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## **The impact on the wellbeing of children of a positive deviance approach to the wellbeing of fathers in Little Hulton**

### **Final Report**

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Our research spans health, social care and education, and focuses on enhancing services, improving outcomes and evidencing impacts on children and families. The research group works closely with colleagues in the NHS, Local Authorities, the Third Sector, and national networks. We have research links with international partners in Scandinavia, the Middle East, the Far East, Europe and Australia.



## **The Context of the Proposal**

As part of a two year project applying a positive deviance approach to enhance the wellbeing of fathers in the suburban village of Little Hulton, part of the City of Salford, the social enterprise Unlimited Potential had commissioned three external evaluations. Alongside an overall evaluation of social return on investment and an evaluation of the impact on fathers and mothers, an evaluation of the impact on children of participating fathers was sought. Children had been involved previously, and some data had been collected, particularly Men Behaving Dadly – children telling the researchers why their father was the best father in Little Hulton; a thematic analysis of what children said that they wanted from their father (at the beginning of the project); and data on attendance at a Saturday Club.

## **Approach to the Evaluation**

A realist evaluation approach was adopted, given the context-bound nature of the outcomes: changes in fathers' health, happiness, and impact on their families. Realist evaluation addresses not only the nature of outcomes but also the influence of context in producing the outcomes (including the response of fathers and their children to the programme). This process of establishing outcomes, context and mechanisms was applied through the following evaluation questions. Child-friendly strategies were adopted, and efforts were made to ensure that the children's accounts were heard rather than those of adult proxies.

## **Evaluation Aim**

The aim of the evaluation was to establish the impact on children and young people up to the age of 16 of their father's involvement in the Little Hulton project, together with the mechanisms that facilitated the impact and the context within which it was experienced.

## **Evaluation Questions**

- 1) What was the nature of the impacts on children and young people of their father's engagement in the project?
- 2) In what context did these impacts occur?
- 3) What were the mechanisms that led to the impact coming about?

## **Evaluation Design**

### **Sample**

Children and young people were eligible for participation if their family was registered as participating in the project. As many children as possible were invited from 18 months to 16 years of age. Attendance at a Saturday Club was the preferred means of recruitment. Thirteen children from six families took part in the event. Two were girls.

### **Data Collection**

A Mosaic approach was employed, allowing opportunities for all participants to contribute in a manner which was comfortable and facilitative while responding to the same basic questions. This also created a stimulating environment with varied fun activities.

#### **1 Individual and small group interviews**

Children and young people were offered the opportunity to talk individually or in sibling groups to a researcher. These discussions were audio-recorded. Other informal discussions occurred without recording but researchers made notes about these immediately afterwards.

#### **2 Video-diary booth**

Participants were allowed the opportunity to paint on the walls of this small enclosure before offering a video-record of their thoughts to specific questions, phrased as required for different age groups.

### **3 "Post-It" wall**

Post-it notes will be available for participants to attach to a board with their thoughts and ideas. One young man took on responsibility for gathering more data from others at the event by asking them to write brief notes in sticky notepad sheets for collation by a researcher. Contributors were then asked to prioritise the collection of comments.

### **4 Play-and-say**

Younger children were encouraged to play while talking to a researcher in the simplest terms about their experience and perceptions.

### **5 Post-card to the Research Team**

Participants were encouraged or helped to write responses to simplified versions of the research questions on a large-scale post-card to be posted to a recognised figure involved in setting up the project.

### **6 Wish tree**

Participants were able to write their responses on a paper leaf (with help from a researcher if needed) and hang them on the wish tree.

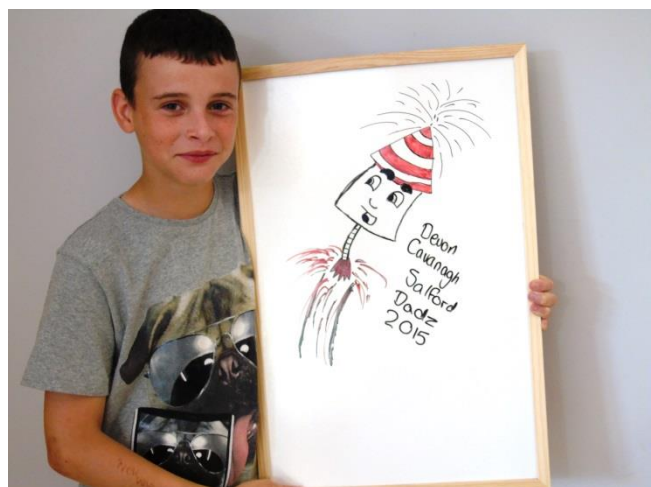
Researchers from CYP@Salford and student child health nurses will supplement the human resource for these events.

### **Data Analysis**

Audio or video-recorded data was converted to text manually (with additional field notes for video data) for framework analysis. The frame was constructed on fields of impact, context, and mechanisms.

### **Ethical Approval**

Approval was secured from the University of Salford Research Ethics Committee (HSCR 15-60).





## What is the nature of the impacts on children and young people of their father's engagement in the project?

There was considerable agreement among the children about the impacts of their fathers being part of Salford Dadz. The older ones were able to express deeper insights, sometimes with remarkable clarity and analysis.

### Spending more time together

*"Before, I didn't spend much time with my dad. I just stayed in the house not really doing anything. Now I spend more time with my dad, and it's special time just for me. But we both like spending time together."* (Video)

*"I made lots and lots of friends, and before I went to Salford Dadz I was stuck in the house all day and it was boring."* (Postcard)

*"It's for boys and girls...there is quite a few girls that normally come. We come every week. It's something to do on a Saturday, and when you're not doing it you're bored."* (Small group discussion)



*"It's something to do on a Saturday morning. Gets us out the house. I like spending time with my dad. He's the sort of dad I always dreamed of having and now I don't need to dream any more. If I wasn't here I'd be in bed."* (Informal discussion)

*"I spend lots of time with my dad, and I have made lots of friends. I look forward to spending time with my dad."* (Postcard)

*"I stay up with my dad instead of going to bed. My mum goes to bed early, but I stay up with my dad."* (Small group discussion)

These contributions were typical of the thoughts of many of the children. For fathers and children to spend time together had been unusual, but this arrangement had normalised. It seemed important to the children to emphasise that both fathers and children enjoyed the new relationship. Sometimes the change was particularly necessary but all the more significant for the wider impact that was seen.

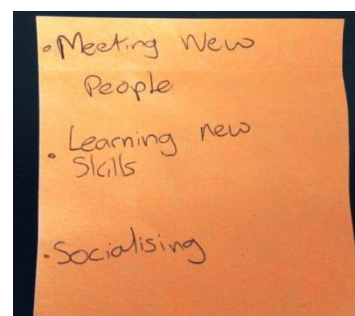
*"Something changed between us. We weren't good together before. Our relationship is better now. We spend more time together; do more things together. It's the same at home and when we go out, too. It wasn't so good before."* (Video)

*"Dad shouted at us a lot before, but not now."* (Video)

The change in behaviour was not one-sided. Children recognised that they had changed, too, partly on coming to understand their father's issues as well as their own responses.

*"I act differently, too. He is interested in me, so we talk together more."* (Video)

*"It changes people. My brothers, they're not as aggressive or mean. They want to do something different like draw a picture, as you can express yourself by drawing a picture. it really helps them. It means a difference for my mum and dad because they're not being silly or aggressive. It makes their life easier. It makes my life easier, too. They (mum and dad) can plan things knowing it's not going to be spoiled."* (Small group discussion)



### Making friends, having fun and being happy

Meeting new friends was an integral part of being together. Most children spoke of making new friends within the group but also then of making new friends at school when this had not been the case

previously. This was attributed to the skills, confidence and attitudinal changes gained from Salford Dadz.

*"My dad meeting new people: that was important, too." (Video)*

*"My dad is a lot happier when he comes to Salford Dadz." (Postcard)*

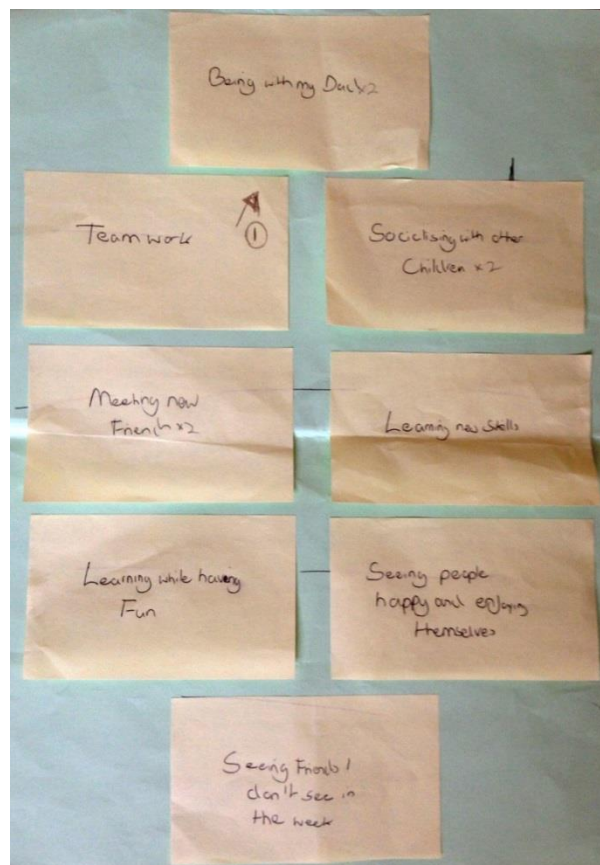
*"It's a way to stay out of trouble. There are friends to meet and fun things to do. There is time to talk to people and generally just have fun." (Interview)*

*"I spend lots of time with my dad, and I have made lots of friends." (Postcard)*

*"I've been getting a lot more friends at school, too." (Video)*

I think that things got better because... *"now I see children and dads happy. I feel elated now that I go to Salford Dadz." (Postcard)*

Salford Dadz made things better for me because... *"they do some activities and they do puppet shows. Because it is exciting. They do fun stuff." (Postcard)"*



From the post-it notes activity it became clear that, while enjoying Saturday Club activities tremendously, most children placed greater value on social aspects of the provision: new friendships, developing and maintaining a network of adults and children, and experiencing the camaraderie and support of the group. "Being with my dad", "Teamwork", and "Socialising with other children" were voted the top three issues out of the twelve that were raised.

### **Finding new respect for fathers and accepting responsibility**

Children had found new respect for their fathers for what they had achieved and how they had worked to make a difference not only to their own family but to others, too.

*"It's not really changed my dad, he was always a fun dad anyway and he knows lots of people. I reckon he's helped a lot of other dads." (Video)*

*"He shares his art with other people as well. I think it's good that he helps other people." (Interview)*

Some of the older children recounted how they had learned to accept responsibility – a significant change in their own outlook, and they had taken on some of the work of running the club. Indeed, this was evidenced at the event when the participants took to encouraging others to engage in different activities, to interview others, and to help with cleaning the painting materials used on the video-recording enclosure.

Many strategies had been adopted by fathers to interact with their children more positively and effectively. One example was typical of this. One participant had experienced problems with anger which often led to bad behaviour and lying to cover his guilt. As part of an alternative way to manage the situation he had agreed with his father that they would use a code word if he or his father thought that he was lying. This had been particularly helpful. He thought that he was far less angry since going the Saturday Club. (Small group discussion)

### **Legacy effects**

Several children spoke of differences in home life as result of Salford Dadz. As well as helping their father, children also explained about the impact on their mothers of their own changed attitude.

*"Things have changed at home, too. I feel like doing the things that we do here at home as well. I spend more time at home with him, too."* (Video)

*"I don't just spend more time with my dad here, we spend more time together at home, too."* (Video)

*"Now I help my relatives (such as my dad, my uncle and my grandad)."* (Postcard)

*"When my mum is ill, we are happy to help out at home with looking after [sibling] and helping with jobs round the house."* (Video)

Changes at home were stated explicitly to be an extension of the impact of Salford Dadz. An effect of the role-modelling offered by their fathers was that children mirrored the positive attitude seen in their fathers. They spoke of a more cooperative home and a community spirit.

*"Because things are better now, we do the washing-up at home and stuff like that."* (Interview)

*"We help each other and so we are able to help other people, too."* (Video)

Fundamental changes were reported in the attitude, skills and behaviour of the children whose fathers were engaged with Salford Dadz. They had come to appreciate the needs of others and to have the skills to gain the trust of new members, interacting in an encouraging, supportive manner, coaching and mentoring both children and fathers. The impact of engagement with Salford Dadz was such that they foresaw sustained involvement through generations..

*"I don't want to be staying in bed till 1 or 2 O'clock, my friends stay in bed for half the day, they're not getting anything done...when I grow up and have kids of my own I'll bring them to Salford dads. I know what my dad's done for me. Everything he's done for me I can pass on to my kids. Some kids don't get this. Some kids are in really bad neighbourhoods where they don't get anything like this."* (Small group discussion)





## In what context did these impacts occur?

### Infectious enthusiasm

The commitment to Salford Dadz was palpable among the fathers who had brought their children to the event, and this was mirrored in their children. Key messages had been internalised such that one young man explained the process of growing the group membership as being *“like ripples in a puddle when a stone is dropped in”* (interview). In all of the activities, children were enthusiastic about what had been achieved, how others could benefit in a similar manner, and the need to continue in the same direction.

*“I’ve told a lot of people. I do bag packs to fundraise and a lot of dads ask what it’s all about. We say ‘you should come along’ and they do actually come along. Anyone can come. Even if you just heard about it you can come along.”* (Small group discussion)

### Learning to trust in an enabling environment

Children spoke of coming to trust their father, both in his feelings for them and his behaviour towards them. At the same time, they realised that they were gaining his trust in return.

*“There’s a massive difference now. I trust my dad more and I like to spend time with him now.”* (Video)

In a small group discussion, one boy explained how he respected his father more because of Salford Dadz. They trusted each other more and understood each other more. He explained that he felt safe around his parents because he knew that he could trust them.

Some of the children were acutely aware of the plight of other who were unable to have such persistent (or sometimes any) contact with their fathers following the break-up of a marriage. They recognised Salford Dadz as a facility to offer safe contact and structured time together.

*“The Saturday Club is a way for mothers to let children see their dads when they didn’t see them before. Not all children get to see their dads.”* (Video)

*“It happened because all parents get to see their children – even when they have broken up. I’m happy that I came to Salford Dadz.”* (Video)

*“Fathers of other children treat step-children as their own. [They just see us all as the same.]”* (Interview)

*“It’s really good spending time with my brothers and my Dad. I’ve got to meet a new friend too. My dad’s not really any different since he’s been with the Salford Dadz. Another thing is that we get to decide what we’re going to do, that’s better than other groups I’ve been to. We get to do lots of fun things because the dads are like big kids too really.”* (Informal discussion)

The Salford Dadz initiative had led to a physical and psychological space in which children could find someone to talk over problems and offer advice. This was not necessarily their own father.

### Mutual recognition of improved happiness

Several children reported that both they and their fathers were happier

*“It has helped me to bond with my dad. It is working. Most stuff is with mums, like shopping and days out, but with your dad you can do more men’s stuff. More games to play.”* (Interview)

*“I think groups like this help you bond with your dad and mum. Groups like this really do help.”* (Small group discussion)

*“Dad realised how much happier I was after he started Salford Dadz.”* (Video)

There was pride in achievements made with their fathers, as exemplified by two brothers.



*"We have fayres and things like that. When they had an open day we had a stall. 'We did that (pointing to plants outside in border on top of wall). We planted all those, and we did the plants and borders near the slide."*

They were proud of this work and explained that they had done this with their fathers. They explained that also engaged in crafts like card making which helped one brother to see that it was not necessary to play on the X-Box all day.

### **A giant family**

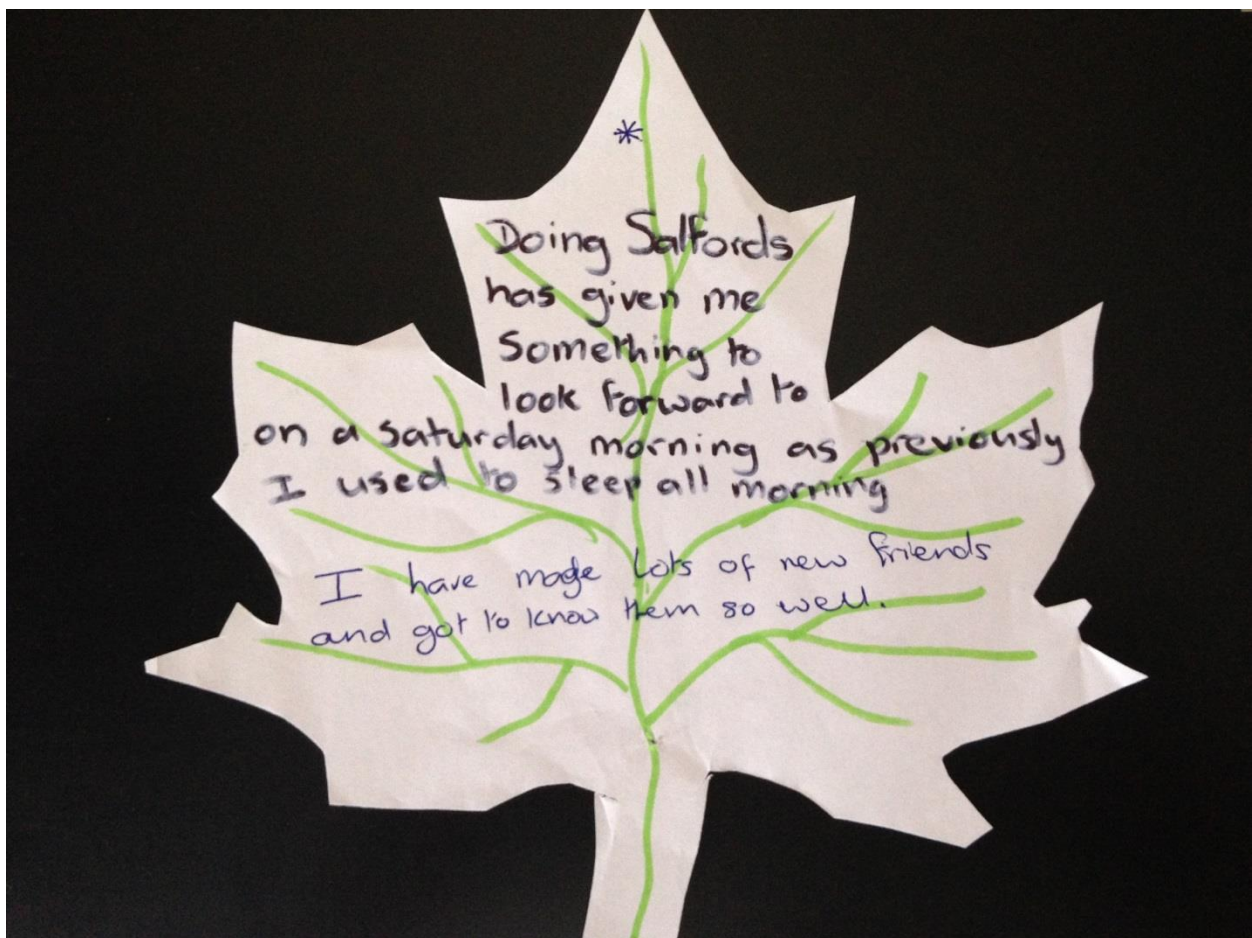
There was a distinct belief, which was borne out by observation, that improvement in the individual relationship between each father and their children was not the limit of the impact. All the fathers befriended all of the children, who reciprocated by making friends with the other fathers. As one participant said: *"We are like a giant family"*.

*"It's not just me and my dad. All the other dads and children make it work." (Video)*

*Dads get to know other dads more and the kids get to know the other dads. We all make new friends." (Video)*

*"All of the dads are friends to all of the kids. They look out for them." (Interview)*

This helped with the process of learning to trust other people more. In individual interviews, different "types" of fathers were identified: arts and crafts dads, those with different hobbies, and those who were good at organising different activities. This meant that these skills could be brought to bear to match the variety of needs and preferences of the children.



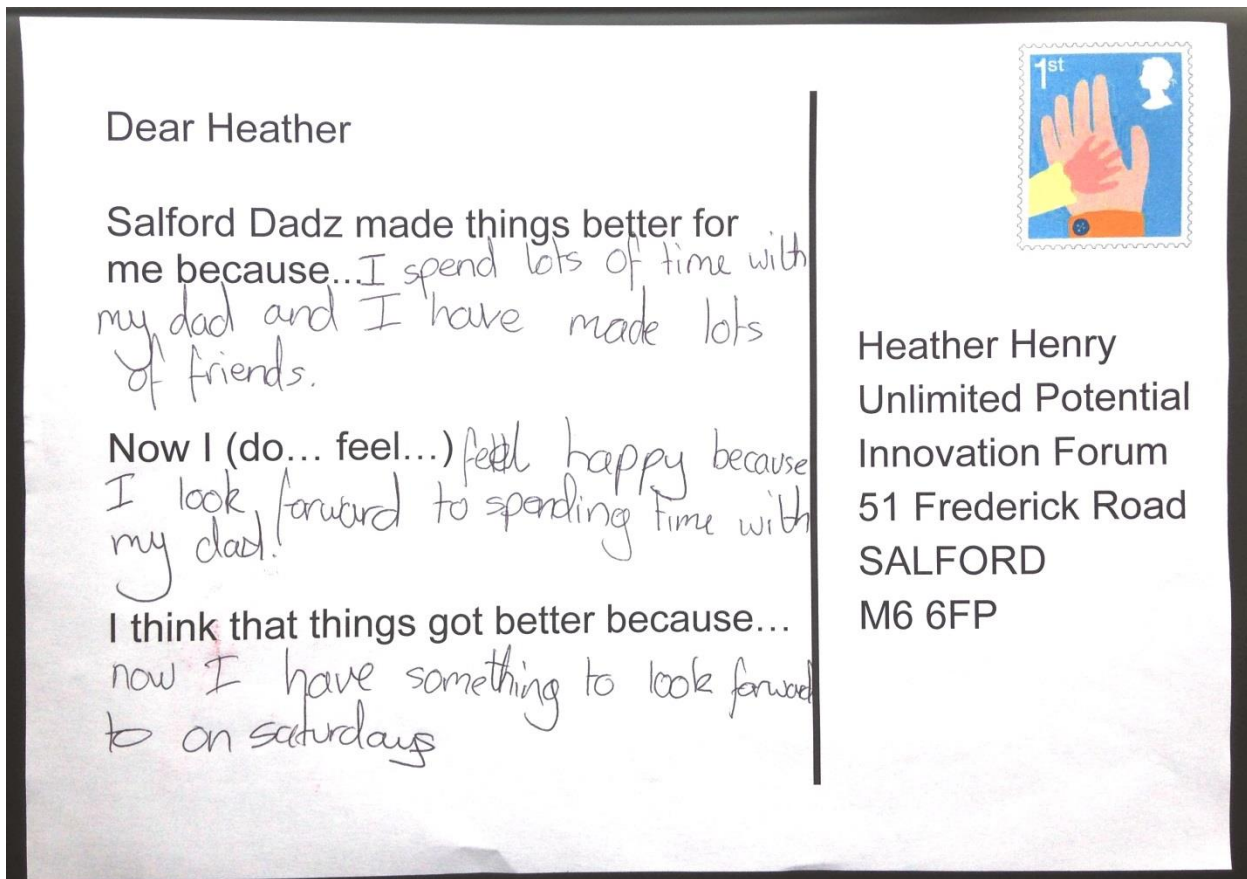
## What were the mechanisms that led to the impact coming about?

### **Structure, stability and certainty**

Not surprisingly, it was difficult for children to express their thoughts on this part of the evaluation yet their contributions yielded the required clues as to how the impacts had been brought about. A considerable part of the data could be seen to relate to the essential role of structure and stability in the Salford Dadz organisation.

Children spoke with confidence of the regularity and certainty associated with the Saturday Club. Such stability was welcomed and served to allow children to believe in the longevity of the changes that had been seen in their fathers. Many spoke of looking forward to this and other events, secure in the knowledge that they would not be disappointed.

*"I've got something to do with my dad. Definitely [emphasised], we will do something."* (Video)



Another part of the structure and stability was having external support but support which was not intrusive or interfering. A feeling of corporate competence and independence was expressed. There were only two unprompted references to such support, with all other contributions focussed entirely on the internal effort.

As part of the security offered by stability and structure, a number of the children reported feeling safe at Salford Dadz.

*"I trust my dad more. I feel safer."* (Video)

Salford Dadz made things better for me because... *"It makes me feel safe, happy and excited."* (Postcard)

Some children were able to gauge the time that was needed for the changes to be seen, encouraging others to recognise this and to persist with engagement. The regularity of the events programme and stability of the approach by Council of Dads were noted to be contributing factors.

*"It was maybe two weeks before I noticed the change."* (Video)

*"After about three weeks I got to know more people and the improvement in my dad was really noticeable."* (Video)

Children acknowledged that ensuring that the time spent with their father was fun was a function of the focus that the Salford Dadz held.

*"It's a special happy time for dads and children. The dads make sure that the children are happy. All sizes and ages of children."* (Video)

### **Active involvement and empowerment**

The way that the Saturday Club was organised by Salford Dadz meetings was identified as one of the vital factors in ensuring that children were actively involved in decision-making. The children appreciated the opportunity to be involved and to exert influence over what would be done.

*"Dads take the lead but they ask the kids what they want to do, and they listen to us, too."* (Interview)

*"They take everyone's ideas and fit them all in."* (Interview)

*"I think and talk a lot about the club at home. I give ideas and the ideas are used."* (Interview)

*"Dads ask the kids for ideas, so we get to say what we want to do."* (Video)

Not only had the relationship between fathers and children changed, but the children were proud of this and no longer felt embarrassed about their visible closeness to their fathers.

*"I enjoy having family days out whereas my friends - they're embarrassed. We spend a lot of time together anyway, going to the park or going to the gym. I'm not ashamed to be seen out with Dad, whereas my friends are embarrassed. They don't like this."* (Small group discussion)

Looking forward to the next few years, one participant replied *"Hopefully it will have spread. It won't just be in Little Hulton. It will be further than that, and there will be more people coming."* (Small group discussion)



## Conclusion

### **What were the impacts?**

The clearest impact on children of Salford Dadz was simply spending more time with their father. This time was precious, novel for many, and enriching. The activities of the Saturday Club were enjoyed and valued, but making friends (with both children and adults) and the opportunity to socialise in a safe environment were valued even more. Through the programme of activities, which served as much as a vehicle to other benefits as an end in itself, children discovered a different perspective on their father, establishing a new level of mutual respect and shared happiness. This improved quality of life was extended beyond the activities of the Saturday Club to life at home.

Aspects of a lasting legacy were identified. The children recognised that their own behaviour had changed in response to their father's improved parenting approach and skills, and they had developed an interest in helping others, too. They were active in recruiting more members and in mentoring them once they had joined. Life skills gained through Salford Dadz such as the ability to express thoughts coherently were evidenced in the event.

### **What was the context?**

These effects were experienced in the context of shared enthusiasm about the initiative together with understanding of the core purpose and values of Salford Dadz. The enabling environment of Salford Dadz had led to children trusting their father more, feeling safe, and being willing to engage with others more confidently. The recognition by children and fathers of the impact on each other's happiness was a stimulating backdrop to their ongoing endeavours. The creation and support of a community of local fathers and children provided a milieu in which the project was nurtured and developed. It provided strength, security and stability.

### **What were the essential mechanisms?**

The structure and stability which was central to Salford Dadz was the key mechanism that brought about the impacts. Feelings of safety were an important facet of this, together with the reassurance of certainty and predictability in the programme of activities and ways of working that were maintained by the Council of Dads. This was complemented by the active involvement of children in the planning and propagation of the initiative, through which the children felt valued and empowered. In return, they demonstrated lasting commitment to the whole endeavour.



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