

Involving Dads in the Early Years

Dads, like mothers, play a very important role in young children's lives. Children do better educationally and socially when dads are actively involved. A positive male influence isn't just limited to biological dad, but includes dad figures such as foster dads, stepdads, granddads, uncles and older male siblings

The benefits of family learning are wide-ranging and include:

- improved educational outcomes for children
- effective ways of engaging parents in their children's learning
- improved communication between parents and practitioners
- a first step back into learning for parents
- improved relationships between parents and children

Dads often describe feeling overlooked when they access Early Years. They often feel left out of the conversation around childcare, and settings have the power to change that.

Early years workers are in a great position to support dads at this crucial time. It's a real opportunity to encourage positive, nurturing interactions between them and their children

Top tips for involving dads in your setting

Use the dads' names whenever talking to them

Ensure that you remember and use the dads' names. It sounds obvious, but it really helps dads to feel included. Ensure dads' names and contact details are included on registration forms

Take time to stop and ask dads how they are doing and build a personal connection

Ask dads how they are? Show an interest in them? You could Ask: 'What has been easier/more difficult than they had expected?' Often these questions are saved for mums.

Contacting the family

Invitations for first meetings or home visits should include dads and flexible times should be offered if possible.

Make an effort to chat to the dads as much as you do the mothers. Contact both dads and mothers with development news. Ensure that dads are invited to all meetings about their child, even if you think they will not be able to attend.

Ensure all verbal and printed communications addresses both parents. “Mums, dads and carers” should be used rather than “parents/carers”. Most people hear “parent” as “mother”.

If dads do not live with their child, make an extra effort to communicate and meet with them and routinely send information to them.

Create a welcoming environment for parents

Staff should try to engage with dads if they are dropping off or collecting their child, by welcoming them into the building and talking about their child’s day. When dads enter provisions at drop-off, staff should make an extra effort to help them participate in routines with which they may not be familiar.

Create a ‘dad-friendly’ work environment

Ensure that your workspaces and materials are dad friendly and display a positive image of men – would dads feel welcome? Have you considered having male magazines in reception areas?

Encourage dads to have quality time with their child

Encourage dads to have joyful, engaging interactions with their baby/child. Maybe you could suggest they have a regular time in the day or week to sing songs together, or share a picture book together

Acknowledge the dad’s involvement with their child, and engage with them about it

Encourage and acknowledge dads' involvement in caring for their child. Take time to have conversations with dads about how they think their children are doing, in the same way you would with a mum. Practitioners should try, as appropriate, to include dads in discussions and decisions about their children

What have dads noticed about their child’s development

Encourage dads to watch and notice their child’s actions and behaviours. Think with them about those behaviours might mean and what their child may need from them. Dads may not feel comfortable coming into a setting they don’t feel accepted in and strike up a conversation about why their child is throwing objects every morning. Why not make a special effort to ask dads in particular about what you’ve noticed about their child’s behaviour?

Encourage dads in your setting to join dad-toddler groups

Consider setting up a dad-toddler group to get dads engaged and show them how much of a difference bonding truly makes

Activities and events

Invite dads to join in activities and events that would appeal to them. Plan and schedule meetings and events when dads are available to participate

When organising events and activities for parents to attend, early years providers need to ensure that they are all “dad friendly” and inclusive for male carers as well as mothers. Some dads prefer family events rather than “dads-only” activities and this may be reflected in attendance

Dads often seem to prefer attending one-off events rather than making regular commitments so this should be considered. Activities that are more popular among male carers include sports, reading and arts and crafts

Feedback from dads

Ask dads for their input on what they would like to see from their early years provision and how they would like to be more involved. Ask if there are any other areas they would like to be involved in, or if they have any particular skills or knowledge that they would like to share with the children.

Think of how dads’ skills can be used

Encourage dads to share their skills, no matter what job or passion they have.

Dads don’t have to be creative or work with their hands to share their passions. If there are finance dads, they can get involved with some of your early maths activities.

Training for staff

Ensure all staff understand the importance of involving dads in the provision. Take some time to think about what your own feelings and assumptions are about dads. Think about how this could perhaps affect the way you work with them.

Some staff may not feel comfortable working with dads and will require extra support and training. Staff should be responsive to the different circumstances of dads and male carers and respond to their needs.