

- Like some mothers, some fathers lack literacy and other communication skills, and/or are shy. There may be other social and cultural barriers too; think about ethnicity, religion, sexuality, disability.

And remember....the best way to find out why dads are not beating a path to your door, is to ask them.

Ten top tips for recruiting more dads

1. Proactively invite them

It's one thing working on the basis that you'd welcome fathers if they happened to turn up, but quite another to see supporting father-child relationships as one of your central objectives. The latter requires you to proactively reach out to dads, and design services in such a way that the importance of father-child relationships is recognised and emphasised. Here are some ideas about how to reflect high expectations of fathers and fatherhood, in the way you design services and communicate with dads (and their families).....

2. Tell them why it's good for their children

Most dads do not think children's services are 'for them' (and in most cases, they're right!). So to engage dads you need to make sure they understand both what your service offers their children and why their own participation will benefit their children. This is the most important message to get across. For example, schools can 'hook' dads by explaining how their getting involved will really help their children's educational performance.

All communications with families need to be written in a way that lets dads know explicitly that you have them in mind, understand their crucial role in children's lives - and welcome them to your service. Think about all your communications including, for example, your noticeboards and displays, the leaflets and invitation letters you send out, the interviews you give to local newspapers and radio stations.

3. Make your venue welcoming

Put yourself in the shoes of a dad coming into your building for the first time. Or better still, walk round your venue with some fathers, and ask them how it feels. Their answer will be a good guide to how father-inclusive your setting is.

Think about your notice-boards and displays - do they show positive images of men as well as women? Making sure they do so is the most obvious way to make a setting father-friendly. See 'Find out more' for ideas on what to focus on when you do your 'walkabout'.

Don't just rush in and change everything though. It's important to acknowledge that making a space more father-inclusive can be upsetting for those who have seen it as safely man-free, or who've had very negative experiences with men, or who fear that children with no dads will feel hurt and excluded.

It's important to work through this and use the opening up of the space as a 'way in' to helping staff understand that not seeing a father doesn't stop a child wondering about or longing for him, or feeling frightened or angry - and that seeing pictures of other children's fathers and father-figures may help children express their confusion and distress about their relationship with their own father. Sometimes this simply brings their feelings out into the open - which is important in itself. On occasion it can even lead to adults taking steps to 'bring the fathers back in'.

Try to raise such issues before you put up any new images - first with staff, and perhaps also with other service users. And expect the discussions to continue after the images go up.

4. Think about the format of your service

Managers and staff often worry about what's the 'right' format for dads. There's no such thing - and it's important not to base your service on gendered assumptions about men only wanting to mix with other men. Here are some key issues to consider:

Single-sex services

Many dads feel out of place and 'on show' when they attend family services that are used mostly by women or feel are not really 'for them'. Some fathers lack confidence as parents, and some think (as do some mothers - and deep down, some of your team too, probably!) that looking after children, especially babies, is 'women's work'. Some dads may want to be kept separate from women for cultural reasons.

It may be, therefore, that for some men you will want to offer dad-only services, run by staff who are particularly skilled at engaging with and supporting men.

For many dads, services involving 'conventional' male interests like gardening, DIY, sports, photography or computers can be a 'way in', offering a welcoming activity with which to tempt them into engaging with your service. In this way, a men-only service can act as an easy 'entry point' and a 'bridge' to more universal services. Don't see a dad-only offering as an end in itself though - and don't stereotype men by assuming they all share the same interests (any more than women do)!

It may be that you feel it important to offer some single-sex services to mothers, too. But if so, don't forget the dads:

- Still hold fathers in mind when working with the mothers
- Consider the fathers' issues, and discuss these with the mums
- Look for ways to 'bring the dad in' or help mums (or others) engage with him more constructively.

Remember that the child's best interests are at the centre of your work - even if you're working only with the mother, think about what support the dad might need to be positively involved.

Dads' groups

Ongoing groups work well for some, but not all, men. Some fathers are more willing to accept new ideas and challenges from their peers, than from 'experts'. Groups can also be a powerful source of support and intimacy - dads can make friends with other dads, which can be really helpful as they work their way through the day to day challenges of fatherhood. Some dads' groups take on a life of their own, with the worker acting as facilitator and the dads themselves organising activities that appeal to fathers and children alike.

There's a danger of successful groups becoming cliquy and unwelcoming to new members, though. One way around this is to run a fixed number of sessions for a 'cohort' of dads, after which they 'graduate' and new members join to work through an identified curriculum.

Even if you do set up a dads' group and it seems successful, don't assume that's your job done: many men will prefer one-to-one support, or mixed-gender workshops, or a mixture of different approaches - and their needs may change over time, depending on the age of their child, the nature of their relationship with the child's mother, changes in their financial circumstances, etc.

5. Information is power!

Ensure your agency routinely and systematically records information about fathers.

Registration forms should do this as a matter of course, providing a space for 'mother', a space for 'father' - and another space for other key carers. You should question referrals that do not refer to the birth father and key father-figures. You also need to know whether or not the father has Parental Responsibility.

Record the name, contact details and other relevant information of every dad your service is in contact with, and who contacts your service. If this worries him, explain that the information is kept confidential and is used only to keep in touch with him about his child - and that you want to do that because fathers are so important. To start with, you may want to ask only for the briefest information - e.g. phone number or email - and follow up soon.

If you only have contact with mum explore routinely with her the potential benefits to her and the child of dad engaging with services. Sometimes this won't be appropriate, but most mothers are glad for fathers to receive support and information. You are legally permitted to record information the mother gives you about the father when he is not present; if the mother doesn't want to give the details, note that the father is an issue - and gradually, at other times, try to find out why.

6. Get to know the local dads

Finding out about local fathers is vitally important because it helps you target your resources most usefully, develop clear objectives and gather the right support for your project. Without direct contact with dads, services generally hold false (often negative) assumptions about them - and the issues they face.

Start within your own agency. Organise a survey of staff attitudes/beliefs and their knowledge base about dads. Here are some ideas for what you need to know:

- What kinds of fathers live in the area?
- What are their ages, ethnicity, education, working patterns, values, beliefs, interests, priorities, hopes, fears?
- How many children do they have, where do the children live and how often do the dads see them?
- What roles do they already play in their children's lives?
- What roles do they want to play?
- What roles do other family members (particularly their children) want them to play?
- What services would they like (or need) to help them achieve such goals?
- When and where do they want them to happen?

How could your team find out more about all this? Remember, this isn't just about meeting fathers' needs: it's about doing the best for children. You need to keep developing your knowledge base and understanding, re-checking local fathers' circumstances and concerns, and monitoring how your service is meeting them.

7. Work out what dads want

- Consult with existing service users - usually mums and children. Ask about issues local dads face and services/activities that might interest them. Should these be male-only? How might scheduling affect their attendance? Will different types of dads need different services? Do mothers know local men who might help you plan services or bring other men to existing services?
- Do a 'Male Involvement Audit'. Use your records, and discussions with all stakeholders, to record exactly how many male service users, volunteers and staff there are. Keep records of men who 'touch' the agency (eg dropping children off). Write down the roles men in service planning and delivery.
- Reach out to dads using staff who are skilled community workers. Male community leaders may help you make contact with local dads. Don't forget dads who don't live with their children full-time, and other male carers including grandfathers and stepfathers.
- Go to where dads are, eg antenatal services, nurseries, schools, recreation, sports and community facilities, further education, churches and couple counselling, employment and youth services, hostels, street corners, pubs and clubs, local cafes/burger bars, bookies and barbers, toy shops, workplaces, contact centres, benefits offices, men's health and

substance abuse programmes, domestic violence projects, shops and supermarkets, local 'shows' and fetes.

- Hold a one-off event. Try a barbecue, dads' breakfast, open day, free trip, sports event, Fathers' Day celebration, 'fix up the Centre' DIY afternoon, bring-dad-to-school day, an information-session outside your own premises (eg school, community, college, workplace, Employment Service) on a special topic (eg first aid, improve your child's brainpower, raising boys, fathering teenagers, child support, legal advice) - and use the event to gather information about the men and their circumstances. Publicise these events (eg through local radio or sports teams). Hook dads and families in with free food, children's activities, local celebrities, workshops with male-friendly themes.
- Record every dad's details. Ask them to fill in a survey or give you advice on developing local services (not necessarily services for dads - services for children, too). Shortly after each event, ask every man on your list to another planned event, and suggest he bring a mate.
- Make sure different types of fathers are well represented on regular parents' forums.

8. Make your building father-friendly

- The outside of the venue - is the signage and look of the outside father-friendly? Or is it pink, fluffy and all about mums?
- The interior - is the decor very feminine - pastel colours, flowery decorations?
- Baby-changing facilities - can dads get to them easily, are they signposted so that dads know they are allowed to use them?
- A male toilet - is there one and is it clearly marked for men (or, if there is only one unisex toilet, is it clearly marked for use by men and women)?
- Positive images of fathers and children - are these clearly displayed, integrated with other images rather than on a 'special' board in one area?
- Photographs of staff - if you have only female staff, you may want to avoid putting up prominent group photographs
- Magazines and other reading material - do they take male needs and interests into account?
- Leaflets and notices - do they address dads directly, or do they only address mums (bear in mind that when people read communications addressed to 'parents', they generally read this as meaning 'mothers')?
- Books - are there books with positive examples of fathers and fathering among the children's books (Peppa Pig is very popular, for example, but Daddy Pig is nearly always

portrayed as silly and ineffectual as a hands-on parent... the butt of the jokes)? Are there books for and about fathers/fatherhood among the parenting books?

- Toys - are there male 'icon toys' in the play area - construction, a mini football table, cars and trains? These can be a good ice-breaker?
- Space for fathers - is there a specific dad-identified space where fathers can congregate and feel like they're 'meant' to be there?
- Outdoor spaces - is there some outdoor space where dads (and mums) can go with their children?

You might be able to involve local dads, mums and children in adapting your venue, including providing photos of dads with children. Local dads and other men might be able to get involved in designing and building or adapting the physical spaces.

9. Father-proof your marketing

While you are re-thinking your noticeboards and displays, think about how you could make your leaflets and other advertising materials more father-friendly. The key here is to make clear that dads are not just welcome, but important:

- Address letters 'Dear Mother and Father', not just 'Dear Parent' (research shows that both men and women read 'parent' as 'mother')
- Always clarify that you want dads as well as mums to attend - don't leave it to chance
- Explain what's involved in the service or event you're running, and why it's important that dads attend
- Fathers respond best where it's made clear what the benefits are to their children, eg Dear Dad, Please come to parents' evening as your active support for your child's education can help him or her achieve better exam results
- Make clear that your definition of 'father' is inclusive of stepfathers, adoptive and foster fathers and other men in a caring role (including uncles and older brothers), as well as biological fathers
- Where appropriate, use positive images of dads - men who look 'real'; men with children of different ages, with and without women; men doing day-to-day caring as well as 'play'; men of different ethnicities.

10. Don't give up!

When local fathers don't beat a path to your door, it's tempting to believe they're not interested, and then lose heart or just focus on the few you've connected with. But the reality is that some services are now working with large, and growing, numbers of dads.

It's important to distinguish between those who are slipping through the net because your service lacks mechanisms to engage with them; and those who are 'service resistant', i.e. they know all about your service and actively choose to stay away, because it doesn't appeal, they don't see the point, or accessing it is too difficult.

There can be many barriers between your service and local fathers - make sure your whole agency makes patient, determined efforts to overcome them. There is no 'magic bullet' for engaging with dads. Here are some key points to consider:

- It's the job of the whole team to engage with men in families they work with, but it's also useful to have workers with a specific responsibility to reach out to dads
- Staff arranging first meetings should always explicitly invite both mother and father, explaining why both are important, and ideally agreeing a time when they can both be there (or separate meetings if this is not practically possible, or if either parent says they'd rather not come together)
- Father-inclusive practice involves always working with other family members in ways that take fathers' roles seriously
- Word of mouth is a great recruitment tool - always ask service users to recommend you to dads they know
- Many fathers will only engage with your agency once they have built a relationship with a trusted worker - often a community outreach or home visit worker, or centre-based worker committed to supporting father-child relationships. Sometimes you'll need to field different workers for a mother and father in the same family, for example where there is domestic violence or couple conflict.

Prepared by Jeremy Davies of the Fatherhood Institute

More resources for employers, service providers and families are available at: www.yearofthedad.org

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