

## Introduction

Much is known about what to do and what not to do to successfully engage with fathers<sup>1</sup> in early years settings. Despite this, it is still a minority of settings which regularly have lots of contact with fathers.

Is this a problem? Well, it is if you accept that the home learning environment (HLE) is the key to children's learning and development, and that settings can support fathers in their parenting, just as they support mothers. What you do with children in your setting is hugely important. Research tells us that what parents - that is mothers and fathers - do with their children at home is even more important.<sup>2</sup>

It has been estimated that children spend less than 15% of their waking time in educational settings by the time they are sixteen.<sup>3</sup> This suggests that they spend up to 85% of their time in the care of their parents and carers.

As early years practitioners you have children's outcomes at heart. Improving children's outcomes requires working in partnership with their parents and carers. And that means working with their fathers as well as their mothers. Not only is it good practice, but in fact the law now requires all services to be equally accessible to women and men, mothers and fathers.

This handbook gives you the nuts and bolts of how to do that. It includes a checklist for you to see how you are doing, an audit form to help you know (rather than just assume) who comes to your door, an action plan for you to note down your next steps and some case study examples from others sharing how they did it.

Involving fathers in early years settings is part of the wider inclusion agenda which aims to include all groups that are under-represented in settings. This book will help you consider the issues that need to be addressed specifically when thinking about engaging with fathers.

However, the information provided needs to be read within the wider context of equality and inclusion. Thus, you could also read the Pre-school Learning Alliance publication *Embracing Equality* which will give you a wider picture of law and practice and *All Together Now*, an Alliance publication that aims to help settings institute a Single Equality Strategy

<sup>1</sup> In this book the term 'father' is used inclusively to mean all fathers and father figures.

<sup>2</sup> Desforges C with Abouchaar A (2003) *The Impact of Parental Involvement, Parental Support and Family Education on Pupil Achievement and Adjustment: A literature review* Department for Education and Skills. Sylva, K., Melhuish, E., Sammons, P., Siraj-Blatchford, I and B. Taggart (2004) *The Effective Provision of Pre-School Education (EPPE) Project: Final Report*. London: DfES and Institute of Education, University of London.

<sup>3</sup> Alexander, T. And P. Clyne (1995) *Riches Beyond Price* Leicester NIACE

## Why engage with fathers?

There is a lot of evidence that suggests that involved fathers are good for children, but before we look at the evidence we need to first address the ‘fathers versus mothers’ debate to make it clear that we recognise that parental involvement in children’s learning works best when mothers and fathers work together as a team. Mary McLeod, chief executive of the Family and Parenting Institute addresses this comprehensively in *What Good are Dads?*<sup>4</sup>:

*“The trouble is that whenever you talk about the value of a good mother, you may be felt to be denying the value of a good father, and vice versa. The simple but true answer to this reaction is that both parents are important to children. But to argue this runs the risk of a second reaction. Many families who are going it alone (often feeling betrayed, grieved or disappointed) feel that in ‘making the case’ for what they have not got - a good and present father - you are denying what they have got, a good family. Whereas the truth is that both mothers and fathers going it alone, like two parents, can succeed triumphantly, even though it is a hard road to journey.”*

The issue of involving fathers in early years settings is both a complex and emotion-raising subject. We will consider some of the challenging issues it raises later in this book.

### **What does the evidence say about the benefits of fathers’ involvement for their young children?**

Professor Charlie Lewis, who has been researching fatherhood in the UK for 30 years wrote in *What Good are Dads?*

*“Some studies suggest that fathers help particularly in preparing the child for the outside world and developing ‘social skills’. In one major study, pre-schoolers who had spent more time playing with their dads were found to be more sociable when they entered nursery school.”* (p6).

He made this statement on the basis of a survey of the relevant literature for a chapter entitled Fathers and Pre-schoolers in M.E. Lamb (1997) *The Role of the Father in Child Development* (3rd Edition) New York: Wiley.

Christina Clark of the National Literacy Trust (NLT) carried out a summary of research into the impact of fathers on children’s literacy called *What’s the point?* It found that a piece of research as far back as 1978 stated:

*“Children ... benefit in numerous ... ways from having involved fathers, including increased cognitive abilities, higher self-esteem and greater social competence. Overall, children are more likely to reap these benefits the earlier fathers become involved with their children’s learning.”*<sup>5</sup>

In the same NLT summary it stated that:

*“the lack of male role models involved in reading and other literacy-related activities during children’s early years is one of the possible causes for the declining rates of school achievement for boys.”*<sup>6</sup>

In a summary of the research into father involvement, the Department of Health and the Department for Education and Skills (as it was then called) concluded in the National Service Framework for Children, Young People and Maternity Services (NSF) that:

<sup>4</sup> Lewis, C. & Warin, J. (2001) *What Good are Dads?* Father Facts. Volume 1, Issue 1. London: Fathers Direct. (can be accessed at [www.fatherhoodinstitute.org/index.php?id=0&cid=740](http://www.fatherhoodinstitute.org/index.php?id=0&cid=740))

<sup>5</sup> Clarke-Steward, K.A. (1978). ‘And daddy makes three: The father’s impact on mother and young child’ in *Child Development*, 49, 466-478 (can be accessed at [www.literacytrust.org.uk/Research/fatherarticle2007.html](http://www.literacytrust.org.uk/Research/fatherarticle2007.html))

<sup>6</sup> This statement is based on findings in Wragg, E.C., Wragg, C.M., Haynes, G.S. and R.P. Chamberlain (1998). *Improving literacy in the primary school*. London: Routledge)

“... 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.” (p69)<sup>7</sup>

Professor Michael Lamb, one of the leading researchers into fatherhood in the USA, reminds us that ‘*fathers play complex, multi-dimensional roles*’ (p1)<sup>8</sup>. So, when we talk about father involvement, we are including such issues as fathers’ financial contributions to the family and their support of their partners as well as what they do (or do not do) with their children.

It must also be remembered that it is not just the amount of time that fathers spend with their children that is beneficial to the children, but that the quality of their interactions are of central importance. As Lamb and Tamis-Lemonda write in their overview of research evidence into the role of fathers:

“... students of socialisation have consistently found that parental warmth, nurturance, and closeness are associated with positive child outcomes regardless of whether the parent involved is a mother or a father.” (p10)<sup>9</sup>

### **Why engage with fathers in early years and family services?**

Professor Margaret O’Brien who, along with Professor Charlie Lewis, has been researching into fatherhood in the UK for 30 years, wrote *Fathers and Family Support: Promoting Involvement and Evaluating Impact* in 2004 for the National Family and Parenting Institute.<sup>10</sup> In it she concluded that there has been little research examining the involvement

of fathers in childcare and family support services and that the research that has been conducted in this area has tended to focus on mothers’ involvement. She does, however, highlight a number of studies into father involvement and finds that these suggest that fathers’ involvement in services seems to be a positive factor in their children’s development. An example of this is one study by Bakermans-Kranenburg and colleagues on early childhood interventions which states:

“... interventions involving fathers, as well as mothers, may be more effective in enhancing parental sensitivity and children’s attachment, than involving mothers alone.” (p25)

O’Brien’s work also finds evidence to suggest that father involvement in early years services can not only support fathers’ relationships with their children in the short term, but that it may also enhance their children’s later development.

<sup>7</sup> Department of Health & Department for Education and Skills (2004) *National Service Framework for Children, Young People and Maternity Services*. London: DoH. The NSF can be accessed at [http://www.dh.gov.uk/en/Publicationsandstatistics/Publications/PublicationsPolicyAndGuidance/DH\\_4089099](http://www.dh.gov.uk/en/Publicationsandstatistics/Publications/PublicationsPolicyAndGuidance/DH_4089099)

<sup>8</sup> Lamb, M. E. (1997) *Fathers and Child Development : An introductory overview and guide in Lamb M E (ed) The Role of the Father in Child Development (3rd edition)* New York :Wiley

<sup>9</sup> Lamb, M.E. and S. Tamis-Lemonda (2004). *The Role of the Father: An Introduction*. in M.E. Lamb Ed. *The Role of the Father in Child Development (4th edition)*. New Jersey: John Wiley & Sons

<sup>10</sup> O’Brien, M. (2004) *Fathers and Family Support: Promoting Involvement and Evaluating Impact* London: NFPI