Fathers’ Involvement in Early Years Settings: 
Findings from Research

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Terminology

In this report the term ‘father’ is often used to mean ‘male carer’, so can include fathers living with and apart from their children, step-fathers, grandfathers and other male attachment figures. Similarly ‘mother’ is used to mean ‘female carer’.
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Section 1: Executive Summary

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

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

It appears from observational evidence that when men set foot in early years settings as fathers, their role is often restricted to ‘gender appropriate’ activities such as ‘doing jobs’ around the setting or being involved in outdoor games and construction play. However, evidence suggests that children do better educationally, psychologically and socially when their fathers are involved with them (National Service Framework for Children, Young
People and Maternity Services, 2004; Lewis, 1997). Research has also indicated that it is not just the amount of time that the father spends with his child that is beneficial, but that the quality of interactions are of central importance (Lamb & Tamis-Lemonda, 2004).

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

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

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

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

- Fathers are involved in 40 per cent of early years settings. However, a higher proportion of parent and toddler groups (57 per cent) had fathers attending.
- When fathers attended a setting, three quarters of them stayed for less than 30 minutes. However, those fathers that visited a setting infrequently (less than once a month) were more likely to spend over one hour in the setting than fathers who visited more frequently.
- Over half of the settings identified an awareness of the importance of fathers in their children’s development as the main motivation for involving fathers.
- Two-thirds of settings were in favour of involving (more) fathers by encouraging them to get involved in general activities (open to both mothers and fathers), whereas only 6 per cent favoured activities specifically aimed at fathers.
• 45 per cent of settings had set up one-off, irregular activities to attract fathers, while 9 per cent had set up regular activities. The type of activity was unrelated to how successful that activity was perceived to be by settings.
• The two most significant factors impacting on increasing fathers’ involvement in early years settings that were identified by practitioners were fathers’ reluctance to be involved (42 per cent) and fathers’ work commitments (28 per cent).
• Almost two thirds of settings would be interested in a ‘what works’ leaflet with practical tips, while almost one quarter of settings expressed interest in training sessions on ‘what works’.
• Just under 2 per cent of settings had applied for funding to support work for including more fathers.

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

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

The findings from the first phase of the study indicated that it is valuable to directly elicit fathers’ views on their perceptions of fathers’ involvement in early years settings, the factors impacting on their further involvement and the types of activities/events that they would like to be involved in. These areas were addressed in the second strand of research which comprised four focus group interviews with fathers of children attending early years settings and four with staff/volunteers working in settings. The latter elicited views from staff and volunteers with the aim of increasing the Alliance’s understanding of the issues connected with fathers’ involvement in early years settings for staff/volunteers.
The key findings from these focus group interviews are as follows:

- Fathers and staff/volunteers agreed that the primacy of fathers’ economic roles – as breadwinners – and the culturally determined gendered nature of staffing and parental involvement in early years settings were key factors that limited fathers’ involvement in their children’s early years settings.

- Female staff and volunteers attending the focus group interviews were unanimous in wanting to involve more fathers in their setting, while a minority of fathers expressed an ambivalence about being involved.

- Fathers tend to be content to see themselves as supporters to their partners – where they have one – who are usually primary carers and are also more involved in their children’s early years settings.

- Fathers and staff/volunteers suggested a number of different actions that settings can take to involve fathers more in settings’ activities. These fall into the following categories:
  1. Encouraging a greater presence of males (staff, students, volunteers) in settings.
  2. Organising activities at times when fathers can attend, such as on weekend mornings, with the express aim of targeting fathers.
  3. When publicising activities that aim to include fathers, to use language that appeals to fathers and ensure that fathers know that settings are specifically keen on their involvement and not just mothers’.
  4. Organising events specifically for fathers.

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

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

- The quantitative data suggests that the involvement of fathers in settings is constrained by fathers’ reluctance to get involved (42 per cent) and fathers’ work commitments (28 per cent). Although one of the key findings from the qualitative data – that the female-dominated nature of settings was a major constraining factor – may appear to conflict with this, it may be that fathers’ reluctance to participate (the main constraining factor from the quantitative data) in settings is to a great extent dependent on the predominantly female nature of early years settings.
• As a result of fathers generally only becoming involved in settings on an irregular basis, they are generally unable to develop a more comprehensive/holistic understanding of their child and their child’s, particularly social, development.

• Settings need to recognise both that it can be effective to use the gendered interests that many fathers may have (such as sport and other outdoor activities) as a way of attracting them into settings while also considering the findings that some fathers may not share these same interests.

• The quantitative findings indicate that few settings would consider opening at the weekend and only a minority would consider activities specifically for fathers. However, both staff/volunteer and father participants in the focus group interviews see the value of offering father-only activities – perhaps on a Saturday morning when more fathers are available. – as a way of involving (more) fathers.

• Although the quantitative data did not find that the presence of males in settings (e.g. staff, students) encourages the participation of (more) fathers, the focus groups suggest – in line with other studies on other marginalised groups – that the presence of males (their own kind) will help fathers feel more relaxed in predominately female early years spaces.

• Mothers’ gatekeeping role in the caring for children was highlighted by the focus group interviews. It appears likely that the active support of mothers (gatekeepers) can contribute significantly to the involvement of fathers in settings.

• The broader issue of gendered appraisals of parenting contributes to many fathers lacking confidence in their own parenting skills and must be challenged as part of a strategy for encouraging greater father involvement in early years settings.

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

- Develop programmes and activities that are:
  1. Sensitive to the local context in which fathers reside.
  2. Sensitive to fathers’ schedules and their economic roles.
  3. Sensitive to fathers’ interests.
  4. Effectively marketed and advertised.
  5. Supported by mothers.

- Develop new terminology/language
- Gender awareness training
- Address the gender imbalance in the early years sector
- Develop father-friendly government policies
- Funding work with fathers.
Section 2: Background to the Project

The Pre-school Learning Alliance and male carers

The Pre-school Learning Alliance is a registered educational charity that links 15,000 early years settings and 500,000 children between 0-5 and their families in England. One of its objectives is ‘to enhance the development and education of children’.¹

The Pre-school Learning Alliance is committed to the involvement of male childcare workers and male carers in early years settings. However, despite the increase in the amount of time that fathers are now spending in looking after their own children, few males are involved in early years settings.

The charity decided to focus on the involvement of fathers in early years settings as part of the Alliance’s inclusion action programme. The charity felt that it might be more effective to target resources at the involvement of fathers in settings rather than conducting research on increasing the number of male childcare workers. This was for a number of reasons:

- numerous research studies have considered the issue of male childcare workers;
- the Alliance’s annual survey (Pre-school Learning Alliance, 2004) indicates that circa 5 per cent of the childcare workforce in Alliance settings are male (a figure which is 2-3 percentage points above the national average) but the Alliance lacked research evidence on the level of father involvement in its early years settings; and
- research into the involvement of fathers in early years setting is warranted because fathers are a group who are important to their children’s development and should be visible in early years settings.

If the Alliance is successful in involving fathers more in its early years settings, which we believe it will be, an indirect outcome is that this may in the long term play a part in generating an increase in the number of men choosing childcare as a possible training option and future career. However, the Alliance aims to increase the involvement of fathers in early years settings not only for an eventual aim of increasing the male childcare workforce, but because it believes that it is equally important for fathers themselves and children. It also reinforces the inclusion agenda that we support and actively implement in our settings.

¹ Pre-school Learning Alliance (2002) Articles of Association of the Pre-school Learning Alliance London; Pre-school Learning Alliance. Page 3
Section 3: Review of Male Involvement in Early Years Settings

It is generally recognised that few men enter the childcare workforce. This is reflected in the fact that the number of men attending Pre-school Learning Alliance courses has remained at around 1 per cent. Figures for September 2003 showed that only 209 were men out of a total of 20,822. However, although men seem to be absent from the public sphere of childcare, research evidence by Fisher et al. (1999) indicates that fathers who live with their children are actually much more involved in the private sphere of the home, doing about one third of all childcare.

The present understanding suggests that fathers appear to be spending more time actively caring for their children, yet this is confined to the private arena. In contrast to this, the job of childcare worker (especially for the under fives) is still a predominantly female occupation with circa 5.1 per cent of the childcare workforce in Alliance member settings being male (Pre-school Learning Alliance, 2004). Figures from the Daycare Trust indicate that 97.5 per cent of the childcare workforce are female, illustrating that more males are involved in Alliance settings. Furthermore, the role that men have within the early years setting often appears to be restricted to ‘gender-appropriate’ activities, thus fathers tend to be involved on management committees or ‘doing jobs’ around the setting such as painting and decorating. If they are involved with children in settings, they often get involved in ‘male’ activities such as outdoor games and construction play.

Thus, 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 of increased father involvement in early years settings. This is perhaps all the more necessary as the number of male childcare workers remains low; for example, figures from the Daycare Trust (2003) suggest that over the decade between 1991 and 2001 the number of male nursery nurses remained at around 1 per cent. The latest figures produced by Sure Start suggest that men represent under 1 per cent of the workforce in playgroups and preschools (2004a) and 2 per cent of the workforce in day nurseries and other full daycare provision (2004b).

1. Pre-school Learning Alliance figures – information correct at December 2003
2. Daycare Trust website
3.1 The benefits of father involvement to their children

In the second half of the twentieth century there has been a rapid increase in the amount of time that all parents, and in particular fathers, are spending with their children. This is most marked in the time that they are spending with their young children, i.e. under five. As Fisher et al. state in their report on British fathers and their children:

“Fathers of young children devoted less than a quarter of an hour per day to child-related activities in the early 1970s; now they account, on average, around two hours per day to this.” (1999: 3)

As Fisher et al. also noted, the increase in time that men are spending with their young children has increased “at a much faster rate than the increase in time that women spend with their young children” (1999: 3) though: “despite the growth, fathers are still only responsible for around one third of all child-care activities.” (1999, 5). Furthermore, evidence has indicated the value of fathers’ involvement with their children as it benefits children not only educationally but also in terms of their psychological and social development. In the National Service Framework for Children, Young People and Maternity Services it states that:

“... 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.” (2004: 69)

In a review of fathers and pre-schoolers, Lewis noted that studies had suggested that fathers were particularly helpful in preparing their child for the outside world and developing ‘social skills’. He referred to a major study that found that pre-schoolers who had spent more time playing with their fathers were more sociable when they entered nursery school. (Lewis, 1997)

Other research has also shown that it is not just the amount of time that the father spends with his child that is beneficial to the child, but that the quality of the 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.” (Lamb & Tamis-Lemonda, 2004: 10)
3.2 Involving fathers in family support services

As evidenced by the research aforementioned, fathers becoming more involved in their children’s upbringing in the private sphere of the home is beneficial to their children’s development. However, there has been little research examining the involvement of fathers in childcare and family support services. In particular, research that has been conducted on childcare and family services has tended to focus on mothers’ involvement. As O’Brien notes with regard to fatherhood in the UK:

“… most of the evaluations of parenting and family support have mainly focused on mothers and very few have compared the impact of a mother or father centred intervention on children’s wellbeing.” (2004: 24)

The research that has been undertaken – much of which has taken place in the wider field of family support services rather than in the narrower field of childcare – indicates that there are beneficial outcomes for children by involving fathers. Thus O’Brien highlights a meta-analysis by Bakermans-Kranenburg and colleagues on early childhood interventions which suggests that fathers’ involvement can be seen as a positive factor to their children’s development:

“those interventions involving fathers, as well as mothers, may be more effective in enhancing parental sensitivity and children’s attachment, than involving mothers alone.” (2004: 25)

Not only does the involvement of fathers seem to be beneficial in the development of their children’s wellbeing, but these benefits have been suggested as having a long-term impact. Thus, an evaluation of the impact of the Head Start programme in the United States described how the benefits of the interventions had an impact both on fathers’ attitudes and on their children’s development:

“Follow up investigations over six months after the intervention ended suggest that men continue to be more supportive of their children’s educational development and their children seem better prepared on education-readiness measures.” (Fagan and Iglesias, 1999: 26)

Thus, the research evidence to date suggests that fathers’ involvement in their children’s early years education is not only of value to their own role as a parent but may also enhance the quality of their interactions with their children as well as their children’s early years and later development.
3.3 Perceptions of men’s involvement with children

The issue of the potential dangers of involving men as carers, both as childcare workers and as fathers, has been addressed both in the press and by research (Cameron, 2003). However, these discussions sometimes fail to address the benefits of men being involved in the care of children. It is not the intention of this research project to focus on the issue of men as potential or actual abusers, but acknowledges that all those involved in childcare should be a part of a system which protects the safety and wellbeing of all children.

From the findings on fathers’ involvement, it is important to highlight the possible impact of fathers as carers not only with regard to the positive outcomes for children, but also on the social wellbeing of fathers and mothers themselves. Thus there is the opportunity for fathers to be involved in the milestones of their children’s lives and for mothers to experience fathers’ involvement as supportive to themselves as parents.

3.4 Examining the extent of fathers’ involvement – The Project

The current research project was developed to meet the charity’s objective of including fathers into the early years environment. The project first aimed to examine the extent to which and in what ways fathers were currently involved in early years settings. Second, the project wished to explore attitudes towards involving fathers more in early years settings, examining staff members’ thoughts about working with men and their feelings about the inclusion of men into what has traditionally been seen as a female space, and fathers’ thoughts and feelings about this.

The research also aimed to investigate how to develop the support necessary for staff and mothers to include men into early years settings with the aim of developing possible action plans in these settings.
Section 4: Approach and Method

4.1 Research aims
There were four main aims addressed by the first (quantitative) strand of the research. They aimed to discover:

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

This first strand elicited information in the form of a questionnaire to early years settings.

The second (qualitative) strand of the research was undertaken in order to elicit data via focus group interviews from fathers connected with early years settings and staff and volunteers in settings on the question of father involvement in early years settings.

4.2 Information gathering
The research hoped to discover the extent to which fathers are currently involved in early years settings and to examine perceptions of staff and fathers on the inclusion of males in settings. The research was conducted in two parts:

1. a questionnaire was sent to a random 10 per cent sample of Pre-school Learning Alliance members to identify the level of involvement of males in early years settings; and
2. focus group interviews were held in a number of settings to explore in depth the level of involvement and barriers to involvement of males in early years settings, and the attitudes of staff towards the inclusion of males. The reader should note that the two pre-schools that hosted the interviews were selected on the basis of the findings of the first strand of the research.

This report then provides the charity with vital information on the involvement of fathers based on the findings of the questionnaire and qualitative data which give an insight into the factors impacting on father involvement.
4.2.1 Quantitative Method

a) Questionnaires were sent to 1,400 early years settings that were randomly selected from the Pre-school Learning Alliance membership database representing some 10 per cent of all member groups. 322 completed questionnaires were received, representing a response rate of 23 per cent. This response rate may be representative of (or masking) the lack of activity with fathers on the ground.

b) The quantitative data was analysed using a statistical software package. The analysis examined the differences between types of early years setting and father involvement.

4.2.2 Qualitative Method

Eight focus group interviews were held, four with female staff/volunteers and four with fathers of children attending the setting. Three settings (one pre-school and two P&T groups) each hosted two focus group interviews, one with staff/volunteers and one with fathers. The fourth focus group interview with fathers comprised fathers who attended a father and toddler group meeting on a Saturday morning. The fourth focus group interview with staff/volunteers was composed of a group of staff from two rural pre-schools.

In three settings both a staff/volunteer focus group interview and a fathers focus group interview were conducted. This allowed for the direct comparison of what was said by staff/volunteers and fathers in the same setting. The pre-schools that participated in the focus group interviews were selected from those settings that completed questionnaires and indicated a willingness to participate in further research on this topic. P&T groups were selected on the basis that they had a minimum of four volunteers – this information was gleaned from the Charity’s annual survey of member groups (Pre-school Learning Alliance, 2004).

Each focus group interview:

- was monitored by the researcher in all cases;
- received similar information on the structure and purpose of the interview;
- used a four-minute clip from a DVD with images of father involvement with their children as the stimulus; and
- entailed discussing five themes during the course of the interview; they were:
  1. How is the setting perceived by fathers?
  2. What do you think of the activities that are on offer for including fathers?
  3. How are activities for fathers advertised as well as how are general activities advertised?
4. What would you like to see for fathers in a setting?
5. How flexible is the setting that the children attend?

b) After six focus group interviews had been completed, the researcher deemed it relevant to elicit data on the participants in the groups, particularly the fathers. Participants in the remaining two groups were asked to complete a monitoring form eliciting information on the personal, family, social and economic status of the participants. The convenors of the other focus group interviews were sent blank monitoring forms and asked to get as many participants as possible to complete a form. In total 62% of fathers and 67% of staff/volunteers completed forms. Three identical but separate forms were developed for fathers, staff/volunteers and the four people who convened the four group interviews (see Appendix 2 for copies of each form).

Each focus group interview was given an ID comprising a number and a letter. The number refers to the setting that hosted the focus group interview and the letter refers to whether it was a group of fathers (F) or a group of staff/volunteers (S). IDs used in the report are as follows:
- Hind Leys Pre-school fathers focus group interview (1F);
- Hind Leys Pre-school staff focus group interview (1S);
- St James Parent and Toddler Group fathers focus group interview (2F);
- St James Parent and Toddler Group staff/volunteers focus group interview (2S);
- Trafalgar Parent and Toddler Group fathers focus group interview (3F);
- Trafalgar Parent and Toddler Group volunteers focus group interview (3S);
- Fat Sams Father and Toddler Group focus group interview (4F); and
- Warwickshire staff focus group interview (including staff from Napton and Stockton Pre-schools) (5S).

Names of participants in the focus group interviews have not been used in the report in order to protect the anonymity of participants.

The focus group interviews were transcribed and analysed using the qualitative content analysis method. This process involves analysing the thematic categories which informed the direction of the focus group interviews (and developed during the research design stage) across like groups (fathers and staff) in order to identify similarities and differences across like groups on these thematic topics. The analysed data was then viewed and interpretatively analysed across the two main groups of participants to draw comparisons and view differences in how fathers and staff perceive male involvement in settings and
the barriers that impact on further and/or greater involvement of fathers in early years settings.

This report presents the findings and analysis from the data collected from both strands of the research activity. It provides the charity and other organisations and agencies with vital information on the involvement of fathers.
Section 5: Findings from the First Strand of Research: Questionnaire

5.1 Provision of responding settings
Of the completed questionnaires that were received, the proportion of responses from the different types of childcare settings can be seen as follows:

![Figure 1: Type of Provision](image)

Of those groups who responded, the majority of settings offered sessional daycare of less than 3½ hours. 11 settings (almost 3 per cent) ran a parent and toddler (P&T) group in addition to the other provision offered. Settings which described their provision as ‘other’ included crèches and after-school care.

5.2 Male involvement in settings
The questionnaire examined the involvement of males in early years settings in the following categories: staff, students, volunteers and fathers.

Overall, males were involved in one capacity or another in 56 per cent of the settings that responded, as shown in Figure 2.
Of those groups that had male involvement, three quarters had father involvement; this represented father involvement in 40 per cent of all settings overall. A higher percentage (56.76 per cent) of P&T groups had fathers attending. Note that those that responded may have done so because of their activity and interest in including fathers.

The percentage of P&T groups that had fathers attending (56.76 per cent) is much higher than the percentage of full daycare settings that had fathers attending (23.81 per cent). It is also higher than the percentage of all settings that had fathers attending (41.5 per cent).

1) Staff
27 settings reported that they had male staff members working in their setting. Of these only a quarter reported that fathers were involved in their setting. Where settings had male staff there was mostly only one male member of staff. Only one setting had two male members of staff.

2) Male students
20 settings with male involvement reported having male students. Of these, half reported having fathers involved in their settings. Where settings had male students they tended to have only one male student.

3) Male volunteers
The regularity of attendance of male volunteers can be seen in figure 3.
There was a relatively even spread in response to the four categories offered as to how often volunteers attended, whether it was: 1) several times a week, 2) once a week, 3) once a month or 4) less than once a month.

Of those groups with male volunteers, the majority of volunteers had been attending the setting for more than one year as can be seen in figure 4 as follows:

In settings that had volunteers, almost half of those volunteers attending stayed for between 2-3 hours, as shown in Figure 5.
4) Fathers

In settings where fathers attended, most fathers either attended settings daily (just over 40 per cent) or weekly (just over 28 per cent), so more than two thirds of fathers attended settings at least once a week as shown in figure 6:

‘Other’ involvement of fathers included those who dropped off/collected their children; covering for mums when they were unable to bring in their children; attendance at specific events e.g. sports day or Nativity play, or when asked to come in.

In settings where fathers attended, more than half of the fathers had attended settings for more than one year and nearly one third had attended for more than six months. In total
over 80 per cent of fathers had been involved in their setting for more than six months with the majority reporting involvement for over one year, as can be seen in figure 7:

![Figure 7: Length of fathers' attendance](image)

In settings where fathers attended, almost half of fathers stayed for less than 10 minutes with a further quarter of fathers staying for between 10 and 30 minutes. Almost one third of fathers stayed for more than one hour. Although two thirds of fathers stayed in settings for less than half an hour, almost one third stayed for more than one hour, as shown in figure 8:

![Figure 8: Time spent by fathers in setting](image)

Regardless of the length of their involvement with their children’s setting, those fathers who visited their setting less than one a month were more likely than other fathers, who visited more frequently, to spend over one hour in the setting during their visits.
5.3 Getting fathers involved

Settings were asked if they had considered encouraging fathers to get involved in activities with their children; the majority of settings (80 per cent) had done so, as can be seen in figure 9:

When asked about motives for taking action around including (more) fathers, motivations for undertaking such action are detailed in figure 10:

Half of settings identified as their main motivation to take action to involve (more) fathers the awareness of the importance of fathers in their children’s development. About a quarter of settings were motivated by a commitment to include under-represented groups. ‘Other’ motivations mentioned for taking action around involving (more) fathers were based on the personal circumstances of the families of children attending the setting, or
due to the policies of the settings; for example, several children had no dad at home, so enjoyed it when someone else’s dad helped in a setting; the need to support fathers who are primary carers or are looking after their children while mothers worked; and working in Partnership with Sure Start. A number of settings stated that all carers, male or female, are invited to become involved with the setting.

Of those settings that had already decided to take action to involve (more) fathers, their preferred activities can be seen in figure 11:

![Figure 11: Preferred activities for involving fathers](image)

Over two thirds of respondents preferred actions to involve (more) fathers by encouraging them to get involved in general activities (open to both mothers and fathers) whereas 6 per cent preferred setting up activities specifically aimed at fathers.

Of those groups who have run activities aimed at including fathers, the frequency of these can be seen in figure 12:
The majority of settings tended to run activities 2-3 times a year.

For those activities that were run, settings reported that an average of eight fathers attended each activity. However, numbers of fathers attending ranged from one father to 80 fathers depending on the activity.

The majority of settings rated the activities aimed at fathers as successful or quite successful (60 per cent), while the remaining settings rated their activities as either unsuccessful or not very successful, as can be seen in figure 13:
Of those who organised multiple activities, responses were equally divided between settings who reported regular attendance and those who reported irregular attendance by fathers.

Settings provided information on the actions they took and the outcomes achieved as can be seen in figure 14:

![Figure 14: Categories of action](image)

Almost half (45 per cent) of the settings reiterated that they were attracting fathers to irregular/one-off activities.

There is, however, no clear link between the type of action undertaken by a setting and how successful it was considered to be.

It is difficult to evaluate more specifically the different activities that settings ran that were aimed at including fathers and their success/lack of success. However, in the light of issues that are discussed in the second (qualitative) strand of the research, it is of interest to note that two settings specifically mentioned offering activities on a Saturday morning – and although they do not explicitly state that children would be involved, we can assume this is the case – and that one setting described these as “very successful, good attendance” and the other as follows: “many more dads attended”.

It is interesting to note that one setting, as a result of organising an activity in which a father participated, wrote: “witnessed a Dad with his own child and interaction with others and offered him a job in our Pre-School”.

30
In reflecting on what factors settings thought prevented more fathers from becoming involved in their setting, the following reasons were given, as seen in figure 15:

![Figure 15: Barriers to involvement](image)

The main factors impacting on fathers becoming more involved in settings were fathers’ reluctance (42 per cent) and fathers’ work commitments (28 per cent). Comments on fathers’ involvement under ‘other’ included: setting mostly used by women: (eg the setting runs a childminder support group which has mostly women, the setting is an Orthodox Jewish playgroup where segregation of the sexes is the norm); ‘most carers in the area are women’; fathers living apart from their children; fears of abuse of children by males; peer pressure; fathers not recognising what they can offer; and historically this has never happened.

Settings were asked to consider the ways in which they might include fathers more in their setting, which can be seen in figure 16:
About one third of settings would consider discussing how to involve more fathers, with a quarter who would consider organising one-off events for fathers. A minority of settings said that they would consider opening at the weekend (3.8 per cent). Other options mentioned by settings included raising fathers’ awareness that activities are open to all, and appealing to fathers to become involved with the committee or fundraising.

When asked what they would find helpful in including (more) fathers in their setting, the following responses were given as seen in figure 17:
Almost two thirds of settings favoured a leaflet with practical tips on ‘what works’, with almost a quarter of settings requesting a training session on ‘what works’ and just over 10 per cent who would find a training session on gender issues useful. ‘Other’ responses as to what settings would find useful included: a leaflet for fathers on why they are important to their children; funding for developing activities with fathers; and more male workers.

Of those who are planning to undertake (more) work with fathers the following actions were cited as areas of activity, as shown in figure 18:

**Figure 18: Types of work planned with fathers in settings**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Types of work</th>
<th>%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. father involvement in general activities</td>
<td>48.28%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. fathers showing skills to children</td>
<td>13.79%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. special events for fathers</td>
<td>10.34%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. join committee/fundraising/do ‘jobs’</td>
<td>10.34%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. other</td>
<td>1.72%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. planning</td>
<td>10.34%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. nothing planned</td>
<td>5.17%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Almost half of the settings planning on undertaking (more) work were planning activities aimed at all parents and carers. Ten per cent were still planning what they were going to do, and 5 per cent had nothing planned at the time when the questionnaire was returned.

Of all the settings that responded, just under 2 per cent had applied for funding around involving more fathers in their settings’ activities. Funding had been applied for from Sure Start and a local EYDCP. One setting had already been successful in receiving a £1000 grant for running a parenting class and the other groups were still waiting for a decision regarding the outcome of their application. Such a low level of applications for funding for work with fathers was expected, both because settings were unlikely to think of applying for funding for work with fathers and also because there appears to be little funding available for such work.
5.4 The current involvement of fathers in settings

5.4.1 Length of time fathers spend in settings

One interesting issue that emerged from the findings was that the length of time that fathers were present in settings depended on whether they were involved as ‘fathers’ or ‘volunteers’. Fathers tended to spend less than 30 minutes during a visit, whereas male volunteers were present for at least two hours on average. Observations of early years settings where parents are actively encouraged to stay suggest that mothers will stay for the duration of a session though they may not necessarily consider volunteering in the setting.

It is feasible and plausible that those fathers who spend less time in the settings are employed and thus are there in the capacity of dropping off and settling/collecting their children. These fathers then might not be able to participate on a daily level in settings but they could be involved in activities that are held outside of work hours e.g. in the evening or at weekends. Fathers who are not in full-time employment would be available to participate in sessions that took place during traditional work hours. If, however, they do not participate in such sessions, one would have to look for other reasons for their self-exclusion. One such reason may be that they would not feel comfortable in a predominantly female environment and thus choose not to get involved in settings. Fathers who frequented their children’s settings less regularly, that is less than once a month, often spent longer in the setting than fathers who attended more frequently.

5.4.2 Frequency of activities

Half of the settings that ran activities aimed at including fathers ran them two or three times a year with only a small minority organising monthly activities. These activities were often focused around particular events in the setting (such as sports days, outings and Summer fairs) and festivals that the children were involved in celebrating (such as a Christmas Nativity play). A number of settings held their activities/events aimed at including fathers in the evenings or at weekends in order for fathers to be able to attend. On the whole settings rated their activities aimed at including fathers as being quite successful or successful. The type of activity that was organised by the setting was not related to how successful or unsuccessful the activity was perceived to be by the setting.
5.4.3 Factors impacting on the participation of fathers in activities

There are a number of factors that contribute to how successful an activity/event aimed at including fathers is. One factor is how thoughtfully organised/advertised an activity/event which aimed to include fathers is. Thus one would need to consider whether the activity/event has been organised at a time when the majority of fathers will not be otherwise engaged, e.g. at work, and advertised in such a way that fathers are aware that it is taking place. Similarly, the extent to which the activities/events organised are actually of sufficient interest for fathers for them to wish to attend is crucial. According to the data, fathers appeared to make an effort to attend sports days and Christmas nativity plays. Another way fathers were successfully encouraged to come into settings was to ask them to talk with the children about their work. Finally, the attitudes of staff to fathers’ involvement, whether it is valued and whether their participation is seen as equal to that of mothers, impacts on the success of any activity.

5.4.4 Barriers to father involvement

The first strand of the research examined the factors that prevented fathers from being more involved in early years settings. The two most significant factors impacting on involving fathers that were identified by settings were first fathers’ reluctance to get involved (42 per cent) and second the work commitments of fathers (28 per cent). Other factors included attitudes of staff, attitudes of female users, fears of men as potential abusers, difficulties with estranged fathers and the cultural/religious segregation of men and women. In order to foster an attitude of inclusion in early years settings it is necessary to address fears and concerns regarding fathers’ inclusion.

For groups that have families from religious/cultural backgrounds that stipulate that the sexes must be segregated, the opportunities to establish separate activities for fathers and children, respecting in turn the rights and beliefs of these groups, are numerous. In other settings where segregation is not the norm, in order to examine and address reservations towards father involvement, staff and users may need to access/engage in gender awareness training.

Although involving fathers may involve or entail overcoming certain barriers, there are a number of ways in which settings can make themselves more open to men. This may mean acknowledging that fathers who work may not always be able to access activities run during the working week, suggesting that settings should be sensitive to this and organise activities that take place in the evenings or at weekends. There is a need for flexible childcare that would benefit fathers as well as mothers, in particular those parents.
in employment. Furthermore, there is a need to secure funding for such activities in order to develop flexible settings. The evidence from the first strand of research shows that a tiny percentage of settings (less than 2 per cent) had applied for funding for work with fathers. This suggests that settings either do not address this area of work – and therefore do not consider applying for funding – or they address the area of work but choose not to apply for funding for it. If they were aware that such funding existed, they might be encouraged both to address this area of work and to apply for funding for it. The National Service Framework for Children, Young People and Maternity Services includes the following radical sentence:

“This National Service Framework supports a cultural shift in all service provision, to include fathers in all aspects of a child’s well-being.” (Department of Health, 2004: 70)

Assuming funding is made available to support this ‘cultural shift’, then settings may be encouraged to work to make their settings (more) father friendly.

5.5 Initiatives to involve fathers

Settings were asked to think about the ways in which they would like to involve fathers more and to detail the ways in which they would wish to receive support for including fathers.

5.5.1 ‘Joint’ or ‘separate’ activities

The majority of settings were interested in setting up ‘joint’ activities for both fathers and mothers rather than setting up separate activities just for fathers. What is not known from the settings is whether there were any events/activities that were currently being held for mothers only. It may be that some settings aim to foster an ethos of integration and thus would look towards activities/events that include the whole family rather than exclude either mothers/fathers. This is a worthwhile aim, but in light of the current figures for the level of father involvement in settings, it is worthwhile encouraging settings to organise father-oriented activities/events. Such activity can tackle some of the factors preventing father involvement and promote the inclusion of fathers into settings more effectively. It would be of value for fathers themselves to be consulted in this process in order to ascertain what sorts of activities/events they would like to be involved in and whether they would like activities/events organised for fathers alone or whether they would like to attend activities/events arranged for both mothers and fathers.
5.5.2 Extending fathers’ particular interests
A small proportion of settings expressed an interest in running special activities for fathers. Activities which had been successfully run by settings in the past that were aimed in particular at fathers included involving them in designing/building a mini assault course, involving fathers in sporting/outdoor activities and getting fathers in to the setting to talk to the children about their work. The option of offering events at a time when more fathers would be available to make use of them, such as on a Saturday morning, was also seen as successful in attracting more fathers than usual. By offering activities aimed specifically at fathers, at times when fathers want to/can access them, settings can develop activities in a father-friendly environment enabling men to feel welcome in what is traditionally conceived of as a female space. These activities would also enable staff to develop better relationships with fathers and aid them to meet the needs of whole families and involve fathers more in all aspects of the setting, potentially tapping into a new group of volunteers and childcare workers.

5.5.3 Extending fathers’ involvement in irregular activities
In addressing the sorts of activities/events that might be successful in involving fathers, settings identified irregular/one-off activities as being more attractive to fathers. The activities that were currently organised tended to be focused around particular events e.g. sports days/outings/Summer fairs and festivals that the children were involved in celebrating. A quarter of settings said that they would consider involving fathers more through the aforementioned activities. By organising such activities specifically to include fathers, fathers can become more familiar with settings without having to commit too much time initially. Perhaps if fathers were to feel more welcome in the settings and become accustomed to pre-school spaces, then other more regular activities/events can be offered, again relating to what fathers would actually like to be involved with and bearing in mind their other (primarily work) commitments.

5.5.4 Fathers and parent and toddler groups
As a point of note, of the settings who had fathers accessing activities/events, P&T groups had the highest percentage of fathers involved with 57 per cent having fathers attending their sessions. P&T settings may prove to be a good testing ground for running pilot projects that hope to achieve and encourage more fathers to be involved. Similar to the way that parenting classes directed at women are aimed to raise confidence about their parenting abilities and skills, this may also be necessary for fathers and P&T groups offer a good opportunity for fathers to become involved in early years settings. However, one would need to be particularly sensitive to the reluctance that many men have of showing
any vulnerability, such as needing increased confidence or skills. A motivation for attracting fathers to settings that is based on seeing them as a resource is more likely to succeed than a motivation that sees them as a group to be included because they need support or ‘sorting out’.

5.5.5 A ‘What works’ leaflet and training sessions
Settings were keen to access help to support them in their work involving fathers, primarily via the use of a leaflet or a training session with practical tips on what works. The benefit of developing a ‘what works’ leaflet is that it is easily accessible for practitioners and can provide suggestions that can be easily implemented in all settings at little cost both in financial terms and in terms of staff time. The added benefit of having a training session for settings to access is that underlying attitudes can be addressed with practitioners being able to discuss any reluctance that they may have with involving fathers more, as well as having the opportunity to think about how settings can be made more welcoming for fathers. It is of value for settings to engage with fathers as well as mothers in order for settings to effectively work in partnership with whole families. Training sessions could conceivably aid practitioners in addressing the practical issues of organising activities/events which, for example, fit in around fathers’ other commitments and the need to raise awareness among fathers with regards to the activities/events being organised. Such training sessions could also address the crucial area of gender awareness in order to develop the sensitivity of (mostly female) staff towards addressing psychological barriers to increased father involvement in settings among staff, parents and carers.

5.6 Conclusion
The first strand of research considered current levels of involvement of fathers in early years settings across England to gauge the ways in which fathers could be included more in early years settings. There were a number of issues raised in the first phase of the research that have been directly addressed in more detail in the focus group interviews with staff/volunteers and fathers. In order to meet the needs of fathers and to provide activities/events that are of interest to them, it is essential to find out directly from fathers the ways in which they would like to be involved and how settings can facilitate fathers’ involvement.

Fathers are not a homogenous group and as such they have different needs that need to be addressed in terms of what they would wish to access and be involved in with their children in early years settings. The questionnaire did not include any questions on
fathers’ socio-economic status e.g. their employment or ethnic background, whether the involved fathers live with or apart from their children, whether they are biological or social fathers, or whether they are co-parenting or parenting alone. By acknowledging that fathers have a range of histories and circumstances which impact on their current needs, settings can more effectively target the inclusion of fathers and simultaneously meet their needs as parents. This would suggest that rather than roll out a single strategy for involving fathers it is more meaningful to develop guidelines so that individual settings can develop their own strategies specifically aimed at the fathers and their families who use the setting, with reference to their community and thus sensitive to the local context.

With regard to strategies that settings have for including fathers and encouraging them to be involved, there were a number of settings that did not feel that anything over and above an open invitation to all parents was necessary. Thus some settings noted that their activities were open to all, or that mothers and fathers were invited to participate in all activities. Although this is an optimistic view of equal access, unfortunately the reality of early years settings for many fathers is one of being an ‘outsider’, often being a single male in a female-dominated environment. What is needed then is something over and above an open invitation to attend activities/events, as well as an acknowledgement of the factors that prevent fathers from being involved by the staff, organisations like the Alliance and the government with the introduction of schemes such as paid parental leave for fathers.

Staff and parents need to be aware of their own role and their own attitudes in indirectly excluding men from early years settings. One setting had responded on their questionnaire that “Males are continuously allowed to help when they can”. The implication inferred here may be that fathers are ‘permitted’ to be included in the setting. Men might not be discouraged from being involved, but as long as they are not being actively encouraged to bring to the setting their skills/knowledge/experience as fathers, they remain an untapped resource to the detriment of children, families and settings.

Based on the first strand of research staff, organisations like the Alliance and the government need to consider making changes and activating programmes to make early years services more father friendly. Changes that might stem from such activity may result in more male staff/students/volunteers in the setting as well as help in making early years settings a more familiar place for fathers. For example, small changes can be made in the language that a setting uses when encouraging fathers to become involved. So, when ‘all parents are welcome’ is stated by a setting, mothers and fathers may not think that fathers...
are included. At least one organisation in the family services sector, Children North East Fathers Plus, has decided to use ‘mothers and fathers’ instead of parents for this very reason. Welcoming ‘mothers and fathers’ explicitly may have a positive impact on father involvement.

Although settings were asked whether they had any male students/volunteers attending, this was not related to the level of involvement of fathers. Some fathers may be more tempted to help out when a setting asks for ‘volunteers’ rather than asking parents to stay and help. What would be interesting to discover is how fathers perceive the presence of male students/volunteers in early years settings and whether this would make them feel more comfortable in becoming more involved themselves. It would be useful to explore the ways in which settings can become more father friendly in order to develop practical tips that are based on fathers’ actual experiences.

Settings, organisations like the Alliance and the government must address the diversity of needs of fathers whose children access early years provision and services, and thus organise activities/events that are of interest to all fathers. This might include setting up strategies to include fathers who live apart from their children and primarily spend time with them, say, on weekends or ensuring that activities for fathers take into account the particular needs of fathers from different minority ethnic communities. It is important to ensure that events are accessible to all and need to be brought to the attention of all fathers as activities that they might enjoy and benefit from.

The findings from this phase of the research indicate the need to elicit feedback directly from fathers regarding what they would wish to be involved in; this is addressed in the second strand of research and in section 6 of this report.
Section 6: Results and Findings from Focus Group Interviews

6.1 Findings from father focus group interviews

6.1.1 Father focus group interview participants

In total there were 21 participants in the four father focus group interviews. Of these, 13 completed monitoring forms. These indicate that all participant fathers spoke English as a first language and none categorised themselves as belonging to a minority ethnic group or were registered as disabled. 12 of the 13 were biological fathers who lived with their children and their partners, and one respondent ticked the ‘other male carer’ category. The majority of the fathers (8) were aged between 31-40, 4 were aged between 41-45, and 1 was aged between 46-50. All participant fathers were in full-time paid employment; 8 had partners who were ‘stay-at-home mums’ and 4 had partners who were in part-time employment. Only one female partner was in full-time employment. 11 of the 13 fathers classified their work as ‘professional’ and 8 were educated to university or equivalent level.

The family circumstances and the social and economic status of the fathers participating in the focus group interviews illuminate the findings below. This activity also indicates that further research needs to be undertaken to ascertain the views of fathers from groups that were not represented in this research.

6.1.2 How social and economic factors and perceptions of gendered parenting roles impact on father involvement in early years settings

Many focus group participants alluded to the fact that the majority of fathers are at work during the week when sessions in early years settings take place. A de facto result of this is that fathers who are at work during the week are excluded from participation. This is illustrated by the following quote from one of the fathers who attended the father and toddler group meeting on a Saturday morning:

“There is nothing you could do to a toddler group on a Wednesday morning to get me to go [because I am at work].” (4F)

A father from a pre-school reinforced this:

“For many people on conventional hours it’s not practical.” (1F)

However, some of the fathers participating in the focus group interviews suggested that government financial provision to enable and encourage fathers to spend more time at home with their children could practically and positively impact on this constraining factor. In addition, participants from a number of groups spoke of the alienation that fathers often feel when bringing their children to an early years setting. This was in part because the vast majority of people working in those settings are female and the vast majority of
people taking and collecting their children (and in some cases staying at the session) are mothers:

“It felt a bit strange that you’re a bloke here and it didn’t feel immediately natural.” (3F)

“You can go in there and you might be the token bloke. Poor sod, sitting there on his own!” (1F)

Participants in one group also suggested that some female staff – and it should be stressed that participants only felt that some female staff fell into this category – did not know how to engage with fathers:

“I found it amazing that even though there were quite a lot of dads doing either the drop off or the pick up, nursery staff just did not talk to us at all in the same way as they would talk to mums …, even though I was a regular person doing that.” (4F)

One of the fathers in another interview stated that the option to share in the care of his children “could be there more easily than I perceive it to be” (3F). However, the comments that the participants in the groups made, generally gave the impression that they were not particularly interested in being part- or full-time stay-at-home carers, though they would be prepared to take on this role if family economics required it. This contrasted with a view most clearly expressed in one group that: “[my wife] couldn’t wait to give up work …I would have done as well, but she wanted to do it. So that was that.” (2F)

The views expressed by the participants across all the focus group interviews showed that their female partners still made the decisions about and took primary responsibility for the caring of their children. Indeed, focus group participants still saw themselves primarily as breadwinners and supporters to their partners rather than co-equal carers.

Fathers in all the interviews systematically mentioned that they were interested in, and were involved in, their children’s education even if they did not attend their care and education settings:

“It’s untrue to say we’re not involved in our children’s education because their education continues when they’re at home.” (1F)

“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.” (1F)

But, as the second quote implies, it was not practical for most of the participant fathers to go into the setting because of their other (primarily work) commitments. Furthermore, they unquestioningly accepted the status quo in which their partners took on the role of primary carers for their children, including taking them to or staying with them in the setting. The participant fathers perceived their role as supporting their partners in their role as primary carers.
A number of the fathers indicated that they were actively involved with their children in the private sphere; this meant that they had to fit the time spent with their children around the hours when they were in employment:

“I do quite a decent amount of [childcare] but none of it is Monday to Friday, during the week.” (2F)

This suggests that the increasing amount of childcare that fathers now do (one-third, for fathers living with their children, according to recent research by Fisher et al., 1999) is primarily confined to the weekends, and perhaps in the evenings. Until settings take this more fully into account, they are unlikely to be able to involve more fathers in activities with their children, especially in areas where fathers are out at work during the week.

Fathers’ sense of marginalisation – some might call it self-marginalisation – from institutions that they perceive and experience as spaces for females and their willingness to take on the role of supporter to their partners in accessing these institutions impacts on their levels of involvement in settings. From the data elicited, it would be wrong to draw the conclusion that those fathers that do not get involved in their children’s early years setting are not interested in their children’s development and education in the early years, but their lack of involvement is connected to a range of factors, including their perceptions of their role as a parent.

It would be fair to assume that the fathers who self-selected themselves to attend the focus group interviews are fathers with a particular interest in and involvement in their children’s upbringing, whether they were able to attend their local setting or not, and with an interest in sharing their views and possibly exploring the relationship between early years settings and fathers. They would be more, rather than less, likely than most fathers to participate in settings’ activities and the fact that they feel and behave in the way they do, suggests that other fathers will feel similarly, if not more, marginalised.

6.1.3 Fathers’ views of early years settings
A view expressed across all three groups of fathers whose female partners took their children to an early years setting, was that mothers value their own participation in the setting – whether that means staying with their children at a P&T group, helping out in a pre-school or getting involved in meetings (such as committee meetings) with other parents (mostly mothers). The following quote illustrates this:
“Certainly, I know with my wife she doesn’t just come here so that the children can have a good time. She comes to playgroups because she gets something out of the other people as well. Otherwise she’s just stuck at home with the children.” (2F)

In one of the focus group interviews, participants talked about the P&T group that their female partners attend as a ‘no brainer’. The fathers did not see a P&T group as an educational setting and instead saw it primarily as a time for their partners to get together with other parents (mostly mothers) for a break from being with their children on their own, for some adult conversation and support, and for the children to have the chance to be able to play together. This suggests that different early years settings conjure up different images: P&T groups are seen as social centres for carers – females in particular – and children while pre-schools and nurseries are seen primarily as educational settings in which carers are welcome to participate.

Further, the fathers said that they (the fathers) did not specially want to attend the settings and were happy in the role of supporters to their partners in their involvement:

“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.” (1F)

“I don’t feel as if I need a support network myself.” (2F)

The father who took time off for work spoke for many when he added: “I can honestly say that it never occurred to me that I should have that morning off and come here” (1F). One father who has a rotating day off said: “I go and play golf [on my day off], so I’ve got to face the facts that I could decide to go to the toddler group if I wanted to” (3F). The following comment seemed to sum up what many of the fathers in the focus group interviews thought: “The main way we get involved is by asking [our partners] what happened, what our child has been up to” (2F).

These views reflect an underlying belief that early years settings play a role as support and social spaces for mothers who spend much of their time looking after their children unsupported and alone during the working week. The fathers expressing these views see their female partners as needing time to connect with other mothers, primarily for adult company. They do not see themselves as needing such a space because they have enough opportunities for adult time in their own lives. These views also reinforce the idea that they see themselves as supporters to their female partners, who have taken on the role as primary carers to their children, and some of the quotes even suggest that the father concerned had not even considered attending the setting. The evidence suggests
that fathers are happy to take time off work to support their partners and children to attend an early years setting, rather than prioritising the inclusion of such activity in their own programmes and daily activities.

6.1.4 Fathers’ views on their involvement in early years settings
What fathers either valued from the few times they had attended sessions, or thought they would value from attendance, were focused on their relationships with their children: “I enjoyed observing my child interacting with other children.” (3F) and a number of fathers acknowledged that this was an aspect of their children’s lives that they generally did not see at home:

“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.” (4F)

A father who had never been to the local P&T group said:

“I’d like to come once just to see what’s going on. I went to [another] one [once] … it was good to see K [my child] doing what he does.” (2F)

One father thought that coming to a session would help him focus on being with his child because: “[There are] less distractions if you are here as opposed to being at home” (1F) and a father who attends the Saturday morning father and toddler group added in a similar vein:

“I work all week and I don’t see a lot of A, [my older child] and it was a way of structuring doing that, knowing it was actually going to happen.” (4F)

These quotes suggest that fathers’ involvement with their children’s early years setting can act to reinforce and broaden the connection they have with their children. Seeing their child in the setting enables fathers to see them interacting with other children – something that they may not have seen when they are with their child at home – and allows them to focus on their child in a (to them) new environment, without the daily disruptions of home – such as the telephone ringing, the household jobs that need doing and children being engaged in their own, solitary pursuits.

One father made a point that was echoed by other fathers when discussing the idea of a special Saturday morning session that would be open to fathers (and mothers) who work during the week:

“My little lad would be delighted if I were to say I’m coming next Saturday and we’re going to playschool and I’m going to stay all morning. He’d be over the moon with that.” (1F)
So, attendance at a group may not just be something that adds to a father’s view of his child, but it might also communicate to the child that their father is wanting to spend the morning with them in their own space.

The fathers who attended the Saturday morning father and toddler group gave some additional reasons for their attending the group. One spoke for a number of others in the group when he said that his attendance: “gave my wife a break – she has [the children] all week” (4F). Another father acknowledged the support he got from other dads even though he – and the other fathers in the group – acknowledged that their primary reason for attending the group was to be with their children, rather than for male company or support. He said:

“I feel it’s really important for dads to be involved with the kids and I work all week and so I want to spend as much time with them as I can at the weekend. … It’s good for me to spend time with other dads. And I can learn from how they are doing things as well.” (4F)

Perhaps their attendance at such a group does mask a need for support and communication with other like parents, namely fathers.

When fathers do attend early years settings they do not say they are looking for support. Evidence suggests that the primary reason for their attendance is to focus on their children. A number of their statements indicate that seeing their child in an early years setting often enables fathers to see a side of their child that they have not seen before at home, giving them a more comprehensive and holistic understanding of their child. In addition, some of the fathers from the Saturday morning father and toddler group, saw that their attendance at the group gave their female partners – their children’s primary carer – a break.

6.1.5 Mothers as gatekeepers

In their own way, participants in all the groups acknowledged that their female partners – who were the primary carers of their children – had a decisive, if not controlling, influence over their (the fathers’) role as carers and their involvement with their children. This suggests that mothers frequently act as the ‘gatekeepers’ to caring for children and broader involvement with children. In some ways this is to be expected given that they do perform the primary care role in their children’s lives.

On the one hand, participants talked about how their partners would ‘filter’ letters brought home from the setting, only passing them ones that they thought would be of relevance or
interest to the fathers. In this way, letters from the Hind Leys Pre-school inviting male carers to the focus group interview (which eight fathers subsequently attended) were passed on by the people, usually mothers, who collected their children from the preschool. Without the support of these ‘gatekeepers’, such a large turnout could not have occurred.

On the other hand, gatekeepers can also limit how involved their partners are in certain aspects of their children’s upbringing:

“I don’t think my wife would even let me get more involved, to be honest.” (3F)

“My wife is a full-time mum and she very much sees it as her job, and it’s her world. [She might say] ‘I don’t tell you how to do your job, don’t you interfere with mine.’” (1F)

In this context it is interesting to note that – according to research by Swedish researchers Linda Haas, Karen Allard and Phillip Hwang into men’s use of paternity leave in Sweden¹, a country which has generous provision for fathers to take time off work to be with their children, and an employment culture which often supports this – fatherhood researcher Graeme Russell of Macquarie University in Australia says of the factors influencing fathers’ take-up of parental leave:

"Most important of all were negotiations between the couple, and the man’s own set of beliefs about fathering.”²

Russell further acknowledges the key part that mothers play in ‘gatekeeping’ fathers’ involvement in the care of their children when he writes of fathers who, in opposition to their partners’ wishes, want to stay home to care for their children:

"It’s a very rare guy who is going to be able to sit there and argue, ‘Hey, it’s my turn’.³

It seems feasible that one can view the findings of this Swedish research in the English context and relate it to father involvement in early years settings.

The partners of the Fat Sams fathers – fathers attending a Saturday morning father and toddler group – appeared to play a similar ‘gatekeeping’ role, though they were all encouraging of their male partners to be involved in an early years setting:

“Actually [it was] my wife who pushed me to go” (4F)

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“I am pretty sure I came with a certain amount of pressure from my wife as well, saying: ‘Well, wouldn’t that be a good idea?’” (4F)

And, as the following quote shows, the experience of the organisers of the Saturday morning father and toddler group shows that mothers generally encourage their male partners to attend the group:

“I’ve been recruiting for this group for 3 years and I have never yet met a mum who didn’t think it was a good idea.” (4F)

Despite the fact that mothers think this, and the fact that lots of leaflets had been produced and distributed through other P&T groups, very few fathers have ever attended the group. There may be a number of reasons for this: for example, it is possible that the leaflets did not promote the Saturday morning father and toddler group in a way that appealed to fathers, or mothers – despite generally showing support for a Saturday morning father and toddler group – may not have passed the leaflets on to their partners, their children’s fathers. However, the explanation that seems most likely – and one that participants in the Fat Sams focus group interview reiterated – is that it is fathers themselves who, for whatever reason, decide that a father and toddler group meeting on a Saturday morning is not for them.

6.1.6 Barriers to father involvement

Fathers’ daily patterns
As mentioned above, a major barrier is that fathers are often at work when sessions in early years settings take place. One father said: “My priority is to go out and work.” (3F)

Fathers’ isolation in early years settings
The fact that few males attend sessions in early years settings leads to feelings of isolation; so those that do attend are typically in a minority of one or two. Even when several fathers attend a group they often do not connect with other participants in the group, both male and female. A father, who attended the Saturday morning father and toddler group, talked about the few occasions when he attended a ‘regular’ parent and toddler group where there were a few other fathers. He said: “You don’t actually get the time to go and talk to them in a big group.” (4F)

Staff lack awareness
Some staff lack awareness as to how a male might be feeling in a predominantly female
environment – fathers felt this to be true both when attending ‘regular’ parent and toddler groups and when dropping off or collecting children from a pre-school setting. Only some staff were felt to lack this awareness. Some also did not appear to know how to welcome and even engage in simple, information-sharing discussions with fathers. One father identified younger staff without their own children as those who had most difficulties in this area:

“It was the more junior end of the nursery staff that just didn’t seem to be able to relate to dads at all. Most of them – I expect a lot of young women – almost certainly didn’t have children of their own.” (4F)

Irregular attendance
Fathers felt at a disadvantage not knowing others (both mothers and fathers) and only being able to attend sessions on an irregular basis. Getting to know others in a large group, for example a large P&T group, especially when there are ready-formed (primarily female) cliques was perceived as being particularly hard and discouraged fathers from wanting to get involved.

Fathers’ lack of self confidence as carers
Fathers perceived their lack of confidence in themselves as carers for children and their thinking that ‘women do it naturally’ as a barrier. These common thoughts and feelings fit in with the gendered view of parenting roles in our society. As an illustration, one father said: “I don’t think it’s a natural environment for any of us.” (1F)

Fathers holding themselves back from fear of being seen as a threat to children
Having the feeling that you may be perceived as a threat to others’ children might make some men feel uncomfortable about entering an early years setting. The following comment from one father raises a concern that is often not far from a father’s mind when he is in the company of young children: “I’ve got to be careful in this environment.” (1F) This is because the actions of a male are under greater scrutiny than those of a female for fear that he may potentially be a sexual abuser of children.

The questioning of a father’s masculinity or sexuality
Although this was rarely discussed explicitly in the interviews, there is a cultural assumption underlying the discussions that took place that early years settings are ‘female spaces’. Thus there is an additional hurdle in front of those men who are open to entering such spaces: the questioning of those men’s masculinity. In one of the father focus group interviews the following exchange about men working in childcare took place:
Father A  You were saying something like one per cent of people working in a pre-school are male and I wonder if that one per cent represents a typical bloke and therefore … this chap is … not necessarily representative of someone like myself.

Researcher A bloke’s bloke –?

Father A  – or is he in touch with his feminine side? (1F)

Just being aware of the possibility of such a questioning of an individual man’s masculinity and sexuality – bearing in mind women involved in childcare are unlikely to be questioned about their female and sexual identities – by either another man or a woman (whether that man involves himself in an early years settings as a worker, a volunteer or a father) can make a man think carefully about whether he really wants to get involved in a setting. This, allied with the underlying suspicion of a man’s motives for wanting to spend time with young children, provides a context for further inhibiting father involvement in settings.

6.1.7 Enabling factors supporting father involvement

A number of factors were mentioned that might make it easier for fathers to feel comfortable in the environment of an early years setting and thus be more open to attending. These were:

A changing social and economic context
A changing social and economic context which meant that more fathers were available – and thus could potentially get involved – when their children attended early years settings. Financial support framed by government legislation was suggested in one group as a means of increasing fathers’ weekday availability and thus making this more possible.

Including fathers in their absence
A suggestion was made for including fathers when, for practical reasons, they cannot get involved in the setting: an introductory pack about the setting so that they would know what was going on, in their absence.

A cultural shift towards considering father involvement in settings as ‘natural’
A cultural shift to a position in which both mothers and fathers considered it ‘natural’ for fathers to get involved in early years settings.

Increasing staff awareness of the experience of excluded groups
The following suggestions were made around the issues of increasing staff awareness of the experience of involving an excluded group (in this case, fathers):
1. Staff (and volunteer) training.
One father wanted staff to be aware that: “When a bloke walks through the door, [staff need to] realise he’s feeling in a fairly alien environment” (1F). Another spoke of the importance of staff recognising that they need to take an active role in helping fathers feel comfortable in an ‘alien’ environment. That father said: “[Staff] have got to be the ice breakers” (1F).

This was suggested in two father focus group interviews (1F and 4F) as a way of enabling fathers to feel more welcome in a female-dominated environment.

3. Fathers knowing that they are especially welcome, not just tolerated.
One father who attended the Saturday morning father and toddler group said, when thinking about a ‘regular’ parent and toddler group session he attended:

“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.” (4F)

Given that fathers have been historically marginalised in early years settings, it is easy and understandable for them to internalise a sense of not being welcome there. For a setting to communicate to fathers that they are particularly welcome can play a part in challenging their internalised sense of not really being welcome there. One possible way of communicating this welcome might be through settings that meet during the week holding an additional Saturday session for fathers. A father who attended the Saturday morning father and toddler group stated:

“They’d have an invitation day where they’d invite all the dads along … So 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.’” (4F)

**Familiarity with the institution**
Familiarity with the institution – the building and the people who use it – could be a factor in helping fathers feel more comfortable. The suggestion was made in one focus group interview of holding an event for ‘dads and kids’ when they start at the pre-school, based on the premise that when fathers know other mothers and fathers, they might feel less daunted about getting involved in the setting in the future. A father from a different interview talked about how familiarity with the building where the P&T group meets – his church – helps him feel comfortable.

It seems as if there are a confluence of barriers that work together to marginalise fathers in early years settings. Firstly there are the economic barriers – essentially fathers’ work commitments which generally coincide with the hours of early years settings. Then there
are the social barriers – early years settings are a predominantly female environment in which mothers seek social contact and support and some staff lack awareness as to how fathers might be feeling in this predominantly female environment and thus do not always know how to engage with them in a relaxed and effective manner. Finally there are the cultural barriers – where fathers (and perhaps mothers too) have learned that caring for children in the public sphere is still an activity that is carried out primarily by mothers and female carers, as well as the challenges to men’s sexual and masculine identities and their motivations for wanting to be involved in early years work. These cultural barriers are still in evidence despite the shifting cultural expectations of how much caring fathers should do and are doing in the private sphere.

Many of the above ideas for overcoming some of the barriers to involving fathers in their children’s early years settings involve actions that could be taken by settings with a minimal input of time and finance.

6.1.8 What activities are fathers interested in?

In the course of discussions a number of different ideas were mentioned as being of interest to fathers:

- One-off special events, such as birthday parties, Christmas parties (this was mentioned in a number of groups).
- Fundraising events (2F).
- Consulting with fathers (1F).
- Observing their children playing with others (this was mentioned in a number of group interviews).
- A session aimed at fathers when their child starts at the pre-school setting, which would then make it easier for fathers to get involved at a later date (1F).
- Special weekend sessions for fathers: fathers from one focus group interview in particular, now that a group of them had met and started to get to know each other, seemed to like this idea. Others expressed an ambivalence about weekend sessions: some welcomed the idea of irregular sessions whereas others said they would feel pressured to attend weekend sessions when the weekend was precious family time. This suggests that there are conflicting pressures with regard to how best to spend weekend time – at home with all the family or with young children in an early years setting? However, does this have to be an either/or choice or can it be both/and? The Fat Sams fathers were unequivocal in the value of their Saturday morning sessions and felt there was no conflict between their early Saturday morning start and a full family weekend. As one commented:
“If you want to go and do family stuff, you’ve still got most of Saturday to do it.” (4F)

Another opinion expressed in that group was that ‘family time’ can be used as an excuse. One father said:

“One of my friends said it’s important family time, but he goes and plays hockey instead.” (4F)

The Fat Sams fathers were, unsurprisingly, enthusiastic about the idea of fathers and toddlers meeting on a Saturday morning. One of the Fat Sams participants made the observation that around the country there are probably lots of church halls, empty on a Saturday morning, with locked cupboards full of toddler toys that could potentially form the basis for a countywide network of father and toddler groups.

The level of connectedness to other parents attending early years setting was repeatedly acknowledged as a factor impacting on whether fathers choose to become involved in settings or not. Fathers in the Hind Leys Pre-school focus group interview acknowledged this most clearly when they commented towards the end of the interview that they would be interested in weekend sessions for fathers now that they had started to get to know each other. Interventions that increase the connectedness of fathers to other fathers and mothers could prove critical in encouraging fathers to become more involved in early years settings.

6.2 Findings from staff/volunteer focus group interviews

6.2.1 Staff/volunteer participants

All participants in the staff/volunteer focus group interviews were female. There were 21 participants in total; of these 14 completed monitoring forms. 13 participants gave information on their ages. The majority were aged between 31-40 (6 participants) and 41-50 (5 participants); 2 were aged between 51-60. One participant was registered disabled. The disabled volunteer identified herself as Chinese and one other staff member identified herself as belonging to a minority ethnic group but did not specify. Two small village pre-schools (near Rugby, Warwickshire) joined together to comprise one of the focus group interviews; all other interviews comprised staff or volunteers from one setting.

6.2.2 Do staff/volunteers want fathers to be involved in settings?

Staff and volunteers from all interviews were unanimous in their desire to have fathers involved. This was summed up by one participant who said:
“We welcome them to come along. It’s nice to have a balance of different people coming really, not just mothers. That sometimes includes grandparents – and we have had some granddads.” (3S)

Participants gave a number of different reasons for valuing the involvement of fathers in early years settings. Firstly, it was acknowledged that the number of children growing up in families without a father living in the home is increasing and that father involvement in settings would be particularly valuable for children growing up in such family circumstances, particularly where they do not see their fathers:

“It’s very helpful because there are unfortunately a lot of one parent families who are usually [headed by a] female, and to have a father around [in the setting] that can play with [and] get involved with the children is very important.” (2S)

It was acknowledged by staff that children particularly enjoy an adult male playing with them:

“If it’s a Dad working with them in the setting, the children get so excited. They all want him to read, they all want him to play, they all want him outside in the garden doing things. They just enjoy it so much.”

The importance of male role-modelling was specifically mentioned in one group and described as follows:

“We have had dads come and get involved and straight away. It alters the dynamics of what’s going on. The dad might get down on the floor and then there might be more boys involved than there'd normally be, and it just changes everything.” (1S)

‘Male role modelling’ is a difficult term to unpack. How should a male role model behave? Should he do the kind of things that men are traditionally identified with, such as the DIY or outdoor sports? Or should he make a conscious effort to challenge male stereotypes by behaving in unconventionally male ways? Whatever male role modelling entails, it was clear that participants in all of the focus group interviews valued the involvement of fathers, in part because they could serve as ‘male role models’. Nonetheless, the importance of children seeing their fathers (and men in general) in non-stereotypical roles and places was also considered important:

“I just think 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.’” (2S)

The following quote illustrates the importance that practitioners attach to father inclusion:

“[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.” (2S)
6.2.3 Constraints on father involvement in settings

Constraints on father involvement can be divided into two. Firstly, constraints that are external to the setting and where the setting has to adapt to the external reality. Secondly, constraints over which the setting has some control and, through changing its practice, may be able to overcome lack of involvement and engage more successfully with fathers.

The following quote sums up the attitude that many participants had about father involvement:

“They’d like to come, wouldn’t they, but they haven’t got the time or they’ve got to go to work. But I think a lot of them would prefer to come and be part of us and see what the children do.” (1S)

So, at the same time as staff/volunteer participants clearly wanted father involvement in the settings – and this quote also shows a recognition that fathers themselves would, all other things being equal, choose to be involved in settings – they also recognised the significant constraints on father involvement.

Participants in the Horsham P&T group discussed the fact that in some areas more fathers are available to attend P&T groups, perhaps because of higher levels of male unemployment in the area, meaning that more fathers are at home with their children during weekdays:

“In Crawley [a town close to Horsham] you’d probably find a lot more dads [at home with their children and thus able to attend P&T groups] – with mums going to work. It depends on the area. I lived in Norbury [in South London] and our mums and tods [sic] was half [male] and half [female], … A lot more … blokes would be out of work because [there’s] quite a bit [of] unemployment and you tend to get quite a lot of men [looking after children]. (3S)

The major constraint mentioned by all settings was the primary role of fathers as breadwinners in their families although it was acknowledged that this is changing slowly:

“A lot of people will see men’s role as going out to work, earning the money, coming home and, you know, the wife and the female being home and looking after the children and getting everything done. But I do think it’s changing slowly.” (2S)

It was mentioned that more men are around at the start of the morning session in the early years setting than in previous years, perhaps because of flexible working schedules:

“There are fathers who drop their children off at pre-school. That has changed as well, so you would think that possibly they might be at home if they were working shifts or something.” (5S)

and in another group one participant said:
“We’ve had some fathers who’ve come when their shift [allows it]. They’ve come when they’re off, and then the wife comes the other week.” (3S)

The predominantly female environment of settings was seen by participants in all the groups as deterring fathers from getting involved. The following statements are representative of this:

“I think they feel intimidated because it is all female.” (2S)

“… 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.” (5S)

“Well, I think they 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.” (1S)

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

In a similar vein, staff and volunteers in two groups acknowledged that fathers found ‘networking’ more difficult than mothers.

“I think it comes naturally for women. You go into a group and you start talking about your children and whatever. It doesn’t come naturally to men.” (2S)

“Women do lots more talk.” (1S)

A number of other factors were mentioned that compounded this issue. Fathers imagined that mothers already knew others in the group and that their own discomfort was not shared by mothers. However, this may well be imagined. As one participant said, remembering back to when she first went to a group with her toddler:

“As a mum myself when I first went to toddler group I was terrified. I didn’t know anyone.” (2S)

In both P&T groups volunteers said that fathers often came in on their own. Thus:

“The fathers I’ve seen come in more or less on their own.” (3S)

“The fathers are nearly always alone. That is a very big thing. Sometimes we’ve got, say, 70 parents here. Most of them are female and for a man, or even two men, to walk into that situation is not easy.” (2S)

Interestingly, this contrasts with female users who often come with others:

“Well, they seldom come alone, the girls, anyway. They nearly always come with a friend.” (2S)
Fathers attend irregularly and so do not have opportunities to get to know the others who are bringing or staying with their children:

“If they come – say, for instance, they’ve got a week’s holiday – it might be another six months before they come again.” (3S)

Also, if they are away from home during the week, they are unlikely to become part of a network with other local carers and their children.

The prominence of such networks is clear when observing mothers attending P&T groups who immediately go and join their friends.

“They say hello and then they go and find their friends…. They’ve more or less ignored the rest of the folks in the group because they’re catching up.” (3S)

As fathers may not know others in the group, they can easily feel (and be) left out of such networks especially in a large group, and find it difficult to enter into such networks. This is particularly important when we consider that many fathers may not find it easy to engage in conversation with mothers because of what others might think:

“It probably feels weird for a woman to actually sit and talk with a man…. You might have someone else thinking: ‘Mmm, she’s flirty. Why’s she talking to him?’” (3S)

This suggests that fathers, if they are active participants in early years settings, may be excluded from contact with the majority of participants because of the fear that there may be sexual tension between them and female carers. Thus, self-marginalisation may be a result of not wanting to upset the dynamics within a setting.

Another constraint mentioned was that some families do not want to send their children to an early years setting where there is a male worker. The person who talked about this, who was in fact the local P&T group development worker, stated that she particularly encountered this attitude in affluent white communities:

“There are people out there with really, really harsh views and as much as males would probably want to come forward, they’re not being given the chance or the opportunity to.” (2S)

Presumably, if these families do not want their children to attend a setting with a male worker, then they would not welcome the involvement of fathers. Interestingly, in this participant’s view this attitude was less prevalent in ethnically mixed and disadvantaged communities.

One setting, when invited to talk about whether female users would lose out with fathers entering into traditionally female spaces, did not take up the opportunity, and none of the
other settings appeared to consider this an important enough issue to address. Thus, for staff participants, it does not appear to be a major concern in the current climate.

However, the early years of the pre-school playgroups movement coincided with the beginning of the women’s movement (i.e., 1960s and 1970s), and playgroups – as they were then called – served an important role as all-female nurturing grounds for mothers who first entered them as users, developed their self-confidence and then went on to train either as childcare workers or embarked on other career trajectories. Since a large number of women have now grown in self-confidence and become so much more independent, both economically and socially, focus group participants presumably no longer saw a need for early years settings to fill this role and be exclusively female spaces.

On the other hand, mothers may still want to be centrally involved in the activities of the setting. If they have to make a choice between whether they or their partners are involved, they may want to continue to be involved themselves and prefer to see their male partners as supporters of their involvement. This is illustrated by the following quote about involvement on the committee. It may also hold true equally for some of the settings’ activities in which children are involved:

“I think we are getting more women on the committee because fathers tend to babysit the children [so] the mothers can get out [to meetings]. And I think the mothers want to be part of it and don’t want to miss anything, so they wouldn’t let — well I wouldn’t say they wouldn’t let the husbands come — but because they come in here every day they want to know what’s going on. So if they come, the husband has to look after the child ... (1S)

This quote also suggests that fathers are prepared to support their partners’ involvement in the setting rather than demand an equal role to their partners in the setting.

6.2.4 Actions that might encourage father involvement
Apart from the constraints posed by fathers’ breadwinner roles in families, and the cultural constraints as to what childcare tasks are seen as appropriate for each gender – both of which are beyond the power of individual settings to change – participants recognised that there were a number of actions that settings could take to facilitate greater father involvement. Furthermore, many of the changes that they suggested could be introduced with little additional demand on a setting’s resources, as is evidenced by the suggestions below:
Increase the number of males in early years settings

“If there were more men working in pre-schools, you would probably get more fathers coming in to help.” (5S)

“If they see one man there they think: ‘Oh, they can’t eat men or something or other.’” (2S)

One of the pre-schools actively encourages male students to come in. As one of the participants said:

“I think it’s really good that they come in the setting.” (1S)

The general feeling expressed was that more males in settings is not only good for children but it also makes it easier for fathers to get involved.

Effective communication with fathers

There was some discussion in a significant proportion of the focus group interviews about the setting’s use of language when publicising its services, recognising that men and women hear words in different ways. All groups clearly stated that they welcomed all parents and carers. “We call it parent and toddler …”, (3S) but participants started to wonder whether fathers actually saw this as including them: “I think we could make more effort to welcome them. I mean, to let them know that [they are particularly welcomed]” (5S).

The Hind Leys Pre-school group were trying to work out why they had had such a positive response to the letter they had sent out to fathers to participate in the father focus group interview. In the end, seven fathers participated but up to ten fathers had expressed interest. Staff had not expected more than a few fathers to express interest. One participant said: “I think directing the letter to the fathers has been a good thing” (1S). In that same discussion, another participant noted: “Probably we need to change the wording of most of what we send out” (1S). The same participant also noted: “What this [focus group interview] has done is made me aware of addressing [a letter] to mum and dad to come on an induction day” (1S).

This reinforces the current assumption that the word ‘parent’ is often heard by mothers and fathers as actually meaning ‘mother’. By specifically stating ‘mum and dad’ on the invitation to the open day, all parents would know that fathers were included.

Timing of events

There was discussion about the timing of events. In both pre-school staff focus group interviews it was mentioned that fathers attended parents evenings: “Because [they’re]
held in the evening, that’s probably more convenient for [fathers] to be available” (1S). It was recognised that fathers made special efforts to take time off work in order to attend the setting for certain events: “We have a good turn out of dads at Christmas time; when we do the Christmas play. They obviously make arrangements so that they can be here for the performance” (5S). However, this was the exception to the rule. Generally fathers do not attend events that take place while they are at work and only attend those that fit around their working hours. In the same focus group interview, one participant gave the following example of this:

“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.” (5S)

In all the focus group interviews there was discussion about holding sessions on weekends, when participants thought that fathers were likely, in theory, to be available to attend settings with their children. When one group considered a Saturday morning extension of their P&T group, specifically aimed at fathers, two comments made were:

“It would go like a bomb.” (2S)

“It would be wonderful. [Fathers] would love it, they’d love it.” (2S)

In the Hind Leys Pre-school discussion about Saturday morning sessions the lead practitioner said:

“If it’s 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.” (1S)

When discussing open days, one participant recognised that if open days were held on the weekend rather than on week days “you would probably get more dads able to come and have a look” (5S).

In the Horsham P&T group there was recognition that one of the participants knew of at least one church P&T group that ran sessions on a Saturday morning: “There are some churches in other places that are doing something on a Saturday, to actually involve families, to actually get the dads along on a Saturday” (3S). Although enthusiasm was expressed by participants in the different focus group interviews for trying out sessions on a weekend morning (i.e., at a time when fathers would be around), settings had generally not tried this. Two of the settings gave the following reason:

“Never thought about it [before].” (2S)

“It’s something I’d never even thought of actually.” (5S)
When discussing whether there were practical reasons that would stop settings from offering sessions outside their usual hours, one group mentioned the shared use of their building, though this was not perceived as an insurmountable obstacle.

**Developing the connections between fathers and other parents and carers**

Recognising that the lack of connection that fathers have to other parents – mothers and fathers – was seen in one focus group interview as a constraint that settings could act to overcome. A ‘buddy system’, whether formal or informal, was advocated in that group: “If we get someone that’s new, and then someone else I know has just started coming, I’ll try and match them up” (2S). The group also recognised that if they were to run a session for fathers and their children on a Saturday morning, the children could provide the incentive to make it easier for fathers to come:

“If you had a Saturday Club for just the guys [and their children], it would be fantastic because the children already know us, they know the set up, they know the place, it would just mean you’ve got to bring daddy instead of mummy or whoever.” (2S)

Another idea to promote connection, from the same focus group interview, was when one of the participants acknowledged that going to people’s homes – when she had photographs to deliver, taken by the photographer who had visited the group – and meeting fathers meant that she started to become a known person rather than just “the person that runs the toddler group” (2S).

**Involving fathers while they are not at the session**

In the course of one focus group interview two suggestions were made for involving fathers that did not require their actual attendance at sessions. One was an idea in the planning stage:

“What I am proposing to do is to [identify] a handful of parents – not just dads – who don’t come into the Centre. At some point during the week, [I will] go round and take a couple of digital photos of [their] child and then email it to the parent with perhaps a comment – because I have taken the photograph – and explain to the child what I’ve done.” (1S)

The other is something that they already do:

“We send lots of things home that dads can contribute to if they can’t get [here]. So, we have the red book that goes home with a child at the end of a week with an achievement. And we do put in there that mums or dads can comment. Some dads do comment in that. It’s something that they can do and be part of [the setting] if they’re not here.” (1S)

**Additional suggestions**

During the focus group interviews the following additional ideas for including fathers were made:
1. Using trips organised by the setting – either trips just for adults, or for whole families – as a ‘bridge’ for men to get involved in sessions. “I think the purpose of [involving fathers in trips] would be that the fathers can get to know other fathers, like the mothers do” (3S). There was some debate about the effectiveness of this, as many families stay together as a family unit rather than mixing with others outside their family or friendship circles (this was discussed in the two P&T focus group interviews).

2. Making fathers more aware of how the setting approaches children’s learning and development because “[fathers] might [want to be more involved] if they were more aware [of] our thinking” (1S). Another comment from the same focus group interview backed up further the idea that fathers (perhaps more than mothers) are not aware of what skills their children are learning while in the setting: “Dads, when they have been to parents’ evenings, have been quite impressed with what the children are doing when they are here” (1S).

3. Using men’s interests as a bridge to further involvement. Different groups mentioned areas where fathers were already involved outside the sessions – such as fundraising (5S) and producing newsletters (3S) – and the way that many fathers feel more comfortable in settings – such as “When the fathers do come, they go towards the craft activities, doing something rather than just sitting and watching [their children] play.” (3S). It is important to take into account fathers interests and how fathers think and feel rather than to assume that they are the same as mothers, or perhaps the complete opposite.

The impact of personality and age
The personality of the individual father was considered to be an important factor in his being able to handle being male in a predominantly female environment, as the following quote from one participant illustrates:

“There was a man a couple of years ago who was here every week, and he stayed at home and his wife worked in London. He’d put the toys out, he’d do anything really. He was a very outgoing sort of person, so it didn’t worry him, who he was talking to.” (3S)

This point was also echoed in a discussion about a father in another group – “I think because of his persona, he didn’t find it quite so daunting…” (2S)

The following comment was made about older fathers, in relation to coming into an all female group:

“Because they are older, they become more confident within themselves [and] they will just go and do it.” (5S)
Again, this was echoed in the discussion in another focus group interview: “… of course he was older. I think young men would probably find it very difficult.” (2S)

What happens to written communication between the setting and home?
There were discussions about who read any letters that were given to the person (normally a mother) who picked up the children. One participant said:

“Whoever picks up the child reads the letter. If it’s something they can deal with, they deal with it, [otherwise they pass it on].” (5S)

A participant in the Hind Leys Pre-school group acknowledged the difficulty the setting had in ensuring that communications between the setting and home were read at all. However, with specific relation to the letter informing parents about the father focus group interview she said:

“There’s obviously communication going on [at home], isn’t there, because a majority of mothers took the letter home and obviously the mothers have read it and said: ‘There’s this [event] open to you’ or they’ve passed the letter on.” (1S)

The text of the Hind Leys Pre-school letter can be seen in Appendix 3. In part, the context of the relationships that Hind Leys Pre-school – a lead early years setting in Leicestershire which is highly regarded for its work in involving parents – has with its parents may have impacted favourably on the positive response from fathers interested in attending the focus group interview. An additional reason may be that the letter they addressed to fathers stressed the importance of father involvement to their children’s development.

The lack of a strategy towards father involvement
And finally, it is interesting to note that all of the interviews acknowledged – whether implicitly or explicitly – that the involvement of fathers was something that was not planned. There were some years when more fathers were involved – perhaps because their work circumstances gave them the flexibility to attend settings – and other years when less or no fathers were, for whatever reason, involved. None of the participating settings had a specific strategy for involving fathers. Each setting tried to be welcoming to all and, if fathers came into the setting, the setting then tried to make those fathers feel ‘at home’.

6.2.5 Where next? The need for reflective practice
At a number of points in different focus group interviews it became clear that one important step that was missing was that settings did not have the time to reflect on the issues surrounding father involvement, and in particular what a setting could do to encourage fathers to be (more) involved. Even in the settings represented in the focus group
interviews – which all wished to involve fathers more – comments were made which showed that the setting had not had the opportunity to reflect on this issue. Quotes from two of the focus group interviews have already been given (see page 60) illustrating the fact that they had never considered opening on a Saturday morning as a way of attracting fathers. The fact that a participant in another group said: “This has been a bit of an eye-opener, the response you had [to the focus group interview]” (1S) suggests that setting up the focus group interview provided an opportunity to try something new in the field of father involvement that the setting had not previously attempted.

6.2.6 Where next? Are settings bending over backwards to include fathers?
It needs to be recognised that practitioners in some settings will feel that the onus should be on individual fathers and their families to make the effort to overcome any barriers to father involvement themselves. As one interviewee expressed:

“I think there has to come a time when the family has to put themselves out a little bit. You know, we’re saying about setting up a Saturday morning session, as an example. We’re bending over backwards again to try and bring [fathers] in. Like tonight, they’re coming [to the focus group interview] and hopefully there’s going to be a positive feel for them that they feel they need to be involved. [As a result the may] have half a day off work and come in and be involved and see what their child and their friends are doing.” (1S)

Similar attitudes may be widely held but they are unlikely to facilitate a greater involvement of fathers in early years settings. Positive actions to make settings (more) father friendly are likely to be needed for this to happen.

6.3 Conclusion
The major constraints to involving (more) fathers in settings that were acknowledged by both father and staff/volunteer focus group interviews were the primacy of fathers’ economic roles – as breadwinners – and the culturally-determined gendered nature of parental involvement in early years settings – factors which lie outside the control of settings.

Within the context of these constraints, however, both father and staff/volunteer focus group interviews agreed that there are actions that settings can take to involve (more) fathers. Two of the major difficulties faced by fathers attempting to access settings were (i) the reality of their lack of connection with other carers (male and female) that makes it particularly hard for them to feel a part of the life of a setting – whether they are dropping
their children off or staying with their children – and (ii) their (often) irregular attendance at settings as a result of their primary role being conceived as breadwinners.

Some of the father participants expressed reservations about wanting to be involved in early years settings – being quite happy to continue in the role as supporters to their partners. However, these reservations are quite understandable given an overwhelmingly female environment. They are unlikely to be overcome before early years settings become more gender neutral (or father friendly).

The kinds of actions that settings can take towards overcoming the constraints mentioned above are:

- encouraging the greater participation of males in settings – as staff and students, for example;
- running (additional) sessions with children at times when fathers would be available to attend – such as on a Saturday morning; and
- using language which appeals to fathers and lets them know explicitly that settings really want their participation rather than just paying lip-service to it.

In certain situations it may not be possible to bring fathers into settings; in such cases attempts could be made to involve fathers in their absence by, for example:

- using an introductory pack that not only informs parents of what happens in settings but is also explicit in the importance it gives to involving fathers;
- by encouraging fathers to make written comments in notebooks that go back and forth between home and setting; and
- by emailing them digital photos of and information on their child in the setting.

If settings are serious in their wish to involve (more) fathers in their activities, then they will need to take positive action to ensure that it happens. This is in contrast to what generally appears to be happening in settings at the current time where the level of father involvement is haphazard (dependent on the availability and attitudes of those fathers who currently have children at the setting), rather than planned.
Section 7: Conclusion

The findings presented thus far in the report illustrate the nature and extent of current father involvement in early years settings. They also demonstrate how fathers and early years staff/volunteers conceptualise father involvement, barriers to father involvement and how best to encourage further father involvement in settings and with their children’s early years.

This piece of research also contributes to the inclusion agenda of the charity. It adds to our understanding on the success/effectiveness of including all groups into early years settings. This is particularly important in the case of fathers, a group that is marginalised and, to some degree, marginalise themselves in early years settings and in family services more generally. The lack of emphasis/studies on fathers as a marginalised group may be the result of the somewhat generic and limited definition of what constitutes/comprises a marginalised group that government, organisations and agencies tend to utilise. In the process of expanding our definitional categories regarding marginalised groups to include fathers, we should not forget a critical caveat – which applies to all marginalised groups – and one that is strikingly evident from these research findings: we cannot conceptualise fathers as a homogenous group sharing identical needs and desires.

In this section the key findings that emerge from both the quantitative and qualitative data-sets and analysis are pulled together to consider the similarities and differences across the data-sets and draw some concluding remarks on father involvement in early years settings.

7.1 Why involve fathers? – The importance of including fathers for children’s development and for the inclusion agenda

The vast majority of respondent settings (80 per cent) to the questionnaire state that they have considered encouraging fathers to get involved in their early years setting. Fifty-one per cent of respondents cite an awareness of the importance of fathers to their children’s development as the reason for developing activities to involve more fathers in early years settings. Respondents also state a commitment to including under-represented groups (21 per cent) and local circumstances (16 per cent) as key reasons for engaging with fathers and including them into early years settings. These findings suggest that setting respondents primarily conceptualise the importance of involving fathers in early years settings as positive for their children’s emotional, cognitive, social and behavioural development.
development. They also indicate that involving fathers in early years settings is critical for furthering the inclusion agenda more generally.

The data from the staff/volunteer focus group interviews reinforce these findings, with many participants indicating an enthusiasm for involving fathers as a result of their positive contribution to children’s development. This corroborates evidence from other studies/research that have demonstrated that increasing father involvement in their children’s upbringing has positive developmental outcomes for children. Participants from these interviews cite a number of reasons for increasing father involvement in activities in their setting. Of particular interest is the finding that including fathers is important for children growing up in lone-parent families where the mother is the only carer and the children may lack a paternal figure in their life. The interviewees also stressed the value for children of seeing males in a ‘non-traditional’ male environment like an early years setting.

The quantitative finding that local circumstances are a key motivational factor for settings wanting to include fathers is interesting. These local circumstances may include high male unemployment and high incidences of fathers living apart from their children. This finding illustrates that settings recognise and are sensitive to the need to develop solutions for involving fathers that acknowledge local circumstances and are developed with the local context mind, and that a ‘one-solution-to-meet-all-situations’ may not necessarily work. This latter point underpins the need to develop programmes/initiatives for involving fathers that are also rooted in the inclusion agenda. They must be sensitive to the reality that fathers are not a homogeneous group and that some fathers (e.g., fathers in prisons, young fathers, fathers from BME groups, refugee fathers) may have particular needs (in part based on their local context) that necessitate different solutions/activities.

One focus group interview with staff/volunteers illustrates that depending on the geographical area where the settings are located different numbers of fathers participate in the settings and in their activities. For example, as a result of high levels of male unemployment in some areas, greater numbers of fathers participate in early years settings and their activities. In another focus group interview a development worker noted that in more affluent primarily white areas (like the area where the pre-school was located) some parents are apprehensive of sending their children to settings with male childcare workers. Evidently, such views impact both on the inclusion agenda and on the possibility of encouraging greater father involvement in early years settings.
However, there remains limited evidence on the value of including fathers for children and families into family services generally. We hope that this project considering father involvement in early years settings will be crucial in shaping the debate on fathers and will contribute to the development of policies and practices that support and facilitate inclusion more generally and the inclusion of fathers in particular.

7.2 Father involvement – Work constraints and fathers’ reluctance

The quantitative data analysis demonstrates that two major constraints impact on father involvement in early years settings, namely fathers’ reluctance to get involved (42 per cent) and father’s work commitments (28 per cent). Analysis of the qualitative data (focus group interviews) both confirms and rejects this finding. On the one hand, this data reinforces the finding that a father’s economic role in the family (breadwinner) limits his ability and opportunity to participate in early years settings that operate by and large during the working week. On the other hand, the interview strand of the research identifies the female-dominated nature of early years settings as a significantly constraining factor (this was especially evident in the fathers’ group interviews). This gender imbalance is visible not only in terms of the primary parent/carer users that access settings (i.e., mothers) but also in the character of settings, which largely reflect the needs and concerns of their primarily female parent/carer users. This may in fact also contribute to the self-marginalisation of fathers from early years settings and further reinforce their reluctance to become involved in settings.

As stated throughout this report, the need to address the gender imbalance in early years settings and how that gender balance is reflected in the character of the setting is of paramount importance. This constraining factor featured heavily in the data collected from fathers directly and suggests that it is important to address this (for example, by increasing the presence of males (e.g., students and staff in early years settings) at the same time as developing programmes and activities that cater for parents in general and for fathers in particular.

Given that both strands of the research highlight that fathers’ employment commitments impact on their involvement in early years settings, settings must acknowledge that if they truly want to include fathers they must reconsider and expand their operational hours. While there are a number of valid reasons why settings have perhaps not operated sessions at weekends (financial, building used by other groups/organisations, etc), the data elicited from fathers suggests that this could be an optimal time to organise sessions
for fathers to attend and get involved. However, only around four per cent (3.8%) of early years practitioners responding to the questionnaire would consider opening at weekends. Unless settings are flexible and willing to take into account fathers’ schedules, father involvement is likely to remain at its current low levels.

The government similarly has a responsibility for ensuring that fathers can further engage with their children and be involved in their early years. Given that fathers are constrained from such involvement as a result of being the primary (and, in the case of the interview data-set, often sole) breadwinners in the family, increasing paternity leave to fathers may encourage and facilitate greater involvement in and familiarity with settings and their children’s early years.

7.3 Fathers in settings – Time spent and degree of involvement

Evidence from the interviews with regard to the time spent by fathers in settings supports the quantitative finding that most fathers spend less than 30 minutes in the setting, with male volunteers spending significantly more time. It would be valuable to draw comparisons with mothers and the time that they spend in settings to view whether patterns of fathers’ behaviour when accessing settings differ significantly from that of mothers’.

The finding that male ‘volunteers’ (who are presumably mostly, if not exclusively, fathers) spend longer in the setting than ‘fathers’ is perhaps representative of fathers feeling more comfortable accessing a setting as a ‘volunteer’ rather than as a ‘father’. Certain terminology/language may be more appealing to fathers and more effective for engaging with fathers. Indeed, using the terminology of ‘volunteer’ as opposed to ‘father’ may aid fathers in feeling more comfortable and less alienated in early years settings and facilitate their integration much more. It may also have additional value as a term by facilitating settings and practitioners/volunteers to engage with all fathers such as social fathers, fathers separated and living independently from their partners and children, etc.

7.4 Existing activities for fathers in early years settings – Are they effective?

The evidence suggests that 45 per cent of respondent settings attract fathers to irregular, one-off activities. The interviews illustrate that it is perhaps only in this one-off irregular capacity that fathers can become involved in their child’s early years setting. While one-off, irregular attendance certainly adds to an enhanced understanding of their children, their
development and the setting that they are accessing, more regular attendance (as was noted by some father interview participants) leads to the development of a more comprehensive/holistic understanding of their child and their development.

Of greater importance was the overriding concern from fathers that events were organised with consideration of their schedules, schedules that often mean that activities held during the working week would lack father attendance. Despite reservations by some fathers, there was a general consensus among them that a weekend morning session could provide fathers with opportunities to get involved in early years settings. This proposal seems particularly relevant in areas where fathers tend to be in full-time employment. The primarily work commitments of fathers thus directly impact on the level and frequency of their involvement and should be considered when creating programmes/activities to engage with fathers.

When fathers are involved in settings, settings rated the success of those activities as either ‘successful’ or ‘quite successful’. The data suggests that certain types of activities may have greater appeal when engaging with fathers, namely sporting events and outdoor events. Getting fathers involved via ‘gendered’ activities (e.g., sports days) could encourage greater involvement in more general and less ‘gendered’ activities. However, other events also have broad appeal for fathers (e.g., Christmas Nativity play). Thus, providing fathers with activities that are framed principally with their gender in mind (e.g., outdoor activities) could alienate their participation from more general and less ‘gendered’ activities that they may similarly wish to engage in. While it is crucially important that we offer activities to support involvement in settings sensitive to the needs and desires of the target audience (in this case fathers), we should not assume that users from a like group have identical needs and desires.

7.5 Proposed activities for involving fathers

The evidence collected from the father participants during the interviews also indicates that it may be significantly easier to get fathers involved if activities were directed exclusively at fathers rather than, for example, activities aimed at working parents that may still attract greater numbers of working mothers than working fathers. However, the data from the questionnaires filled in by early years practitioners is in stark contrast to this finding with over two-thirds of setting respondents preferring the development of future activities as joint activities, that is open to both mothers and fathers. There was an overwhelming and expressed desire from fathers that ‘father only’ activities would ensure greater involvement in early years settings, however only 6 per cent of practitioners
responding to the questionnaire state that they would consider/favour developing separate activities just for fathers.

Staff/volunteer participants in the focus group interviews expressed enthusiasm for running Saturday morning sessions. In one focus group interview the consensus was that a Saturday morning session should be directed at fathers. They suggested that unless ‘fathers’ were explicitly targeted, the special session would result in simply attracting predominately mothers. In another focus group interview, the staff/volunteer participants stated the primary aim of a Saturday morning session would be to attract fathers rather than (in principle) be opened to both mothers and fathers. Surprisingly, in neither the staff/volunteer nor fathers’ focus group interviews did participants express a need for any forthcoming activities/initiatives to be opened to both mothers and fathers. We can then deduce that both practitioners/volunteers in settings and fathers conceive the primary goal as one that enables more fathers to be involved rather than ensuring that all activities provide equal opportunities for both mothers and fathers to become involved.

7.6 How important for fathers is the presence of male staff/students in settings?

While the studies/projects thus far conducted on involving fathers in family services have suggested that the presence of males working in family services aids/facilitates greater father involvement, this has not been confirmed by our quantitative evidence. Given the relatively average response rate to the questionnaire (23 per cent of the 1,400 sample), this may be indicative of data-set limitations rather than offering an accurate picture of the impact of male childcare workers in encouraging greater father involvement.

However, data collected from both the staff/volunteer and the fathers’ focus group interviews suggests that male presence (staff, students) is likely to be an enabling factor in encouraging fathers to get involved or further involved in early years settings. The finding that fathers feel alienated in the predominately female early years space and that this contributes to their reluctance to participate in activities in settings suggests that encouraging a more gender-balanced early years environment can only enhance father involvement. Indeed, studies considering including other marginalised groups (e.g., Black and Minority Ethnic groups, refugees) into institutions and local communities indicate that the presence of a staff member that may share similar experiences and characteristics facilitates feelings of comfort and increases their involvement.
7.7 A role for mothers in involving fathers in settings?
Evidence from the focus group interviews suggests that mothers tend to be more active as parents, in part because they are often the primary carer of the children and thus were more likely to be involved on a regular basis in settings. The fathers’ focus group data similarly reinforces this finding, with fathers stating that they conceive of their parenting role as one of supporting their female partners rather than being co-equals in parenting.

Despite this perception of their role as a parent, fathers also state that mothers play a significant role in determining their male partners’ involvement in their children’s early years setting. This ‘gatekeeping’ role that mothers perform can have both positive and negative effects on involving fathers in early years settings. On the one hand, for one focus group interview, mothers played a crucial role in ensuring that fathers were informed and participated in the focus group interviews, and thus contributed to the success of the research project. On the other hand, this position affords mothers with almost exclusive control in determining the nature and extent of father involvement in early years settings. However, given the positive response in one setting from mothers that we received with regard to the research project in helping to locate fathers to participate in the interviews, it appears that many mothers are happy to have their male partners involved in early years settings. As a result, if mothers can be brought on board to support initiatives that aim to include fathers in early years settings, these may be significantly more likely to be successful than initiatives that do not have broad-based support from mothers.

7.8 Challenging ‘gendered’ perceptions of parenting
Raising the current and somewhat low levels of father involvement in early years settings will evidently be impacted on by the development and introduction of practical strategies to encourage greater involvement. However, without simultaneous strategies to challenge the culturally-constructed, gendered appraisals of parenting roles and the gender imbalance in early years settings, other efforts may not be as effective as they could. Unchallenged assumptions that mothers do it ‘naturally’ and fathers pose risks to young children as potential sexual abusers increase fathers’ lack of confidence in their ability to care for young children and impact on their inclusion in early years settings. Indeed, they may contribute to the self-exclusion of fathers from early years settings.

Challenging the culturally-constructed parenting roles via nation-wide campaigns and ensuring that central government funding is available to support father initiatives/activities in early years settings can conceivably have a significant impact on the nature and level of
father involvement. Similarly, stimulating exchange between practitioners/volunteers and fathers/mothers in early years settings and acknowledging the reservations of both staff/volunteers and fathers/mothers for further father involvement appears a sensible way forward. This research project will hopefully contribute to stimulating debate on this question among practitioners, parents, researchers and policy-makers and contribute to changes in practice and policy at the setting and national level. Changing the practices of a setting (e.g., running activities directly targeting fathers) and the language used by a setting (e.g., ‘mothers and fathers’ rather than ‘parents’) similarly encourages discussions on ‘gender awareness’ and ‘gender sensitivity’ among staff, among staff and parents, and among parents (fathers and mothers). By carefully considering the issue of gender awareness in projects of this nature and via the suggested activities, settings are more likely to challenge attitudes and their findings could become embedded as core components of the setting’s practice and policy. Indeed, training sessions that address both ‘practical tips’ for supporting father involvement and gender awareness discussions are a crucial step in developing the right strategies and ensuring that they are effectively implemented.

7.9 Encouraging further father involvement in early years settings – Searching for the Holy Grail?

The data from both strands of the research project highlight that settings would welcome a leaflet detailing practical tips on what works with fathers and training sessions on how to engage with fathers. Indeed, discovering what will help settings facilitate greater male involvement proved relatively easy. The development of a practical leaflet is presently at the production stage and draws on many of the findings discovered by this research project.

The development of training programmes to ensure father involvement and father retention when they access a setting once is somewhat more daunting as a task. This challenge is not directly connected to the creation and delivery of training programmes to ensure father involvement. Instead, it relates to the cultural (as opposed to organisational) shift necessary to help settings instinctively include fathers and think of including fathers. Given the reality that family services, which were largely created in the post-war period, have been developed to support mothers during the process of child-rearing and have largely operated with an almost exclusive female staff-base, this may be no small task.
However, based on the positive response to the questionnaire and the data collected from staff/volunteers during the focus group interviews, there appears to be a desire and willingness to get fathers involved in early years settings and with their children’s early years. Indeed, many staff/volunteer interview participants unambiguously and unequivocally commented on the importance of fathers to their children’s development and the positive impact that father involvement can also have on other children in settings that may lack a paternal figure at home. While the views of the staff/volunteers that participated in this research may not be representative of the feelings of the broader early years workforce, they do provide us with some hope that, despite the cultural shift necessary, many practitioners view the inclusion of fathers as a crucial and somewhat delayed development.

It is of paramount importance that settings, organisations and government engage in consultation with fathers to support practice and policy development which facilitates the inclusion of fathers and of marginalised groups more generally, as well as being sensitive to the particular needs and desires of fathers. Indeed, the focus group interviews helped in demonstrating to staff/volunteers that consulting with fathers is neither daunting nor impossible.
Section 8: Recommendations

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

- **Develop programmes and activities that are:**
  1. **Sensitive to the local context in which fathers reside:**
     Fathers have different needs depending on the local context in which they reside. For example, in areas of high unemployment or in areas with high incidences of BME fathers, young fathers, fathers in prison, settings will need to develop different activities to engage with these diverse fathers and ensure that they are all effectively integrated into the setting and into their children’s early years. Further research considering the diversity of fathers is necessary for programmes to be truly effective and inclusive.
  2. **Sensitive to fathers’ schedules and their economic roles:**
     Many fathers tend to be the main breadwinners in the family unit and as such have schedules representative of this. This makes it somewhat difficult for fathers to engage in early years settings’ activities when they largely take place, i.e., during the working week. By organising some activities to take place outside of ‘traditional’ working hours and/or at the weekends, greater father involvement in their children’s early years settings could be achieved. Developing such activities may necessitate that settings alter/expand their operational hours, which may or may not be feasible (e.g., some settings share building space with other groups/organisations, the financial viability of running extra sessions). However, without such a change, father involvement is likely to remain at the current low levels and, as such, ensuring that early years settings are sustainable in order to be flexible in their operational hours is critical for the further involvement of fathers.
  3. **Sensitive to fathers’ interests:**
     Fathers appear to be interested in engaging in activities that are both framed with their gender in mind (for example, sports days) and those that are not (for example, general activities). The assumption that fathers only want to engage in early years settings’ activities that are ‘gender sensitive’ is not accurate, based on our evidence. There is broad-based father support for both gendered and non-gendered activities. Indeed, by offering
a diverse programme of activity settings can ensure greater father presence and, more importantly, father retention in early years settings.

4. Effectively marketed and advertised:
The evidence suggests that any programmes and activities developed must explicitly target fathers and be directed at fathers if settings hope to secure involvement from fathers. Additionally, general activities that settings organise and to which they hope to attract both mothers and fathers should be advertised and marketed as such. Evidence from this project and from other studies suggests that the term ‘parents’ is often read by both mothers and fathers as meaning mothers.

5. Supported by mothers:
Given the important role that mothers play as gatekeepers to father involvement in early years settings, it is advisable that settings develop activities and programmes that have broad-based support from mothers. This would ensure that fathers are effectively targeted, as well as aid in challenging the assumptions that fathers/males in early years settings pose risks as potential sexual abusers to children.

• Develop new terminology/language:
Using appropriately sensitive terminology/language is crucial if marginalised groups are to be effectively included in early years settings. However, this cannot happen in a vacuum. In fact, if the terminology and language used is to be inclusive and sensitive to the target group (in this case, fathers), all stakeholders must consult directly with fathers, as well as exchange the content of such consultations and of good practice/effective terminology with each other. Developing new terminology also has added value for the broader inclusion of marginalised groups, particularly if this language/terminology is developed in consultation with marginalised groups and implemented across all stakeholders.

• Gender awareness training:
The evidence suggests that there is a need for staff and volunteers to engage in gender awareness training if fathers are to be effectively included in early years settings. This appears of paramount importance if the culturally-constructed, gendered appraisals of parenting – held by parents (both mothers and fathers) and by staff – are to be challenged and addressed. Such training sessions would also contribute further to embedding the inclusion agenda in early years settings, policy
and practice. As such, funding for implementing such training must be identified and allocated for inclusion work with fathers.

- **Address the gender imbalance in the early years sector:**
  There is an obvious and urgent need to address the gender imbalance in the early years sector. Nation-wide campaigns targeting males as the childcarers of the future and the development of a practical ‘what works with fathers’ leaflet (directed at practitioners) could positively contribute to alleviating the feelings of reluctance that fathers experience when accessing an early years setting, as well as change practitioners' knowledge as to how to engage with and sensitivity towards fathers as a marginalised group. (A practitioner leaflet detailing ‘what works with fathers’ is presently at production stage.)

- **Develop father-friendly government policies:**
  Extending the number of weeks of paternity leave could conceivably lead to facilitating father involvement in their children’s early years, as well as perhaps encouraging fathers to become familiar with their children’s early years setting when children begin accessing such settings. Given the research evidence that father involvement has a positive impact on children’s development and that fathers’ gain a more comprehensive and holistic understanding of their children when they attend early years settings, encouraging and facilitating father involvement in their children’s early years and early years settings appears of paramount importance. Evidently, this requires a concerted effort from government to develop and propose father-friendly employment, family and early years policies.

- **Funding work with fathers:**
  Sustainable and long-term funding for working with fathers is long overdue. Indeed, if central and local government aspire to the inclusion of fathers in early years settings and to increase the levels of their involvement with their children (especially in the early years) beyond and above the present one-third of parenting done by fathers in the private sphere, funding is needed to ensure that activities/programmes can be developed to ensure fathers’ effective inclusion in early years settings and to support the delivery of gender awareness training sessions to staff and volunteers.
References


Sure Start (2004a) 2002/03 Childcare and Early Years Workforce Survey: Playgroups and Pre-schools Nottingham: DfES.

Sure Start (2004b) 2002/03 Childcare and Early Years Workforce Survey: Day Nurseries and Other Full Daycare Provision Nottingham: DfES.
Appendix 1

FATHERS QUESTIONNAIRE

Please describe your setting: *(Please tick one box only.)*

☐ Parent and toddler group
☐ Sessional daycare running 3½ hour or less sessions
☐ Sessional daycare running 3½ to 4 hour sessions
☐ Extended daycare running 4 to 8 hour sessions
☐ Full daycare running 8 hour or more sessions
☐ Other *(please specify)*: _______________________________________

Q1. Do you have any adult males participating in your pre-school setting? *(Please tick all boxes that apply and state the number for each applicable category.)*

☐ Staff _____
☐ Students _____
☐ Fathers/male carers _____
☐ Volunteers _____

*If no adult males participate, please go to Question 4.*

Q2. With regard to your male volunteers (excluding fathers/male carers) please give as accurate a description in the spaces provided with reference to the following questions.

i. How often do male volunteers attend? *(Please tick all boxes that apply and state the number for each applicable category.)*

☐ Several times a week _____
☐ About once a week _____
☐ About once a month _____
☐ Less than once a month _____
☐ Other *(please specify)*: ________________________________
ii. For how long have male volunteers been attending your setting? *(Please tick all boxes that apply and state the number for each applicable category.)*

- □ Less than a month ______
- □ Between 1 month and 6 months ______
- □ Between 6 months and 1 year ______
- □ More than 1 year ______
- □ Other *(please specify)* ____________________________________________

iii. How long do male volunteers generally stay during an individual session? *(Please tick all boxes that apply and state the number for each applicable category.)*

- □ Less than an hour ______
- □ Between 1 and 2 hours ______
- □ Between 2 and 3 hours ______
- □ More than 3 hours ______

3. With regard to fathers/male carers please give as accurate a description in the spaces provided with reference to the following questions.

i. How often do fathers/male carers visit your pre-school? *(Please tick all boxes that apply and state the number for each applicable category.)*

- □ Every day ______
- □ About once a week ______
- □ About once a month ______
- □ Less than once a month ______
- □ Other *(please specify)* ____________________________________________

ii. In general, for how long have fathers/male carers been attending? *(Please tick all boxes that apply and state the number for each applicable category.)*

- □ Less than 6 months ______
- □ Between 6 months and 1 year ______
- □ More than 1 year ______
- □ Other *(please specify)* ____________________________________________
iii. How long do fathers/male carers generally stay when visiting the setting? (Please tick all boxes that apply and state the number for each applicable category.)

- □ Less than 10 minutes _____
- □ Between 10 minutes and ½ hour _____
- □ Between ½ hour and 1 hour _____
- □ More than 1 hour _____

Q4. Has your setting considered encouraging fathers to get involved in activities with children? (Please tick one box only.)

- □ Yes  □ No

Q5. If you decide to take action around involving (more) fathers, what would motivate such action? (Please tick all boxes that apply.)

- □ Local circumstances (e.g. high male unemployment, many fathers living apart from their children)
- □ Awareness of the importance of fathers in their children’s development
- □ Male staff member raising the issue
- □ Female staff member raising the issue
- □ Commitment by the setting to include under-represented groups
- □ Other (please specify) ____________________________________________

If fathers are not involved in your setting and you are not working with fathers, please go to Question 12.

Q6. If you have decided to take action to involve (more) fathers, which of the descriptions below most accurately describes this activity? (Please tick one box only.)

- □ Encourage more fathers to get involved in general activities (open to all)
- □ Set up activities specifically aimed at fathers
- □ Both of the above
- □ Other (please specify) ____________________________________________
Q7. If you have run activities aimed at including fathers, how often did these take
place? (Please tick one box only.)

□ Once □ Once a month □ 2-3 times a year
□ 4-6 times a year □ Other (please specify) ____________________________

Q8. How many fathers, on average, attended each activity you organised? (Please
specify average number of fathers attending in the box and/or indicate the range of
numbers if attendance varies between activities.)

Average number of fathers attending an activity _______
Between ______ and ______ fathers have attended the activities.

Q9. If you have organised multiple activities, would you say that you have a regular or
an irregular attendance of fathers? (Please tick one box only.)

□ Regular attendance by fathers □ Irregular attendance by fathers

Q10. Please give a brief description of the action(s) that you took and the outcome(s)
achieved:

Action(s): ___________________________________________________________
______________________________________________________________

Outcome(s): _____________________________________________________
_______________________________________________________________

Q11. If you have taken action to involve (more) fathers, how would you categorise the
level of success of your initiative? (Please tick the box that most closely describes the
results of your actions.)

□ Unsuccessful □ Not very successful □ Quite successful □ Successful

Q12. What factors do you think prevent more fathers becoming involved in your setting?
(Please tick all boxes that apply.)

□ Fathers’ reluctance to become involved
□ Female users reluctant to have fathers in a traditionally ‘female space’
□ Staff wanting to protect the setting as a traditionally ‘female space’
□ Staff unconfident about/inexperienced with engaging fathers in the setting
□ Lack of time to organise activities for fathers in the pre-school
□ Other (please specify) ______________________________________________
Q13. Which of the following might you consider in your setting? (Please tick all boxes that apply.)

☐ Discussing issues around the setting as a space for use by mothers & fathers
☐ Discussing how you plan to involve more fathers
☐ Providing training for staff to gain skills in engaging fathers in the setting
☐ Organising one-off activities specifically aimed at fathers
☐ Organising regular on-going activities specifically aimed at fathers
☐ Considering opening at the weekends to attract fathers
☐ Other (please specify) ____________________________________________

Q14. What would you find helpful in including (more) fathers in your setting? (Please tick all boxes that apply.)

☐ A leaflet with practical tips on ‘what works’
☐ Training session/s on what works
☐ Training session/s to address gender issues associated with traditionally ‘female spaces’
☐ Other (please specify) ____________________________________________

Q15. If you are planning to undertake (more) work to include fathers, please describe this in more detail in the space provided below.


Q16. Would your pre-school setting be interested in participating in further projects and pilot projects on fathers’ issues organised by the Pre-school Learning Alliance? (Please tick one box only.)

☐ Yes ☐ No

Q17. Have you applied for funding around involving more fathers in your settings’ activities? (Please tick one box only.)

☐ Yes ☐ No

If you have answered no to the above, please return the completed questionnaire to the named person and address stated at the end of the questionnaire. If yes, please continue.

Q18. If you have applied for funding, which organisation(s) did you approach?
(Please tick all boxes that apply and specify.)

- Local Sure Start
- Local EYDCP
- Local statutory organisation (please specify) __________________________
- Local voluntary organisation (please specify) __________________________
- National statutory organisation (please specify) _________________________
- National voluntary organisation (please specify) _________________________
- Other (please specify) _____________________________________________

Q19. Please detail how much money you applied for. (Please tick one box only.)
- £0-£4999
- £5000-£9999
- £10000-£49999
- £50000+

Q20. What was the response to your application? (Please tick one box only.)
- Successful
- Unsuccessful
- Still awaiting a decision

In the space below please describe the response to all other funding applications, stating the amount applied for and if the application(s) was successful/unsuccessful/still awaiting a decision for each application made.

______________________________________________________________

______________________________________________________________

Thank you for taking the time to complete this questionnaire.

Please return the completed questionnaire to:
Pauline Henniker, Director of Family Programmes,
Pre-school Learning Alliance,
69 Kings Cross Road,
London WC1X 9LL.
Appendix 2 i) Monitoring Form for Focus Groups – Fathers

It would help us with our research if you could complete the following form. Although we are asking for your name, the information will be completely confidential and used exclusively for research purposes.

Your Details
First name

Family name

Ethnic Group
Would you categorise yourself as belonging to a minority ethnic group?

Yes  No  

If yes, which ethnic minority group do you categorise yourself as belonging to?

Black Caribbean  Bangladeshi  
Black African  Chinese  
Indian  Mixed  
Pakistani  
Other (please state)  

Language
Is English your first language?

Yes  No  

If ‘no’, can you please say what your first language is?

Age

16-20  31-35  46-50  61-65  
21-25  36-40  51-55  66 and over  
26-30  41-45  56-60  

Are you registered as disabled?

Yes  No  

1. How many children do you have attending the setting?

1  
2  
More than 2 (please state how many)  

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2. What is your relationship to the child(ren) who attend(ed) the early years setting? *(Please tick one box unless more than one box applies because of more than one child.)*

- Biological father
- Social father
- Foster father/adoptive father
- Other male relative
- Other male carer (not related to child)
- Other (please specify)

3. Do you live with the child(ren) who attend(ed) the early years setting? *(Please tick one box unless more than one box applies because of more than one child.)*

- Yes
- No

4. Do you live with a partner who brings up the children with you?

- Yes
- No

5. What is your level of education? *(Please tick one box)*

- O level/GCSE or equivalent
- A level or equivalent
- Further education or equivalent
- University or equivalent

6. What is your employment status? *(Please tick one box)*

- Working full time
- Working part time
- Not in paid employed

- If part-time, no. of hours per week ___

7. If employed, how would you describe the type of work that you do?

- Professional Work
- Skilled Work
- Semi-Skilled Work
- Manual Labour
- Other (please state)

8. What is your partner’s employment status? *(Please tick one box)*

- Working full time
- Working part time
- Not in paid employment
- Not applicable

- If part-time, no. of hours per week ___

Many thanks for taking the time to complete this form.
Appendix 2 ii) Monitoring Form for Focus Groups – Staff/Volunteers

It would help us with our research if you could complete the following form. Although we are asking for your name, the information will be completely confidential and used exclusively for research purposes.

Your Details
First name
Family name
Date of birth
Postcode of the house where you live

Gender
Male
Female

Ethnic Group
Would you categorise yourself as belonging to a minority ethnic group?
Yes
No
If yes, which ethnic minority group do you categorise yourself as belonging to?
Black Caribbean
Bangladeshi
Black African
Chinese
Indian
Mixed
Pakistani

Other (please state)

Language
Is English your first language?
Yes
No
If ‘no’, can you please say what your first language is?

Age
16-20
21-25
26-30
31-35
36-40
41-45
46-50
51-55
56-60
61-65
66 and over
Are you registered as disabled?
Yes [ ] No [ ]

What is your position in the setting?
Manager/Leader [ ]
Deputy Manager/Leader [ ]
Assistant [ ]
Administrator [ ]
Other (please state) [ ]

Do you hold any other roles at your setting?
SENCO [ ]
Equal Opportunities Officer [ ]
Other (please state) [ ]

Many thanks for taking the time to complete this form.
Appendix 2 iii)

Additional Monitoring Form for Group Leader

Name of Leader

Name of Group

Contact Details of Group

Setting Information

Is the pre-school/P&T located in what you would describe as an area of deprivation?

Yes ☐ No ☐

In what sort of place is your setting located?

- Inner City
- Suburban or large town
- Country Town
- Village
- Isolated Village
- Armed Forces base
- Other (please state)

How did you publicise the focus group for fathers/male carers?

cont’d over
What was the response to trying to get fathers/male carers to attend the focus group session?

From female carers:

Why do you think female carers responded in this way?

From male carers:

Why do you think male carers responded in this way?

Any other comments?

Many thanks for taking the time to complete this form.
URGENTLY CALLING ALL FATHERS / MALE CARERS

FOCUS GROUPS ON FATHERS / MALE CARERS INVOLVEMENT IN PRE-SCHOOLS

• WHAT IS IT?
The Pre-school Learning Alliance are engaging in research into Fathers involvement of pre-school life. We as a setting have been selected to run a focus group together with Tim Kahn, from the Family Learning Team based in London and you as Parents. It will involve discussing activities and events that are of interest to successful in engaging Fathers.

• AIM
The goal of the project is to detail how Fathers can be more involved in pre-school settings and their child’s development. What we mean by Fathers may mean Male Carers and/or partners of adults who attend, whether they live with, or apart from the child.

• WHEN IS IT?
The session is planned for Monday 17th January at 7pm in the pre-school room. The Focus Group will be for a maximum of one and a half-hours, it will be taped, informal and may start with a short video clip.

• IMPORTANCE OF BEING INVOLVED
It is vital that we get as many male role models involved as possible. Your children are educated and cared for by a female dominated staff team. This provides an ideal opportunity to equal that balance, participate and contribute your own ideas and thoughts forward for analysis.

• WHAT TO DO NEXT
Please complete the reply slip and return it to pre-school ASAP. If you are unsure about this focus group and are worried about the level of commitment, please allay your fears by asking Ruth Sharpe or Jo Burton at any time.

I am able to attend your Focus Group on Monday 17th January 2005

Name ........................................................................ Contact Tel No. ..............................................
Child’s Name ................................................................

LEICESTERSHIRE LEAD SETTING IN EARLY YEARS EDUCATION