Engaging Fathers

1. The Spa Spiders area

The Askern ward lies twelve miles north of Doncaster town-centre and is geographically one of the largest wards in the borough. Askern is the main centre of the catchment area and up until the late 1980’s provided a rich source of employment through the Coalite plant and the colliery. In addition there are several isolated communities surrounding Askern whose main source of employment is unskilled agricultural work.

The Coalite plant closed in 1987 and the colliery followed shortly after in 1989. In 1987 57% of the local population were employed in the energy production sector, by 1996 this figure had fallen to 0%, the Askern ward now falling within the top 10% of deprived wards in England and Wales. Unemployment in the area is currently running at 4.17% but only 71% of the population are economically active with large numbers of people not working through ill health.

2. The Spa Spiders Sure Start

The Spa Spiders Sure Start owes its name to the Spa Lake based in the centre of Askern onto which the current shop front accommodation faces. The programme itself is a sixth wave one that achieved approval in March 2003. Just under half of the staff, including the programme manager, are from the local community and the programme is though to have good local links.

3. Introduction to the research

This research project was commissioned by the Spa Spiders Sure Start in response to difficulties the programme was experiencing in engaging men and a desire to locate any future initiatives within a context suitable for the local community. In order to discover a suitable context for these developments research was undertaken to explore the Sure Start dilemma of whether to engage with existing gender roles and develop projects accordingly, or whether to seek to change attitudes by using Sure Start as a catalyst for change within the community. The principle aim of the research was to seek ways to engage men.
4. Methodology

The tender brief was very clear in setting out the aims of the research in terms of gathering the views of men and women from a variety of occupational groups, different locations across the Sure Start area and from different areas. We were particularly interested in their views on gender roles and their satisfaction or otherwise with the status quo. We were also interested in the consequences of these for the local Sure Start.

Research was begun in January 2004 and fieldwork was carried out in February 2004. The research used both quantitative and qualitative methods. The views of professionals working in association with Sure Start and the local community were also sought. The following five-phase methodology was adopted.

Phase 1 - Identification of groups for research

Working with the parental involvement workers at Sure Start groups were identified to take part in the research. These were local groups serving the community across the age range. In addition individuals associated with Sure Start were encouraged to set up their own house groups in the evenings. All groups were offered an incentive to the person who set up the groups as well as gifts for each person who volunteered to be a participant.

In all 21 groups were held with members of the local community. These included parents waiting for their children at ballet or swimming classes, toddler groups, church groups, five house groups brought together by individuals, keep fit classes and a walking group. Attendance at the groups was generally very high, which was attributed to the person co-ordinating the groups receiving a gift as well as those who participated.

In addition agreement was reached with the local school and 700 questionnaires were distributed across all school years to gather the views of those under 16.

This process resulted in over 450 questionnaires being completed for the quantitative stage of the work.

Phase 2 – Focus groups quantitative element

Each group began with a short quantitative questionnaire in which demographic details were collected along with the individual’s views on gender roles. This quantitative questionnaire was developed in association with the Sure Start workers and interested users to ensure that the language and tenor of the questions are culturally appropriate. The questionnaire consisted of a series of statements for example ‘men find it easy to access services’; ‘Sure Start is for women’ ‘a woman’s place is in the home’; ‘housework should be shared’, etc. From these the respondent was
encouraged to assess each statement for their level of agreement. The results from the questionnaire were analysed using Access.

**Phase 3 – Focus groups qualitative element**

After completion of the questionnaire the group held a discussion around the statements used in the questionnaire where they were asked to select those statements that summed up the views of the community. The aim was to shed light on how the culture of the group affects people’s responses to this issue and what views are permissible in different contexts.

At the end of the group participants were asked if they would like any feedback from the research or would like to take part in further work in this area.

**Phase 4 – Gathering the views of professionals**

We also held two groups with professionals to look at their views and to help in identifying any differences in opinion and outlook between the professionals and local people. One group was held with Sure Start directly employed workers who were usually from the local community. The other with health service workers who worked within the community but tended to live elsewhere.
5. Findings from the qualitative work

The focus groups were conducted in an informal atmosphere with people generally feeling able to challenge views that they disagreed with and debate the issues in relation to gender roles. Most of the groups were of single sex and this lead to often a more relaxed and open discussion – with lots of laughter. Where groups were mixed this was characterised by more discussion of the issues with opinions often split along the gender divide. Some areas were however discussed across the groups, although their context and the language used might be different. These areas were:
♦ The difficulties men have in accessing Sure Start services
♦ The need for time off from parenting
♦ The importance of family life.

5.1 The difficulties men have in accessing Sure Start

Both men and women spent a lot of time talking about the difficulties men had in accessing Sure Start and programmes like it. These difficulties were attributed to:
♦ practical problems in accessing Sure Start
♦ difficulties in building Sure Start into the male role
♦ anxiety related to being with children and paedophilia.

5.1.1 Practical problems in accessing Sure Start

Sure Start was thought to be inaccessible to men because of the hours it is open. Both men and women talked about seeing men in the Wacky Warehouse as it is open on a Sunday. Also in several of the groups male partners worked away from home and only spent time with their children at the weekends when Sure Start was shut.

‘Work is the main barrier here, for men staying with their kids.’ (Men’s group).

‘Because men have been at work they’ve had less time to spend with the children.’ (Women’s group)

‘We never have time to do anything together. He is at work that much and when he comes home he is that tired.’ (Women’s group).

‘It’s work commitments more than anything that keeps us from Sure Start; if you ask most of them (mums) it’s their boyfriends or husbands that are working.’ (Men’s group).
This discussion of opening hours reflects a situation where women take on most of the responsibility for childcare, quite often on their own when the men are away. Under these circumstances Sure Start is seen very much as a facility for women.

However suggestions were made as to how to get men more involved, these included extending the opening hours as stated above, having activities just for dads, having more male workers and significantly getting to men through their wives.

‘If it were open on a Sunday and that was what she told me to do, I could go along with the children.’ (Men’s group).

‘If there was a day purely for dads then maybe he would take them.’ (Women’s group).

‘Men get involved more when it is family oriented rather than just dads bringing them to play groups.’ (Women’s group).

There was also quite a lot of support across the groups for the idea that men were more interested in children as they got older. This might suggest that Sure Start should attempt to engage with fathers of children at the upper end of the age limit rather than of small babies.

5.1.2 Difficulties in building Sure Start into the male role

Unlike the above where the problems were seen as soluble by Sure Start more resistant problems were also discussed. These were related to what men in Askern were like according to their partners and the barriers that this set up for them in terms of places like Sure Start. Men themselves talked about the responsibilities that they felt in terms of being a provider and to some extent this continued to be the case amongst young people because of the different economic opportunities offered to men and women. However if the tables were turned it was thought reasonable for women to work and men to stay at home.

‘Men would find going to a playgroup not a manly thing. They would be frightened that other men would see them in that role as well.’ (Mixed group).

‘You don’t seen many men walking with a pram like women in the street.’ (Women’s group).

‘I think a lot of men feel that they have to provide.’ (Women’s groups).
‘It’s a woman’s job. A man goes to work and goes to pub. A woman does everything else.’ (Women’s group).

‘He’d have fobbed her off on anybody. He wouldn’t have had her. It’s not a man thing to do. His dad didn’t do it so he won’t.’ (Women’s group).

‘I think a lot of women’s jobs advertised in the paper seldom exceed £20,000 but there are loads of bloke oriented jobs at £60,000.’ (Man in mixed group).

An interesting adjunct to this was how people were bringing up their own children and the differences that they were making. Whilst some stated that their children, especially sons could look after themselves there was also thought to be a need for male role models to learn how to behave in a ‘tough’ way. This apparent contradiction was reflected in lots of the discussions amongst women about gender roles, where opinions fluctuated between men being ‘stuck in the dark ages’ and a pragmatic acceptance that the current situation may serve the needs of men and women in some ways and thwart them in others. For example several of the women only groups started off on a discussion that ‘men round here live in the dark ages’ and ended with agreement that ‘men are underestimated.’

‘Men are underestimated by themselves, women and their kids.’ (Women’s group).

Within the older groups there was some discussion about how things had changed since they were young and feeling that men did do more nowadays, although the partners of these younger men did not share this feeling.

‘The lads nowadays are so different to their fathers. A lot do cooking, washing and sewing. They take part in everything.’ (Women’s group)

‘They just follow on from their dads.’ (Women’s groups).

5.1.3 Anxiety related to men being with children and paedophilia

Both men and women talked about the barriers preventing men from being involved in Sure Start that have resulted from wider concerns in society about paedophiles. Examples were given of how men policed their behaviour in relation to their own and other children.
'Allegations and stuff like that. He has got two little girls and he won’t wipe them…he won’t bath them and stuff like that.’ (Mixed group).

‘If it were a kid I knew I wouldn’t worry, but if it were one I didn’t know then I would be careful.’ (Men’s group).

‘It’s more difficult for men to be with children today…it’s society, which frowns upon men playing with children, especially with girls.’ (Women’s group).

Older people recognised that this was a change that had occurred in the community. They also experienced it as something about which they felt especially vulnerable.

‘When you get a bit older you’ve got to be careful who you talk to now.’ (Men’s group).

Health workers within the local area had also recognised that this was an issue preventing men from taking part and an example was given of a man attending a parenting class and refusing to bath his daughter as he didn’t think it was right.

This is an issue for Sure Start more generally and has several consequences for how men are to be engaged in Sure Start without feeling constrained by the judgements of others. An interesting aside to this issue is that those men who do use Sure Start are well thought of and none of these anxieties appear to be directed at them.

‘One male comes in. He is lovely. Our kids sit on his knee.’ (Women’s group)

A side issue associated with this anxiety is trust that women have in their own partners and their competence in looking after children. This was an issue that was raised in various guises in several groups and one that prompted much discussion. Evidence was offered by women and men as to why men were not able to look after children related to an inability to multi-task or a lack of maternal instinct, However this was also countered with men stating that they were perfectly capable of looking after children. In several of the groups this was also conceded by the women who came round to the view that in some ways this suited them as it allowed them to maintain control of childcare and the home.
‘Most men are quite capable of changing nappies and domestic duties and there are many men that do that. It’s just that they are often not expected by both women and other men to do so.’ (Men’s group).

‘Very often it’s the women’s fault because she still thinks she has to do the housework and won’t let go – it’s because that is how we were always brought up.’

‘I do the cooking and housework because he doesn’t do it how I like it.’ (Women’s group).
5.2 The need for time off from parenting

Both men and women talked about the need for time from parenting and the role that Sure Start might play in this. However how they managed this was seen as very different. Within the discussion this was a major areas in which there was a clash of gender roles and in which men were seen to have distinct advantages. Men were viewed as better at getting time off and more capable of getting their own space than women although this was generally expressed as ‘pub and football’, the exception being those women who did not have children who thought that they were better at having time to themselves.

‘If he does something for half a day he feels right good about it and thinks he has done me a favour.’ (Women’s group).

‘He works away and when he comes home he thinks it is his time, not our time.’ (Women’s group).

‘I haven’t had a night out in 11 years.’ (Women’s group).

‘Men get their own space with pubs and football. Women get it with other women.’ (Women’s group).

‘When women have children to look after and they are at home all day they feel trapped.’ (Men’s group)

For some women Sure Start was playing a valuable role in offering them the time off from parenting. This was regardless of them being involved in other activities whilst having this time off.

‘We do a lot with Sure Start but we only do it because they can look after the kids.’ (Women’s group).

‘It is a good idea, to have this sort of thing here; the community came together in the miner’s strike and the Sure Start offers something similar for the young mothers.’ (Men’s group).

There was also a generational aspect here, with previous generations not expecting to leave their children in the care of others.
5.3 The importance of family and community life

In discussions with men and women in Askern people talked about the importance of family life and living in a close knit community. This was generally thought to be a good thing and advantages were seen to it, especially for the young people who thought that they would like to live in Askern in the future. Where disadvantages were experienced these were to do with a lack of change, everyone knowing everyone else’s business and for women, a responsibility for family life.

“They are old mining communities. They might be nosy but if my neighbours hadn’t been nosy I might not be here today.’ (Women’s group)

‘When they are going out with their families, that means they are going out with us, which means we are not getting a break.’ (Women’s group).

5.3.1 Community life

For older members of the focus groups there was a feeling that community life were breaking down. This was viewed as a result of wider political and economic changes that were having a direct effect upon their area. The chief amongst these was the loss of the pit, which was remembered as the focus for the community. Conversely nowadays, the local area was seen as one for which people commuted to other areas and where people did not necessarily know their neighbours.

‘People’s experience is very diverse to what it used to be. Everybody used to work together, lived together, knew one another and did all sorts of things together.’ (Older men’s group).

‘This used to be a community that was closely knit around 2 or 3 streets and the women knew all the business that was going on and provided help when needed.’ (Men’s group).

Another consequence of the loss of the pit and the miner’s strike was an ongoing suspicion of government and its interference in family life, particularly amongst men.

‘We are a mining area with old fashioned values and although these values have been changing over the last twenty years most people are
still reluctant for the authorities to intrude into how they bring up their children.’ (Women’s group).

‘They have taken responsibility away from everywhere.’ (Men’s group).

Whilst things were thought by older people to have changed in some respects as a result of the miner’s strike, among younger groups there was still a strong sense of where they were from.

‘I couldn’t live in town I wouldn’t know where to go.’ (Young women’s group).

5.3.2 Family life

The loss of the pit was also felt to have impacted on how families functioned with both parents or in some cases the woman only, now being required to work. This sense of change was particularly profound for older groups.

‘Twenty years ago kids would stay in with their mums and dads would go out to the pub, but that doesn’t happen so much these days as people tend to use their money to do things as a family and can’t afford for one partner to be going out on their own.’ (Women’s group).

‘Women are in a much better position that they have been previously. But that sometimes this better position helps to destroy your family.’ (Women’s group).

‘In some cases the situation has changed for the better but in others it has got worse. You see some mothers and they just don’t care where their children are.’ (Older women’s group).

For those whose families are not based on a traditional model this could lead to problems.

‘I think it is very family here and sometimes my kids find it a bit hard.’ (Women’s group).

In this context and that of other changes such as the increase of single parents grandparents where thought to be increasingly important terms of childcare.
‘There are a lot of relatively young grandparents who are not working and it gives them an opportunity to be able to help.’ (Older men’s group).

‘When they are both on shift work, both working full time, that’s where the grandma and grandad come in. They do more work now that they have ever done.’ (Mixed group).

In many of the younger groups there was an insistence that each family was different and they all sought their own solutions to the economic and lifestyle problems that were created by their individual circumstances.

‘It depends on the family as well. We both work but I have all the childhood responsibilities. It’s not just area, but individual family set up.’ (Mixed group).
5.4 The view of the professionals

Two focus groups were held with professionals working with Sure Start to examine their views in relation to gender roles in the local community. One of the groups was with health care professionals who worked through Sure Start the other was with Sure Start directly employed workers who were in most cases local parents themselves. These differences between the membership of the two groups was reflected in the discussions with the healthcare workers being aware of their practice, for example how ‘woman centre care’ can exclude men’ and the impact of that on gender roles.

They were also able to take an external view on aspects of family life that they say as prevalent within the local community. For example they identified two separate cultures in the local community, that of women and that of men. The men’s culture was based upon:

- male as provider
- drugs and drink culture of young men
- a reluctance on men’s behalf to have physical contact with children

Women’s culture was based on:

- extended families leading to a culture where men are excluded from child rearing
- having babies and engaging in childcare activities with your peer group

Domestic violence was seen as a particular problem and one that could be the consequence of any attempts to challenge the status quo.

These views were quite difference to those expressed by the Sure Start employed staff which were more akin to those in the focus groups with women throughout the area. However there was also a reflection on the aims of Sure Start and what Sure Start hoped and could achieve in the local community.

‘The way it is, is the way a lot of people like it; that they have distinct roles; whatever gets the job done for the family.’

‘All the opportunities have been put in place for men to come into Play Planet but if they don’t, even when the government says otherwise, then that should be that. Why should we have to go the extra mile with the dads; if you give the opportunity for dads to come and play and they don’t then that is that and we shouldn’t be too concerned with it.’

‘We feel obliged to go and talk to a man who has come along to the programme, simply because he is a man, which you wouldn’t do to a woman. I think we are in grave danger of scaring them off.’
6. **Findings from the quantitative work**

Before each of the focus group discussions each person filled in a questionnaire that asked him or her about their level of agreement with a set of statements. These questionnaires were kept confidential and the focus was upon the views of the individual. This presented some interesting contrasts with the wider discussion of the group and the data from the questionnaires suggests some contrasts between what individuals think and what they think the rest of the community thinks.

6.1 Analysis by sex

Data from the questionnaires suggests that there are differences between the sexes in relation to some aspects of family life, however there is also a lot of agreement between the sexes particularly in relation to the running of the home.

Whilst the phrase ‘the government shouldn’t interfere in family life’ caused a lot of debate in the focus groups and was thought to be a view held by the community; the views in the questionnaire were more balanced, although men were still most likely to agree with the statement. This might suggest that individuals see themselves as having more progressive views that the rest of the community.
Conversely both men and women were broadly in agreement that childcare should be shared and that housework should be shared.

We can also say that the questionnaires tell us that men and women broadly agree that:
- women need their own space
- men don’t meet together in groups
- doing things together as a family is fun
- men enjoy playing with children
- men want to be with children.

Men and women broadly disagree with the statement:
- mums and dads don’t do things together

Men are more likely to feel that
- it is a man’s place to provide for this family
- men want different things to women
- mums are better with the children.

Women are more likely to feel that
- people look after each other around here
- men have hobbies, women have children.
6.2 Analysis by age

The focus groups discussions brought out a lot of issues related to the changes in community and family life that have occurred in Askern over the last twenty years. These changes were thought to have led to changes in the way people behaved within and thought about the community and family life.

These changes were reflected in the data.

♦ People were increasingly likely to agree with the statement ‘a man’s job is to provide for his family’ they older they got unless they were under 16 in which case they tended to agree with the older group.

![Graph showing agreement by age group](image1)

♦ Those over sixty were likely to be in agreement with the under 16s on ‘boys learn from their dads’, a sentiment that was more likely to be disagreed with by the middle groups.

![Graph showing agreement by age group](image2)
In relation to the statement ‘men look after children well’ those under 20 and over 50 were most likely to agree with this statement suggesting that most negative sentiments towards male ability to look after children are concentrated in the middle child bearing years.
6.3 Analysis by area

From the questionnaires there are three areas where we have a sufficient sample to be confident of the views of local people\textsuperscript{1}. These are Askern, Campsall and Norton. Looking first at the statements where there is good agreement between men and women. Here we can see that there are three minor differences (~10-25\%) between the areas. These are that:

Fewer people in Norton (2/3\textsuperscript{rd}) than in Campsall or Askern (8 or 9 out of 10) believe that:

\begin{itemize}
  \item ‘Men don’t meet together in groups’
  \item ‘Women need their own space’.
\end{itemize}

\textsuperscript{1} Even so we should treat the views from Norton (n=16) with caution. For Askern (n=81) for Campsall (n= 38).
More people in Norton (over 9 in 10) than in Campsall or Askern (8 in 10) believe that:
♦ ‘Men enjoy playing with their children’.

There are also a number of topics where other differences emerge between the areas. The following proportions actively agree that:
♦ ‘Male workers make men feel more welcome’. Askern (1 in 2), Campsall (1 in 4), Norton (1 in 5). Small proportions actively disagree.
♦ ‘Men need their own space’. Campsall (3 in 4) Norton (½) Askern (½).
♦ ‘Women need their own space’. Campsall (9 in 10), Askern (8 in 10), Norton (7 in 10).
♦ ‘A women’s place is in the home’. Askern (1 in 20), Campsall (1 in 7), Norton (0).
6.4 Analysis by users and non-users of Sure Start

There are three areas where there are large differences between the views of those who have used Sure Start and those who have not. These are that:

♦ Over 3 in 10 non-users agree with the statement ‘Women should go to work’ where this view is held by only around 1 in 10 of Sure Start users.

♦ Roughly 6 in 10 non-users of Sure Start compared to 4 in 10 users believe that ‘Men are underestimated in what they can do’.

♦ Roughly 4 in 10 non-users of Sure Start compared to 2 in 10 users hold the view that ‘Boys need to learn to be a man from their dads’.

This might suggest that users of Sure Start are more likely to hold traditional views than non-users.

There are also eight areas where minor differences (~10-15%) emerge between users and non-users of Sure Start. These are that:

More non-users than users agree that
♦ ‘Mums are more fun than dads’. (1 in 8 non-users agree with this compared to 1 in 25 users).
♦ ‘What women want is somewhere to get away from the family’.
♦ ‘Men want different things to women’.
♦ ‘Sports activities are good to do with dads’.
♦ ‘Men are more interested in their children as they get older’.
♦ ‘Men around here look after their children very well’.
♦ ‘The government shouldn’t interfere in family life’.

More users than non-users disagree that
♦ ‘Children need their mums more than their dads.’ (Users more clearly disagree with this view than non-users).
6.6 The professionals

From the questionnaires it seems that the Health staff hold broadly the same views as each other. There is slightly wider variability in the views held by the Sure Start employed staff. Health and Sure Start staff held broadly the same views with the following exceptions, where there were large differences between them.

The following proportions actively agree that:

- ‘Housework should be shared’. (All) Sure Start employed staff, (3 in 5) Health staff.
- ‘Men need their own space’. (2 in 3) Sure Start employed staff, (2 in 5) Health Staff.
- ‘In groups men feel happier with other men’. (1 in 2) Sure Start employed staff, (All) Health staff.
- ‘Women need their own space’. (4 in 5) Sure Start employed staff, (3 in 5) Health staff.
- ‘Sure Start is about getting people back to work’. (½) Sure Start employed staff, (No) Health staff. 30-40% of all staff in both occupational groups actively disagreed with this statement.
‘What women want is somewhere to get away from the family’. (1 in 12) Sure Start employed staff, (3 in 5) Health staff.

‘Sure Start is about giving mums a break’. (½) Sure Start employed staff, (1 in 5) Health staff.

‘Men around here look after their children very well’. (1 in 3) Sure Start employed staff, (None) Health staff. Only 1 in 5 Health staff actively disagrees with the statement.

The following proportions actively disagree that:

‘Sure Start is for women’ (over 9 in 10) Sure Start employed staff, (3 in 5) Health staff. No one actively agreed.

‘Male workers make men feel more welcome’. (½) Sure Start employed staff, (4 in 5) Health staff.

‘Men want different things than women’. (None) Sure Start employed staff, (2 in 5) Health staff. 50-60% of staff in both occupational groups agreed with this statement.

‘The government shouldn’t interfere in family life’. (1 in 3) Sure Start employed staff, (4 in 5) Health staff. Roughly half the Sure Start employed staff neither agree nor disagree and a very small proportion actively agree. None of the Health staff actively agree with the statement.
7. Discussion

This research has demonstrated that a variety of views on gender roles are active within the Spa Spiders area, within different groups and within individuals as they seek to negotiate the varying tensions of living here. These tensions might be characterised as variously between:

- A traditional mining area and an area now identified as for commuters
- An area with traditional family roles and an area where women and men both work
- An area where men’s space is defined by pub and football and an area where women’s role is tied up with children and the family
- An area that would like to see dads more involved with their children but is mindful of allegations of child abuse.

These tensions present some challenges for Sure Start in developing services for men. These challenges can best be summed up by the original dilemma faced by Sure Start as to whether to seek to change the local culture or whether to work with it in developing services for men.

The data from the focus groups and the questionnaires suggests that:

- Older people report that changes have already taken place in this respect and that men have made changes in response to the wider social and economic changes in the area.
- Whilst women of child bearing area may be negative in their assessment of men generally and their partners, in particular there was also a recognition that they underestimate their men.
- Children tend to have a higher opinion of the ability of men to care for and enjoy the company of children than women do.
- Men themselves think that they are capable of looking after children and being involved in child related activities, but are prevented from doing so by work.
- Women think that men should be encouraged to use Sure Start and admire the men who do use it.

Overall there is a suggestion that Sure Start can build upon changes that are already underway and that the community will not be entirely resistant to these.

This is not to suggest that men will actively engage in Sure Start activities, rather that the view is that it is not impossible to engage with men and under certain circumstances men are more likely to be involved. These circumstances are:

- When they are told to by their partners
- When the activities is family oriented
- When it involves older children
- When it involves something they enjoy – football
- When it is in the evenings or at weekends
- When other men are involved
8. Next steps

Sure Start Spa Spiders now needs to consider the evidence presented by the research and develop an action plan in terms of developing services to include men in Sure Start activity. As part of this research individuals volunteered to be involved in this next stage of development activity and groups will now be convened to consider the evidence and develop initiatives.