

**FROM MELLOW DADS TO THE DAD'S CLUB
--AN INNOVATIVE WAY TO ENGAGE FATHERS**

In spite of various parenting initiatives, it seems services for fathers are still at the early stages. Is it or is it not a myth that fathers cannot be engaged in parenting work? In West Lothian the Sure Start Team have been working on this for the last 5 years. This article is about our latest development for engaging with fathers.

Fathers value support offered, and also value the opportunity to meet other fathers. We have developed a range of services for fathers. One of these has been the development of "Mellow Dads" here in West Lothian. This is an intensive intervention. The group lasts 14 weeks. In the morning, the focus is on the fathers, and has a strong psychotherapeutic element. At lunchtime, there is a play session, which is video'd allowing for feedback on the parent-child interactions. The afternoon is input on parenting, and also includes video feedback. Parents are seen as experts on their own children and peer learning is seen as fundamental.

Clearly children benefit from positive interactions with their fathers, and play is crucial for their development. But fathers can feel excluded from mainstream services because they can feel as though they are mainly for women, and staffed by women. One father said he felt "irrelevant" when the mid-wife called as he was not included in conversation. This is also often true for fathers where there are concerns for the children's welfare.

While "Mellow Dads" was effective, we saw a need for on-going support, and have developed a group which relies on play and video feedback on parent-child interactions (essentially the lunch-time element of "Mellow Dads"). We have called the group "The Dad's Club" and it is really about peer support.

The aims of the group are:

1. To build parent-child relationships:
2. To help fathers see the world more from the child's point of view, and to be more conscious about their interactions with their children:
3. To help generate more ideas on playing with children, and to encourage the fathers to play more with them: and
4. To have fun!

The group started in May 2007. It is an open group, so fathers can join at short notice. All fathers have children under 4 years. Original entrants to the group were "graduates" from "Mellow Dads" and from another "Dad's Club" where there were a number of single fathers and "Stay at Home" fathers. All new fathers are now by referral (usually from Social Workers, or Health Visitors). Because West Lothian is a semi-rural Council with poor transport, we offer this to and from the group.

In our first year we have had 37 fathers referred (with 44 children). 3 did not attend, while 11 attended for 1 or two sessions only. We have 6 on our waiting list and 17 have attended for 4 or more sessions (average attendance is 12 sessions). At present there are 11 fathers who attend, though they do not all attend every week.

Fathers have left the group because their child started Nursery School (5), simply left - reason unknown (4), the child was accommodated (2) or the (non-custodial) father lost contact with the child due to a variety of circumstances (3). In general fathers attend for a reason, and when they have got what they wanted, they leave.

While the group is open to all fathers, it has been encouraging that 10 fathers who had children on the Child Protection Register or who have had children accommodated have engaged with the group.

The group runs for two hours. Once the children are settled in the children's group, (run by crèche workers), the fathers have coffee in the parents' room, where there is general chat about the week. This has included a "Stay at Home" father's outrage at not being able to write "househusband" on his child's birth certificate (he is the first father in Scotland to have this on his child's birth certificate), raising a wide range of issues around the role of fathers and how they are perceived in society at large. We have also given some input on child development, the value of play, and on a particular way of playing called "Attending" where the parent tries to be there for the child, describing what the child is doing, and trying not to take over the play. While we did this at first, now we rely on fathers to tell new fathers about the play (they are better at it than us!).



We then go through to the playroom, and the fathers play with the children. We film this. At the end of the play session (20-30 minutes) we sing some songs (we are also recording some of this for a CD!), and then go back to the parent's room to have a look at the video. Feedback is offered on parent-child interactions, focusing on the positives, and also allowing fathers to reflect on things they might do differently.

The play involves a lot of messy play—water, “gloop” (cornflower and water), playdough, “slime”, shaving foam, for instance, and we have used junk toys, and made collages. A community artist has come regularly and offered her ideas. She thought this group format was the ideal way to promote parent-child interactions, and allowed fathers the chance to imagine what it is like to be a child. Over the weeks she saw fathers relax into their role as carer and play companion, and she enjoyed seeing the children make new friends. We recently had input on “yoga stories”, which the older children thoroughly enjoyed.

We have been quite surprised the group has worked so well. We thought fathers would be put off by the idea of being filmed, and that this would be especially true for fathers involved with Social Workers. In fact fathers seem to value the opportunity to reflect on their interactions, and start to see their children as individuals more. One father said “It was a bit embarrassing at first, but the chance to see myself being a bit more directive than I wanted meant I could change”, and this is the general view of the fathers. So the video feedback was seen as a plus for the group.

The idea of “Attending” as a way of playing is akin to reflective or active listening, so there is an opportunity for fathers to understand their children more and also their own ways of interacting. One father had found that using a more reflective listening approach led to a greater understanding of his child, and this helped him find ways to avoid major conflicts.

This has led to discussions on managing behaviour—temper tantrums, bedtime routines, for instance, although this is not a major focus of the group. Nowadays, the regular members of the group can help new fathers feel more comfortable and they act as role models for the play and the sort of interactions that help the play. For example one father remained very calm when his daughter, when asked to let the next child do the activity, said in a loud, firm voice, “But I haven’t finished yet!” He simply started to gently move his daughter, while talking softly, but firmly about what would be happening next, so that she was able to be distracted and recover from what might have developed into a conflict.

In common with any parenting intervention, the fathers are relieved to find they are “not the only ones” facing the hassles involved in parenting. The opportunity to meet with other fathers has been very important. Getting ideas from other fathers has been more beneficial than from “experts”, and the group can become a forum where fathers feel comfortable in the company of other fathers—One father said, “It is important to have somewhere to go and get support”. Another father said, “It is a good group—a fun group”, indicating that the atmosphere developed is what fathers are looking for. Fathers have talked about feeling calmer, not “flying off the handle so much”, and being better able to “put myself in my children’s shoes”. And they play more with the children, and are more relaxed about this so they have more fun. They are often surprised and pleased to find there are fewer behaviour issues to deal with at home, and that the children seem happier. Over the weeks fathers also notice the changes in the children’s development.

The group has had its ups and downs around attendance, but now is stable and thriving. The group is great fun to run, and it satisfying as we can see it meets a real need. We are now getting a lot of referrals so we think this is an indication of the need for this type of intervention. As workers find out about the group, we are getting more and more “word of mouth” contacts.

10 fathers have asked our Sure Start Careers Advisors about vocational and further education opportunities, and again this has been assisted by the example of fathers already undertaking further education, etc. Two of the fathers now assist with the antenatal courses offering input on their experiences of being a new father.

This group has been developed by both the writers, within a wider service for fathers, which includes antenatal and Baby Massage courses for fathers, one-to-one work, and community based groups. West Lothian has been fortunate in employing a worker specifically for fathers. The next step is to encourage the fathers to engage more with the parenting courses we offer.

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&
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