

# Parents as Partners in Early Learning

## Case studies

### Engaging fathers through Active Play

### Liverpool

Liverpool's Parents as Partners in Early Learning (PPEL) project complemented existing priorities and initiatives focused on engaging parents with their children's early learning and the city's drive to promote healthy, active lifestyles.

The PPEL funding was used to create an Active Play project aimed specifically at fathers. Six-week courses were run in over 20 early years settings. A free rucksack, crammed with equipment designed to sustain the positive indoor and outdoor activities and messages learned on the course, was promised to each father as an incentive to encourage regular participation in the PPEL Active Play sessions.

department for  
**children, schools and families**





### Enhanced access for fathers

Liverpool's Active Play programme relied on four part-time key workers, whose flexible approach to programme delivery meant that training programmes could be run at times convenient for those fathers who could only attend at weekends or in the evenings. Overcoming these time barriers enabled good levels of uptake for the courses.

Many of the children's centres had already benefited from broader active play training aimed at children and early years practitioners, so the PPEL funding fell on fertile ground. The project extended work where there were fathers' groups already in existence, and also helped develop new groups in other settings. All shared the same purpose: encouraging fathers to engage with their young children.

### Getting everything into place – benchmarking begins

The PPEL project support officer's role proved crucial, particularly as she had worked with the nominated settings in her previous role. Her detailed knowledge of the settings and target families helped her to anticipate what was needed to keep things running smoothly – including the considerable paperwork that each course required.

Questionnaires designed to benchmark the extent of the fathers' engagement in their children's active play were completed before the courses began. 'I hope to see my child grow in confidence,' said one father when asked to express his expectations of the Active Play sessions. The completed questionnaires also revealed the amount of time the fathers devoted to playing with their children each day and the kinds of resources they used, if any. Many fathers admitted to being short of ideas when it came to extending their children's active play on their own.

### Broad appeal, extensive take-up

The PPEL Active Play sessions attracted over 200 adults across the various children's centres and schools – with grandfathers and principal male carers well represented. All that was asked of the adults was that they attended the sessions regularly, and this was a condition of their qualifying for the Active Play rucksacks that were distributed at the final session.

One focus of the project was the recruitment of fathers who were not already involved with local services. There were a number of major breakthroughs with individuals overcoming considerable difficulties, such as depression and a reluctance to leave home, in order to get involved with their children's early learning.

## Good openings

***'It was very apparent that much of the fathers' initial nervousness was based on fears that they would somehow fail.'***

*Family link worker at one of the children's centres*

Fathers who attended the sessions were reassured from the start that there were no rights and wrongs, and that any ideas they had for activities would be valued.

'In one of my groups the breakthrough came quickly,' remarked an Active Play project worker, 'when a father devised a new game. The success of his suggestion gave the entire group licence to adapt and change what we showcased.'

## The sessions explained

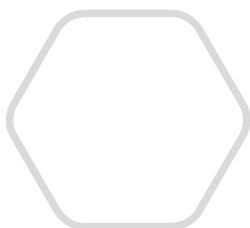
The PPEL Active Play sessions were run both indoors and outdoors. Ice-breaking activities were followed by games and activities based on the materials planned for inclusion in the Active Play rucksacks. Each father and male carer was given a disposable camera. They were encouraged to use these to record evidence of their involvement with their children's Active Play at home. Parents were promised their own copies of any images they took, with a further set going to the project itself – forming part of the initiative's monitoring and evaluation evidence.

The core equipment trialled in the Active Play sessions was then included in each of the rucksacks, along with a set of activity cards on a key ring with a stopwatch. The fathers' Active Play sessions and the home-use resources were designed to link with the Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS) areas of learning and development, in particular, children's Personal, Social and Emotional Development.

The final session was an awards event – a celebratory occasion for entire families and the distribution of the Active Play rucksacks.

## Making an impact

At the end of the programme fathers completed simple feedback forms. High levels of satisfaction in the courses were expressed, with many comments identifying improvements in their children's capacity to play confidently and constructively with adults and other children. Fathers' feedback also revealed a significantly enriched personal understanding of how their children play and learn. Evaluation evidence showed that the sessions had developed children's generic ABC skills: agility, balance and coordination. The activities gave some behaviours, for example turn-taking, a meaning and validity that, for many children, had previously been lacking.



## Feedback – making Children’s Centres more ‘father-friendly’

Alongside the impact assessment analysis that resulted from the baseline and end-of-course questionnaires, the Active Play sessions also provided a less formal way to capture fathers’ views of children’s centres and other such early years settings. A common and revealing opinion was that simple changes to décor could easily make such places more father-friendly.

The previous Active Play projects in Liverpool had already embedded a commitment to such work in many of the city’s early years settings. The PPEL project proved an ideal addition to this initiative, forming a strong base from which further father-focused support can be launched.

### Key findings:

- The value of Active Play both indoors and outdoors as a means of engaging fathers.
- The importance of a key project coordinator with good local knowledge, both of settings and practitioners.
- The essential nature of encouraging participants to see themselves as contributors to the activities.
- The many knock-on benefits, in terms of children’s broader development that come with active play.
- The importance of rewards such as the rucksacks and outings as a means of encouraging regular attendance and also building team spirit among participants.
- Team work with outside agencies.

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