

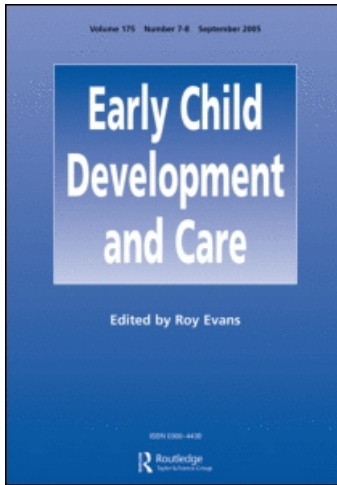
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‘Something in it for dads’: getting fathers involved with Sure Start

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This paper presents a case study of one local Sure Start programme’s significant success in engaging large numbers of fathers with its services. The paper details both the levels of male involvement in the programme over time and the strategies found to be effective in involving men. Numbers of fathers using programme services rose to over 100 in 2005, with the total number of male attendances exceeding 1000 in that same year. The successful engagement of fathers in this programme’s activities was found to be a result of a combination of both strategic and day-to-day approaches. Effective strategic approaches were close partnership working with an expert local voluntary agency, the use of a gender differentiated approach and in-going commitment to the work at programme management level. Factors related to success at a day-to-day level included the high level of skill and persistence demonstrated by a dedicated Fathers Worker and the implicit use of a social marketing approach. Findings are discussed in the context of current national policy contexts relating to father engagement.

Keywords: *Early years; Fathers; Service provision*

Introduction

The Labour government’s green paper *Every child matters* (DfES, 2003) stated, ‘We should recognise the vital role played by fathers as well as mothers’ (p. 20). Reviewing 21 research studies related to fathers in the UK, Lewis (2000) concluded that ‘the current policy interest in fathers is the culmination of three decades of rapid change in the institutions and conventions of family life’ (p. 2).

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There is substantial evidence that when fathers are more involved with caring for their children, then children often do better in later life, particularly in their psychological and social development (e.g. Lamb, 2004). Head Start researchers in the USA found that where fathers had been highly involved, children did better in school and where less so, children tended to show more behavioural problems (Fagan & Iglesias, 1999). Dubowitz *et al.* (2001) found that the presence of a father in families of six year olds was associated not only with increased cognitive development but also with a sense of greater competence by the children themselves.

Despite these known benefits of fathers' involvement, it has been generally acknowledged that the practice of providing effective support to fathers in their parenting role continues to lag far behind policy aspirations (Lewis, 2000; O'Brien, 2004). The National Family and Parenting Institute's mapping of family services in England and Wales (Henricson *et al.*, 2001) recorded that fewer than 1% of family services were targeted at fathers and that fathers 'are not perceived to be in the mainstream of provision and face barriers to support' (p. 7). In their review of family centres, Ghate *et al.* (2000) concluded that:

Provision of services for men as child carers lags behind that for women. Fathers are neither well served by family support services nor are they widely catered for in their own right. (Ghate *et al.*, 2000, p. 2)

There are a number of widely acknowledged structural and attitudinal reasons for low father engagement in family services, a full discussion of which is beyond the scope of this paper. However, major factors include the following: father perceptions that such services are 'for mothers' and there being significant justification for such a perception (Ghate *et al.*, 2000); traditional belief systems which see fathers as economic providers and mothers as childcarers (Goldman, 2005); professional reluctance to engage men (Ryan, 2000) and male reluctance to seek help and advice (Lloyd, 2001).

Sure Start

The introduction of Sure Start, a major New Labour initiative aimed at alleviating disadvantage in the early years, was intended to achieve change in the area of father involvement with early guidance documents exhorting local programmes to include parents in all aspects of the planning, managing and running of services. They were required to 'Involve parents, grandparents and other carers in ways that build on their existing strengths' (DfEE, 1999). The strong inference was that programmes should adopt a broad service delivery approach, which included fathers. However, Lloyd *et al.* (2003) found that 36% of 118 round 1 and 2 programmes gave only a low priority to working with fathers, 52% a medium one and only 12% had made it a high priority in their work. More recently, a report produced by the National Evaluation of Sure Start, reviewing developments within the programmes during their first four years spoke of a 'low overall level of father involvement in programmes' (Tunstall *et al.*, 2005). Such findings demonstrate that despite explicit guidance that local Sure

Start programmes should seek to involve fathers, only a minority apparently sought to do so in a comprehensive fashion. Sure Start Hinton, the subject of this study, was one such programme.

Research aim

The aim of this study was to find out to what extent fathers were engaged with Sure Start Hinton and to determine which strategies fathers, mothers and programme staff believed to be most effective in engaging men. Father and mother perceptions of the many benefits of engagement with the programme are discussed elsewhere in this paper.

Research design

The case study presented concerns a Sure Start local programme in the north east of England. Sure Start Hinton was established in 2000 and became operational in 2001. Specific services for fathers and male carers began to be set up in 2002.

This study took place in the context of a five-year independent evaluation of a number of programmes in the area. Where possible, and with the agreement of the Programme Partnership Boards, evaluations were linked in order to make relevant comparisons of process and outcomes. For this study, the comparator programme operated within the same county as Sure Start Hinton and provided information about its activities for fathers and data on their involvement. This comparator programme would best be described in terms of Lloyd *et al.*'s (2003) criteria as giving 'medium priority' to fathers.

The impact of Sure Start Hinton's work is assessed quantitatively, comparing the two programmes in terms of the numbers of fathers engaged and the total number of attendances per year. Engagement and attendance data were collated for the years 2002–2005 from the programmes' databases. The collection of such data is a requirement of funding and both programmes used the same software and methods. Perspectives on the nature of strategies perceived to be effective in engaging men are then discussed in relation to the views of fathers, mothers and Sure Start Hinton staff.

In order to obtain parents' views, a convenience sample of 16 fathers and one grand-father with care of the children was recruited and eight mothers, partners of some of these men, also agreed to take part. Fifteen fathers were married; 11 of these were employed and the other four were unemployed and had full-time care of their children. The other two were unmarried, unemployed and had sole care of the children.

Semi-structured interviews were undertaken with nine of the fathers and the eight mothers. Twelve fathers participated in four focus groups organised on the basis of attendance at particular programme activities such as a Childcare course and a 'Dads Drop in' session.

Staff perspectives were obtained from semi-structured interviews with three members of Sure Start Hinton staff, namely the Fathers Worker, the Programme

Manager and the Health Visitor Co-ordinator and with the director of an expert voluntary organisation working with fathers in the north east of England.

Data analysis

All focus group and interview data were transcribed and a summary of each returned to each participant as a mechanism for checking the trustworthiness of the data (Robson, 2002). Data analysis was undertaken using NVIVO qualitative software program. A grounded theory approach was adopted (Strauss & Corbin, 1990) where the development of theory is inductively derived from the study of the phenomenon which it represents. Specifically, data analysis took place in three stages. Initially, first level general thematic categories were identified, following which, a number of sub themes within each of these wider categories emerged. Finally, direct quotations representing each sub theme were selected to provide a rich description of the perceptions of fathers and mothers.

Findings

Fathers' engagement and attendance

The number of fathers engaged in the Hinton programme's activities increased from three in 2002 to over a hundred in 2005. This compares to an average of 7.5 fathers in the comparator programme (Figure 1).

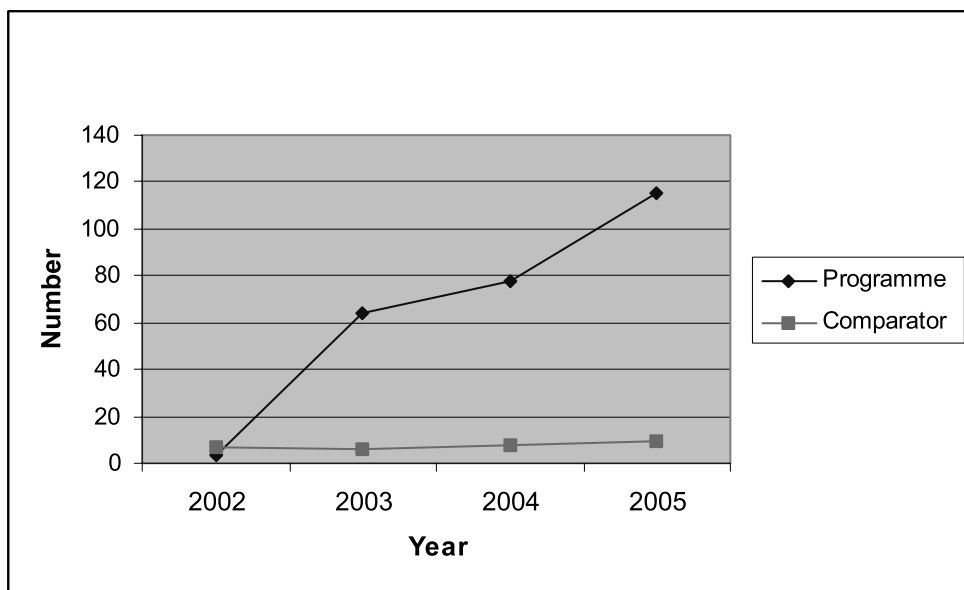


Figure 1. Fathers engaged in programme

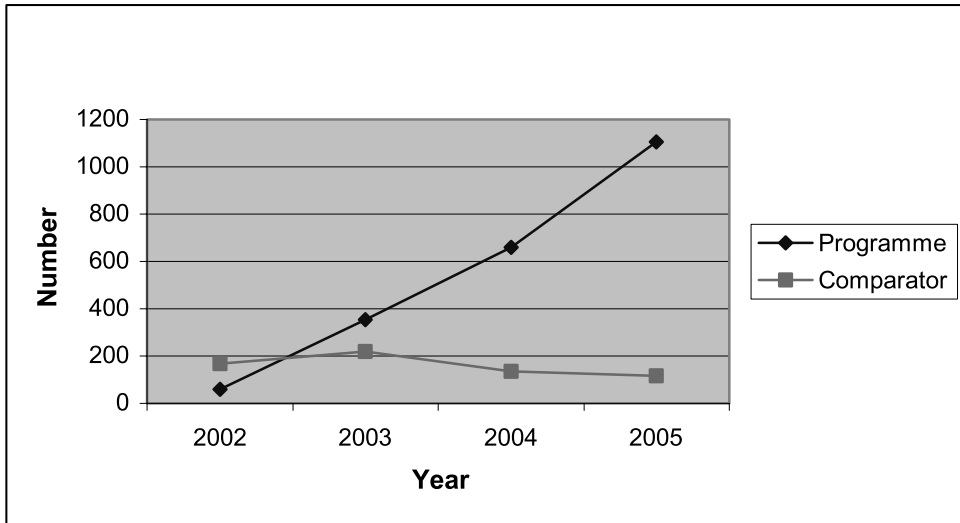


Figure 2. Total attendances

The total number of male attendances at Sure Start Hinton's activities rose from 60 to over 1000 in 2005, whereas in the comparator programme it started higher but declined in the last two years (Figure 2).

The men were involved at all levels of the Hinton Sure Start programme, from attendance at a range of activities through to membership of the Parents' Group and Sure Start Partnership, the governing body of Sure Start programmes. However, it is important to note that over 90% of all attendances after 2003 were recorded at male-specific activities and events.

Getting fathers/male carers involved: what worked

We now explore the reasons for Sure Start Hinton's apparent success in engaging large numbers of fathers and male carers. Factors at both strategic and everyday levels can be shown to have been important in the creation of a whole systems approach to working with men.

Strategic level

The programme's early and continuing commitment to active involvement for men appears to have been especially important. Despite a slow start to the programme's work in this area, witnessed by the regular involvement of only three fathers in 2002, programme managers continued to support fathers' work strongly over a number of years.

The second strategic factor perceived to contribute significantly to programme success in engaging fathers was a close working relationship with a local voluntary organisation having expertise in the process of male engagement. The programme

manager believed that staff input from this agency was of 'fundamental' importance in developing the work with fathers and male carers. The voluntary agency supported the appointment and training of a part-time Fathers Worker and entered into a successful dual management of this member of staff. The agency also delivered extensive staff training to the whole Sure Start team since the launch of programme services in 2001.

A third factor identified at a strategic level was the programme's consistent use of a gender differentiated approach which sets out to recognise and address the different needs and interests of men and women as opposed to a gender blind approach, which treats men and women in approximately the same way (Ghate *et al.*, 2000). Providing all-male activities is one important aspect of a gender differentiated approach, as is the introduction of a dedicated worker to focus specifically on involving fathers.

Programme delivery level

Skills and abilities of the dedicated Fathers Worker

At the everyday level of programme working, both staff and fathers/male carers considered that the skills of the Fathers Worker were fundamental in engaging men locally. In general, men felt strongly that the worker was doing a very good job:

She is an excellent worker. (F (father) 6)

She does a really cracking job. (F15)

In particular, staff and fathers/male carers emphasised the importance of the worker's persistence:

Persuading people—she's never heard the word 'no'. (F12)

Hard work and positive outlook were also valued by fathers and male carers:

She's just so enthusiastic—to me—it's partly her enthusiasm I think—I wish I was as enthusiastic in my job. (F4)

The female Fathers Worker's ability to relate well to men was highlighted:

She just joins in—she's like one of the lads—she supports you and she even joins in—you know you could get other people and you could be uncomfortable type—whereas [the Fathers Worker] just goes along with it. (F13)

The importance of humour in all-male groups was emphasised by a number of fathers and male carers. One father said:

Men Mickey take all the time—specially when you get a group of men together—you've got to have banter—if you haven't got banter you haven't got a group. (F6)

Finally, the use of an individualised approach was valued:

She doesn't treat you like a number—she treats you like an individual person. (F2)

A social marketing approach

Another key factor was the implicit use of an assertive social marketing approach where activities and events are ‘sold’ to fathers and male carers on the basis of explaining what they and their families can gain from them (McDermott, 2000).

The worker herself stated:

There’s got to be something in it for dads or they’re not going to do it—at the end of the day, the programme has to ask ‘why would fathers choose to come in?’

There are three critical stages in the approach: First, the worker, in close collaboration with her two line managers, set out to identify the most attractive ‘products’ through a process of explicit consultation with fathers and male carers. Several fathers commented on the importance of this strategy:

[the dads worker] keeps on saying ‘what do you want to do?’—she’s always asking that—or trips wise—is there anywhere that we want to go? And if the funding’s there we can get something sorted. (F1)

The second stage is to act on the suggestions quickly and consistently, so that there is a variety of activities being developed at any given time to maintain interest. The final and most critical stage is ‘selling’ the activities to individuals. The worker concerned seemed particularly adept at doing this, as one remarked:

The way she does it is excellent—she’ll come up to you and say ‘this class will be very good for you—would you like to do it? We can sort out funding, I’ll help you with this and I’ll help you with that’ and she’ll keep on telling you (F9)

Male specific activities

There was overwhelming support amongst the fathers for all-male activities:

I think I’d rather it be lads like—definitely—all men like. (F5)

I prefer it [all men]—I do definitely—definitely. (F8)

Some believed that male-specific activities were vital to attract fathers in the first place:

I mean it is crucial really that there’s a dads club—if there wasn’t a dads club solely I’m sure there’s a lot of people wouldn’t go to a mixed club.

It’s just the way men are. It doesn’t bother me personally—but a lot of men won’t go if it’s mixed and stuff. (F3)

Several fathers gave detailed accounts of stressful experiences in mixed-gender sessions. One father recalled:

I was like that when I first went to [one of the mixed groups]—I think there was only one other bloke there and meself and it was all women and they’re all like looking at you—I was like running across the floor—you think ‘oh God’—I was pleased when I went that the Fathers Worker was there—I was thinking ‘I’ll sit over here out the way’ (laughing). (F8)

All eight mothers felt that an all-male environment was beneficial, some believing that it had helped their partners to take part in the first place. Examples of mothers' comments were:

The fact that it is all men makes it easier for them to go—[my partner] won't go to anything mixed with me—it's a good idea for them to have their own stuff. (M5)

The dads' club is great— [dads] do it because other dads are doing it. (M2)

High interest or 'hook' activities

Another important strategy was the use of high interest or 'hook' activities explicitly developed to appeal to men. The aim was to draw fathers into the programme and then to interest them in other sessions, once a positive relationship has been established. The development of such 'hook' activities required careful planning however, particularly when they did not appear to relate directly to the stated Sure Start aims and objectives. For example, it was important to emphasise that the Martial Arts class was not about 'fighting'; rather it used a range of sophisticated techniques to teach relaxation and anger management. A key member of staff stated that the programme has to offer services:

... which recognise the situation that men are in. If a man has a partner with Post Natal Depression, then the father is the key to that woman's well-being. If the woman is depressed, the father may also become depressed as well as the baby. There is a ripple effect. The courses they offer help men to think about their place in the family and their place in relation to other men.

The Martial Arts class was successful at a number of levels. Firstly, it has attracted large numbers of fathers into the programme. In both 2003 and 2004, it was the best attended activity, achieving a total of 191 attendances over the two years. The activity has appealed to a number of men. One father commented:

If it was something like knitting or that kind of activity, I wouldn't have stuck it out but it's a masculine thing you know—I'm doing martial arts—that kind of thing. (F4)

It would appear that this strategy has been successful. The Martial Arts class accounted for 17% of male attendances in 2003 and 20% in 2004. Further, just under two-thirds of those whose first contact was through this class or through football went on to use other services.

Effective first contacts

Having first developed activities which were attractive to fathers and then persuaded them to take part, Sure Start Hinton's next step was to welcome and support them within the crucial first few sessions. If the father's experience was positive he was likely to return.

The [Dads Worker] always get like new members involved as well—rather than you just being sat in the corner on your own just being quiet like you normally do when you don't

know people—when I first come like—I didn't know anyone—[the dads worker] was just constantly trying to get us involved. (F8)

The next stage in the retention process was to contact fathers, usually by phone, after they had attended their first group to ask for their views on the session and to encourage them to come again. Again fathers themselves commented on the worker's persistence in this regard:

She doesn't let go—she'll follow up and follow up and follow up (F6)

This 'on the spot' following up seemed essential in retaining father involvement. Again, it seems to be a proactive and assertive approach which achieved good results.

Strategies to keep men engaged

An important factor in keeping men involved was that the agenda for activities and events was user led. Several fathers commented that they had an opportunity to 'have their say' in terms of the activities and trips they could take part in.

Its not like [the worker] says 'look we're going to do this—we're going to do that'—we have an input in it—it's not just we're going to do this and nobody turns up—nobody's interested in it—you know. (F3)

[Staff] usually say that there's a range of things that we can do—usually geared to what fathers want rather than being based on someone else's idea—gives them more of an option. (F10)

One of the mothers we spoke to believed that involving men in decision-making was vital:

What works more than anything is that they can have a say. (M2)

Tensions and ways forward

As is to be expected, given the newness and scale of the task, Sure Start Hinton experienced a number of challenges in developing its work with fathers. Managers guiding the development of fathers' work were acutely aware that in order to expand and sustain fathers' involvement in future, responsibility for it must be shared across the whole team and between agencies. As one professional pointed out, the task requires 'a shift in organisational culture' since all staff may not have experience of the approaches and structures which are necessary to include men.

Lloyd *et al.*'s (2003) report on fathers work for the National Evaluation of Sure Start concluded:

To increase father involvement, it is essential that commitment to father involvement permeates the whole Sure Start programme ... A programme-wide commitment to fathers. (p. 52)

In order to include men fully, it was clear that there was a need for change at a number of levels which caused tensions in some areas. For example, there are differences in the

ways that men and women interact in groups which some staff were more familiar with than others. The employment commitments of many men meant that more flexible patterns of staff working were required which had significant structural implications for staff working conditions. Such changes required on-going skilled negotiation on the part of the Programme's Manager.

Discussion

This study demonstrates how one Sure Start programme was able to engage large numbers of fathers with their early years services, in somewhat stark contrast to the majority of other local programmes, as noted above. Several of the approaches used by Sure Start Hinton to engage fathers are consistent with other strategies found to be effective in working with men, such as persistence in seeking fathers out and making services less female dominated (Ghate *et al.*, 2000), in addition to taking account of what motivates fathers (Lloyd, 2001). What singles Sure Start Hinton's work out as qualitatively different from that undertaken by others, is that many of those approaches found to be effective have been implemented within the context of relatively small scale projects (see Lloyd's (2001) study 'What Works with Fathers', for example). By contrast, Sure Start programmes, as forerunners of children's centres, were wide-ranging whole service delivery mechanisms for families across local neighbourhoods and as such, the success achieved by Sure Start Hinton has a number of important implications for the more widespread inclusion of men in early years services.

Firstly, the consistent use of a combination of both strategic and day-to-day strategies was fundamental to the programme's success in engaging men. At a strategic level, close day-to-day partnership working with an expert voluntary agency and the persistent use of a gender differentiated approach was perceived to be vital, as was on-going commitment to the work at programme management level. At a day-to-day level, the skills, abilities and persistence of the dedicated Fathers Worker, strongly supported by a dual management structure were fundamental to the work's continuing success. Having said this, whole staff training to support the development of a team-wide approach was found to be essential in working towards sustainable change in the delivery of all programme services to men. In addition, the implicit use of a social marketing strategy in which the views of fathers/male carers on what should be provided and how were gained on an on-going basis, with activities and events then 'sold' to fathers in a very proactive way, seemed particularly effective. Such an approach may be especially men-friendly since by taking consumer desires as its starting point, a social marketing strategy is likely to avoid difficulties with negative male perceptions of often used service terms, such as 'help', 'need' and 'support' (Summers *et al.*, 2004).

It is especially important that lessons from such effective work are learnt within a policy context which continues to introduce ever greater requirements for male involvement with family services. Practice Guidelines for Children's Centres (DfES, 2006) stated that:

All Sure Start Children's Centre services should be responsive to supporting fathers in their role as a parent and in their relationship with their partner or ex-partner, and more generally to promote the role of fathering. (p. 81)

Despite this much more explicit guidance on father engagement for children's centres than was initially produced for Sure Start local programmes, early indications on progress continue to be disappointing, with the National Audit Office concluding that centres were found to be *less effective at meeting the needs of fathers* (National Audit Office, 2006, p. 34).

Since the launch of children's centres, however, even greater obligations have been placed on public services to include men. Since April 2007, facilitating male access to services has become a matter of legal concern, with the introduction of the Gender Equality Duty which legally obliges all public bodies to:

Gather and use information on how the public authority's policies and practices affect gender equality in the workforce and in the delivery of services. (Equal Opportunities Commission, 2007, p. 3)

In practice, this means that men are now legally entitled to receive services in ways which best meet their needs and this represents a very important change in terms of accountability with regard to accessible service provision.

Sure Start Hinton's effective work in achieving father inclusion within their services demonstrates that high levels of male engagement can be achieved through the consistent and integrated use of both strategic and day-to-day approaches. Its efforts need to be replicated and extended at both local and national level, if men are to be more effectively supported in their fathering role. The task is a challenging one but the long-term benefits are likely to be great. As Carpenter (2002) noted:

In empowering fathers ... through inclusive practices, professionals can strengthen and empower the whole family network. (p. 201)

Finally, this is one father's vision of what might be gained through greater father access to men-friendly services:

We've found with the dads group—it's making them better people more interested, more interactive with their children—which makes them better children and as they grow up they'll pass it on and you've started the ball rolling—it's going to get better and better

Acknowledgements

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