

Parents as Partners in Early Learning

Case studies

Parents as Partners – making it strategic

Blackburn with Darwen

Blackburn with Darwen's Parents as Partners in Early Learning (PPEL) funding was used to support targeted projects. One of the most successful was the Me and My Dad scheme. In several parts of Blackburn with Darwen, considerable challenges face those wishing to build long-lasting parental engagement with early years settings and schools. Seeking creative ways of bridging the gap between practitioners and parents, especially fathers, is one of the authority's key goals. This case study outlines the nature, philosophy and positive impact of the Me and My Dad scheme and describes the generic lessons learned about parental involvement, project design and execution.

department for
children, schools and families





Knowing where we are – taking the opportunity

Blackburn with Darwen was quick to submit a creative bid for PPEL funding. The project's timing coincided with the authority completing its children's centre delivery programme and the drafting of its parenting strategy.

'The PPEL initiative was an opportunity to test out and refine generic practicalities of project and programme design and the guiding principles that should underpin such interventions.'

Mary Carley, the authority's lead officer for commissioning in the Children's Services Department

Multi-agency working

The PPEL project struck a chord with the authority's emphasis on synergy between its various parenting initiatives and programmes. A number of local forums were established, including a multi-agency task force, to inform the drafting of the parenting strategy. A key message emerging from these sources was the absolute necessity of involving parents, to ensure that partnership work with parents was understood and supported by local communities. The need to build relationships with fathers was already a key priority of the authority.

A multi-agency approach became a fundamental aspect of the Me and My Dad project.

'We have made a point of inviting a range of professionals onto the separate steering groups overseeing the scheme locally. It has also been important forging links with those in the region working closely with our diverse and culturally rich communities such as the fathers worker for the Lancashire Council of Mosques and Diocesan Board.'

Gary Rich, PPEL fathers worker

Opening up the steering groups to interested fathers ensured that parents' voices were heard at the heart of the programme. This greatly enhanced the fathers' commitment to the project as well as its overall local impact and status.

Choosing the areas

The Me and My Dad project was targeted at areas of greatest need, based in four of the authority's children's centres and a similar number of their satellite schools. A fathers worker took on the project's management aided by a part-time Gujarati and Urdu-speaking worker, and facilitators were appointed in each of the settings to help embed the work.

Building Capacity – the role of training

A key element throughout was the emphasis upon building the long-term capacity of practitioners through training. There were two elements to this: the ContinYou 'Involving Men as Fathers' seminars and SHARE training aimed at building the skills and activity repertoires of the various setting-based facilitators.

Benchmarking and evaluation

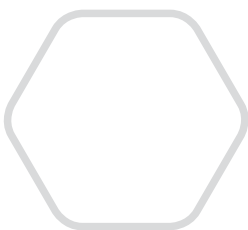
An important part of the parenting strategy and a major feature of Blackburn with Darwen's Children and Young People's Plan is capturing positive results emerging from any commissioned projects. The PPEL Me and My Dad scheme was in place at an ideal time to trial a number of innovative approaches.

A baseline assessment was carried out among fathers to measure their involvement with their children and identify barriers to engagement. At the end of the programme, this exercise was repeated to evaluate the impact of the scheme. Fathers were also asked to keep records of the differences the courses were making when they were with their children, both at home and in other places outside the setting. Keeping diaries worked for some fathers, while for others the use of cameras proved more effective.

Later in the project a fun day was organised for both fathers and children, featuring activities like role-play, storytelling and learning circus skills. Some of the activities were specifically chosen to match aspects of physical play that fathers often enjoy with their children. Ideas from fathers, about 'What it means to be a Dad', were compiled during the day and printed and distributed to the fathers.

Impact – fathers and their children

The records and diaries kept by fathers clearly show that involvement with the project strengthened fathers' bonding with their children. Fathers described how they now read, play and go to the library with their children more often. Some demonstrated how they have used project activities at home. Children's joy at having their fathers come into their school, or early years setting, to learn alongside them is also very apparent. 'It's our special time,' said one child.



Strategic impact

One element of the Me and My Dad project that has had a significant impact on the authority's thinking and its parenting strategy is the need to accommodate parents' different home lives and work patterns. The timing of events is particularly important. One of the main benefits for fathers coming into settings for the meetings on Fridays was the chance this gave them to practise what they had learned with their children at the weekend. And for those who were separated from their children's mother, the meetings often meant a valued extension of the time they were able to spend with their youngsters.

'What the PPEL project confirms is the absolute need to see that the work we do is governed by an entirely positive outlook towards parents, how important it is to build all we do upon the knowledge that most parents want the best for their children. It is then up to us to develop appropriate interventions, through sensitively-aware staff, that can help settings develop more fulfilling partnerships with parents as their children's first and most important educator.'

Pat Salmon, early years development manager

Key findings:

The need for:

- clear benchmarking and careful evaluation and monitoring, undertaken in a variety of ways to ensure fairness of participation;
- constructive engagement with fathers that responds flexibly to their needs;
- coordinated inter-agency working;
- no underestimation of parental desire to play a central role in their children's learning;
- settings reflecting lessons learned by removing barriers to involvement;
- involving parents in decision making and development of activities.

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