

# Parents as Partners in Early Learning

## Case studies

The Kids and Dads project

## Plymouth

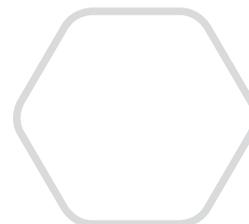
*'Already I have learned of many play ideas, especially messy play. I am more confident at attending other venues to join in activities... I have learned to play differently and see the child's way and experiences.'*

*Feedback from a father involved in the PPEL project*

Plymouth's Parents as Partners in Early Learning (PPEL) Kids and Dads project was a joint venture involving Keystone children's centres, Plymouth's YMCA children's centres and the local authority. The project worked in partnership with five voluntary and community organisations, serving some of the most deprived communities in the city. Activities focused on ways in which to involve fathers more with their children's early learning. The project made good use of benchmark research and enjoyed a prominent local profile, thanks to an effective marketing strategy. Evaluation evidence has revealed significant gains for parents, children and practitioners.

department for  
**children, schools and families**





## Beginning big

The Plymouth PPEL project was launched on 17 June 2007 (Father's Day), soon after the funding fell into place. Steve Lewis, project manager for the PPEL Kids and Dads scheme explained how significant this was for the success of the initiative: 'It was the ideal date and we were quick off the mark... Plymouth's outsourcing of the funding to the voluntary and community sector helped speed things up, giving us the freedom to engage a local public relations firm able to arrange the opening event in time.'

The launch attracted over 200 fathers and showcased a wide variety of activities designed to highlight the value of play for children aged from three months upwards. The research element of the project also started early – fathers who attended the event were interviewed about their involvement with their children's lives and any barriers that they had experienced. In addition, practitioner training before the event revealed how many early years staff felt quite unaccustomed to collaborating with fathers. This raised awareness of the need for play projects aimed specifically at including fathers.

## Establishing the baseline and key objectives

The project began with benchmarking research conducted among fathers and the 47 services catering to the under-fives. Of the 17 groups that provided feedback, only one had an active fathers' group, with the rest having no strategy to recruit fathers, or even any apparent recognition of fathers' contribution to their children's learning through play. Changing this situation became a key objective of the project and underpinned the approach to ensuring sustainability.

The key project objectives were:

- recruiting fathers to form focus groups;
- expanding the opportunities for fathers and children to come together, sometimes as a part of whole-family groups;
- working with practitioners to help them engage more successfully with fathers;
- developing strategies for long-term sustainable delivery of Kids and Dads provision.

## Serious comedy

As well as conventional recruiting methods the Kids and Dads project employed a number of original means to encourage fathers to meet, as a prelude to developing local focus groups. In August and September 2007 three get-together evenings were held across Plymouth, featuring a local comedian – whose specially written stand-up set explored aspects of fatherhood. The final evening attracted a 40-strong audience, all of whom were told about the opportunities for getting more involved.

## From focus groups to fathers' groups

The recruitment phase led to the setting up of focus groups at four Voluntary and Community Organisation (VCO) settings. They enabled fathers to talk to each other, discussing their feelings, attitudes and perceptions. Key points emerging from these sessions included:

- When designing father-friendly activities, it is important to recognise occasions when it is necessary to cater for both mothers and fathers. Weekends, for example, are often the only occasions families can spend good quality time together.
- The importance of encouraging a broad vision of parental involvement – one that includes grandfathers and other male relatives and carers.

To date, four long-term fathers' groups have grown out of the focus meetings. A local Black and Minority Ethnic (B&ME) support group has developed its focus group into a regular Saturday morning session for fathers. They organise family fun days which are expanding the opportunities for fathers, children and family groups to come together. They are recruiting more members as well as fundraising to ensure the groups' long-term sustainability.

## Broadening the activity range

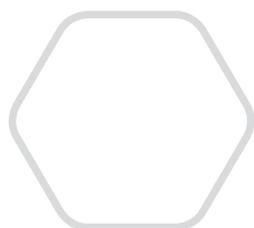
In response to the evidence of limited provision for fathers and children, five VCOs were funded via PPEL to deliver a varied programme of activities designed to maximise fathers' involvement. One community centre developed soft-play opportunities and another arranged the construction of a wall-mosaic. The value of providing activities with which both children and fathers can engage has emerged as a crucial element in the success of such ventures.

*'Instead of just going for a walk to the creek, we now go for a walk and let the kids experiment with the mud; we talk about what we see and the colours that are around... we now try to spend quality time each day with our children...'*

*Feedback from a father involved in the PPEL project*

## A creative approach to staffing

A significant discovery emerging from both one-off and more sustained project activities is the benefits of a dual-staffing system. This model allows one practitioner to work with the children, while a second practitioner initiates and builds fathers' trust and involvement. Another finding was the extent to which practitioners benefit from specialist training designed to improve their interaction with fathers.



## Prominence, perpetuation and development

Project findings have been systematically distributed across a variety of settings. The project was the subject of a keynote speech at the city's Gender and Equalities conference in March 2008 and the PPEL project manager has been invited to take the lead in Plymouth's parent and family support implementation plan. The importance of engaging parents in early learning is now well placed as a central element of the city's parenting strategy.

*'What our project has proved is the value for local authorities of engaging with the voluntary and community sector – particularly when it comes to making the most of projects dependent on short-term funding and the swift turn-around of initiatives and results... It is also crucial that at the heart of such work with fathers there are activities that can be absorbed into standard practice, if and when specific funding ends. In the end, the best work is straightforward and fun. The benefit too of effective marketing and publicity cannot be underestimated.'*

*Steve Lewis, project manager*

## A healthier future

*'We can be assured that added involvement of fathers does make a significant difference over time just as eating five fruit and vegetable servings a day may enhance the possibility of living a longer and healthier life... We are clearly in the realm of long-term impacts with this work.'*

*Steve Lewis, project manager*

## Key findings:

- Keep it simple and enjoyable.
- Learning through play is a powerful tool for engaging fathers.
- Don't lead with complex messages.
- Recognise the impact of marketing and publicity.
- Understand what motivates people.
- Build a multi-skilled team.

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