fathers and Working with Men. As they state in their introduction “we need to understand how better to encourage and support fathers in their role as child carers” (p.4). Their research was designed with the intention of “[highlighting] ways in which family centres can be made more accessible and acceptable to fathers as well as to mothers” (p.7).

This was followed by another large scale piece of research in England into father involvement in early years programmes: Fathers in Sure Start (Lloyd et al, 2003). The findings of that research reinforced the findings of the current research in that both identified similar barriers to father involvement and made broadly similar policy and practice recommendations.

Like the Ghate et al (2000) research, the current research was designed with the intention of making policy and practice recommendations to encourage settings to engage with whole families. To this end, following on from the research reported here,
the Pre-school Learning Alliance has set up pilot projects in approximately 30 early years settings to test out what appear to be the most effective ways of increasing father involvement – this will be reporting in Summer 2006. From Summer 2006 the organisation is piloting a two-day training programme on working with fathers for people working in and supporting early years settings. And the organisation is taking steps to ensure that its partnership work with fathers (as well as mothers) is embedded at all levels of the organisation.

References


Notes

1. Sure Start guarantees pre-school education and access to other services (health, family, etc.) for the children and families who live in the 20 percent most deprived wards (districts) of England.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Tim Kahn is an Inclusion Officer with the Pre-school Learning Alliance. He is co-ordinating a project to encourage a greater involvement of fathers in early years settings. His interest in the issues connected to ‘men as carers’ began when he became a parent in 1985 and since then he has worked with groups of, and written about issues for, fathers.