

# Fathers in Sure Start local programmes

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Sure Start is the Government's programme to support children, families and communities through the integration of early education, childcare, health and family support. Sure Start is committed to delivering the best start in life for every child, better opportunities for parents, affordable, good quality childcare and stronger, safer communities. It is also a cornerstone of the Government's drive to tackle child poverty and social exclusion.

Sure Start local programmes are a key part of delivering this aim. They are based in areas of disadvantage and aim to improve the health and well being of young children under 4 and their families, so that children have a greater opportunity to flourish when they go to school. This is a summary of a study that investigated how far men were being encouraged to take part in Sure Start local programmes. What was being offered to them and what did they think about it? What difference does the involvement of fathers make to Sure Start local programmes? What works well for everyone: programmes, families, fathers and children? The study took place in the early years of the programme, when programmes had been operational for approximately one year.

### Key Findings

- ▶ Staff in a large majority of Sure Start local programmes reported low levels of father involvement in programme activities. Where fathers took part it was most likely to be in outdoor, active fun-type activities. However, many fathers do have 'arm's length' contact with programmes, through their partners.
- ▶ Fathers are inclined to attend activities designed specifically for them. Events for fathers and children together can be a stepping-stone for fathers into a wider range of Sure Start experiences, including whole family activities.
- ▶ Most fathers felt welcomed at services provided by Sure Start local programmes, although being in a conspicuous minority among large numbers of women could be daunting, especially at first. Mothers supported the idea of fathers using Sure Start local programme services and of male staff working in them.
- ▶ Fathers continued to come to Sure Start local programme services when they had seen a positive benefit to themselves or their children from a service.
- ▶ Where programmes had high levels of father involvement, they had decided early in the planning stages of the programme that fathers would be central to their work.
- ▶ In such programmes there was an attempt to spread commitment to fathers to every aspect of the programme and to everyone involved. There was a joined-up approach to involving fathers.
- ▶ An important encouragement for fathers was the presence of a staff member dedicated to involving them. Such workers have helped Sure Start local programmes discover and respond to issues that affect fathers: bereavement and loss, anger management, concerns about child development and feelings of isolation among them.

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## Background

Sure Start local programmes are community based programmes containing on average between 400 and 800 children under 4. By March 2004 there will be 524 Sure Start local programmes which have been rolled out in 6 stages or 'rounds'.

A comprehensive National Evaluation is assessing the impact, implementation and cost effectiveness of Sure Start local programmes by examining the first 260 programmes. The earliest of these programmes were approved in late 1999, the later rounds were approved by early 2002. This study is part of the Implementation Module of the National Evaluation of Sure Start which examines how Sure Start local programmes were set up and delivered, what services are provided and how these are organised locally. It also looks at how far Sure Start local programmes have re-shaped or added value to existing service provision.

## Aims of the study

This research study explored the origins and purposes of attempts to involve fathers by Sure Start local programmes and the extent to which programme staff and parents themselves felt that these had worked. It looked at the different approaches to involving fathers that local programmes were taking, the experiences and attitudes of staff and of fathers themselves. And it examined more generally the roles of fathers in Sure Start areas, both in their families and in Sure Start, and men's feelings about these. And finally it considered the implications of focusing on fathers – both for Sure Start local programmes and for all kinds of interventions to help families.

## Methods

The research used other aspects of the Implementation Module in the National Evaluation as its starting point. In particular, it drew on the national survey, which collects information about the involvement of fathers in local programmes. The national survey categorised programmes according to the importance they give to involving fathers. In the first two rounds of Sure Start, (128 programmes), 20% gave it 'low', 68% gave it 'moderate' and 17% gave it 'high' importance.

In the first phase of fieldwork a sample of 25 programmes, taken from the first two rounds of Sure Start, was selected, 13 from the high, 10 from the low and 2 from the 'moderate' categories. Programme managers and staff, including family support workers, health visitors, crèche workers, father's workers, were interviewed. From the 25 programmes 5 were chosen for interviews with fathers/male carers and mothers/female carers. The basis for choosing the programmes for further study included the type of area, the composition of families targeted by the local programme and the information already collected from programme managers and staff. Individual, face-to-face, in-depth interviews were conducted with 42 service users. The study was carried out between February 2002 and March 2003, with fieldwork conducted between July and December 2002. Therefore, this study can be seen as a snapshot of what was going on in local programmes at the beginning of their operation.

## Main findings

It was clear from all local programme areas that engaging fathers is not easy. Although fathers attached importance to their parenting role, they could feel discouraged from joining general programmes or services for children. These feelings were often personal: individual fathers either didn't think of attending such services, or considered them to be aimed at mothers. But some strategies used by Sure Start programmes were meeting with success in getting fathers involved.

### Engaging fathers – the challenge

Existing research evidence suggests that what matters in child-rearing is a parenting style that includes attention, emotional support, consistent discipline and help when the child needs it. Where a father is 'involved' in child-rearing, he will be taking a role equal to the mother's in the management of the children, be interested in their development and take them on outings. Such fathers may or may not live with the family, and may or may not be the biological fathers.

Research shows also that when fathers have been involved in this way with children of seven, there are good results for educational attainment and family relationships both at the teenage stage and in adulthood. As teenagers these children are less likely to be in trouble with the police and as adults they are less likely to be homeless or have mental health problems. There is also recent evidence from US studies to show that "interventions involving fathers appear to be significantly more effective than interventions focusing on mothers only" (Bakernans-Kranenburg et al. 2003).

In other words, father involvement is a protective factor. But it has been shown, too, that services for families can be insensitive to the needs of men, that few men work in services for young children and that staff in such services are highly aware of the risk of abusive behaviour by men.

It was not surprising that around 80% of the Sure Start staff interviewed for this research reported low levels of father involvement in their programmes:

**"When I came I was introduced to 'the dad'."**

Programme Manager

Where fathers were present they tended to come to outdoor, active, fun-type activities and often preferred to do things with older children rather than babies. They were most inclined to attend activities put on for them specifically.

Although at the time of the study almost half of Sure Start local programmes had at least one male parent on the management board, the great majority of parents contributing to management were mothers. Very few programmes had male staff. In general men make up only 2% of the childcare workforce, but by the middle of 2003 there were 24 male managers of round 1-2 Sure Start local programmes.

To increase the number of male staff, some programmes are encouraging local fathers to become volunteers, access training and move on to employment with Sure Start:

**"We have been quite successful in recruiting male workers. One who came along was engaged through the fathers' project...he's actually now in our employment, came along as a trainee play worker and now he's fathers' project worker."**

Programme Manager

There is a recognition that men need a careful introduction to the programme through special activities, an opportunity to sample and gain experience through volunteering, and that this may lead, ultimately, to a career in work with children.

## Welcoming – but wary

Though staff in Sure Start local programmes were keen to increase the involvement of fathers, because they believed this would help children, many felt the importance of engaging men had got lost in the pressure to get the programme up and running:

**“ We haven’t done anything specifically for dads and I think that’s been because we’ve been inundated trying to set up services for women and children, ‘cause that’s like the core business.”**

Programme Manager

There were reservations. Occasionally staff commented that domestic violence in programme areas could affect the attitude of mothers to male participation. But, given how widespread domestic violence is reported to be in many local programme areas, such comments were few. Mothers had mixed views. Most liked the idea of more fathers using services, a few felt that Sure Start was a place of their own and were unenthusiastic about partners using it. One woman observed that because there were so few men in evidence, an increase would seem rather odd. But on the whole mothers agreed that both children and fathers themselves would benefit, and that more male workers would be good for Sure Start local programmes.

A few remained worried about access to children.

**“ I think there are boundaries for men... It would take a while for you to feel comfortable around them with your children. Whereas with a female you feel just fine.”**

Mother

Most fathers felt welcome at Sure Start services, despite initial anxieties about attending. Fathers continued to come when they had seen a positive benefit for themselves and their children. Among those benefits reported were:

- ▶ being able to cope with discipline after a father-only parenting course;
- ▶ social support and friendship networks;
- ▶ getting access to services like speech therapy, for which the child had been waiting;
- ▶ improved personal confidence.

**Sure Start local programmes can minimise any risks from men which may be a worry to women users. Opportunities for open discussions between men and women about the realities of child abuse and domestic violence can provide a basis for mutual understanding. Many women are surprised to find how nervous men feel about approaching children in the current climate. Programme staff can reassure with unobtrusive presence.**

## Family life for fathers in Sure Start local programme areas

**“ Being a dad is important for me. As I say, he’s my first child, I love him to pieces and I’d go to the end of the earth for him.”**

Father

Fathers told of the importance they attached to the role of fatherhood, which had brought them joy and changed their priorities. Many helped with childcare but tended to spend less time with babies when they were very young. Some mothers felt their partners could do more to help, but recognised that work demands often made this impossible. There was some evidence of ‘maternal gate-keeping’, where mothers found it difficult to share responsibility for childcare with fathers.

Attitudes like this prevented some fathers from taking part in Sure Start local programme services. A predominantly female environment could be excluding. Men were sometimes the butt of jokes and their motives could be questioned.

**" Our single fathers said it is really hard... there's a lot of talk about them, whether they are trying to pick up women... They have a really hard time."**

Programme Manager

Although parents welcomed the involvement of men in Sure Start local programme services, both as users and workers, there remained some traditional attitudes towards the role of men which could be an obstacle. And there were signs that many men simply did not know or understand what was on offer.

**" I thought it was just for women to chinwag and I thought, just let them get on with it... It wasn't till my wife asked me to go and I said 'Will it be alright for me to go?' And she said, 'Yes, they don't mind fathers turning up,' that I thought I'd try it and go up there and I was made to feel quite welcome...It was really good fun, actually."**

Father

Some fathers are shy and do not have the confidence to overcome these barriers, real or imagined. Partners exert influence, both to get them to use Sure Start services and to stop them going. But the fathers who used Sure Start local programmes most were those who needed it most – that is, lone fathers and those who were the main carers.

**" You go into a playgroup or the practical parenting groups and it's all women. It's a bit daunting. I mean, I've learnt to deal with it because I've had to...I've had to do it as I'm a single parent and there's nobody else to do it."**

Father

## What works for fathers in Sure Start local programmes

Programmes which are successful in reaching and helping fathers have the following characteristics

### They decided early in the planning stages that fathers would be central to the Programme

Sometimes it was because mothers wanted this:

**" They wanted a worker to make sure that their partners became more involved in childcare, and more involved in bringing up the children, more involved in the community."**

Programme Manager

Sometimes agencies on the programme's Partnership had a history of working with fathers and made sure they had a place in the early thinking and development of the programme. If fathers were not included at this stage it proved much harder to integrate them later.

### There is a commitment to involving fathers across every aspect of the Sure Start programme, by everyone involved

In programmes with this commitment, everyone – health visitors, midwives, crèche workers, family support workers, community workers, management board, parents, volunteers – supported one another in making contact with fathers and telling them about Sure Start activities.

### There is a plan for involving fathers

Successful programmes:

- ▶ made sure that positive images of fatherhood were displayed in Sure Start venues;
- ▶ provided services in the evenings and at weekends for working fathers;
- ▶ raised awareness among all staff about engaging with fathers;
- ▶ started a fathers' group;
- ▶ advertised Sure Start in places where fathers gather – pubs, social clubs, bookmakers;
- ▶ consulted with fathers to make sure that activities were what they wanted.

## There are activities for fathers

Providing activities for fathers, or for fathers and children together, can be a stepping stone into other Sure Start services. Among the targeted services offered are: drop-in sessions, discussion groups, coffee mornings and courses like parenting skills for fathers only.

## There is a staff member dedicated to involving fathers in the Sure Start local programme

Although well over half of Round 1 and 2 Sure Start local programmes reported that they had a member of staff with such a responsibility, it was clear from this research study that there were differing approaches to this work. Many fathers' workers and programmes had been unsure about how to tackle the task at the outset and had worked out what to do by trial and error. Some had received specialist training and found it invaluable.

**" It was a curriculum for fathers' development, about 25 modules. Some you wouldn't use, but it had lots of building self-esteem, child development, communication... It was a great resource."**

Fathers' Worker

Among the tasks carried out by fathers' workers were: coordinating fathers' groups; making home visits to support fathers; publicising the Sure Start local programme to fathers, including stopping them in the street to tell them about it; raising awareness about fathers' needs among Sure Start staff; running drop-in centres for fathers where they can get support, (with job-seeking, parenting advice, basic skills, for example); advocacy and advice for fathers (on dealing with the benefits agency or social services departments, for example).

Fathers' workers have helped Sure Start local programmes discover issues that affect fathers and which might have been overlooked: bereavement and loss, concerns about child development, anger management, feelings of isolation, post-natal depression among them. Programmes with such staff have a higher level of involvement from fathers than those without.

## Fathers' stories

A separated father with three young children described the trauma of his marriage breakdown;

**" I didn't see my daughters for five months... I was in bits really, I'd just split up with my partner, lost my kids, that sort of thing, and they [Sure Start staff] helped me. It just built me up really, to deal with all the stuff that was going on in my life at the time... They are the ones who came up to me and said 'Are you all right?'"**

This father has participated in courses on relationship breakdown, parenting and confidence building and attends a weekly fathers' group.

A lone father, with a daughter of 2 1/2, was unaware of Sure Start and had no family support. He met a member of the Sure Start local programme staff at a health visitor clinic and was invited to use the weekly Sure Start playgroup. He also attends a parenting course and fathers' group meetings. He said

**" There's nothing that's been told to me that's not reached my expectations... People are ready to jump in and help out. You know it's there."**

## Conclusions

The research study contains much detailed advice to help Sure Start local programmes and others, develop their relationships with fathers. Among the recommendations for extending involvement are:

- ▶ develop outreach services which include fathers before and after childbirth;
- ▶ celebrate becoming and being a father, using peer support, videos and role models;
- ▶ increase men's confidence in 'hands-on' caring for infants;
- ▶ educate fathers in the support needed by breastfeeding mothers;
- ▶ increase the range of 'male-focused' activities, consulting with men to build on their interests (for example, sports, carpentry, 'fathering');
- ▶ use fun and outdoor activities to attract fathers;
- ▶ broaden opening times for services to weekends and evenings;
- ▶ engage fathers at key points in the day – when they drop off partners or collect children from childcare, for example;
- ▶ increase the number of males in the Sure Start local programme workforce;
- ▶ provide training for staff on working with fathers;
- ▶ publicise Sure Start local programmes among fathers, using their female partners where possible;
- ▶ use mothers' support to persuade fathers to join in mixed gender activities;
- ▶ develop a coherent plan for involving fathers;
- ▶ collect information about the gender and status of parents to understand how far fathers are involved;
- ▶ evaluate the impact of fathers' involvement in Sure Start local programme activities on the well being of both fathers and mothers and children.

# National evaluation summary

## Fathers in Sure Start local programmes

### Further information

Further copies of this summary are available from:

- ▶ DfES Publications, PO Box 5050, Sherwood Park, Annesley, Nottingham, NG15 0DJ  
(Tel 0845 6022260 or  
e-mail: [dfes@prolog.uk.com](mailto:dfes@prolog.uk.com))
- ▶ Quote reference NESS/SF/004
- ▶ Copies of the full report of '*Fathers in Sure Start*' are available from the above address (quote reference NESS/SR/004 ) or from the Sure Start website [www.surestart.gov.uk](http://www.surestart.gov.uk)
- ▶ Further information about the National Evaluation of Sure Start (NESS) can be found at [www.ness.bbk.ac.uk](http://www.ness.bbk.ac.uk)
- ▶ Further information about Sure Start and Sure Start local programmes can be found at [www.surestart.gov.uk](http://www.surestart.gov.uk)