The provision of services and support groups for fathers to support their mental wellbeing and parenting
In West Lothian Council, The Children & Young People Team developed a support group, along with some fathers who identified this gap in service provision. The group has been running monthly since its development in January 2012. The group is made up of fathers, who after attending a formal parenting group like Mellow Dads, wanted additional support to maintain the changes in their life that they had achieved. The attendees are a mixture of lone fathers, men taking on a fathering role in a family and fathers living with their family.

The aims of the Dads R Us group are:

- Develop a self-supporting network for people taking on a fathering role
- Provide the dads with the opportunity to speak to other dads about their personal and parenting achievements and challenges.
- To contribute to the improvement of the mental health and wellbeing of the dads and their children
- Promote equal parenting, where appropriate, and emphasise the importance of positive father involvement in their child’s life
- Improve confidence in their parenting skills and build on existing parenting knowledge

The group runs for two hours, once a month and transport is provided for any father requiring it, to make the group accessible to all fathers who want to attend and receive this type of support. Tea, coffee and biscuits are provided for the fathers to add to the nurturing environment the facilitators try and provide. The aim is if group members feel nurtured, respected and valued, they will be more willing and find it easier to support their peers.

“The company can be fun at times, good banter between group members. We feel close to each other as we have been together for a while, I don’t socialize in my community but enjoy the social aspect of the group. If one dad had a really bad month I feel that it is okay if we all chip in and support him” (Dads R Us participant 2013)

Each group session is split into two parts. The first 50 minutes of the session provides an opportunity for fathers to take turns and discuss a few things that have went well for him during the month and a few things that have been a challenge for them. During this time the father can choose to talk about something to do with him or his family. The fathers then have a 15 minute break and the second 50 minutes focuses on a specific topic that the fathers have previously agreed that they would like more information about. Some of these sessions have included:

*Developing solutions to problems*
Should dads hug their children?

Children with Additional Support Needs (led by Educational Psychologist)

Strategies to manage our own feelings

Discussion about whether it is okay to allow children to view material via tv or video games that has an age rating older than the age of the child.

Supporting children to discuss how they are feeling

The group regularly supports each other to talk about their thoughts and feelings and how to manage challenging and stressful situations. During one of the first group sessions one of the dads discussed with the group:

“Dad’s mental health is just as important as a mother’s but there are more stigmas so males don’t want to be seen not to be coping” (Dads R Us participant 2012)

The same dad discussed the following statement with the group just over a year later.

“I enjoy coming here it is just like going to the pub but without needing or wanting a drink, you get to talk about what you are really thinking and feeling” (Dads R Us participant 2013)

During school holidays the group invites the children to attend the group and the fathers do activities with their children. These sessions have included “play in the woods session”, sports days and a trip to the Falkirk Wheel and water play park.

The Fathers have also contributed to round table discussions to contribute ideas, suggestions and opinions regarding fathers and parenting for the development of the National Parenting Strategy and along with other fathers their suggestions and ideas has helped West Lothian to further develop and improve its services and supports to fathers and those taking on a fathering role.

Some of the questions asked to the fathers to help improve service delivery are detailed below.

What did you achieve by attending the group? (Mellow Dads)

“An understanding of child development”

“To spend time with my son and a chance to talk about things”

“More confidence, more at ease (less stressed) and meeting other dads in my situation”

“Being able to talk to other dads about my thoughts and feelings”
What was the most helpful thing you got from the group? (Mellow Dads)

“Being able to talk about what has happened in my life”

“Support with my son”

“Time with my child on a 1-1”

“Meeting other Dads with similar problems”

Do you feel that by you attending the group it has helped your children, if so could you give examples? (Dads R Us)

“Yes it has given him more strategies”

“More open and happier”

“Their behavior has had some improvements; my child is back in mainstream education and achieving well”

“Before it may have become physical between me and my child but now, no way I wouldn’t do that”

“I can now walk away from problem situations and deal with him when I am calm and when he is calm”

Has advice from other dads in the group been useful for you? If so could you give examples? (Dads R Us)

“Strategies to manage my child’s behavior”

“Some advice, especially listening to how the other dads dealt with things”

“Yes, they have given me confidence to follow through with things”

“Some advice has been useful, particularly about my thoughts and behavior”

**Additional information about the parenting groups mentioned**

Dads R Us is a voluntary support group for fathers or those taking on a fathering role and was developed jointly by the Children & Young People Team and fathers in West Lothian.
Mellow Dads is an attachment and relationship based group intervention for dads who have babies and children under the age of three. A mixture of reflective and practical techniques is used to allow parents to address their personal challenges and the challenges they face with their children. Similar to Mellow Mums, the Dads programme takes place in the morning whilst the babies/children are cared for in the Children’s Group and lasts 14 weeks. For more information please visit [www.mellowparenting.org](http://www.mellowparenting.org)

Stewart McLean
On behalf of Dads R Us group facilitators and members
21 February 2014