

meet dads on their own terms, which means dealing with them each as unique individuals with their own unique qualities and perspectives.

3. Understanding where dads 'come from'

Generalising can be dangerous, but it's important to be aware that many dads do come to parenting from a 'different place', when compared to mums. Many do see the mum as the 'expert' and take their lead from her; they're also likely to spend less time with their children than the mum does (even if in many cases they would love to see them more). Many dads have received less information about children and child development; they may also have grown up in families where traditional models of masculinity Dads may also be:

- More socially isolated as parents
- Less aware of what services are available
- Likely to assume (usually rightly) that services are 'for women'
- Uncomfortable being the 'only bloke at the toddler group'
- Wary of being judged as an inadequate or risky parent
- Uncomfortable showing vulnerability or uncertainty.

4. Rapport, respect, relaxation and reliability

It's important for staff to be able to build a relationship with fathers by listening to their stories, and tuning in to their experiences and concerns. Comfort with expressions of emotion (especially anger, pain and vulnerability) is also important. Respect is vital, and is rooted in genuinely valuing what men can offer to children. Most men respond well to workers who are relaxed and 'real', and as they are often distrustful of services, you should always do what you've said you'll do.

5. Holistic and strengths-based

Staff should be able to help the father see where he wants to get to, and develop practical plans to get him there. Identify his strengths and build on these, rather than trying to 'shame' him into action. It's important to see him as a whole, and help him on practical and emotional levels, to build his confidence as a parent, support him to work effectively as a co-parent alongside his child's mother (whether they are in a couple or not), and boost his communication skills.

6. Sensitive to gender and power

Most men retain power in their families, but they can also lack confidence and feel marginalised as parents. It's important not to take sides but also - in a way that suits the people in question and is not too confrontational - to be able to challenge both parents to rethink their roles beyond the confines of gender stereotypes.

7. Engaging with mothers on fatherhood

Supporting father-child relationships involves more than just working with fathers - it affects how we engage with the whole family. Sometimes you'll need to encourage mothers to think differently about fatherhood, supporting them to understand fathers' importance to children. Often this means helping them work through pain, disappointment and anger. Some mothers may need support to try to involve fathers who have slipped out of children's lives, and children too may need help to explore feelings around 'absent' or 'difficult' dads.

Keeping the team father-focused

It's crucial to ask - and keep asking - if your organisation is really committed to supporting father-child relationships. Why?

- Because fathers so easily slip off the agenda. Few staff think 'dad' when they picture who is important to a child; staff often let the fact that fathers are invisible to their service persuade them that they're doing their job (of meeting mothers' needs) perfectly well.
- Repeatedly asking this question makes staff develop a clear vision about what children need from their fathers and what difference their agency can make. This can give a crucial sense of shared purpose, to help change deeply embedded practices.
- Revisiting the question regularly enables you to develop clarity on what exactly you're going to do to fulfil that commitment. This moves the whole team beyond lip-service to focus on developing specific, workable objectives and, from these, policies and services to achieve them.

Leading the way

A service that genuinely engages with fathers can only develop with well-informed and firm leadership. Get this right, and much else falls into place. Get it wrong, and the best efforts of individual team members will lead at best to pockets of top quality service provision - and at worst to frustration and burn-out for committed staff who are unable to make any real change.

To help you build a team with good knowledge and understanding of fathers and fatherhood - and the ability to turn it into active and meaningful engagement - here are some questions to keep asking yourselves:

- Is engagement with fathers talked about routinely by managers, and included in your appraisal system?
- Do you include father-engagement in your job descriptions and person specifications (and not just for roles that are specifically about father-engagement)?
- Are team members encouraged to reflect on how they interact with fathers, for example through annual objectives?

- Do team members talk to mothers and fathers equally (or do they make a beeline for the mother)?
- Are team members confident at supporting involved fatherhood in separated families and/or where there is couple conflict?

The answer to all these questions should be a resounding YES.

Key team-building issues

Who?

Can female staff engage with dads effectively... or do you need men on the team?

Many services fall into the trap of assuming that it's only possible to engage with fathers if there's a man on the team. This is not the case. Most dads say that skills and attitude are far more important than the gender of a worker - and some prefer a female worker.

In an ideal world you would have both male and female workers available - but the lack of a male worker should not put you off. Remember, being father-inclusive is not about setting up a separate service for dads - it's about including them in all the services you offer. So you should focus on training female and male workers alike to engage with fathers and other male caregivers, and to see it as part of their role to strengthen men's visibility and role in service settings and delivery.

Where possible, it can be helpful for male and female workers to co-facilitate services, so as to 'model' cooperation and shared expertise between the sexes around looking after children.

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.

When?

How can you time your sessions to maximise the chances of dads coming along?

A key aspect of providing a father-inclusive service (and one that's inclusive of the growing number of working mothers, too) is the ability to offer provision outside 'normal' working hours. Many fathers can and will make themselves available during the working day - they may work shifts, be unemployed or be able to work flexibly. But for those who can't, it's important to schedule provision taking into account the fact that most dads, like a growing proportion of mothers, juggle work and caring commitments.

Given that separated fathers' contact with their children is often centred on weekends, Saturday sessions can be popular. To create a schedule that works for the parents in your area, it's a great idea to run a consultation (perhaps linked to an open day or series of events), where you seek mums' and dads' views on what kinds of services they most want and at what times.

Where?

Where's the best place to offer services if you want men as well as women to attend?

Offering some services to men (or men and women) in other venues can be a good way to widen your reach. Think about using schools, colleges, sports facilities, playgrounds and parks, community centres and other halls, pubs and local hotels, for example. Large local employers or football clubs might also partner with you to offer services. You may also want to think about organising outdoor events or day trips - but don't let this reduce your focus on making family services feel like 'home' for dads too.

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Organised by Fathers Network Scotland with support from the Scottish Government

