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## **Benefits of daddy play**

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### **Abstract**

The Fathers’ Engagement Project was designed to assess the impact and feasibility of a six week physically active play based programme on fathers’ engagement with their three to five year old children. Sessions were held at City based Children’s Centres. Fathers’ engagement and attitudes to child PA were measured pre- and post-intervention via questionnaire. Acceptability of the intervention was explored through participant and staff focus groups. Results from questionnaires showed that fathers felt more in control of their children and had increased awareness of their role in motivating their child to play. Fathers also suggested that sessions provided opportunities to spend quality time with their children despite there being no significant increase in the overall time fathers self-reported spending with their child during the week or at the weekend. A number of recommendations for both research and practice are provided.

### **What was the Fathers’ Engagement Project?**

Researchers and policy makers have reported the benefits of positive paternal involvement, particularly during the child’s early development e.g., language acquisition, motor skills, and social skills. These benefits provide positive outcomes for the child in their teenage and adult years, while demonstrating a clear link between uninvolved fatherhood (the lack of paternal involvement) and societal problems. Active play programmes have been used to increase levels

of physical activity in young children for health benefits and have acknowledged the role of both the childcare setting and family setting as appropriate for effective interventions (see O Dwyer et al, 2013 and O Dwyer et al in Press). Further, while a number of parenting programmes exist within the UK to promote engagement between parent and child and/or help parents develop and refine parenting skills, few of these are targeted specifically at fathers. Moreover to date, no known research has explored the effects of an active play programme on that of father-child relationships. The aim of the Fathers' Engagement Project was to assess the impact and feasibility of a physically active play based programme on fathers' engagement with their three to five-year-old children across Liverpool. Specifically, the project explored how the physically active play programme impacted on: Fathers' attitudes towards their child's physically active play; fathers' time (quantity and quality) spent with their child during the week and at weekends; and father's confidence in their parenting skills (parenting self-efficacy). The project also aimed to explore the acceptability of the intervention to fathers and Children's Centre staff.

### **What did the sessions consist of?**

Children's Centres received 6 x 90 minute active play sessions (Dads Active Fun Time – DAFT) between September 2012-July 2013. The sessions were designed to foster six aspects of parental engagement for fathers'/male carers and their children: Time spent with child; quality of father/child engagement; positive parenting; role modelling; teaching new skills and rough and tumble play. An external delivery partner with significant experience of working with young children and their fathers within a Children's Centre setting delivered all sessions, with a member of Children's Centre staff available to assist at all times. Each 90 minute session was split into 3 x 30 minute sections consisting of:

- (1) Initial physical activity/play based games section

- (2) Interactive workshop/break (linking parent/carer-child activity such as drawing, discussion, craft with a physical activity focus)
- (3) Final physical activity/play based games (consisting of different games to the first section).

### **How was the impact and feasibility of the programme measured?**

Fathers' engagement and attitudes to child physical activity were measured pre- and post-intervention via validated questionnaire. Acceptability of the intervention was explored through participant and staff focus groups to 1) further assess the impact of the intervention on father engagement, and 2) gain insight into the feasibility of the intervention from the perspective of both fathers and Children's Centre staff. The design of the intervention (including a sample session plan) and research data collection procedures are available as supplementary files within Houghton et al (2014).

### **What was the uptake of the programme?**

94 participants from 19 Children's Centres across Liverpool engaged with the programme and 26.6% of these fathers (approximately 1 in 4) had not used the Children's Centre before, demonstrating the potential of the DAFT sessions to recruit new fathers to the Children's Centre. This is particularly important as fathers are notoriously difficult to engage with, especially within environments such as Children's Centres (Baker, Arnold, & Meagher, 2011). However, seven Children's Centres were not able to recruit to the sessions and therefore the programme was not delivered at these centres.

In general Saturday sessions proved to be the most successful in terms of attendance with a number of fathers indicating they would have not been able to attend the course if sessions were on another day. Fathers were also more likely to attend if Children's Centre staff were present during the sessions. Barriers to engagement were linked to external factors and circumstances

such as illness or disability of parent and/or child; lack of understanding about the sessions and how this was conveyed through advertising; needing to engage multiple children within/outside the programme target age range; how taking a number of children out of the house can be quite a daunting task for a father, lack of parental motivation, shyness and session timings clashing with commitments (particularly work schedules), and perceptions that the Children's Centre was perceived as a female environment. In respect of the latter one father commented:

...Often when you go to normal toddler groups it's mostly mums and there's hardly any dads F65.

A number of fathers also made reference to the role of the mother as a gatekeeper and organiser suggesting that they would not have attended the sessions or been aware of the programme if they had not been encouraged to attend by the child's mother. For example:

...I suppose for me, how do I put this? My wife's the organiser....if there's a Dad's club or something sort of going on (she will say) why don't you go along there and that's what we've done. F32

### **What did the results show?**

Results from questionnaire data showed that the programme had no effect on the overall time fathers spent with their child during the week, however it can be suggested that fathers appeared to somewhat overestimate the amount of time they spent with their children, particularly before they engaged with the sessions. Therefore the intervention helped them to become more accurate and realistic about what constituted time spent with their child(ren) and lead to an increase in the quality of time as opposed to quantity. Focus group data further demonstrated the sessions provided both positive and impactful opportunities for fathers to spend 1-1 quality time with their young children:

...It builds your relationship because you're doing something in a different environment with them and it's just really valuable [the time spent with children] F29.

Fathers also demonstrated an increased awareness of their role in motivating their child to play following the intervention. Parenting self-efficacy (the belief that one is able to perform parenting tasks successfully) increased across the 'control' subscale i.e. fathers felt more in control of their children after the intervention, however no other significant differences in self efficacy were noted. The impact of the intervention on parental control was also replicated in the focus group findings, as fathers reported that the sessions made an impact on their skills and knowledge as a parent. At one Children's Centre fathers reported how the sessions had made life at home easier and that they had noticed a significant improvement in their children's behaviour both at home and at school since attending the sessions.

Fathers on the whole were positive about the session content with areas for improvement such as a larger group size and more team based games being offered within the sessions suggested. For example:

... If there had been some more team games I think then they (father and child) would bond more and I just think it would have been a better experience F39.

In general feedback from Children's Centre staff was positive related to both session structure and content, with staff particularly noting the ability of the delivery team to adapt the session plans in order to suit the needs of the group. Several centres and staff members indicated that the sessions enabled them to recruit new fathers, several of whom have now since signed up to additional courses and groups within the Children's Centre.

## **What do the results mean for Early Years Practice?**

The programme can be considered a feasible and appropriate way to promote father engagement with their young children and is deemed to be portable to that of other similar childcare settings/programmes or suitable for contact centre provision for non resident fathers/those under supervised contact. Whilst for the present study intervention was designed for indoor play, a pilot course of six outdoor sessions was also facilitated through an outdoor play specialist demonstrating the potential to explore the intervention design partially/fully outdoors. More information on the outdoor sessions can be found within the project report (Houghton et al, 2013).

The intervention within the current project was limited to six weeks in length with 540 minutes spent in sessions in total and may be considered short within the context of other parallel parenting-based programmes. Indeed the Incredible Years Programme includes weekly 120 minute sessions for a period of 12 weeks (1440 minutes). Increasing the length of the programme and contact time, may have led to a greater intervention impact being seen, particularly related to overall parenting self-efficacy. Regardless of these limitations, a number of recommendations for both research and practice are put forward here.

### **Key points/recommendations from the project**

- Where possible sessions targeting fathers should be offered on Saturdays to maximise attendance.
- When courses led by an external company /agency are delivered within a Children's Centre setting a member of staff from the Children's Centre should be present during the session. This would enable rapport to be developed and foster continuation of engagement post course.

- Active play is an appropriate means for fostering fathers' engagement with their pre-school children. The current programme has demonstrated that active play can be a basis for PA and also a focus or 'hook' for craft and quiet 1-1 time for father and child.
- Practitioners may consider combining sessions such as craft and active sessions that may be by virtue of their nature delivered as separate sessions
- Marketing/recruitment for fathers sessions may also involve the mother of young children as gatekeeper/organiser to increase uptake as well as targeting fathers directly

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### **Useful resources**

For more information on the Fathers' Engagement Project, please visit

<http://www.ljmu.ac.uk/paexchange/projects/123445.htm> where a link to the full project report is also available.



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