



**UNIVERSITY OF
BATH**

CELEBRATING FATHERHOOD:

**AN ANALYSIS OF BATH & NORTH EAST SOMERSET'S FATHERS' FRIDAYS
INITIATIVE 2012**



**Celebrating
Fatherhood**

**Bath and North East Somerset
Local Safeguarding Children Board**

Report for Bath and North-East Somerset Council

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Photograph: taken from "Why fathers matter", a film made by the University of Bath on Fathers' Friday 2012, to be launched in September 2012

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1. Introduction and background

The role of fathers' in child development has come to the forefront of research and policy in recent years. Fathers' role is seen as particularly important because of concerns the difficulties faced by some fathers in sustaining relationships with their child, with almost 20% of fathers reporting that they feel left out of their child's upbringing (see B&NES, 2012a). This is particularly true in post-separation situations where, despite increased contact between fathers and children in recent years, fathers continue to form the vast majority of non-custodial parents, since studies consistently show an association between involvement of non-custodial fathers and better emotional, behavioural and educational adjustment of children (Amato & Dorius, 2010). But more generally there is a feeling among both parents that fathers could be more closely involved, bringing benefits for children's development and for family relationships generally. Fathers' paid employment often constitutes an obstacle to greater father involvement, whilst childcare and education professionals tend to address mothers rather than fathers (see B&NES, 2012b; Daycare Trust, 2012). This "invisibility" of fathers as carers (see Burnett et al, 2010) creates a situation where men are less familiar and comfortable with children's worlds outside the home.

It is in this context that B&NES decided to hold a year of Celebrating Fatherhood and, within this programme, to encourage schools and early years settings to hold specific events aimed at involving and engaging with fathers (and other male role models such as grandfathers, uncles etc).

The objectives of Fathers' Friday may therefore broadly be seen as (1) raised awareness of fathers' role in child development; (2) promotion of closer contacts between fathers and care/education professionals; and (3) the establishment or strengthening of local networks of support and advocacy for fathers.

Altogether, ten schools (counting Moorlands junior and infants schools as one) took part in the Fathers' Friday initiative in 2012, following the example of Moorlands Federation which organised its first Fathers' Friday in 2011 (although we are able to verify this only in seven cases: see Appendix, Methodological Note 1). The schools were allowed to organise the day according to their own priorities and logistical requirements, but there was a degree of coordination through newsletters, visits and briefings from B&NES Children's Services team, and additionally local media coverage managed by the B&NES press office provided an overall context and rationale.

A further thirteen children's centres/early years settings took part in the Fathers' Friday initiative, although only a small number of these organised specific days, others taking part in activities relating to the Celebrating Fatherhood initiative through fathers' networks, as we discuss below.

2. Our study

We followed the Fathers' Friday throughout the day (on 22 June) at Moorlands Federation, having first conducted in-depth interviews with the headteacher and with two fathers at the school (who had both participated in Fathers' Friday in 2011) who also have a professional interest in support services for fathers. On 22 June, we collected completed questionnaires from 70 fathers, and also conducted interviews with other fathers and children as part of our film project. In addition, we set

up a video room for short interviews with fathers and children, managed by older children at the school, which continued for a further week with children.

Subsequently we also spoke to teachers and childcare professionals at six other schools and twelve early years settings (see Methodological Note 1 in appendix). Where possible we have drawn on questionnaires and other evidence (written comments, photographs) provided by the settings.

This brief report seeks to assess to what extent the broad objectives of the initiative have been met and to draw attention to ways in which the initiative could be followed up or further supported. In so doing we draw on academic literature on father involvement which emphasises diversity of situations and practices. As Pleck (2010: 88) argues, *“Practitioners should always have in mind the multi-faceted nature of paternal involvement. Because there is no ‘one way’ for fathers to be involved, there is necessarily no ‘one way’ to promote increased father involvement.”*

This literature highlights the potential for support services to contribute to longer-term social change by raising awareness through private and public conversations about fathers (Schaefer, 2012); and to increase parents’ social capital (family-based and community-based) by strengthening links between the family and external agencies (Pleck, 2010).

The report presents findings from our interviews, questionnaires and other data, structured around the schools and childcare providers’ perspectives, the fathers’ perspectives, and the children’s perspectives.

3. Perspectives of early years settings

Current UK government policy for early childhood is based on a consensus that the foundation years should focus on child development (physical, emotional, cognitive and social) (DfE/DoH, 2011: 8; DfE, 2011). The reshaping of the Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS) curriculum aims to provide a basis for children’s ability to learn by focusing on three areas: personal, social and emotional development; communication and language; and physical development (Tickell, 2011). Accordingly, a new core purpose of early childhood settings will be to promote child development and school readiness, and to provide parenting and family support. Support for families and parents is positioned within a wider agenda addressing the potential of early intervention to eradicate inequality and child poverty, through for example the provision of high quality of early education, which affects later life chances (Field, 2010).

Early years settings therefore need to engage with parents in order to fulfil their core mission. At the same time, they are often dealing with fragile and vulnerable families where it may be particularly difficult to engage both parents.

Our study included all five Sure Start children’s centres in Bath as well as Radstock, and a number of other nurseries/ pre-school settings (East Harptree, YMCA, Zebedees Bath) which had decided to take part in Fathers’ Friday. We also spoke to the fathers’ support coordinator for Radstock, Paulton, Midsomer Norton and Peasdown St John. Staff we interviewed at these settings told us that they took part because the initiative responded to work they had already begun on engaging parents.

Some of our respondents said that they thought initiatives like Fathers’ Fridays work better in schools, where it is about *“throwing the doors open”* to show what happens inside the school, than

in early years settings where relationships with parents need to be built up as an ongoing activity and integrated into community services. This view was voiced by several of our respondents: *"I don't think the pull is quite as good as schools, so I think we'll just have to do more to get them involved. With the schools, the dads like to know what's going on"*, whereas in nurseries and early years settings parents feel they know what is going on and it is a matter of thinking imaginatively about ways of promoting sustained engagement. Our brief overview here therefore discusses how and why this uncertainty about the value of one-off Fathers' Friday events was reflected in the organisation of the event and continues to be a matter of consideration for the settings concerned.

In contrast to schools, early years settings also have difficulties in organising a one-off as children may not attend all days or even for whole sessions, or every day of the week.

Several settings reported that they had felt unsure about how to target the event. Some had sent a general invitation to parents but tried to word it in a way that focused specifically on fathers, or to talk to fathers in particular when they came in to drop off or pick up. Others had sent an invitation to fathers only but talked to mothers and promised similar activities for them; they reported that mothers had generally been in favour of activities to try to get fathers more involved.

First Steps Twerton reported that they already have a number of dads who drop off but tend not to get involved and some don't see the value in messy play. A small number of dads responded to the invitation to come in for play (three) and specific activities were organised. The centre plans to follow up with plans for a stay-and-play group on Saturdays.

First Steps Moorlands already have a good relationship with parents including dads, so it was a case of trying to get them involved, staying and chatting instead of just dropping off. Around ten dads participated but their activity was over a week instead of just one day. They are planning to follow up with other stay-and-play activities and the Saturday group (occurring in conjunction with First Steps as they are part of a cluster) especially for separated fathers with weekend care.

At Radstock, too, it was reported that future Fathers' Friday events would probably be organised over a week rather than on a specific day.

St Martins Garden Children's Centre felt their fathers' Friday activity was not a huge success; however, they had decided not to run a specific event on the Friday because they already participate in a fathers' group run from Weston and another in Odd Down and decided to have displays in the foyer. Any fathers that attend their usual weekly groups were encouraged to celebrate fatherhood. So for this setting it made more sense to focus on weekend activities within the context of the fathers' groups: *"In the week it's hard to reach the dads as there are work commitments for some, but if the family's separated then it's the weekend that they see them"*.

At St Martin's Garden Children's Centre nursery, around six fathers participated in a highly targeted event designed as a *"thank you"* to parents with whom the setting had already engaged, following their 2008 Ofsted report which recommended further efforts to involve parents. They invited specific fathers to come in to nursery to take part in activities such as music and literacy. The setting reported that it had also organised some out-of-school forest activities for parents.

At Parkside, too, the planned event in a local park did not take place because it was felt to clash with other activities and particularly a fathers' group organised on Fridays. It was reported that fathers questioned the need for a specific Fathers' Friday initiative.

Weston children's centre also reported that their Fathers' Friday event (which had been planned around the Book Day activities in the park with Parkside as part of the cluster but, which were cancelled due to bad weather) had suffered from being timed to fit in with another existing group that attracted dads at another centre within this cluster and another planned Dad's day event they were due to hold the following weekend.

Within the cluster for Radstock, Paulton, Midsomer Norton and Peasdown St. John, Radstock Nursery took part in the Fathers' Fridays Initiative and four fathers attended (three new fathers whom the staff do not usually meet). Paulton children's centre did not take part in the Fathers' Friday initiative because they are already engaged in activities to promote father engagement "*all year round*", through their fathers' groups, in discussion with service users, and through sports events run at the weekend (for example, they plan to organise an Olympic games). The cluster coordinator reported to us that they were trying to address gender imbalance in childcare by discussing in team meetings how to engage with fathers: "*we're trying to make the service more father friendly by saying to the groups, bring your partner down*".

A similar approach could be seen at The Hut pre-school (Twerton), where it was felt that fathers are more involved than they used to be. Holding a Fathers' Friday event was not so much about seeking to engage with fathers for the first time as celebrating those fathers who were already involved: "*because you're in and your hands on, here's a gift for you*".

Probably the most successful in terms of number of dads engaged was East Harptree (also the biggest setting) which has a forest play facility. They had previously thought about organising an event because a lot of dads said they would like to come in but as most are the primary earner and work long hours it was difficult to take time off ("*weekend dads*"); there are also a number of single parents. The setting was surprised by the high response: "*Almost everyone*" came. They used their own feedback questionnaire to get more qualitative reflections from dads and highlighted a couple of responses for us which they said were typical: "*Fathers in general should get more involved with school and with their children. Anything that encourages this is to be applauded*"; "*Being able to spend time in this setting is very rewarding as I am at work most of the time he comes*". The success of the event has encouraged this setting to think about organising other events in future.

Also highly successful in terms of attracting relatively large numbers of fathers was the YMCA Fathers' Friday, despite low expectations due to lack of preparation time (less than two weeks). Although few fathers turned up in the morning, fourteen fathers and two grandfathers arrived in the afternoon and took part in activities as well as a barbecue where staff noticed how important it was for fathers to interact with other parents: "*We have got lots of dads that feel isolated and that was good for them, there was a little camaraderie.*" The YMCA reported that Fathers' Friday had helped them to think through their strategy for engaging with parents, which they had already identified as a priority area. The unexpectedly high turnout showed them that it was possible to engage fathers and that events could help to build relationships: "*It was a test; we didn't really know...we didn't think, oh this isn't going to work; and by the end of it with comments and feedback from dads and granddads we thought it went quite well. Our expectations were changed by the end of it.*"

Both in cases where settings felt the events had been a success in terms of numbers, and those which reported it had been a failure, had used the occasion to reflect on how to engage parents and were considering organising other events in future.

For this reason if no other, we conclude that the Fathers' Friday initiative played an important role in encouraging and supporting settings in their ongoing efforts to engage parents. But for various reasons the initiative had limited impact, particularly in the children's centres where it appears either to have clashed or been overshadowed by other activities especially those occurring at weekends and in the evening.

We recommend some further reflection on whether in future years it might be useful to separate out Fathers' Friday initiatives in schools and other types of activity aimed at fathers in nurseries and pre-school childcare settings. Coordination and exchange of information seems to be particularly useful, and possibly also some sharing of resources or information about types of resource (e.g. the forest school oriented model type of activities, such as building dens and exploratory walks, which are cited by many participants as highly attractive to parents and useful in attracting fathers and stimulating initial networks).

On the other hand, the holding of a specific one-off event has been shown to serve a useful purpose in settings where it can either cement an existing relationship with parents or build new relationships.

Fathers' Friday 2012 was therefore very timely in that it took place when settings are reflecting on how they engage with parents and it seems important to us that these reflections and actions should continue to be supported. The great diversity of approaches and experiences reported here attest not only to the range of social purposes served by early years settings, and the variety of social contexts in which they take place, but also the value of experimenting with different methods of engagement with parents.

4. Schools' perspectives

Schools shared a broad objective of engaging as many fathers as possible in children's educational experience, based on the general understanding that parental involvement is beneficial for child development and learning (Goldman 2005), and that fathers are harder to engage than mothers, for a variety of reasons.

However in deciding to participate in a Fathers' Friday event and how to organise it, schools varied in the way they conceived and focused on the role of fathers in child development, not least because of the socio-economic conditions in their catchment area (awareness of relative lack of male role models) and any specific family circumstances of individual children. In some cases too, schools' organisation of Fathers' Friday was influenced by the experience of previous attempts to engage parents (whether successful or not), by awareness of gender issues in the composition of staff, and/or by logistical constraints (size and availability of facilities).

In all cases apart from Moorlands Federation where the school was able to build on its 2011 event and prepare for Fathers Friday 2012 well in advance (also briefing Reception class parents before

entry), most schools organised an event relatively late in the school year, in response to an email from B&NES (some schools told us that they had ignored the first couple of emails). This indicates that there is considerable scope for building on these events in 2013 both in terms of broadening (encouraging more schools to participate, by publicising Fathers' Friday 2012) and deepening (supporting schools as they prepare for Fathers' Friday 2013). In all cases, schools told us that they would definitely like to organise such events in future, but perhaps change some aspects, discussing and planning with their staff over a longer period.

In all cases, schools felt that Fathers' Friday 2012 had been successful in terms of the number of fathers involved (which exceeded expectations everywhere), the response from fathers (see below, Fathers' Perspectives) and from children (see below, Fathers' Perspectives) as well as mothers, and relationships between the schools and parents. Schools told us that they felt that by holding one event they had started a longer-term process of building and enhancing relationships between school and home.

We highlight here a number of issues which arose from schools' experience of Fathers' Friday, for further consideration by schools and/or by B&NES Early Years team:

i. Logistical and organisational issues

Having more than half a dozen adults in a classroom presents considerable organisational and space issues for teachers, and in some cases the space requirement more than doubled. Teachers used a range of imaginative solutions, but in some cases where the physical space is severely constrained schools may need to restrict participation or stagger participation over several days. For example, it may be useful to concentrate full attendance over one day to Reception/ Reception + Year 1, with the organisation of separate, more focused activities for fathers in later years, once the initial relationship between the school and fathers has been established.

This model would see Fathers' Friday-type events as the start of other activities both within the school (e.g. assembly, projects, one-off classes, invitations to fathers to come in to school to read) and possibly also out-of-school activities organised through the school (we came across an example of this at High Littleton). We suggest that the maintenance of a longer-term set of activities requires a champion within the school (nominated father liaison/contact point) and possibly also a father representative.

Of course, this is not the only possible model, and we can also see advantages in having mass participation by fathers across all years, where space permits, both to create "critical mass" (see below) and to encourage the sense of a special day which is a strong incentive for participation, where school size and space permit.

The size of the event makes it difficult to organise a fully reliable sign-in system for parents, although this would be ideal not only to ensure compliance with child protection regulation but also to help with future event planning. Schools were able to ensure easy visual identification of father participants by use of name badges/stickers, but some thought should be given to helping schools organise easy registration/sign-in systems without undue burden on school administrative staff.

ii. How to reach fathers

Schools used a variety of methods to advertise Fathers' Friday and attract fathers to the event. Most schools publicised it via the standard newsletter, which proved an effective means of communication. However maximum attendance was ensured by a more direct appeal to fathers from children (a letter written by the child asking the father or other male figure to attend). The additional advantage of communicating via the child is that it also started a conversation with the child about any difficulties Fathers' Friday could pose for him/her because of the family situation. Schools reported that such conversations allowed them to overcome difficulties in most cases (by helping the child to identify an alternative male figure or to ask a friend's father to take part in activities on his/her behalf too), or to find alternative solutions (for example, one boy in a very difficult situation was allowed to spend more time on his favourite activity under the supervision of a particular teacher; in one case, a boy asked his male teacher to be his "father" for the day).

At Moorlands, we found strong evidence that children and mothers passed on information from the school and asked fathers to attend, and also that the holding of an event one year created expectations from children that fathers would attend in future years. To some extent, schools' ability to attract fathers to events depends on prior relationship with mothers, although schools' relationship with mothers can also be enhanced through conversations started as a result of passing on information about events for fathers.

iii. The need to be inclusive

All schools were sensitive to the need not to exclude any children not living with their biological fathers, and this message was successfully transmitted to children and to parents, who often commented on this in the video recordings (e.g. infants father sitting with two girls: "*it doesn't have to be a dad, can be another male*"). Teachers in all schools could give examples of grandfathers, uncles, brothers and family friends who had taken up the invitation to attend. Our sample of Moorlands questionnaire respondents included grandfathers, uncles and a brother (and our video recordings also include several family friends), and a mixture of resident and non-resident fathers as well as stepfathers.

Grandfathers in particular seem to have particularly appreciated the opportunity to find out more about their grandchildren's school life, especially those who lived some distance away, and several had taken part in 2011 and 2012. Grandfathers' responses showed no difference in terms of overall evaluation of the day or participation in activities.

All schools had experienced some initial complaints from mothers who felt that children without ready access to fathers were further disadvantaged by initiatives aimed at father involvement. In all cases, the head teacher spoke to those concerned and only in one or two cases (particularly where there had been bereavement) it was agreed that the child could stay away from school on Fathers' Friday as it was too sensitive. In all other cases, the head teacher felt that the conversation with parents about fathers had led to positive outcomes in terms of better communication and understanding between all parties.

In building on the 2012 initiative, it is important to highlight the positive evaluations of grandfathers and other male figures and the value attached to their participation by schools, children and other family members, in order to encourage further such participation in future.

iv. *Being versus doing: a normal school day, or special challenges?*

Schools differed in their approach to the organisation of activities, with some teachers feeling strongly that “*just having dads sitting in classrooms*” would be “*dull*” and unlikely to attract participants, and others either reluctant to organise separate activities in the absence of knowledge about how many would attend, or deliberately planning activities. In some schools, a mix of both types of activity was planned depending on how individual teachers wanted to organise the day, and fathers’ experience depended on which year/class their child attended.

We found that fathers were divided in their response, some pleading strongly for an “*authentic*” experience of a “*normal school day*”, others expressing a desire for a “*special*” day, so there is no “*one best way*” to engage fathers. It may be that as schools develop a relationship with fathers they are able to monitor and gauge what types of activity work best for the needs of their particular catchment area, but our findings suggest that a balance of “*special*” and day-to-day activities are required, perhaps not necessarily on the same day. A lesson of Fathers’ Friday may be the need to address these conflicting preferences by organising one special day per year but bolstering it with other types of activity aimed at keeping contact with those who are already involved.

Alternatively, as in the case of Moorlands, it may be that an initial shorter, “*special*” event could prepare the way for a longer event giving the possibility of experiencing both types of parental involvement in school activities.

v. *Resources and B&NES support*

Participation in Fathers’ Friday was not cost-free for schools. As well as the time of teaching and administrative staff, financial costs were incurred in the provision of meals and refreshments for participants, and in some cases in the provision of additional craft materials.

For this reason, we recommend that (in place of the Fathers’ Friday gift bags which had an initial launch effect) B&NES should consider resources to support schools in future, and/or encourage schools to set aside their own resources for future Fathers’ Friday events. As we note below (5.iv) providing a coffee and a bacon sandwich for participants, or a meal (especially in an economically deprived area where fathers may not eat with children on a regular basis), can help to build important networks for fathers and also to provide an opportunity for fathers to eat with their children. Where lunch was provided, it was very often singled out both by participants and by teachers as a particularly successful aspect of the day.

5. *Fathers’ perspectives*

Our evidence demonstrates that fathers overwhelmingly support initiatives such as Fathers’ Friday and that there is significant unmet demand for new or continued initiatives to engage fathers in children’s education.

First, participation by fathers¹ exceeded expectations in all the schools surveyed, and in most of the early years settings where specific events took place. In most schools, staff estimates (confirmed by the number of Celebrating Fatherhood bags distributed) indicate that at least one third of fathers took part, despite relatively short notice. We estimate, on the basis of the questionnaire data from Moorlands (see Methodological Note 2), that around 30% of fathers attended for more than one of their children across the infant and junior schools, and that at least 10% of those attending did so for more than one child where the school takes either infants or juniors. (Analysis of photographs from Oldfield Park infants confirms this estimate).

At several schools, attendance easily exceeded 50% of potential fathers, especially taking into account attendance for more than one child. At Combe Down, over 90% attendance was achieved (for Reception and Year 1 classes); at Moorlands, we estimate that around 70% of fathers attended at some point during the day, based on sign-ins (which may have excluded some fathers who arrived at the end of the day).

Second, fathers' evaluation of Fathers' Friday events was unanimously positive, with fathers giving the highest possible ratings. For example, in Southdown Juniors' questionnaire, which had an estimated 75% response rate, 100% of respondents gave the day the highest rating: comments included *"a good idea"*, *"it's been a great day"* and *"really think [it] should be done again"*.² Respondents at Southdown Juniors emphasised how useful it had been to learn about the school environment and their child's education, and several remarked positively about how learning had changed since their own school days.

Open questions about fathers' views of Fathers' Friday at Moorlands elicited entirely positive evaluations. Asked what they remembered about Fathers' Friday 2011, over 20% of respondents spontaneously used positive adjectives: *"huge fun"*, *"great"*, *"lovely"*, *"cool"*. As well as highlighting what they had enjoyed themselves about the day, typically comments focused on children's response: *"The kids appreciated it and enjoyed it so much"*. Similarly, when asked about Fathers' Friday 2012 participants used exclusively positive terms: *"it was brilliant"*, *"great to see [my step-daughter] confident and happy"*, *"inspiring"* (from questionnaires); *"really good idea"*, *"very good idea, loads of fun"*, *"good for kids"*, *"good to see what they're doing"*, *"fantastic"* (from video diaries); *"wonderful experience"*, *"fantastic afternoon"*, *"enjoyable, fun, interesting"*, *"excellent"*, *"well done everyone, and thanks!"* (comments in school visitor book).

Third, fathers spontaneously asked for follow-up activities. The experience of Moorlands demonstrates that Fathers' Friday creates a behavioural norm of participation (reinforced by children and by mothers) which is likely to lead men to take part in future activities: 58% of those fathers who responded to our questionnaire had already attended Fathers' Friday in 2011, and open

¹ Where we refer to fathers here, we intend also to refer to all those men who took part in Fathers' Friday, although some of these were grandfathers, uncles, stepfathers, brothers, or family friends.

² However, one respondent who gave the top rating for enjoyment and for learning about his child's education disagreed that Fathers' Friday was a good idea. As this was his only written comment it is impossible to explain this apparent contradiction, although we speculate – in line with findings presented in this report – that it could be linked to the difficulties faced by some fathers in taking part in Fathers' Friday (since, where fathers expressed adverse comments to teachers, their objection concerned the great difficulties they had experienced in taking time off work).

questions elicited responses such as “*Looking forward to next year*”. Comments from other schools confirmed that Fathers’ Fridays can lead fathers to expect future engagement.

Asked what they valued most about Fathers’ Friday, fathers emphasised the opportunity to spend time, “be with” their child (for example, many identified the opportunity to have lunch at school with their child, rather than to take part in formal classroom activities; a typical response was that the best part of the day was “*seeing the children happy their dad is there*”); to learn more about what happens on a “normal” day at school (many fathers highlighting the gap in knowledge between their own experience of school and current curriculum and practices); and to see their child interact with their peers (this aspect of parental responsibility more usually falling to the mother). To a lesser extent, but still significantly, fathers also placed value on the opportunity to meet and talk with other fathers.

We highlight here a number of findings which we suggest should be taken into account when planning future activities:

i. Helping fathers to negotiate the demands of paid employment

Schools were surprised that many fathers were prepared to spend substantial periods of time at school, many taking either half a day or a full day off work. Fewer than 25% fathers in the Moorlands survey reported that they did not have to make special arrangements or take time off work in order to attend, although most said that this did not pose particular problems (some specified that they had built up overtime to take off time in lieu). However, some fathers noted that as they were self-employed they had either lost business or lost income.

A small number of fathers in all schools reported more significant problems either due to loss of income or problems negotiating time off with their employer. Several schools reported that fathers had complained to them about attendance difficulties related to employment.³ We can also assume that some non-attendance where applicable was attributable to such problems.

The overwhelmingly positive evaluation of Fathers’ Friday by participants indicates that men did feel it was worth seeking to negotiate with employers, or accepting some loss of income, in order to attend. However, in order to improve participation further, it may be useful for schools to think of ways in which fathers can participate for small fractions of the day (e.g. by sending out or posting on the school website a timetable for the day, which fathers can consult in advance, as some participants suggested), show support in ways other than attendance (for example, working on a project together which the child can bring in on Fathers’ Friday), or organising follow-up activities outside school hours (e.g. concerts after school, or weekend out-of-school activities).

ii. Roles and activities

As noted above, some schools preferred to organise activities for fathers which, it was felt, responded to men’s strengths and preferences. Fatherhood research indicates that fathers tend to interact with children through play to a proportionately greater extent than mothers (“playful dad”:

³ An extreme example of this was given in one case where a father wrote to the school concerned, in very critical terms, asking the school to negotiate with his employer. The school did this and the father was able to attend.

see Lamb, 2010; Lewis, 2010; Pleck, 2010), and that fathers engage in riskier play (outdoors, “rough-and-tumble”). We found some support for this, particularly regarding sports activities. At Southdown Juniors, fathers appear to have valued the playtime activities where football and other outdoor sports were organised (and one argued in the questionnaire that they wanted to be allowed to play on the field). In the Moorlands questionnaire, few participants used the opportunity to make additional comments, but one of the few who did argued in favour of risk-taking in play.

At Moorlands, when asked to identify the best part of Fathers’ Friday, almost a quarter of respondents cited sports or PE activities (compared to almost a third who cited lessons, whether generally or specific subjects). Moreover, sports played a big part in men’s memory of previous Fathers’ Friday events as well as the 2012 event, when they were asked to name which activities they had taken part in that day.

We found only limited support for the belief that men prefer to take part in science, engineering or maths-related activities, since participants remembered and highlighted arts, craft and literacy activities as often as science or maths activities. (It is worth noting, nevertheless, that craft activities often involved engineering-type activities.)

Whilst there is some evidence of men’s appreciation of sports and especially outdoor play, there is also considerable evidence of their interest in a range of classroom activities, confirmed by a large number of responses stating that the main benefit of the day was to learn about the child in a classroom setting (spending time with the child, and learning about the child’s learning and educational and social development). Typical comments from fathers/male figures included: “[I wanted] to see what it’s like in school for my son”, “to see what a normal day is like”, “understanding how they learn”, “spending time in lessons with my two boys”, “expected to get a real feel of how the school operates”.

iii. Helping fathers to overcome uncertainty and lack of confidence

Fathers commented in their questionnaire responses that their sense of enjoyment and learning was heightened by awareness of unfamiliarity (“don’t often get time to be this involved”, “it’s so rare we get the chance to see what they’re doing”), and that they enjoyed being guided by their child through the day’s activities. Teachers at other schools commented that they had observed that, in contrast to mothers, most (but not all) fathers displayed a lack of familiarity with the routines and physical environment of the school, and that children quickly noticed this and took pleasure in acting as guides. In this respect, participation in Fathers’ Friday is itself a learning experience.

However, some fathers told us that, either in their own experience or that of other fathers they knew, unfamiliarity could act as barriers to involvement. Our questionnaire showed that, unlike those fathers who had taken part in Fathers’ Friday 2011, those who attended for the first time expressed uncertainty about what to expect, and our interviewees suggested that this uncertainty could deter fathers, particularly those least confident about their own social or educational capital.

For this reason, more publicity about Fathers’ Friday (e.g. photos from 2012 on school websites, testimony from participating fathers and children) would help to dispel fears. We hope the university film will serve this purpose.

iv. Critical mass and networks

The relative weakness of fathers' social networks related to their fathering activities, compared to those of mothers, has frequently been observed and used to explain gaps in father involvement in children's education. Fathers' confidence can also be boosted by a sense of critical mass: "*more dads*" was a typical response to the request for suggestions about how to improve Fathers' Friday, and those who had participated in 2011 noted with satisfaction the increased attendance in 2012. 39% of fathers reported that they had found Fathers' Day useful to make contact with other fathers (45% if non-fathers are not counted in this question), and in interviews fathers often spontaneously cited discussions with other parents as a benefit of the day. It was reported to us that a group of fathers who know each other socially had used the occasion of watching a European Cup football match in the pub to check what time others were intending to turn up for Moorlands Fathers' Friday. This finding was confirmed in our school interviews where teachers spontaneously told us that they had seen fathers talking to each other in the playground.

On this basis as on others noted above, we would expect Fathers' Day events to encourage greater future involvement by fathers.

We note also that several schools had thought of organising a social space for participants, either over lunch or over coffee and/or a snack, and fathers greatly appreciated this chance to meet each other in a relaxed but purposive setting.

6. Children's perspectives

Asking children what they think recognises that they are able to speak for themselves and have insights into their own feelings and needs. In terms of parenting and its outcomes, children can be seen as experts (Madge and Willmott, 2007).

As part of the study we wanted to capture the child's perspective of the event and the value of the Fathers' Friday initiative. Time and resource constraints prevented us from carrying out a fully planned child based evaluation, but through a video diary (Noyes, 2004), rather like those seen on number of television documentaries, e.g. 'Big Brother', we thought it might be possible to gain some insight into the children's perspectives of the day and the value of supporting father involvement generally (see Methodological Note 3). We recorded fathers' and children's views of Fathers' Friday, with Year 6 children in charge of filming, and also left the cameras in place for a second week of filming with children alone. The key findings that emerged from the children's perspectives are resonant of some of the more recent key dimensions of parental involvement (Pleck, 2010) and support the view that children value fathers and their involvement in their lives through such initiatives as FF.

Overall, children spoke of Fathers' Friday in similar terms to those used by their father (or other male figure) but two key differences emerged. Like the fathers, they emphasized the opportunity to spend time with their father, and they also highlighted the playful side of the day, in line with their broader reflections of the role and importance of fathers, as carers and as playmates. However, although they also referred to the opportunity for fathers to see what they were doing in school, they had less precise recollections or thoughts about specific classroom activities. The absence of

reference to disciplinary aspects of fathering also distinguished children's accounts from those of fathers, in this respect.

The second key difference is that the children reflected much more often and at greater length on the difficulties faced by those children without ready access to a father or father figure.

Children spoke of the event as an opportunity to spend time together, in the context of eating, learning about what the children do in their school or playing. Of those younger members of the school who were not too camera shy and who were able to initiate or negotiate their own responses Fathers Friday was a day that *"dad gets to come in"* and they liked that because it was fun. Typical comments included *"I like it when daddy comes to school 'cos he can have lunch with me"*, *"it's fun"*, *"it's fun and we like playing with our dad and it's fantastic"*.

For the older children too, it was about sharing their day with their dad: an opportunity to spend time with their dads and for their dads to learn about their school world. Typical comments included *"I think it's really good 'cos you get to spend a day with your dad and do things"*; *"it's good because dads know what you're doing"*, *"I like Fathers' Friday and it's a good time to be with dad"*, *"because your dad can come and see what you're doing"*, *"well it's a day when dads get to come in and see what their kids are doing and I think it's fun"*, *"it's a time when your dad can see what you do in general and just for them to spend time together in school"*.

Both younger and older children – particularly in the recordings made in the second week when children entered the diary room without parents - were highly sensitive to the fact that there were children without fathers present on the day, who may perceive things differently: *"I think Fathers' Friday is really good but I think it's quite sad for people who don't have a dad"* (junior school video diary); *"some fathers can't come"* (infant diary). At the same time pupils were aware that the event was open to all male figures, as one child pointed out that *"Fathers' Friday is a day when you share a day at school with your dad or your grampy or your male friend"*.

7. Conclusion and recommendations

Our principal finding is that schools, early years settings, fathers (and other male family figures) and children all gave a positive assessment of the Fathers' Friday initiative, saw beneficial outcomes from it, and expressed a desire for such activities to continue in the future.

The three key objectives of the initiative (raised awareness of fathers' role in child development; promotion of closer contacts between fathers and care/education professionals; and the establishment or strengthening of local networks of support and advocacy for fathers) have all been realised. However, although local networks of support and advocacy have been established and enhanced, we feel there is still much to do to continue the progress made and to sustain and strengthen networks.

The Fathers' Friday initiative undoubtedly raised awareness amongst childcare and educational settings of the importance of fathers and father figures, within a broader context of engaging parents with which all settings were already familiar and had already begun to engage. It provided an opportunity for reflections on how best to engage fathers could take place or continue, for

conversations with parents about how best to involve them, and for experimentation with different types of activity. All the staff we spoke to saw the 2012 initiative as a starting-point for further reflections, conversations and activities.

We found evidence that staff were aware of research on the importance of fathers in child development. In some schools, however, not all teachers were convinced of the value of engaging with fathers, and the Fathers' Friday initiative provided a useful way of starting discussions within schools as well as between schools and parents. Usually we found that successful events depended on the presence of a local "champion" to lead the way. In this respect, too, Fathers' Friday served as an important awareness-raiser and an opportunity to change attitudes and practice in the longer term.

An important outcome of the Fathers' Friday initiative is that most of the settings involved have seen an improvement in relationships with parents, whether in terms of deepening of existing contacts (as in two of the early years settings we highlight above), of reaching fathers who had hitherto not been in contact (as we found in many examples across schools and early years settings), or of extending the reach of paternal and wider family involvement. We found that Fathers' Fridays initiatives can be particularly useful in establishing a norm of paternal involvement which has the capacity to modify behaviours over a longer period. In other words, involvement is dynamic; it encourages further involvement in both a broadening and deepening sense: involving those previously less involved, and encouraging further involvement of those already involved. At the same time, paternal involvement remains problematic for the reasons we have outlined, and needs to be nurtured through sustained contact and dialogue.

There is room for further work on finding the best way to maintain this process of involvement through a mixture of approaches and experimentation.

Finally, we found evidence that the objective of creating and maintaining networks – between fathers, and between childcare settings through advocacy and support groups and activities - had been substantially achieved, although there is a limit to what can be achieved in a single set of events. Rather, Fathers' Friday initiatives provide a significant opportunity to reinforce ongoing support and coordination.

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Appendices:

Methodological Note 1

Fathers' Friday 2012: List of participant schools and early years settings (those interviewed for this study are highlighted, blue for face-to-face interviews at the setting, yellow for telephone interviews)

Early years settings

East Harptree Pre-School
First Steps Nursery/Children's Centre (Twerton)
First Steps Moorlands Children's Centre
Radstock Nursery
St Martin's Garden Nursery
The Hut Pre-School
YMCA
Zebedees

Also interviewed:

Parkside Children's Centre
Paulton Children's Centre
St Martin's Garden Children's Centre
Weston Children's Centre

(did not take part in Fathers' Friday due to timing and other issues: see discussion in report, section 3)

Schools

Combe Down Primary
Moorlands Federation (infants and juniors)
Oldfield Park Infants
Southdown Juniors
WASPS (Weston) Primary
Whitchurch Primary

We were unable to contact the following settings in the available time:

Midsomer Norton Children's Centre
Chew Valley Children's Centre
Keynsham Children's Centre
Camerton Primary
Castle Primary

High Littleton Primary (but we did speak to one participating father from this school, who happened to be a teacher at another school where we interviewed)

Westfield Primary

Methodological Note 2: Questionnaires (fathers' perspectives)

Questionnaires were distributed to fathers as they registered on arrival at Moorlands school, although due to the number of registrations it was not possible to ensure that all fathers received a questionnaire. 70 useable, completed questionnaires were returned, which represents an estimated response rate of 42% (of these, around a quarter were attending for more than one child).

Of the respondents, 84% were fathers (83% of these co-resident), 8.5% grandfathers, 3% stepfathers, 3% uncles, 1.5% brothers.

58% were attending Fathers' Friday for the second year running.

42% attended for the first time, and almost half of these were new to the school (oldest child in reception class).

This questionnaire was longer than the B&NES questionnaire as it sought to elicit additional responses on how participation in Fathers' Friday 2011 had influenced expectations of the event in 2012; detail on activities undertaken during the day and views on each of these; how fathers/father figures related to other fathers; and how fathers/father figures related to the school and other activities organised by the school.

In addition, we were able to view the written comments made by fathers/father figures in the school's visitors book for 2011 and 2012.

At Southdown Juniors, we were able to view the responses to the B&NES questionnaire. This school had the highest response rate at around 40% (34 useable, completed responses). Most respondents limited their response to the closed scale but some gave fuller answers (which also corresponded to the conversations reported by the headteacher).

Methodological Note 3: Video room recordings

As part of the study we wanted to capture the child's perspective of the event and the value of the FF initiative. Time and resource constraints prevented us from carrying out a fully planned child based evaluation, but through a video diary (Noyes 2004), rather like those seen on number of television documentaries, e.g. 'Big Brother', we thought it might be possible to gain some insight into the children's perspectives of the day and the value of supporting father involvement generally. Whilst we explored the possibility of using a 'big brother' style booth, its lack of availability meant that we set up two small video rooms within two parts of the school: the infant and the junior. The film cameras were set up on the day of the event and also for the following week.

The cameras were operated by a group of Year 6 pupils who belonged to the school's film club (under the supervision of a university researcher and the deputy headteacher, but working independently).

Three questions were to be asked and they were written out on large sheets of A3 paper and pinned to the wall of each diary room, so that both the interviewers and respondents would be able to see them:

1. What is Father's Friday and what do you think of it?
2. Why are dads important?
3. What is a good dad?

We included the question on 'a good dad' because the concept of 'good parenting' is central to language used in current Governments' initiatives within the document 'Supporting Families in the Foundation Stage' (DfE/DfH 2011).

As a follow up to the filming of the video diaries, a group interview was conducted with four of the children who had conducted the interviews and operated the film cameras. The group interview aimed to elicit the kinds of issues that the children felt were important in trying to elicit data from children and also in operating film equipment. This would help to evaluate the strength and weakness of this method.

A total of 90 video contributions were collected. 72 of these were recorded on the day of the event, involving both fathers and children; 46 from the junior video room and 36 from the infant school room (6 of the 36 were juniors who used the infant school room). A further 18 contributions were recorded in the second week by children (without parental presence).

Video contributions were strongly influenced by the questions and by the way the children framed the questions as interviewers. The material was of good quality and has been used extensively in the "Why Fathers Matter" film.