West Lothian has a 12 year history of targeted support to fathers with very young children, following consultations with fathers by Sure Start staff in 2002. Fathers said they felt excluded from ‘parents’ groups as they were attended mainly by mothers: they felt mistrusted and unwelcome. Single-gender groups were proposed as more appropriate to their needs.

**Provision of services and support groups**

The full range of groups for fathers support is available to all fathers, those with sole care of their child, shared care or non-resident contact. Some have been supported to maintain contact, and others have regained care of their child following progress in a Mellow Dads parenting programme.

**Early Years**

Each early years team in West Lothian has staff dedicated to work with fathers as their role. They also offer assessments of parenting by these specialist workers and child-friendly venues for contact.

In 2013 there were 37 referrals to Family Centres for Dads work: 18 took up offer and engaged in Dads group. Two fathers in 2014 have sole care of their children.

Livingston Family Centre and Sure Start run a fathers’ support group weekly on Mondays, for 2 hours. It offers opportunities for father and child to play; to meet other fathers and children; and non-stigmatising access to advice and guidance. It is staffed by male and female staff. Most recently they have been using Bookbugs and singing rhymes, greatly improving confidence in some attenders. Whitdale Family Centre also has a weekly fathers’ group in the west of the locality on Monday afternoons.

In collaboration between NHS Midwifery/ Parentcraft and Sure Start, a universal ante-natal ‘Dads2B’ course is available for any man to attend. It runs for 4-5 evening weekly sessions and raises confidence about involvement in their child’s care. Male same-sex couple adopters have attended in the past. This has been running for at least 7 years, very successfully now rolling out across Scotland. It is especially important in valuing the role of a father from the antenatal period onwards.

The course is often followed by Baby Massage sessions to promote attachment and bonding between father and child.

Early Years staff also support families with outreach/ home visiting and with a recent increase in staff, this includes work with fathers who are resident or have contact. It would be available to men with sole care, but there is very little demand so far. The Young Mums2B part of Sure Start enables links to be made with the young partners who wish to be involved with their children, offering individual support or group work as appropriate. If any of these young men were to become sole carers, there are two male workers dedicated to supporting them in this role.

**School Aged Children**
The school social work team, Children and Young People Team offer a range of parent supports, home visiting and groupwork. They also have male staff, one of whom is a specialist in working with fathers, and who runs regular groups and parenting programmes for men.

Mellow Dads, part of the Mellow Parenting set of programmes, is an intensive therapeutic course focussing on past experiences, changing behaviour and promoting positive parent-child relationships. It is run annually with excellent results in improving outcomes for fathers and their children.

Dads R Us is a self-support group for fathers in West Lothian. The group was established in January 2012 following a request from a group of fathers for an additional support group which would allow them to socialise and maintain the changes in their lives that had occurred as a result of them attending the intensive intervention courses ‘Mellow Dads’ and ‘Getting Through the Day’.

The Dads R Us group is co-ordinated by the Children and Young People Team and provides an informal environment for fathers to meet and chat about parenting issues. The group meets once a month at Bathgate Partnership centre for two hours and provides an invaluable opportunity for like-minded parents to provide peer support and obtain advice and information on any of their parental concerns. The fathers themselves identify what topics they would like to cover, and each session also includes a dedicated 45 minute slot to allow them to discuss personal or parenting achievements or challenges. Six fathers are attending in 2014.

The main aims of the Dads R Us group are to:

- Develop a self-supporting network for people taking on a fathering role
- Provide participants with the opportunity to speak to other fathers about their personal and parenting achievements and challenges.
- To contribute to the improvement of the mental health and wellbeing of the fathers 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

**Evaluation results**

Common themes include their enjoyment in the opportunity to meet and share with other men, the support it provides and (in common with the antenatal group evaluations) an increase in confidence in parenting.

‘It is good to be able to talk to other dads, helping each other providing and receiving advice, finding out that you are not alone with your problems and caring for each other and looking out for each other’

‘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’

‘Being able to talk to other dads about me and parenting issues’
‘Listening to the other dads stories’

‘I have spoken to my son in law and encouraged him to go to a dads support group to get help’

All six of the fathers felt that their confidence had improved markedly since joining the Dads R Us group. Marked improvements in terms of confidence in parenting were noted for all six of the fathers, following their attendance at the Dads R Us group.

Conclusion

The Dads R Us support group was set up to provide ongoing peer support for attendees of the Mellow Dads and Getting Through the Day parenting groups. The current evaluation has revealed that the attendees greatly value the support and advice that they are provided with through this group.

Both the 1-1 interviews and the focus group discussions suggest that attendance at the Dads R Us group has had a number of positive benefits to the fathers including increased self confidence, increased confidence in parenting techniques, improved relationships with their children at home, as well as providing them with relevant parenting strategies which they can use in real–life situations and which work for them. As a result they now feel more relaxed at home and more confident about dealing with difficult situations.

In addition, the fathers value the peer support they get from the other group members, and feel this provides them with an invaluable network out with their home environment. They feel that the small group size (max of 10) and the variety in ages and personalities of the members, provides a range of different opinions and experiences which they can all benefit from.

They particularly like the informal nature of the groups as this allows the group sessions to be tailored around dealing with events and situations as they happen. They also value staff support both in and out of the group.

The fathers were very positive about the Dads R Us support group, and they would all recommend it to other fathers. The main suggestions for improvements were to have it more often, or for slightly longer sessions, and to incorporate more activities which they can do with the children as well. They also suggested inviting more guest speakers along to some of the sessions.

Overall, the Dads R Us support group appears to provide an invaluable network for fathers in West Lothian who require additional support with their fathering role. It provides the dads with the opportunity to chat to other fathers about their personal and parenting achievements and challenges, and to support each other in finding useful strategies and building their self-confidence. As a result the fathers have seen marked improvements in their confidence in positive parenting and ultimately in their relationships with their children.

Other parenting developments

Parenting programmes such as Triple P and Incredible Years are extending their reach: Incredible Years has been run by Sure Start for 4½ years, but a significant increase in training multi-agency staff has been possible due to NHS Education Scotland Psychology of Parenting Project (PoPP). Partners in delivering
programmes include NHS, Community Learning & Development, Children and Young People Team, Through Care Aftercare, Early Years and Education. Groups are open to both mothers and fathers but attendance is predominantly by women. Some couples attend but this is not common. It is intended to offer groups for fathers in the future and are ready to offer evening or weekend courses as appropriate.

**Societal attitudes**

As noted above, in the local consultation of 2002, fathers said they felt excluded from parents groups as they were attended mainly by mothers: they felt mistrusted and unwelcome.

In 2012 staff were consulted on the National Parenting Strategy and their comments are attached (appendix 1). The evaluation report of Dads R Us offers comment on similar topics. In addition one member of staff asked the consultation questions of one father.

Common themes were their expressions of difficulty getting or using informal support; lack of engagement by agencies dealing with their children, or not listening, and more difficulty for fathers asking for help.

The father consulted writes that

Challenges: he did not feel listened to by doctors/health staff

Specific challenges:

1. he was not listened to by the bank when needing additional support.
2. he has not had a break from care in three years due to lack of family support. Without close friends, he feels isolated

Support and services: he finds outreach and the dads group beneficial.

‘Workers put me at ease and I can ask them anything’

Access: No difficulties experienced so far

Public perception: ‘At times I feel the public judge me when I am out on my own with my son, especially people who stare at me. I feel they are judging me. It makes me feel uncomfortable. I can feel embarrassed when my son’s behaviour is challenging and I have to deal with it in public.’

Jane Kellock
Senior Manager - Children and Early Intervention
West Lothian Council
18 March 2014

Reference

National Parenting Strategy – Engaging with parents - Feedback Form

Organisation Discussion Group Dad’s Group

Date and no. of participants 19th March 2012 – 7 Participants

Location (Local Authority Area/Town or Village) Group based in Bathgate West Lothian but participants from all over West Lothian

Facilitator Name and Contact Details

Please identify group attending: All dads

Please identify any particular circumstances of the group: Dads who have all taken part in Mellow Dad’s Group or Getting Through the Day Dad’s Group and who have now set up their own support group which meets every 6 weeks and is still supported by staff from the Children and Young People Team

Please indicate the ages of children (approx) of the parents, carers attending the discussion

Primary School Age (with some Younger Siblings)

Please complete this form and return it to me with your feedback as soon as possible

National Parenting Strategy - Feedback Discussion Form

Q1. List the top 5 things parents mentioned the most:

- Celebrating my child’s milestones and achievements
- Seeing my child smile
- Bonding with my child
- When I can communicate with them positively
- Interacting with them on their level

Q2. What main kinds of informal help and advice did parents find useful?

Dads found it quite difficult to get informal support. Their experience is a lot of support around for mums but dads felt they were expected to cope or didn’t want to be seen to be asking for help. Even more difficult if the don’t live with the partner and/or child. Their perception was it was more difficult for Dads to ask for help

Who provided this? Some have been able to get support from their partners. Since attending a group they get support from each other.

Q3. Which services did parents feel most supported by and why?

Most had experienced help from Social services both on a voluntary and Statutory basis. But all wished help had been available at an earlier stage. All of them had felt supported by attending a Dad’s group and had appreciated the support from the workers taking
the groups but also the peer support from each other – this is why the group has continued to meet after the formal courses have finished.

**Which services did they not feel supported or helped by and why?** In their experience, help is always offered to the mums and the dads often get forgotten about especially when there has been something like a miscarriage, no one ever asks how the dad is coping and they have the lost the child too. Schools also tend to deal with the mum’s and don’t pass on information to dads. If parents have split up and schools have been asked to keep both informed quite often, in their experience, they still don’t pass on information to the father.

**What more could services have done to make a difference?**

1. More publicity for dad’s groups.
2. Listen more to what dads have to say
3. Don’t wait till child protection stage to actually do something to help – if a parent is asking for help, listen to them and get services involved instead of waiting until it is at crisis point.

**Q4. What prevents parents asking for help?**

1. Dad’s mental health is just as important as a mothers but there is more stigma so males don’t want to be seen not to be coping
2. Workers attitude towards the dad has a lot to do with whether they engage with a worker. If Dads don’t feel worker is really that interested in their opinion or how they are feeling/coping/dealing with situation they won’t want to work with them.
3. Most social care workers are women and that can be off putting as well.

**Q5. Do parents feel there is enough and the right kind of information for them? What’s helpful/not so helpful, what more do they need on what issues?**

1. Loads of information around but a lot of information aimed at mothers
2. Not everyone has access to the internet or even knows how to use a computer
3. Peer support is great for all parents but some dad’s not confident enough to access mixed groups
4. More information about tackling mental health for men
5. There should be a central location for parenting information set up by the government – like a national parenting website that has all you need to know and links to local information
6. More information on helping older children

**Q6. What makes parents feel confident? What practical things make a difference supporting them in their parenting role?**

1. Seeing your kids achieve helps you feel like you did something good
2. Feeling included in your child's life and feeling like your opinion on what should happen to and for them is being listened too.

3. More groups for dads as they help you to feel less isolated and not like you are the only dad who has struggled.

4. “we came here as individuals now we leave as a group”