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Fathers' Friday: encouraging paternal engagement in children's education and development

About this research

Researchers from the University of Bath worked with local schools and families to assess the success of events to involve fathers (and father figures) in their children's education and upbringing. For Bath and North East Somerset Council, 2012 was a year of Celebrating Fatherhood. On 22 June, 11 schools and 13 children's centres and early years settings held events for Fathers' Friday, an initiative aimed at strengthening fathers' participation in children's education and development. The research found that the Fathers' Friday initiative increased paternal involvement in children's education and development and is likely to lead to continued participation in such events in the future.

Key findings

The research found that:

- There is a significant demand for initiatives which promote fathers' involvement in children's education and development. Such involvement is associated with improved social, emotional and educational outcomes for children.
- Staff understood the importance of fathers (and father figures) in children's education and development. They used Fathers' Fridays to reflect on and discuss with parents how fathers could best be engaged, as well as experimenting with a range of activities.
- Children themselves are often the most important bridge between fathers and school. On Fathers' Friday most settings organised their recruitment and activities to be led by the children. This kind of communication helped fathers to become familiar with what schools and settings expected from their children.
- The initiative strengthened pre-existing relationships with fathers, involved fathers who had not previously been in contact with schools, and increased the range of involvement from fathers and wider family.
- The fathers and children all gave positive assessments of the Fathers' Friday initiative, saw beneficial outcomes from it, and expressed a desire for such activities to continue in the future.
- Fathers' Friday can create a behavioural norm of participation which is likely to lead men to take part in future activities.
- Fathers often do not have the strong networks with each other and with childcare and educational settings that mothers do, and this can inhibit paternal involvement. On Fathers' Friday men were able to create and build on such networks, although further work and events are needed in order to maintain them.
- Fathers still face challenges, particularly from employment and unfamiliarity with schools and childcare settings, which limit their involvement in children's education.
- Engagement needs to be cultivated and supported, and will require a variety of approaches and events.

Policy relevance of the Father's Friday initiative

Research has shown that fathers' engagement in their children's education and development has a positive effect on children's overall wellbeing and their social, emotional and educational outcomes.

The UK government's current policy agenda for early childhood includes a consensus that the foundation years should focus on child development (physical, emotional, cognitive and social). The reshaping of the Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS) curriculum aims to provide a basis for children's ability to learn by focusing upon three areas: personal, social and emotional development; communication and language; and physical development. In accordance with this, a new core purpose of children's centres will be to promote child development, school readiness and provide parenting and family support.

In this context, the Fathers' Friday initiative in B&NES sought to:

- Increase awareness of the importance of fathers' role
- Forge closer relationships between fathers and educational and childcare professionals
- Initiate and strengthen support networks between fathers

The initiative was successful in accomplishing all of these aims, with analysis undertaken by researchers at the University of Bath offering recommendations for policy and practice to be taken forwarded in other localities.



Findings and recommendations for local authority policy: the start of something special?

Fathers' participation in Fathers' Friday exceeded all schools' expectations, with at least 30% attendance in most, well over 50% in some, and up to 90% in one.

100% of fathers who participated rated the event positively. Children, mothers and schools agreed that the initiative was positive, although children particularly were sensitive to the difficulties faced by those without a father there. Such difficulties were addressed, and it is recommended should continue to be addressed, by encouraging the involvement of grandfathers, uncles, brothers and other male family figures as well as fathers, and were not/should not be a barrier to participation but provide an opportunity for communication between schools and families about these issues.

Schools offered a range of 'normal' and specially laid-on activities, from classroom-based literacy, craft and science activities, to outdoor play and sport. Fathers varied in their responses and expectations: some wished to see a 'normal' school day, some preferred to take part in an event that felt 'special', while others just wanted to see their child(ren) interacting with their peers. It is recommended that schools should continue to employ a range of strategies to communicate events to fathers, and provide a suite of activities to participate in. However, the availability of space may mean staggering events for different year groups across a week rather than a single day. Children, fathers and schools all expected Fathers' Friday to lead to further events and engagement.

There are some costs associated with these events, notably for staff time, meals, refreshments, and craft equipment. Sharing a meal with children (which may not happen regularly out of school) provides important chances for networking and relationship building, and both fathers and teachers remarked on the success of shared meals where these occurred. It is recommended that councils and/or schools consider setting aside resources for future events.

Recommendations for policy and practice

The Fathers' Friday initiative was a highly effective way of establishing and reinforcing paternal involvement in children's development.

It is recommended that:

- Councils and schools introduce and extend this type of event, and set aside resources for this.
- A mix of 'normal' and 'special occasion' activities, both indoor and out, be offered, so as to engage the greatest number of fathers and children.
- Events be held regularly in order to nurture fathers' networks with professionals and with each other, and to accumulate 'critical mass' which further promotes fathers' participation.
- Schools consider allocating space to one year group per day, if space is an issue.
- To accommodate the difficulties faced by fathers in taking time away from work, settings should:
 - offer events which take only part of a day;
 - organise a range of projects for fathers and children to do at home, and for children to bring in; and
 - think about arranging some activities out of school hours, making sure they give fathers plenty of notice of events so they can negotiate time off work if they need to.
- Early years settings and schools consult with families and experiment with a range of approaches for encouraging fathers' engagement.
- Schools nominate a fathers' champion (a point of contact for fathers) and a fathers' representative.

What Else Can Be Done?

It is clear that if initiatives of this kind are to have the greatest effect, they must not be isolated incidents but supported and nurtured by a range of events and practices. Future research from the University of Bath will:

- Identify how fathers' involvement can best be promoted by early years settings;
- Map the ways fathers can help their children's learning at home; and
- Seek children's perspectives on the differences between learning at home and away from home. This insight will help fathers engage with their children in a way that also supports the aims and objectives of their schools, children's centres and nurseries.

Methodology

This research was conducted in 2012. The findings are based on data from a documentary film of the Father's Friday event in a case study school, this included interviews conducted by researchers with children, fathers and staff, and was supported by data from 70 questionnaires returned by fathers from the case study school (plus 30 shorter questionnaires from another school). Researchers also set up video diary rooms in the infant and junior parts of the case study school and collected a total of 90 short recordings with children and fathers, managed by older children from the school. This school had already held a Fathers' Friday event in 2011 (following the example of another school in the B&NES area which has held Fathers' Friday for nine years running), so it was possible to track fathers' participation from one year to the next.

Alongside the data from the case study school, semi-structured interviews (a combination of telephone and face-to-face) were conducted with teachers and childcare professionals at seven other schools and twelve early years settings which had organised Fathers' Friday events, either as stand-alone activities or as part of a programme of events, aimed at involving fathers.

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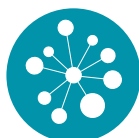
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More on this research:

Download the full report:
<http://fathersfridayresearch.wordpress.com/key-findings/>

Watch a video featuring Fathers' Friday at one school: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_YAjv3xyhJE

Further video interviews can be viewed at:
<http://fathersfridayresearch.wordpress.com/video-room/>



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