ENGAGING WITH FATHERS

The more recent surge of interest in involving fathers to improve outcomes for children, clearly extends to fathers’ engagement in their children’s learning. However, there is a lack of evaluations relating specifically to fathers as most programmes and literature do not differentiate on the gender of the ‘parent’.

What does the evidence tell us?

Within the evidence, the term ‘father’ is almost always used to include biological fathers, father-figures, step-fathers, or a significant male carer or role model. It is difficult to isolate the effect of father engagement from other types of parental engagement, and the evidence suggests that engagement of a parent/carer is more significant than gender or family structure. Therefore engagement of fathers may be critical in the absence of any other parent/carer in the family.

The presence and engagement of fathers is positively associated with children’s intellectual development, social competence, and emotional well-being (Clark 2009; Geddes 2008). A lack of recognition of their significance and of effort to include them in their children’s education, both at school and at home, can have negative implications for children’s learning, mental, and emotional well-being (Clark 2009; Tan and Goldberg 2009; Geddes 2008). However, there is little equivalent evidence for the involvement of mothers and it is hard to isolate the impact of fathers’ involvement from parental involvement more generally.

Fathers reported the following as barriers to involvement in parenting support services and parental/family engagement in learning programmes: work commitments; a lack of awareness of services offered; a lack of organisational support; and concerns over the content of the services (Passey 2012; Goodall and Vorhausl 2011; Bayley et al 2009). Fathers are less likely to get involved with their children’s education than mothers. One Ipsos MORI family learning survey revealing 68% of mothers read with children compared to 54% of fathers (Grant 2009).

When looking at the influence of father involvement on child outcomes it is often difficult to disentangle father involvement from the effects of social class and family structure, as well as access to resources and the general socio-economic context that shape children’s well-being (Clark 2009). The findings from an English based study of the REAL (Raising Early Achievement in Literacy) family literacy project suggest that fathers who were indicated as having little or no involvement with their children’s literacy were more likely to be on a low income than fathers who were reported to engage in literacy activities with their children (Morgan et al 2009).

Fathers’ engagement in children’s learning may be less visible than mothers’ (Morgan et al 2009). Morgan et al found that while fathers were reportedly highly involved with recognising children’s literacy achievements and engaging in informal reading and writing activities with them at home, they were much less likely to be the
ENGAGING WITH FATHERS

providers of literacy opportunities (providing supplies, access, and space to engage in literacy) (2009).

Fathers need to be involved in their children’s learning and development from the beginning (Potter et al 2012). Fathers’ involvement in the early years correlates with the later academic achievement of their children. Fathers’ involvement in their children’s early schooling, particularly their more direct and interpersonal involvement, was shown to increase children’s enjoyment of school and reduce their school-related anxiety (McBride et al 2009; Tan and Goldberg 2009).

The motivation for fathers’ later school involvement affects whether or not the engagement impacts on children’s achievement positively or negatively (McBride 2009; Tan and Goldberg 2009). When fathers play an ‘additive’ role in their children’s later education – becoming involved because their children are perceived to be struggling academically by either the school or family – children’s performance and attainment could actually suffer.

What seems to be working?

Best practice for recruiting and engaging fathers includes:

- **Active targeted promotion and prioritising fathers within organisations and school** – For example, the Father’s Transition Project in England demonstrated that a gender-differentiated approach, which did not exclude mothers’ participation but did focus on involving fathers, was effective in appealing to and engaging fathers in the pilot project (Potter et al 2012; Bayley et al 2009).

- **Alternative forms of provision** – The use of more ‘hands-on’ activities and scheduling interventions for evenings and weekends both worked to engage more fathers (O’Mara et al 201; Passey 2012).

- **Inclusion of varied ethnic or cultural perspectives** – In the Father’s Transition Project, the project attributed the success of engagement in large part to using a worker who came from a similar background to the participants (Potter et al 2012; Goodall and Vorhaus et al 2011).

Engagement programmes aimed at fathers should provide opportunities for them to become more involved in and responsible for children’s learning in the home and wider world (Lipscomb 2011; Geddes 2008). Results from an exploratory study suggest that fathers’ early parenting may have a direct impact on their later involvement in school, but it is never too late to strive for increasing fathers’ confidence in their parenting competency as well as in their learning support (Passey 2012; McBride et al 2009).

**Fathers often engage with their children’s literacy by using alternative literary forms and practices** (Passey 2012; Morgan et al 2009). By expanding and encouraging literacy forms beyond the traditional book based modes to include
ENGAGING WITH FATHERS

magazines, newspapers, television guides, and even maps, the lived experiences and knowledge of fathers from lower socio-economic means may be built upon within literacy programmes (Passey 2012; Morgan et al 2009).

**Fathers should be specifically targeted in communications from the school regarding parents’ events and meetings (Goodall and Vorhaus et al 2011; Lipscomb 2011).** When communication from schools address ‘parents’, evidence suggests that fathers are unlikely to assume it means them, so that direct notification increases the likelihood of their attendance (Lipscomb 2011).

**Services and programmes for engaging the family in children’s learning should specifically target fathers in recruitment and communication (Passey 2012; Goodall and Vorhaus et al 2011; Bayley 2009; Grant 2009).** With many fathers perceiving parent services, support, and programmes to be aimed at mothers, recruitment is more successful through various channels (post, email, text, telephone, and the internet) and in non-traditional venues, such as pubs, sports facilities, workplaces, and job centres (Bayley 2009).

What is the impact?

**There is consistent evidence that fathers’ interest and engagement with their children’s learning is statistically associated with better educational outcomes, including better exam results, higher levels of educational qualifications, higher educational expectations, more positive attitudes and better behaviours (Goldman 2005 cited in DCSF 2008).** Furthermore, these positive associations exist across different family types, including two-parent families, single-parent families, and children with non-resident fathers (Goldman 2005 in DCSF 2008).

**Family literacy programmes need to acknowledge that they are building on families’ existing knowledge, skills, and culture (Morgan et al 2009).** When taking into consideration fathers’ alternative forms of literacy practices, the mixed methods REAL study found that almost two-thirds (65%) of fathers reportedly read to their children, almost half (45%) helped children with writing, and almost two-thirds (63%) modelled reading behaviour at home (Morgan et al 2009).

**Case Study**

Research that examined what happened when a group of fathers were recruited to access the Wider Family Learning Project in a town in England focused on exploring the factors that are influential in enabling and motivating more fathers to participate in their children’s learning (Passey 2012). Through questionnaires, interviews, focus groups, and observations, the findings from this project tell us:

- Past poor learning experiences discouraged fathers’ commitment; when programmes aid fathers in developing coping strategies and increase their
ENGAGING WITH FATHERS

awareness of children’s capacities, the impact of past negative learning experiences is reduced.

- The discounting of fathers’ own socio-cultural experiences and knowledge can lead to disengagement; by valuing the skills related to individual fathers’ interests and accepting and integrating their prior knowledge and experiences, a programme curriculum can build on fathers’ transferable skills and provide a solid foundation.

- Curriculums need to build on lived experiences of families and not be externally dictated; when fathers and professionals share and recognise skills equally, a positive environment is quickly established.

- Paternal motivations for involvement flourish when they are left in sole charge; plenty of opportunities for further bonding with their children can increase fathers’ self-efficacy.

- A curriculum built around hierarchical relationships will lead to poor working relationships; clear curriculum structure, good planning, and the familiarity and convenience of project setting instills confidence and encourages attendance.