

Support for fathers through Hillingdon Children's Centres

Background

The children's centre programme provides a range of universal and targeted support services for parents-to-be and families with children up to age 5. The centres also host a range of services delivered by partner agencies, including health visiting, midwifery, and peri-natal mental health.

The Equality Issue¹

Research shows that fathers play a crucial role in young children's development and that the early years are particularly important. Children whose fathers are highly involved in their upbringing from their earliest years are more likely to succeed academically, be more stable emotionally and have a good parent-child relationship in adolescence and, are less likely to become involved in crime and other antisocial behaviours.

Due to social and economic changes, fathers are now spending much more time caring for their children than in previous generations. Practitioners report that fathers and other male carers are increasingly seen dropping off and collecting their children but are still reluctant to get involved in the provision.

What did you identify, what was the need?

The main barriers to father involvement in early years provisions include:

- early years provisions being perceived as "female" spaces, with predominately female staff and mothers present, which can be intimidating to fathers and other male carers
- fathers' work commitments
- staff's lack of confidence and skills around engaging with men/fathers
- society's attitudes — childcare is seen primarily as women's work
- lack of opportunities for fathers to participate in activities in the provision which would appeal to them
- poor communication with fathers both in person and in more formal communications such as letters, emails, posters, etc.

How was this addressed?

- We carried out an exercise to see if our staff team was representative of the community we work with, with a focus on gender and ethnicity; the data was used to make a case for adding positive statements to our job adverts and all recruiting managers were required to undertake Unconscious Bias training.
- We re-launched the Cherry Lane Children's Centre Dad's group (post Covid) and launched a new Dad's group in Yeading Children's Centre.

¹ [Involving fathers in early years provisions | Croner-i \(croner-i.co.uk\)](https://www.croner-i.com/insights/involving-fathers-in-early-years-provisions)

- We have supported expectant Dads to participate in antenatal classes, by maintaining a good virtual offer, which means they are able to join online whilst at work, or at a class held later in the day, enabling more participation from fathers and working parents.
- Within the Perinatal Mental Health training, we discuss the role of fathers, both in supporting partners who may be experiencing mental health issues, and for those experiencing mental health issues themselves. During this training staff are encouraged to ensure that fathers are spoken to at all visits, asking them how they are adapting to life with a new baby.

What was the outcome?

- We previously had one male employee within the service and have recruited a further 3 male employees in the past 6 months. Two of the men are Senior Family Engagement Officers providing 'front- of house' support for the centres and one is a childcare worker.
- More dads are accessing the online antenatal courses and the number of dad's and male carers in group sessions is increasing.
- Staff report that they feel more confident in engaging dads in sessions, at midwifery appointments and in starting conversations with dads to understand their concerns around child development, mental health etc. This can be seen in both group work and 1-2-1 support.
- Dads' groups run once a month on Saturdays at Cherry Lane and Yeading Children's Centres (both running since September 2021). Attendance is:
 - Cherry Lane has on average 10 Dads and 11 children per session.
 - Yeading has an average of 5 dads and 7 children per session; the numbers for this group are increasing each month.
- The groups have been incredibly successful and a great space for dads to come and engage with their children. Staff have given advice and support on arrange of topics including mental health and well-being; baby led weaning; toothbrushing and oral health; speech and language development and child development. Many conversations have been had regarding siblings, family dynamics and positive behaviour strategies.
- Family Development Workers have provided targeted support for fathers experiencing a range of complex issues, including being a victim of Domestic Abuse, substance abuse and misuse, lone parents of children with additional needs, poor mental health of a partner.