



Early Years: An International Research Journal

Publication details, including instructions for authors and subscription information:

<http://www.tandfonline.com/loi/ceye20>

'I am reading to her and she loves it': benefits of engaging fathers from disadvantaged areas in their children's early learning transitions

Carol Potter ^a, Gary Walker ^a & Bev Keen ^a

^a Leeds Metropolitan University, Leeds, UK

Published online: 11 Jun 2012.

To cite this article: Carol Potter, Gary Walker & Bev Keen (2013) 'I am reading to her and she loves it': benefits of engaging fathers from disadvantaged areas in their children's early learning transitions, *Early Years: An International Research Journal*, 33:1, 74-89, DOI: [10.1080/09575146.2012.666959](http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/09575146.2012.666959)

To link to this article: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/09575146.2012.666959>

PLEASE SCROLL DOWN FOR ARTICLE

Taylor & Francis makes every effort to ensure the accuracy of all the information (the "Content") contained in the publications on our platform. However, Taylor & Francis, our agents, and our licensors make no representations or warranties whatsoever as to the accuracy, completeness, or suitability for any purpose of the Content. Any opinions and views expressed in this publication are the opinions and views of the authors, and are not the views of or endorsed by Taylor & Francis. The accuracy of the Content should not be relied upon and should be independently verified with primary sources of information. Taylor and Francis shall not be liable for any losses, actions, claims, proceedings, demands, costs, expenses, damages, and other liabilities whatsoever or howsoever caused arising directly or indirectly in connection with, in relation to or arising out of the use of the Content.

This article may be used for research, teaching, and private study purposes. Any substantial or systematic reproduction, redistribution, reselling, loan, sub-licensing, systematic supply, or distribution in any form to anyone is expressly forbidden. Terms &

‘I am reading to her and she loves it’: benefits of engaging fathers from disadvantaged areas in their children’s early learning transitions

Carol Potter*, Gary Walker and Bev Keen

Leeds Metropolitan University, Leeds, UK

(Received 15 September 2011; final version received 12 February 2012)

Findings presented here relate to the evaluation of a one-year father-inclusion project which took place in an area of multiple deprivation in the North of England. The project’s goal was to engage fathers and male carers in their children’s transition from an early years setting to a reception class and to maintain that involvement in the mainstream school setting. The project was successful in engaging men, recording 76 male attendances, 19 of which were recorded at school-based activities after the transition. Key benefits identified by fathers engaged in the project were closer relationships with their children and greater involvement in their play and learning. Children were very positive about their fathers’ involvement and school staff identified a better rapport with fathers following the project.

Keywords: father engagement; early transitions; socioeconomic disadvantage; benefits

Introduction

In a review of scholarship in the field of fatherhood, Marsiglio et al. asserted that:

... substantial consensus now exists within developmental psychology that father–child relationships can be remarkably influential. (2000, 1177)

Indeed, a number of studies have demonstrated that father involvement in children’s lives leads to better child outcomes, in a number of important areas. In a meta-analysis of 24 studies, Sarkadi et al. (2008) found that father involvement had the effect of reducing psychological problems in young women, and behavioural problems in boys while also facilitating intellectual development in both sexes, as well as reducing criminality and economic disadvantage in low socioeconomic status (SES) areas.

Especially pertinent here, early father involvement has been found to relate strongly to later educational achievement, with father involvement at age seven predicting educational attainment at 20, independently of the involvement of mothers (Flouri and Buchanan 2004). Blanden (2006), using data from the British Cohort Study of 18,000 children born in 1970, found that father involvement in children’s learning can be important in enabling children to escape from poverty

*Corresponding author. Email: c.a.potter@leedsmet.ac.uk

and disadvantage later on. However, it is also the case that fathers from disadvantaged areas are less likely to be engaged in their children's learning (Flouri and Buchanan 2003), possibly due to greater experience of failure at school, especially in areas of literacy (Fletcher and Daley 2002).

Positive father involvement, therefore, has a number of beneficial outcomes for children and families. But what is father involvement? How is it defined? Clarity in relation to the concept is needed in order to measure it. An early definition referred to three dimensions, namely: 'engagement', relating to time spent in direct contact with children; 'accessibility', referring to father presence and availability; and 'responsibility', defined as involvement in decision-making (Lamb et al. 1987). This conceptualization has been used frequently in a large number of research studies. However, limitations of the framework include a lack of reference to other key aspects of the fathering role, such as bread-winning. In response to such criticisms, broader conceptualizations have been proposed that detail a number of more specific roles which fathers undertake with children. Palkovitz (1997) introduced 15 dimensions of father involvement, while Hawkins et al. (2002) advanced a more detailed taxonomy consisting of 43 aspects of direct and indirect involvement in relation to behavioural, cognitive, affective, moral and ethical aspects. Despite such progress, Schoppe-Sullivan et al. (2004) have argued that current frameworks continue to fall short of capturing the depth and complexity of the fathering role as it is undertaken within an increasingly diverse range of social contexts.

Alongside a growing developmental literature, a number of other theoretical perspectives have emerged in relation to fatherhood in recent years. Most relevant here are deficit and generative discourses, as discussed by Hawkins and Dollahite (1997) who argue that a 'role inadequacy perspective' has often been adopted, in which fathers are viewed as unwilling or unable to nurture and support their children. Potter (2012) argues that such a view of fathers has long been apparent in both policy and media arenas in the UK. Lewis (2002) concluded that UK policy towards fathers in the 1980s–90s was driven not by a desire to enhance father participation but by negative perceptions that many men are essentially not willing to support their families.

Importantly, in the context of the current research, deficit approaches appear to have been differentially applied. In a UK context, Gillies notes:

... the policy discourse of the involved father is highly classed. Concern is directed in particular at poor or social-excluded fathers who are viewed as needing parenting support to help them become more (appropriately) involved with their children. (2009, 52)

Hawkins and Dollahite (1997) assert that the deficit approach is a stereotyped and inaccurate response to most men's actual experience of fathering which is involved and extremely beneficial for children. They argue for a generative discourse which sees men as both willing and able to nurture the next generation. Such an approach is strength based and starts from a position of valuing men in their fathering role.

With the advent of the New Labour government in 1997 in the UK, a more generative approach began to be visible within policy frameworks, partly due to an increased awareness of the benefits of father involvement. The need to engage fathers in service delivery began to be advocated widely across a range of policy and legal frameworks, such as: *Maternity Matters* (Department of Health 2007);

Every Parent Matters (DfES 2007); the Gender Equality Duty (2007); The Welfare Reform Act (2009) and Support for All (Green Paper on families) (DCSF 2010). For a more detailed discussion of these and other relevant frameworks, see Olley and Potter (2012). However, a study commissioned by the DCSF (Page et al. 2008) found that the increasing recognition of fathers at policy level has not been widely translated into father engagement in services. Following a review of father engagement in 46 local authorities, the report concluded that:

Father inclusive practice was not seen to be routine or mainstream in family services. (DCSF 2008, 6)

A number of significant barriers to father engagement in services have been identified, including: father perceptions that such services are 'for mothers' (Ghate, Shaw, and Hazel 2000); the largely feminized nature of family services and traditional belief systems which see fathers as economic providers and mothers as childcarers (Goldman 2005); professional reluctance to engage with men (Ryan 2000); services which are inaccessible to men (Lloyd, O'Brien, and Lewis 2003), male reluctance to seek help and advice (Lloyd 2001) and lack of sufficient training in working with men (Page et al. 2008).

A number of strategies have been developed to overcome some of these barriers, such as the use of gender-differentiated approaches where the needs of men and women are seen as different and are therefore likely to require different approaches (Ghate, Shaw, and Hazel 2000; Chawla-Duggan 2011); the need for a structured approach to father engagement, setting out clear goals and strategies (Lloyd, O'Brien, and Lewis 2003) such as the delivery of services at accessible times for fathers (Featherstone, Rivett, and Scourfield 2007) and the use of hook activities to recruit men initially (Potter and Carpenter 2008).

Such approaches need to be seen within the wider theoretical models underpinning service delivery in relation to fathers. McBride and Lutz (2004) argue that all social programmes should be consciously grounded within specific theoretical or philosophical frameworks in order to better understand what is being proposed, how it may lead to change and what this change is likely to be. They discuss a number of models which have been employed in working with fathers, such as an ecological approach, which aims to build on how men interact with their social environment across a range of interrelating contexts. A social learning theory model is likely to work with men in groups to promote a range of opportunities for fathers to learn from each other. Empowerment approaches focus on identifying individual needs and attempting to give men a means of overcoming these difficulties independently (McBride and Lutz 2004).

A final area of interest in relation to the current study appertains to the importance of educational transitions in children's lives, especially in the early years. Fabian and Dunlop stated that:

The start of primary schooling has been perceived as one of the most important transitions in a child's life and a major challenge of early childhood. Initial success at school, both socially and intellectually, leads to a virtuous cycle of achievement. (2007, 1)

A number of theoretical frameworks inform our understanding of transitions, the most relevant here, it is argued, being Bronfenbrenner's (1979) ecological approach,

which sees individuals as moving within and between a set of systems that overlap at a number of points and in a variety of ways. A number of approaches have been found to be important in helping young children to negotiate the early years transition between nursery and school. One of the most often used draws on this ecological approach for its rationale by seeking to provide an overlap between the different systems in which the child lives, through the active involvement of parents in the new school setting (Sanders et al. 2005). It is this latter approach that was fundamental to the orientation of the current Fathers Transition project.

This paper sets out the perceived benefits and gives an indication of some of the challenges related to the Fathers Transition project. Strategies found to be effective in engaging fathers/male carers during the project have been discussed in detail elsewhere (Potter, Walker, and Keen forthcoming). In short, the use of a gender-differentiated approach was effective at a strategic level, in which the needs of men and women were acknowledged as different and were addressed differently. At an operational level, a number of strategies were important in fostering participation, namely: the explicit use of a face-to-face, informal approach, focusing on the building of trust; the development of a programme of male-orientated activities and men-only groups, in consultation with fathers, such as trips to a mine and a lighthouse, the making of bird boxes and dens in the forest; and a process of intensive communication with fathers and mothers between activities, mostly through use of phone calls and texts.

Context

This case study presented here concerns a 'Fathers Transition project' set up in a predominantly white working-class area in the north of England that ranks high on the index of multiple deprivation, with one in four of its residents being employment deprived and one in three experiencing income deprivation (HM Government 2007). An expert agency in the field of male inclusion worked with a children's centre and its neighbouring primary school to engage fathers/male carers in the summer before their children's transition and to maintain this engagement when children reached school. Very few of the fathers in the area had previously been involved with any kind of support service.

Research design

Method

The aim of the Fathers Transition Project was to engage fathers and male carers during the crucial period of their children's transition from an early years setting to a reception class in the local primary school (both on the same site), in order to enhance their children's enjoyment, achievement and learning at this critical early stage of development. This paper concerns the extent to which father involvement in transition was achieved and the perceived benefits of such involvement.

Key research questions relevant to this paper were:

- What was the level and nature of father involvement in the target early years and school settings before and after the Fathers Transitions project?
- What were fathers' perceptions of engagement in the project?
- What were staff perceptions of father involvement in the project?
- What were children's perceptions of father/male carer involvement?

A case study approach was employed, to undertake an in-depth exploration of father and project worker views within the context of this piece of development work. Yin described a case study as an empirical inquiry that:

... investigates a contemporary phenomenon within its real life context; when boundaries between the phenomenon and the context are not clearly evident and in which multiple sources of evidence are used. (1989, 23)

Cohen, Manion, and Morrison (2000) discuss the challenges involved in developing a case study, discussing issues such as defining and refining the focus, as well as negotiating access to participants, a particular issue for the current study.

Engagement and attendance data were collected before and after the project. In order to obtain fathers' views, a convenience sample of five fathers and two grandfathers was recruited. Although this undeniably constitutes a small sample, nevertheless it does represent half the number of men who participated in one or more activities. Fathers generally are considered by many as a 'hard to reach' group, in terms of both service engagement and participation in research (Lupton and Barclay 1997; Russell 2002; Lloyd, O'Brien, and Lewis 2003), with access becoming more challenging in relation to some groups of fathers, including those from areas of socioeconomic disadvantage. In relation to recruiting fathers to research projects, Mitchell et al. note that the recruitment of one father can be an extremely time-consuming process, taking anywhere 'from one 5-minute phone call to 5 or 6 months of repeated phone calls' (2007, 240) to family members, trips to the child care settings and possibly visits to both the father's home and his workplace. Consequently, the use of semi-structured telephone interviews was adopted since this is a method which has previously been effective in accessing fathers who rarely act as participants in research studies (Kirsch and Brandt 2002). Staff perspectives were obtained from 12 semi-structured interviews with staff from the expert male inclusion agency, the children's centre and the local primary school. In addition, three focus groups were undertaken, comprising a further 11 staff from the children's centre. In relation to gaining children's perceptions, we sought to gain their responses through interviews with fathers/male carers, as well as relevant children's centre and school staff, since, unfortunately, there was insufficient time within the project to develop the kind of meaningful relationships acknowledged as ethically and methodologically necessary when researchers are working with young children (Clark and Moss 2001).

Data analysis

All face-to-face interview and focus-group data were transcribed and summaries were sent to each participant as a means of checking the trustworthiness of the data (Robson 2002). We used a grounded theory approach (Strauss and Corbin 1990), analysing data in three stages. At stage one, general themes were coded, for example: benefits discussed by fathers, children's centre staff and school staff. During the second stage of coding, different themes highlighted by each group were identified, for example with reference to fathers, in relation to relationship building, play and learning. Themes were identified as representative according to the frequency of their appearance within the data. For example, nearly every father/male carer within our sample talked about how project participation had led to greater

participation in their children's play and learning. At the third stage of data analysis, we chose quotations identified as representative from each second-order theme to provide illustrative examples of the views of fathers and staff. A range of themes in relation to both the benefits and the challenges of the project emerged from our analysis. The current paper focuses on a discussion of benefits and provides a brief indication of some of the challenges. The latter are discussed in more depth elsewhere (Potter and Carpenter 2008).

Findings

Pre-project engagement: children's centre and school

Information collected from interviews and focus groups suggested that prior to the Fathers Transitions project there was a steady but relatively small involvement of fathers and male carers within centre activities. There were some activities which a few men had attended with their partners such as antenatal classes, play sessions and breastfeeding workshops.

At the beginning of the project, school staff noted that the majority of parental contact occurred during celebratory type assemblies/activities where approximately 10% of parents attending were fathers, although for particular events this could rise to around 30%. It was hoped that the celebration of children's achievements would lead to parents taking a more active interest in their children's learning.

Level of father engagement during the project

Father/male carer engagement increased significantly during the Fathers Transitions Project with a total of 76 male attendances being recorded over a nine-month period by 14 fathers during nine project activities, which consisted of six trips and three activity based sessions (see Figure 1).

Some fathers became regular attenders, while others attended only one or two activities. A further breakdown of attendance data was not available, in terms of number of attendances for each father. There were no expectations conveyed to fathers in relation to attendance. Rather, the Fathers Transitions Worker contacted individual fathers before activities to encourage them to attend, particularly emphasizing benefits for children of their doing so. A total of 42 men were

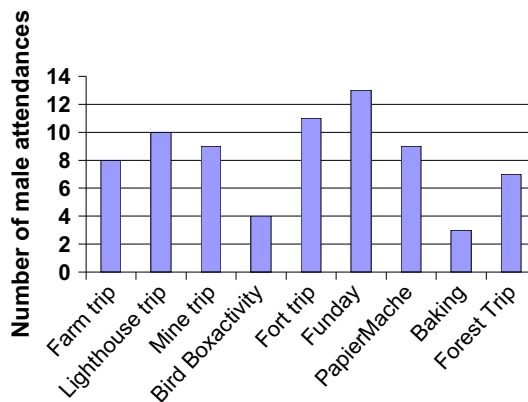


Figure 1. Number of father/male carer attendances at project activities/events.

registered, an important figure since generally fathers are rarely registered for UK services. Clearly some fathers who registered did not then go on to attend any project activities. Limited data are available as to why this was the case. However, some possible explanations can be proffered. Information from children's centre staff indicates that some fathers who initially registered had later moved out of the area while other fathers working shifts were reluctant to start attending after the activity had already started. Another broader issue is the relatively limited time available for recruitment of fathers to activities after initial registration. The Fathers Transition Worker came into post towards the end of June, for funding-related reasons, and project activities began in the middle of July. The Fathers Transition Worker explained that, following initial registration, intensive follow-up contact was usually necessary to actively encourage fathers to attend one of the summer events. Most fathers had never attended such an organized event before and they were initially cautious in their response. The worker commented:

There wasn't much time. Otherwise I would have had better attendance

One of the most important outcomes of the project was that some fathers did become engaged in school-based activities after their child's transition in the autumn, with 19 male attendances being recorded at three school based activities by five fathers. These figures, although modest, represent impressive results, it is argued, especially given the area of high multiple deprivation in which it took place, the lack of previous father engagement in any kind of support service and the very limited timescales involved.

It is difficult to compare the level of father involvement in this project with other similar settings where such projects were not in operation, in major part because father attendance data goes largely uncollected. For example, Lloyd, O'Brien, and Lewis found that that 'systematic standardized data on father participation in Sure Start activities across programmes were not available' because programmes were not collecting that information (2003, 28). Having said this, findings from a number of national reports make it clear that father attendance within early years services is generally low. The National Audit Office concluded that children's centres were 'less effective at meeting the needs of fathers' (2006, 34). Page et al. found that 'virtually all' of the 46 local authorities and family services they surveyed reported that 'engagement with fathers was substantially lower than with mothers' (2008, 3).

Benefits of the Fathers Transition project

Fathers, carers and staff talked enthusiastically about a range of benefits of project participation, especially in relation to increased involvement in their young children's lives and learning. In the findings below, father quotations are numbered to indicate the range of opinions (F1, F2 etc.).

Supporting relationships between fathers and children

Some of the fathers/male carers we spoke to talked about how involvement in the transitions activities had supported the development of their relationships with their sons and daughters. One father said:

It's what we needed – some quality time just me and him – I don't mean the mothers in the way – it's been great for me and it has been for the litt'un as well.. It shows that I want to be with him, that I care and that when things are fun and exciting that I'm there to share it with him ... it's just for the father and son to bond properly. (F4)

Another father talked about the impact of having time alone with his young children:

I think dads need that little bit of time. I suppose if mams are there they would tend to take over a bit – I suppose it gives one to one time ... we are close as a family and we go everywhere together – but these little groups it is something different – it is nice to have this special time with the kids. (F6)

There is a clear indication here that fathers have begun to reflect in some depth on their parental role and changes within it, as a result of their involvement with the Fathers Transition project. It is also interesting to note the perception here that mothers may be acting as gatekeepers in relation to father access to and involvement with their children.

Father involvement in children's play and learning

One of the central aims of the project was to promote greater father engagement in children's play and learning and this was achieved in relation to most of the fathers/male carers we interviewed. One father described how project involvement had led to increased confidence in his own literacy skills which in turn had led to changes in the ways in which he interacted with his daughter, especially in relation to reading:

... now on a night.... It is enjoying these times with the bairn ...when I was a young one I found it difficult to read out loud, but because of these groups, I am wanting to get more involved – these groups are making me want to – I am reading to her and she loves it – I read her a bed-time story. (F6)

Fathers we spoke to described the ways in which they had shared playful learning experiences with their children in project activities, such as the bird box making activity.

[We] worked with each other. The dads put it together but [the children] put it together with us and they did painting with us too afterwards. (F1)

Another father described the process of communication involved in building the box with young children:

When I was building the nest box, I was getting to know what the kids wanted basically and I was asking them what they wanted. They enjoyed it. (F5)

The forest trip had clearly provided a number of valuable opportunities for shared learning opportunities. One father talked enthusiastically about the ways in which he and his son had worked together on building a shelter during the trip:

[We were] building a little den in the woods – finding twigs and building it up and then looking at the tracks of the animals and it was just hours together – just me and him. It was fantastic – a beautiful day – he loved it. (F4)

Another father talked about the importance of sharing the experience of making papier mâché planets with his son:

The best thing was the bairn was saying, ‘you have to do it with me’. So I was doing it with him. (F5)

One member of the children’s centre staff commented on the quality of engagement between fathers and children on a trip:

The dads were completely different on this trip. I went on a dads’ trip two years ago and it was completely different. Most of them just came for the free trip. It wasn’t about mixing with their family.

There was also evidence from school staff of an increase in sustained shared thinking between children and their fathers during the school-based activities, and of higher quality conversations. One school staff member observed:

[When fathers were involved] children actually were more engaged for longer on activities ...the level of conversation between parents and children was improved....

The implications of these developments are potentially significant. If children engage with their fathers in qualitatively different ways following the kind of intervention discussed here, it is clear that the work could have positive effects on children’s future learning, in key areas such as cognitive functioning, language development and self-esteem, as has been well documented in a range of research studies.

It is also of interest to note the ways in which fathers gave detailed accounts of how they themselves were influenced by their children’s words and actions. One father reported his child’s direction: ‘you have to do it with me’ and another said that he was ‘getting to know what the kids wanted’. Such comments provide some useful insights into aspects of the reciprocity of father–child relationships.

Benefits of a focus on fathers

We asked fathers/male carers what they thought about the project’s focus on providing activities specifically for fathers and children. All of the fathers/male carers were enthusiastic about this approach. Examples of comments are:

I think it is a good idea because [fathers] should be involved as well. (F1)

‘I think it’s fantastic ... getting involved in working with the children – getting the dads involved and that – I think it’s brilliant. (F3)

One father who was also very positive about the project reflected on the importance of fathers in children’s lives, relating this to his own early experiences:

Definitely [a good thing], I grew up without a dad – wished I’d had a father figure – never had one – so now hopefully I can point him in the right direction ... just having some me and him time is perfect. (F4)

A senior member of staff within the children’s centre reflected:

I think having the project here has given us a focus – it's made people think about dads whereas before we did a lot of talking about it but probably didn't necessarily have the tools.

Such comments reinforce the generally accepted view that a gender-differentiated approach is effective in engaging fathers and male carers. It is interesting to note that five of the seven fathers/male carers we spoke to had not been involved with any kind of service provision before. One father explained why this was the case for him:

It's the way like dads are treated – you know what I mean ... like they're an outsider – everything's for mams isn't it – you know there's nowt for fathers ... everything's female. (F3)

The fact that the Transition Project was able to engage fathers who had previously held such strong views is further testament to the skill and persistence of the worker involved and the larger project goals and infrastructure provided by the expert male inclusion agency.

Children's responses to father involvement

As stated above, we sought to gain information on children's responses to father involvement through interviews with fathers and staff engaged with the project. It is clear that children responded very positively to having their fathers/male carers engaged in activities with them.

One father gave us his view on the focus on activities for fathers and children:

Personally, I think it's a great thing. If you speak to my little lass, she would say the same thing. Our time is Saturday morning now and she looks forward to going out with me on Saturdays to these things. (F6)

Another father told us that his son had been very pleased to have him in his classroom:

He was telling everyone 'that's my dad – he's me dad'. (F3)

One school staff member commented:

...we've seen changes in the children – they're talking much more about their dads... 'When can my dad come?' or 'When can I invite my dad to come?' which we didn't have before....

More specifically, shortly after a project activity, a school assembly took place entitled 'It's good to be me'. Children were given a sheet to fill in that asked 'When do I feel good?'. The same staff member found it interesting that some children had drawn a picture of themselves with their father, and had had written comments such as 'I feel good when my daddy comes to things'. Such responses had not been forthcoming prior to the project.

While these are only isolated examples, taken together with literature on the impact upon children's development of father involvement, they add weight to the

sense that the benefits of father involvement are potentially deep and wide-ranging for the children concerned.

A better rapport between school and fathers

There was a view within the school setting that in some ways project involvement had led to a better rapport between the school and the fathers who had been involved in project activities. One member of school staff said:

... I think it makes it easier for the teacher to have that [better] kind of relationship with the dads – when they are just bringing their child or standing in the yard ... you say ‘Good morning’ and that’s about it.... I just think it makes it easier if you’ve got an issue to discuss with them or they want to come and see me – I just think they see you in a different light and we probably see the dads in a different light.

If school staff and fathers have improved rapport as a result of the activities undertaken by fathers, this can lead to increased understanding of each other, which in turn may make it easier for both parties to raise issues which they may not have raised beforehand. This new connection has the potential to feed into better support for children’s learning, especially where there may be particular issues to address regarding individual children.

Empowering fathers within the process

Finally, throughout the project, the Fathers Transition Worker tried to empower fathers in a number of ways to benefit individuals and to build further capacity within the work (Potter, Walker, and Keen forthcoming). His approach stemmed from a firmly held belief that fathers could make a positive contribution to their children and families, if given the opportunity and support to do so. He commented:

You have got to show some interest in [the fathers] – they have some value....

He went on to elaborate on this strengths-based approach, when first seeking to engage fathers:

You are looking for their skills, something that they are confident in, something that they can do....

The Fathers Transition Worker also set out to support a smaller group of fathers in the development of planning skills so that in the future men could begin to organize and deliver their own activities, although this is acknowledged to be a longer term process. A small number of fathers began to attend planning meetings to discuss possible future trips and were gradually encouraged to become more involved in the actual organisation of such events. In particular, a small group of men were closely involved in the development of the forest trip, visiting the site beforehand and costing out the activity.

Challenges within the process

Notwithstanding the evident benefits for fathers and children of participation in the Transition project, there were a number of challenges within the project's development and implementation. Below, we provide two examples which are intended to illustrate the range of issues and tensions encountered, the first relating to working with fathers in groups and the second relating to multi-agency aspects of the work.

Establishing group ground rules

The Fathers Transition Worker noted that there had been some challenges in working with fathers in groups, which in his view was both to be expected and formed an important part of the learning process for men who had not been involved in such activities before. There had been issues relating to use of language, in relation to speaking respectfully to each other and to children. An incident had occurred during one group session involving the use of an inopportune comment. The Worker saw this as an opportunity to discuss the need for ground rules based on mutual respect:

I said [to the fathers] if someone in the group said they didn't like your child's manners, then what impact would that have? ... is that right? So we had a discussion around how to talk ... those discussions build a strong group....

Such approaches are clearly grounded within traditional community work approaches, which view process issues as fundamental to development.

Multi-agency working

In addition to group development issues, a series of challenges arose in relation to the multi-agency aspects of the project. The three partners in the project were the children's centre, the school and the expert agency and at each stage of the project various tensions arose in relation to roles, expectations and boundaries, issues recognized as common examples of the kinds of inherent and structural factors which often impact on effective multi-agency working (Stainton Rogers 1989; Joughin and Law 2005).

In the current project, it became clear that project partners sometimes had conflicting expectations regarding roles and responsibilities within the work, especially in relation to the precise role of the Fathers Transition Worker within the children's centre. At times, there seemed to be an expectation that the worker would engage with fathers in general, rather than only with fathers in relation to transition. In addition, when the focus of the project shifted to involving fathers in the school setting, it became apparent that school staff were not necessarily fully conscious of the expectations surrounding their involvement in the project. One member of expert agency staff later acknowledged that there had been a misunderstanding in this regard:

It would be important [in future] to contact schools directly, earlier in the process to make sure that they were fully 'on board' and understood exactly what was involved.

Discussion

The Fathers Transition project discussed here charted relatively new territory within the UK, successfully engaging fathers from an area of high multiple deprivation in the north of England during the crucial period of their children's transition from

early years to the reception class. Fathers and staff identified a range of significant benefits obtained from project involvement, such as improvements in the quality of fathers' relationships with children, as well as enabling them to become more closely involved in their children's play and learning. Children's responses to their fathers' involvement in trips and activities were very positive, indicating a desire for greater father presence in their school environment. Staff from both settings believed that project involvement had led to a general refocusing on working with fathers and several staff acknowledged learning more about effective approaches to working with men through informal observation of the specialist Fathers Transition Worker.

Such findings are promising in the light of research demonstrating the importance of father involvement to later child outcomes (Sarkadi et al. 2008). It is especially noteworthy that the current project successfully engaged men in a disadvantaged area where fathers are less likely to be involved in their children's learning (Flouri and Buchanan 2003). The increased desire expressed by some fathers to read with their children as a result of project involvement is especially significant given the proven relationship between father involvement in early literacy and better child outcomes (Clarke 2009).

It is clear from the Father Transition Worker comments in relation to empowering men that the project has its philosophical roots in a generative model of fatherhood (Hawkins and Dollahite 1997), which adopts a strengths-based approach to men as fathers, as opposed to deficit model approaches which conceptualize men as a 'hard to reach group'. Rather than undermining the possible contribution of men, the theoretical frameworks in evidence in the Fathers Transition Project tended instead towards social learning and empowerment approaches, evident in the development work which was undertaken in group activities and the building of confidence and self-esteem.

Other findings relate to developmentalist notions of the way in which relationships between father and children operate within 'a mutually interdependent' context (Marsiglio et al. 2000) where each exerts influence over the other within their interactions. This is an area that requires further exploration since, as Milkie, Simon, and Powell (1997) pointed out, while we are becoming increasingly aware of those aspects of parental behaviour which are thought to be valuable for children we know less about aspects of such behaviour that might be deemed important by children themselves.

At present, despite overwhelming evidence that positive father involvement in children's lives promotes better child outcomes, the message from a range of policy initiatives continues to be that services *should* provide father-inclusive services that they *must* do so. The Gender Equality Duty, introduced in 2007 in the UK, should, in theory, have addressed this omission, imposing on all organizations a statutory obligation to 'promote equality of opportunity between men and women' in relation to policy and service provision (Equal Opportunities Commission 2006, 6). While some services are beginning to undertake assessments in relation to low levels of father engagement, as yet there is little evidence that the Gender Equality Duty alone is likely to effect the sea-change required to ensure that fathers/male carers are fully included and engaged in the whole range of family provision. To ensure such a development in future, UK policy and legislation must pursue a more accountability-driven approach to father inclusion than has been adopted hitherto, in which there are repercussions for organizations that do not increase father engage-

ment over time in meaningful ways. In relation to schools, the UK's Office for Standards in Education (OFSTED) is especially well placed to monitor and promote father engagement although, to date, its wide-ranging stipulations have not yet required such an approach. This needs to change in order to deliver the UK government's stated goal that

... fathers should be offered routinely the support and opportunities they need to play their parental role effectively. (DFES 2007, 5)

There are clearly limitations within the current study, in relation to the small number of father/male carer respondents. In addition, we were not able to collect the views of those local fathers who chose not to engage in the project, perspectives which would have been valuable in possibly introducing an alternative analysis of the project. However, the difficulty of recruiting fathers to research studies who have not participated in identified services or interventions is significant, especially in the light of the widely acknowledged difficulty of gaining any father perspectives within research contexts (Burghes, Clarke, and Cronin 1997; Daniel and Taylor, 2001).

More research is needed to establish the extent to which fathers who become involved in their young children's learning in such contexts remain involved over time. In addition, other studies should seek to ascertain whether the approaches used in the current development project would result in similar benefits in more ethnically diverse social environments, or with fathers of different ages.

The stakes are high, however, since it is clear that when fathers are enabled to play their parental role effectively, children do better. Unfortunately, the reverse is often the case, with children whose fathers are least likely to be engaged being already educationally disadvantaged by poverty (Cassen and Kingdom 2007; MacInnes, Kenway, and Parekh 2009). Amongst the other necessary structural changes in our society to address child poverty, there is an urgent need to provide accessible and meaningful support to fathers in areas of socioeconomic disadvantage, to help promote better educational outcomes for some of the most vulnerable children in our society. The possibility of a future escape from an ongoing cycle of disadvantage and social exclusion must surely be worth the attempt.

References

- Blanden, J. 2006. *Bucking the trend: What enables those who are disadvantaged in childhood to succeed later in life?*. London: Department of Work and Pensions.
- Bronfenbrenner, U. 1979. *The ecology of human development: Experiments by nature and design*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Burghes, L., L. Clarke, and N. Cronin. 1997. *Fathers and fatherhood in Britain*. York: Joseph Rowntree Foundation.
- Cassen, R., and G. Kingdom. 2007. *Tacking low educational disadvantage*. York: Joseph Rowntree Foundation.
- Chawla-Duggan, R. 2011. Working with practitioners' perspectives: Supporting father involvement in family services in England. *Early Years* 31: 149–61.
- Clarke, C. 2009. *Why fathers matter to their children's literacy*. London: National Literacy Trust.
- Clark, A., and P. Moss. 2001. *Listening to young children: The mosaic approach*. London: The National Children's Bureau and the Joseph Rowntree Foundation.
- Cohen, L., L. Manion, and K.R.B. Morrison. 2000. *Research methods in education*. London: Routledge.

- Daniel, B., and J. Taylor. 2001. *Engaging with fathers: Practice issues for health and social care*. London: Jessica Kingsley.
- Department for Children, Schools and Families. 2008. *A review of how fathers can be better recognised and supported through DCSF policy*. London: DCSF.
- Department for Children, Schools and Families. 2010. *Support for all*. London: DCSF.
- Department for Education and Skills (DfES). 2007. *Every parent matters*. London: Stationery Office.
- Department of Health. 2007. *Maternity matters*. London: HMSO.
- Equal Opportunities Commission. 2006. *Gender equality duty: Code of practice England and Wales*. Available at: http://www.equalityhumanrights.com/uploaded_files/gender_equality_duty_code_of_practice_england_and_wales.pdf (accessed March 15, 2012).
- Fabian, H., and A-W. Dunlop. 2007. *Outcomes of good practice in transition processes for children entering primary school*. Working Paper 42. The Hague: Bernard van Leer Foundation.
- Featherstone, B., M. Rivett, and J. Scourfield. 2007. *Working with men in health and social care*. London: Sage.
- Fletcher, R., and K. Daley. 2002. Fathers' involvement in their children's literacy development. Paper presented at Evolving literacies. Perth: Australian Literacy Educators National Conference.
- Flouri, E., and A. Buchanan. 2003. What predicts father involvement with their children? A prospective study of intact families. *British Journal of Developmental Psychology* 21, no. 1: 81–98.
- Flouri, E., and A. Buchanan. 2004. Early father's and mother's involvement and child's later educational outcomes. *British Journal of Educational Psychology* 74, no. 2: 141–53.
- Ghate, D., C. Shaw, and N. Hazel. 2000. *Fathers and family centres*. York: Joseph Rowntree Foundation.
- Gillies, V. 2009. Understandings and experiences of involved fathering in the United Kingdom: Exploring classed dimensions. *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 624: 49–60.
- Goldman, R. 2005. *Fathers' involvement in their children's learning*. London: National Family and Parenting institute.
- Hawkins, A.J., K.P. Bradford, S.L. Christiansen, R. Palkovitz, R.D. Day, and R. Call. A. 2002. The Inventory of Father Involvement: A pilot study of a new measure of father involvement. *Journal of Men's Studies* 10: 183–96.
- Hawkins, A.J., and D.C. Dollahite. 1997. *Generative fathering: Beyond deficit perspectives*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- HM Government. 2007. *Index of multiple deprivation*. London: The Stationery Office.
- Joughin, C., and C. Law. 2005. *Evidence to inform the National Service Framework for Children, Young People and Maternity Services*. London: Department for Education and Skills and Department of Health.
- Kirsch, S.E.D., and P.A. Brandt. 2002. Telephone interviewing: A method to reach fathers in family research. *Journal of Family Nursing* 8: 73–84.
- Lamb, M.E., J.H. Pleck, E.L. Charnov, and J.A. Levine. 1987. A biosocial perspective on paternal behavior and involvement. In *Parenting across the lifespan: Biosocial dimensions*, ed. J. Lancaster, J. Altmann, A.S. Rossi, and L.R. Sherrod. Hawthorne, NY: Aldine de Gruyter.
- Lewis, J. 2002. The problem of fathers: Policy and behaviour in Britain. In *Making men into fathers: Men, masculinities and the social politics of fatherhood*, ed. B. Hodgson, 125–49. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Lloyd, N., M. O'Brien, and C. Lewis. 2003. *Fathers in Sure Start*. London: Sure Start Unit.
- Lloyd, T. 2001. *What works with fathers*. London: Working with Men.
- Lupton, D., and L. Barclay. 1997. *Constructing fatherhood: Discourses and experiences*. London: Sage.
- MacInnes, T., P. Kenway, and A. Parekh. 2009. *Monitoring poverty and social exclusion*. York: Joseph Rowntree Foundation.
- Marsiglio, W., P. Amato, R.D. Day, and M.E. Lamb. 2000. Scholarship on fatherhood in the 1990s and beyond. *Journal of Marriage and Family* 62: 1173–91.

- McBride, A.B., and M.M. Lutz. 2004. Intervention: Changing The Nature And Extent Of Father Involvement. In *The role of the father in child development*, ed. M.E. Lamb, 446–75. Hoboken, NJ: Wiley.
- Milkie, M.A., R.W. Simon, and B. Powell. 1997. Through the eyes of children: Youths' perceptions and evaluations of maternal and paternal roles. *Social Psychology Quarterly* 60: 218–37.
- Mitchell, S.J., H.M. See, A.K.H. Tarkow, N. Cabrera, K.E. Mcfadden, and J. Shannon. D. 2007. Conducting studies with fathers: Challenges and opportunities. *Applied Developmental Science* 11, no. 4: 239–44.
- National Audit Office. 2006. *Sure Start Children's Centres*. London: NAO.
- Olley, R., and C.A. Potter. 2012. Forthcoming. Fathers and UK policy. In *Engaging fathers in the early years*, ed. C.A. Potter and R. Olley. London: Continuum.
- Page, J., G. Whitting, and C. Mclean. 2008. *A review of how fathers can be better recognised and supported through DCSF policy*. London: The Stationery Office.
- Palkovitz, R. 1997. Reconstructing 'involvement': Expanding conceptualizations of men's caring in contemporary families. In *Generative fathering: Beyond deficit perspectives*, ed. A.J. Hawkins and D.C. Dollahite, 200–16. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Potter, C.A. 2012. Forthcoming. Why involve fathers? In *Engaging fathers in the early years*, ed. C.A. Potter and R. Olley. London: Continuum.
- Potter, C.A., and J. Carpenter. 2008. 'Something in it for dads': Getting fathers involved with Sure Start. A case study. *Early Child Development and Care* 178, no. 7–8: 761–72.
- Potter, C.A., G.D. Walker, and B. Keen. Forthcoming. Engaging fathers from disadvantaged areas in children's early educational transitions: A UK perspective. *Journal of Early Childhood Research*.
- Robson, C. 2002. *Real world research*. Oxford: Blackwell.
- Russell, G. 2002. Adopting a global perspective on fatherhood. In *A Man's World? Changing men's practices in a globalised world*, ed. B. Pease and K. Pringle, 52–68. London: Zed Books.
- Ryan, M. 2000. *Working with fathers*. Abingdon: Radcliffe Medical Press (for the Department of Health).
- Sarkadi, A., R. Kristiansson, F. Oberklaid, and S. Bremberg. 2008. Fathers' involvement and children's developmental outcomes: A systematic review of longitudinal studies. *Acta Paediatrica* 97, no. 2: 153–8.
- Sanders, D., G. White, B. Burge, C. Sharp, A. Eames, R. McEune, and H. Grayson. 2005. *A study of the transition from the Foundation Stage to Key Stage 1*. London: National Foundation for Educational Research.
- Schoppe-Sullivan, S.J., B.A. McBride, and M.R. Ho. 2004. Unidimensional versus multidimensional perspectives on father involvement. *Fathering* 2: 147–63.
- Stainton Rogers, W. 1989. Effective co-operation in child protection work. In *Child care: Concerns and conflicts*, ed. S. Morgan and P. Righton, 82–94. London: Hodder & Stoughton.
- Strauss, A., and J. Corbin. 1990. *Basics of qualitative research: Grounded theory procedures and techniques*. London: Sage.
- The Welfare Reform Act*. 2009. London: Stationery Office.
- Yin, R. 1989. *Case study research*. London: Sage.