

Cover Sheet

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AI Summary

I confirm that I have not presented any AI generated text as my own work. I confirm I have copies of my drafts, notes, and other resources I used before, and after the use of AI tools which I may be asked to provide in evidence.

How fathers in disadvantaged areas experience fatherhood when raising early years children with emerging needs and/or identified ALN.

Literature Review

Connell (2022) and Butler (2023) highlight the complexities of gender and its influence on fatherhood. Connell (2022) discusses gender as both biologically and socially constructed, recognising fluid identities. Butler (2023) distinguishes sex from gender. Sex is a category assigned at birth for medical and legal terms whereas gender is an open ended concept shaped by culture, family and personal identity (Butler, 2023). Butler further states neither sex or gender should determine how one should live their life (Butler, 2023).

Machin (2019) and Fathers Network Scotland [hereafter FNS] (2025) emphasise that fathers are biologically primed for parenting, with evolutionary changes supporting their caregiving role.

Machin (2018) and JAVA Discover [hereafter JD], (2024) explain that first-time fathers experience hormonal shifts, such as reduced testosterone and increased oxytocin, aiding sensitivity and bonding. Machin(2018) demonstrates that when living with their pregnant partner, fathers synchronise biologically with aligning heart rates, eye contact and communication to strengthen emotional connection. Fatherhood begins before birth (JD, 2024). Post-birth, brain changes support nurturing, risk assessment, and problem-solving, impacting all fathers, not just biological ones (Machin, 2019 and JD, 2024). Machen (2018) emphasises that a fatherhood is not defined by genetics but rather by the person who steps up and actively raises the child.

JD (2024) and Machin (2019) further acknowledge the flexibility of fatherhood, encompassing roles beyond biological fathers to include uncles, friends or stepfathers. Some children benefit from having whole teams of fathers, forming a support network dedicated to the child's survival and wellbeing. FNS (2025) discuss the 'social father' concept, reflecting evolving societal shifts and the advancements of fertility treatments. They argue the title of 'dad' being more diverse than ever.

JD (2024) explains that father-child attachments differ from those of mothers, as fathers build bonds through interactions. Whereas mothers get them through emotional attachments typically cuddles and affection (Machin, 2018 and Machin, 2019). This can lead to delayed emotional connections, sometimes taking up to six months for feelings of love and attachment to develop. To strengthen bonds, fathers should engage in playful "serve and return" interactions, particularly through rough-and-tumble play. These interactions serve to release the oxytocin fathers need to build those bonds and to synchronise to the child.

Machin (2019) links father-child attachment to executive functioning, supporting resilience, self-esteem, and conflict resolution (JD, 2024; FNS, 2025).

Cannito (2019) argues fatherhood varies widely, making a single model difficult to define. Hunter *et al.* (2017) link fatherhood to gender roles and that changes in fatherhood must be understood in relation to the broader division of caregiving responsibilities.

Marsh *et al.* (2020) further state that evolving family structures and society values have reshaped fatherhood. Traditionally deemed as providers, fathers are now taking a more active care giving role, this increased involvement extends beyond typical parenting to the parenting of children with additional learning needs [hereafter ALN].

In comparison to mothers, research into fathers involvement and experiences of a child with ALN are limited (Boyd *et al.*, 2019; Potter, 2017; Brown *et al.*, 2021). Fathers play a crucial role in the families wellbeing but face strong emotions and inadequate support (Potter, 2017 and Boyd *et al.*, 2019). Diagnosis often brings with it feelings of anger, grief and frustration (Brown *et al.*, 2021; Manor-Binyamini, 2018; Boyd *et al.*, 2019). Brown *et al.* (2021) international research found that fathers reported the diagnostic process stressful. Manor-Binyamini (2018) reported that formal support services needed to be more culturally informed and sensitive on how to support fathers from non westernised cultures in particular to those fathers that felt shame and stigma related to the ALN therefore enforcing a need to hide or reduce the visibility of ALN. In addition Potter(2017) reported parents stating the child's diagnosis had had a negative impact on their relationships and felt that they had not been sufficiently supported during the diagnostic period. Brown *et al.* (2021) fathers

often felt that with an absence of a visible disability their child would "catch up", particularly with early concerns related to speech or sensory difficulties. Once a formal diagnosis was confirmed, their expectations, roles, and responsibilities as fathers shifted accordingly. Davys *et al.* (2017) found that after the initial shock fathers adapted over time, however this varied with the fathers perception of what ALN meant to them.

Collectively fathers expressed the need for balanced perspectives in ALN contexts. Access to timely information, knowledgeable practitioners, peer support and more balanced realistic messages relating to diagnosis and future life experiences remain key concerns. (Potter, 2017. Brown *et al.*, 2021; Manor-Binyamini, 2018; Boyd *et al.*, 2019).

In Wales Flying Start [hereafter FS] (2017) emphasises that statutory services should actively include both mothers and fathers while considering family culture, faith, and ethnicity. They state further that any letters or literature must use explicit language such as "father" in literature instead of ambiguous terms. To engage hard-to-reach families, particularly fathers, FS (2017) outlines key strategies. These include developing father-inclusive approaches, using positive literature and imagery, training staff on effective father engagement, and creating opportunities for fathers to provide feedback on service provision. They also acknowledge that fathers may require tailored interventions, leaving implementation open to individual local authorities.

Children in Wales (2025) highlight the importance of working with families through early interventions and ensuring fathers have access to parenting resources. Dad Matters Cymru (2025) is a project that supports fathers during pregnancy and early years helping them to navigate mental health challenges, stress and parenting concerns. It also encourages father participation in traditional mother-focused services. Torfaen County Council (2025) offer a group 'For Dads, By Dads'. A parenting programme specifically for new expectant fathers which aims to support them on the transition to fatherhood. Although these mentioned are regionally and locally available nowhere does it mention or offer access to support for fathers of children with ALN.

During the review process it became apparent there is very little information given to the views of fathers during the early years diagnostic period let alone any literature relating to fathers from disadvantaged areas experiencing the process. Addressing this gap through research will provide valuable insights into their experiences, challenges and support needs which in turn may be able to be used to shape and influence future policies and interventions in Wales and beyond.

Abstract

Research exploring the experiences of fathers having early years children with additional learning needs are limited. With the added specifics of being from disadvantaged areas these are even more sparse and somewhat non-existent. The research will include a mixed method approach to gain holistic insight and understanding into the support needs of these fathers with a view to informing future Welsh policy and interventions.

Participants and Sampling

The target participants for this research are fathers or those that identify as fathers, as defined in the literature review, of early years children with additional learning needs [hereafter ALN] who live in disadvantaged areas in Wales.

Welsh Government [hereafter WG] (2015) defines early years as the period from pre-birth typically to the end of the foundation phase or birth to 7 years of age. WG (2021) define ALN as learning difficulties' or disabilities that require extra or different educational support compared to peers of the same age. This aligns with the NHS definition of ALN that stipulates ALN refers to learning difficulties or disabilities that require additional learning provision beyond what is typically provided for children and young people of the same age (Betsi Cadwaladr University Health Board, no date). WG (2025a) determine disadvantaged areas using the Welsh Index of Multiple Deprivation (WIMD). This is measured in small areas across Wales and considers a number of factors, not excluded to, employment, income, education, health and community safety. This data is then used to determine the highest levels of deprivation.

For this research the participants are being purposefully selected based on their knowledge and lived experience in relation to the topic. This is known as purposive

sampling, also known as subjective or selective sampling and offers the researcher qualitative data (EBSCO, 2025) . Robinson (2014) states that purposeful sampling is used within qualitative and mixed methods research where participants are intentionally chosen based on their relevance to the study. Like grounded theory it allows the researcher to identify key concepts and themes through observations and reflection. Purposive sampling directly contrasts with random sampling (Hammond and Wellington, 2020).

Method

Recruitment for the research will be multi-faceted with a range of methods adopted. An email will be sent to all 27 Special Schools within the demographic of Wales (Catt, 2025), to all local authority Early Years Inclusion Teams requesting it be shared with parents, to recognised Welsh ALN charities to share on their social media pages for fathers to access and health services to be shared in venues holding clinics that relate to fathers and men. The email will include all relevant information in relation to the research with the Web links and Flyers attached with QR codes available. There will also be a download option available for participants to complete in paper form if needed as not all fathers may have access to online services due to location, limited internet, or lower income. In addition online recruitment would also include less formal groups such as 'The Dad's Network', a national organisation supporting dads groups in Wales, 'Dad Matters Cymru', supporting dads to have a positive parenting experience, 'For Dads, By Dads', a father specific parenting support programme and 'GLAD DADS', a Cardiff based parent support group for dads of children with ALN. Furthermore, in addition within a smaller geographical area, to allow the researcher to travel, stalls with advertisements will be held at Welsh ALN and free community family events for face-to-face recruitment. Participation will be voluntary, informed, and free from coercion.

For the purpose of the research as many fathers as possible would benefit however in reviewing the literature the average across all articles was approximately ten to twenty participants. As this will be a Wales wide research project it is hoped that the number will be higher however with practical constraints this may be unobtainable.

Data Collection

Survey

In terms of the research itself, this will consist of an online survey with several closed questions, characterised by either answering with a 'yes' or 'no' or at least a very short reply, and open-ended questions, offering opportunity for more detail while inviting the participant to share more detail. Closed questions are effective at fact checking however offer no expansive thinking. However, they can pave the way for more specific questions to follow. Open questions gain a deeper insight, offer individuality and valid participation (CPD Online College, 2025).

For this research an online survey will be compiled. Questions will be aimed at extracting specific information from fathers in relation to the forenamed topic. Advantages of surveys, in this case online surveys, are speed, cost, flexibility and reach. They can collate data quickly and effectively. It allows participants to answer in their own time and at their own pace. With the lack of an interviewer there is a reduced probability of bias ensuring consistency in delivery (Nayak and Narayan, 2019; Ball, 2019).

However as with all research there are challenges some of which include the response rate, survey fraud, data storage and confidentiality. They also offer no ability to ask further to follow up questions or to ask for definitions of ambiguous language or answers. Nayak and Narayan (2019) found that while online surveys were less personal and did not offer an increased return in response, they did find that participants found them more relaxing, faster and more interesting. However, they also found that better educated participants and defensive clients did not like online surveys (Nayak and Narayan, 2019; Ball, 2019). This is one of the factors why this research will use a multi method approach to the research

To quality assure the survey to the best possible standard the Checklist for Reporting Results of Internet E-Surveys [CHERRIES] will used. Using the checklist will ensure transparency and quality (Eysenbach, 2004).

Focus Group

The research will also offer the opportunity to take part in a focus group. This enables participants the opportunity to go into more detail if they prefer. It also has the added advantage of allowing fathers from global majority backgrounds and Welsh speaking fathers with English as an additional language and fathers with limited literacy skills to take part. A focus group primarily obtains qualitative data from

a purposely selected sample of individuals through group discussion and observation. (Ochieng *et al.*, 2018 and McCleod, 2023). McCleod (2023) discusses the advantages and disadvantages of Focus groups. They state that focus groups offer opportunities to gather different perspectives, offer meaningful interactions and flexibility for moderators to be able to ask to follow up questions to unexpected insights. However, they can also hinder some responses due to hesitation of sharing or confidentiality concerns. There can also be transcription issues when conversations may overlap or may be difficult to capture and the moderator must be mindful of managing dominant voices (McCleod, 2023 and NHS England, 2016). Guest *et al.* (2016) found during their research with over 40 focus groups that 80% of the data would have been discoverable within two to three focus groups, with this in mind for this research two focus groups would be required.

This researcher has chosen these methods to offer a range of qualitative and quantitative research data. In addition to the more educated participant preferring a more focused approach this researcher wanted to be able to offer an opportunity to all fathers no matter their educational attainment hence both survey and focus group.

Rigor and Reliability

Using the mixed methods of an online survey and a focus group allows for triangulation of the data, comparing the mixed method data, while enhancing the validity and credibility of the findings. This research will include methodological triangulation, using multiple research methods, and data triangulation, using data from different times, spaces or people. the goal being to increase the credibility of the results, when the data agrees it can be said the research has been triangulated. (Roberts-Holmes, 2018).

Lincoln and Guba's (1985) focus on research integrity and state credibility, transferability, dependability and conformability are key to qualitative research. This compares to Cohen *et al.* (2018) whose framework considers the psychological model with more emphasis on an individual's behaviour. Despite a contrast in perspective, they both aim to ensure trust in human behaviours and findings.

During the focus group credibility for the research will be met by consistently checking in with the participants and verifying interpretations of answers to questions. Transferability will be facilitated during the focus group in discussions on

how fathers are feeling, by sharing ideas and lived experiences. Dependability will be embedded throughout the detailed research process and confirmability will be supported by the objectivity of the researcher and the findings. Results must be shaped by the participants not researcher bias, perspectives or motivations in relation to the Hawthorne or Halo effect (Helpful Professor Explains, 2025; Sprouts, 2022; Elston, 2021).

Limitations

The research findings will have limitations. The participants, fathers, themselves are already deemed to be within the cohort of 'hard to reach' clients by Flying Start (2017). With the added requisite of fathers of children with an ALN and the added focus of being from deprived areas will be a challenge in itself. This is without the added potential complexities of any language barriers, from global ethnicities or Welsh speaking families, and or any literacy disadvantages fathers may have.

To address the limitations, where possible, the researcher will roll out a sensitive, robust, recruitment plan as outlined previously. This will include collaborating with stakeholders from Health, Education, Social Care and Third Sector individuals and groups. Collaboration will also include translating the survey and the focus group questions into Welsh alongside working with interpreters from local, non-English speaking, communities to ensure accurate data collection. Focus groups will be offered at three separate times of the day/week – daytime, evening and weekend. This allows any working fathers, shared care fathers or any fathers that may need to arrange suitable childcare the opportunity to attend. If it becomes apparent that childcare is a barrier to attendance an online focus group may be offered. Focus groups will take place in community venues such as 'Men's Sheds', rugby clubs, sports centres and so on with the aim to reduce stigma to attending and to create a less medicalised model.

Ethical Considerations

Informed Consent

Informed consent is fundamental for ethical research, it has three key aspects (WTH is Bioethics, [hereafter WTH] 2019). Firstly consent must be voluntary with no sense of force, obligation or coercion. Secondly consent must be informed, where all

participants have enough information to have a clear understanding of the research in relation to their own level of understanding and capabilities. This includes the nature of the research, the expected benefits, any possible risks and any likely consequences of engaging with the research itself. Thirdly the participants must be capable of giving consent, they must have a clear understanding of what is being asked of them and understand any consequences in relation to their decision or lack of decision and to the research itself (National Institute for Mental Health, 2022; WTH, 2019).

Consent is an active process, if anything changes during the research or more information is needed in the future participants will need to be kept informed. This also relates to a participant's capacity, if this changes then consent must be reconsidered to ensure it is still informed (Ethical Research Involving Children [hereafter ERIC], 2024; WTH, 2019).

For this research fathers consent will be required. The researcher will provide an informed consent document, this will include details of the research. Details for the survey will include the length and number of questions and the expected time to complete. It will also include information on how participants can access support to complete the survey if necessary. Details for the focus group will include the timings and length, the potential venues, access to the venues and information on how to get help with access if needed in terms of mobility, interpreters and or funding for transport. Information for both the Survey and the focus group will also provide the expected outcomes of the research with the potential benefits, possible risks and how these will be mitigated. It will also include information on how participants can withdraw consent at any time.

Prior to attendance this researcher will review the informed consent with participants to ensure full understanding and consent has been ascertained. If during the process the researcher questions the participant's ability to consent, consent will become void and all responses from this participant will not be considered by the researcher.

Confidentially and Anonymity

Much more harm can come to participants if they are identifiable, particularly when there is a small number of participants relating to a specific research question (Peter, 2015). Participants identities and data handling must be protected within a robust

process that aligns with domestic, UK General Data Protections Regulations [hereafter GDPR] and the international DATA Protection Act, 2018 (GOV.UK, no date). researcher must have explicit consent of participants before storing any data (British Educational Research Association [hereafter BERA], 2024).

GDPR and DPA 2018 dictate that personal data must not be kept for longer than necessary. It also suggests using an identifier or code per participant (GOV.UK, no date). For this research participant information will be kept to a minimum and will only be used in relation to the research itself. Data storage will comply with BERA regulations and will be stored electronically with sufficient password protections in place. If ongoing mental health support is required informed consent for the referral will be obtained from the participant and all data protection guidelines will be followed in relation to collaborating with health services.

However with confidentiality there must also come the caveat of disclosure. If any participants at any point share intentions to harm themselves or others, or share historical harm it must and will be shared with the appropriate authorities (WG, 2025b). As such this researcher will ensure participants are informed of the above legislation (BERA, 2024).

Ethical Risks for the Participants, Researcher, and University

Taquette *et al.* (2022) state that during research it is crucial to respect the dignity and liberty of participants. With the research topic itself it is essential for the researcher to consider the vulnerability of the participants themselves. This researcher has no intention to re- traumatise the participants however research that delves into deeply personal experiences can be highly invasive, as such participants should be protected (Peter, 2015).

Due to the nature of this research, safeguards to minimise harm to wellbeing will be put in place for both the participant and the researcher. Focus groups will include regular breaks throughout and may take place over more than one session if needed. It must be considered that as the participants will be early years fathers some of their experiences may be very recent and raw. Counselling will be pre-arranged for participants that need ongoing support or for those who are still in the initial stages of shock.

The researcher themselves will be experienced in delivering focus groups that are emotionally sensitive and will be set to attain ethical mindfulness throughout. In addition they will have their own robust methods of conflict resolution and professional support for mentoring and supervision (Taquette *et al.*, 2022; Peter, 2015; BERA, 2024).

In terms of the university BERA guidelines state that educational researchers must uphold the integrity and reputation of educational research. This is done by maintaining high standards throughout while contributing to critical analysis and constructive criticism (BERA, 2024). Universities must work in collaboration with each other and while researchers should not tarnish or sully one another they should also avoid presuming other institutions inherently understand what constitutes good research (BERA, 2024 p.11).

Ethical risks to universities include damage to reputation and to international partnerships. The Concordat to Support Research Integrity [hereafter CSRI] ensures that government, business and the public can have confidence in UK research (Universities UK, 2025). The University of Wales Trinity St David outline that research undertaken by the university and its students will be in alignment with the agreed standards as set out by the CSRI thus to ensure integrity, honesty and accountability. To ensure the highest standards are maintained all research approval and consideration will be determined by the by, in this case, the university ethics committee (University of Wales Trinity St David [hereafter UWTSD], 2022) . If at any pint the research takes an unexpected turn researchers must seek further ethical approval before continuing (Peter, 2015).

Mitigation of risks

For ethical research to be at its best it demands ongoing reflection. Influences on research must be given attention and mitigated through out (ERIC, 2019). Many of the risks in relation to this research have already been addressed in terms of data protection, participant and researcher protections and protections by the university itself. If participants or any one else has concerns regarding the research they can contact UWTSD to discuss and or raise their concerns (UWTSD, no date). At all times during research balance must be considered between risk and benefit. For ethical research to be at its best it demands ongoing reflection. Influences on

research must be given attention and mitigated through out (Peter, 2015; ERIC, 2019).

Conclusion

This research is in no way meant to shame, or emotionally damage the afore mentioned fathers. In contrast it is to offer them an opportunity to share, relate and connect with other fathers who may be experiencing the same life challenges and obstacles. In conclusion although a deeply sensitive topic the purpose of this research is to offer these fathers who are in a position where they are generally hidden or marginalised by society itself an opportunity to have their voices considered and heard.

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