

Ingress:

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[Read how to successfully motivate and engage men in supporting children's learning. \(link to the document on our web site\)](#)

The document:

How can organisations successfully motivate and engage men in supporting children's learning?

Campaign for Learning (CfL)

Every dad is important to his child. This is true whether they are proactive and supportive parents, absent or even dead. Whilst research demonstrates that both men and women impact on children's development, motivation and achievement, (Goldman 2004), the current learning offer for families is still not universally effective at engaging with dads and male carers.¹ Too often when we talk about parental involvement and engagement, we subconsciously think about mothers.

The gains in working with fathers for families and the children themselves are multiple. They include increased understanding and higher quality relationships, improved behaviour, less criminality in later life and higher attainment in school. (DfES/0314/2004) The low engagement levels with family learning programmes and Children's Centres was therefore an issue that needed to be addressed. Working in partnership with NCH, the team at CfL decided to test new engagement strategies that would increase dads' involvement in supporting children's learning.

The initial work was created through an engagement project called Putting Dads in the Picture. There were three key principles that underpinned the development work; firstly that everything should be directed by dads themselves, from recruiting project staff, to designing materials; secondly that the strategies should be flexible enough to be adapted for use in a diverse range of settings; thirdly that the delivery was supported by training to provide organisational change that promotes men-friendly practice.

The project was tested in a concentrated area in the West Midlands and targeted dads with low skills. This was a particular challenge because the men did not perceive themselves to be equipped to help their children. Their own educational

¹ The DfES project Skills for Families reported that less than 8% of participants in Family Literacy, Language and Numeracy programmes were male in 2004. This figure had not risen in the 2007 LSC returns.

experiences had left many of them feeling that they were 'thick'. These attitudes created the biggest barrier to successful engagement and reinforced findings from other research projects that identified barriers to parental engagement in children's learning.

'The data showed that the greatest barrier was parental experience of education. School staff in particular felt that this was the greatest barrier. This reinforces the findings in the literature, which shows that parents can see schools as places where they have experienced (or remember experiencing) only failure, as places of conflict, or as representatives of a system which they must fight and must aid their children in fighting. This was seen as a particular issue by staff.'

(Do Parents Know They Matter? Engaging Parents, Raising Achievement final research report, Specialist Schools and Academies Trust, 2007)

The project was highly successful at building positive first steps in to learning for nearly 300 dads and male carers. For example, simple but effective marketing tools resulted in 74 dads turning up with their children for one small local Family Learning Week event. All the marketing materials, including beer mats, flyers and posters, were designed through focus groups with local dads. This was critical because it enabled us to create materials that we knew dads would respond to. One of the most successful methods involved personal invitation to the dad from the child. A wanted poster template was created, with a space for each child to draw a picture of the person they wanted to come with them. The 'what, when and where' were the only other pieces of information. All the marketing materials, including beer mats, flyers and posters, were designed through focus groups with local dads. This was critical because it revealed that the men were 'deselecting themselves' from many of the resources designed to give parents of young children information. The primary reason for this was that the graphics, design and content reinforced the idea that they were for children, rather than just about children. Images like cartoon elephants on resources for parents reinforced significant cultural and gender stereotypes. Many of the men in focus groups still felt that their role should be to provide money and material support and would pass information on to women, rather than use it themselves. The resources did not communicate to the dads that they were for dads.

Building on the success of the engagement work, the second stage of the project was supported by the Early Learning Partnership Project. Its focus was to prevent learning delay, by working with parents of 1-3 year olds to help them stimulate and support their child's development. This work provided the opportunity to extend the learning offer to dads and develop new resources specifically designed with dads, for dads.

Because the majority of the men were not confident about their own skills, the concept of teaching their child was difficult and remote. However, dads were familiar with the role of coaches in sport and the idea of becoming a coach to develop your own child's tactics and skills were positive, easily understood and non-threatening. This approach was combined with Learning to Learn² principles

² www.campaignforlearning.org.uk

and practice that have been the basis of 7 years of action research run by CfL. The 'Best Coach' resources that have been produced promote the importance of dads and male carers in supporting learning and offer some principles and practical activities that support them in this key role.

The integration of Learning to Learn concepts had significant and positive impact in terms of dads recognising themselves as learners and understanding how they learn themselves, as well as how they could help their child. It was also very liberating for some of the men, because for the first time, they could see that their 'failure' at school was in part, the result of the way they were taught and that being able to be good at learning is something that you can learn.

The techniques that the dads were introduced to included games to build children's confidence as learners, to stimulate creativity and resourcefulness and to help memory. The approach is currently being evaluated by Oxford University and initial indications are that the intervention has not only transformed the way dads view their role and interact with their children, but also enabled them to access a wide range of services for families that they had not previously been aware of.

There are many types of parental involvement and a significant body of research evidence that evaluates the impact on children's achievement. From Desforges' report in 2003 to the work of Professor Alma Harris and Dr Janet Goodall from Warwick University in 2007 researchers are consistently identifying that parental engagement and support for learning, particularly in the home has the most significant impact on children's achievement.

- Parents have the greatest influence on the achievement of young people through supporting their learning in the home rather than supporting activities in the school. It is their support of learning within the home environment that makes the maximum difference to achievement.

The evaluation commissioned by DCSF is not longitudinal and will not therefore be able to measure the long-term impact of this programme on raising children's achievement. Oxford University is however; measuring attitudinal and behavioural change in the men who are involved in the 'Best Coach' programme and the full findings will be published in June 2008. The issues and principles around working with dads and the resources that have been developed through both stages of the project will also be brought together and published to support effective practice in Autumn 2008.