



Dads and Kids Clubs:

Research Report

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ABSTRACT

This study considers the potential of father oriented parent and toddler groups as places where the fathers' can experience parenthood and socialise. This report focuses on exploring the main reasons why dads joined and attended the playgroups, and the benefits they received from the groups.

Keywords: playgroups; qualitative research; fatherhood; social support; parenting

INTRODUCTION

Parenthood is a significant life transition, and a time often experienced by new parents as overwhelming and emotionally and physically exhausting (Nelson, 2003; Nystrom and Ohrling, 2004; Barnes et al, 2008). The relationship children have with their parents undeniably has influence on the subsequent social, emotional and academic well being of children. Longitudinal studies around the world have found that fathers' involvement with their children is linked to higher educational achievement and higher educational/ occupational mobility relative to their parents (Sarkadi et al, 2008; Flouri, 2005; Pleck and Masiadrelli, 2004). Further to this, research has demonstrated the importance of fathers' commitment and interest to their children's schooling processes, and the positive outcomes this has for educational success. A key predictor of fathers' involvement in children's learning is having been involved in their care very early on (Goldman, 2005). Mechanisms for parents to engage with children from a young age exist in many countries, however, the focus of this research is playgroups. However, in contrast to previous research, this report focuses on the positive outcomes for fathers who attend playgroups, in contrast to many studies which have focused on the positive outcomes these groups have for children.

Parent and toddler groups have long been established within communities in the UK and around the world, and are viewed as 'groups who meet regularly for the purposes of socialisation and engagement in play activities' (McLean et al, 2015). In the US for example, playgroups are described as 'an arrangement whereby groups of parents and their young children meet together' (Mize and Pettit, 2010: 1271). Further to this, in New Zealand playgroups are described similarly but include an added emphasis on the facilitation of play (Ministry of Education New Zealand, 2014). Playgroups as a context or sites for the facilitation of play are also discussed in reference to playgroups in the UK (Statham and Brophy, 2006). Playgroups have been in existence since the 1960's and evolved 'as a self-help response' to a shortage in preschool or nursery school services (Statham and Brophy, 2006: 40). However, in recent times the interest in playgroups has shifted from filling a service gap (Moss et al, 1992) to the very real potential for playgroups to contribute more broadly to social capital (Nyland et al, 2014). Within the broad range of early childhood services, playgroups have emerged as sites for promoting positive outcomes for families and children (French, 2005; Oke et al, 2007). This has contributed to the establishment of different types of play groups aimed at meeting the diverse needs of family participants (Dadich and Spooner, 2008). Playgroups are generally utilised by parents with children prior to school entry, and are distinctive from other early childhood services as the accompanying family member and/or caregiver who attends with the child remains responsible for the child during the session.

The focus of this research is on playgroups which are self-managed, unfunded and do not necessarily have a strategic focus on improving outcomes for particular community groups of families. This type

of group generally offers ‘free-flowing play activities and are parent-led (McLean et al, 2015, 5). They are not for profit, and if donations are required from parents to cover the cost of the facilities used, they aim to be affordable. These groups are usually run by volunteers, and are generally seen to provide a great opportunity for children to socialise with one another, and a space where parents have the possibility to make connections and friends also. Of the main playgroup models, it has been argued that this type of group, community-led, may provide insights into sustainable outcomes for families who attend on a regular basis (McLean, 2015: 6). Research has shown that playgroups provide a great opportunity for the development of parenting skills, social capital and social support (Moore, 2005, 2006; Jackson, 2009; Hanna et al, 2002), but there is a general trend for these groups to be aimed at mothers. This study however focuses on groups that are created by and attended by fathers. In this report we discuss the advantages these groups have for dads, and the need for recognition that these types of groups should not solely be assumed to only benefit mothers.

Although variations in playgroups exist, playgroups appear to have a common aim to engage parents and children in play and social activities (McLean et al, 2015). Jackson (2011) describes the key aim of these groups as providing access to play, parenting resources, social networks, parenting, and child development support. Other researchers describe playgroup aims in similar ways (Johnson et al, 2004; Lloyd et al, 1989) and highlight a range of benefits associated with regular attendance including social, emotional, physical and cognitive learning outcomes for children and social outcomes for parents that lead to flow on effects in the community (Sneddon and Haynes, 2003).

THE RESEARCH

As discussed, the purpose of this research was to develop an understanding of the opportunities organised playgroups provide for dads. Given this, it should be noted that only groups which advertised themselves as ‘father and kids’ groups were approached to take part in this research. This research project involved conversations with fathers who attended organised fathers and toddler groups.

Group Membership

The fathering contexts of the men in the groups were diverse and encompassed a wide range with varied personal characteristics, ethnicities, experiences, and familial circumstances. Therefore, the fathers who attended these groups should not be seen as homogenous in their views and approaches to parenting and spending time with their children. It was the motivation to attend the playgroups that linked these fathers together, so there were commonalities in the fathers’ narratives. The fathers in the sample had at least one child between the ages of 6 months- 5 years.

The Conversations

Conversations began by asking participants about the groups to which they belonged (e.g. How would you describe your group? How many people are involved? What is the purpose of the group?). Next, participants were asked how their group was formed and how members joined (e.g. How did your group get started? Who comes to this group? How inclusive is the group?). Participants were then asked about their own motivation to join the group (e.g. How did you get involved? Why were you drawn to this group?), the benefits of attending the group (e.g. What do you get out of your involvement with the group?) and the roles in the group (e.g. How does your involvement in the group influence your experience as a father?). Where appropriate, participants were asked about the potential benefits and drawbacks of their membership to the fathers and toddlers groups.

WHAT PEOPLE TOLD US

SETTTING UP OF THE GROUPS

Groups ‘Run by Dads for Dads’

As mentioned, the groups who participated in this research were led by volunteers and had been operating for between 3-4 years. The volunteer community led atmosphere of the clubs for both groups was a specific outcome that the organisers of the groups strived for:

I noticed that with my first born that the majority of parent and toddler groups out there are for mums. Maybe they're not intentionally set up that way, but after going to a couple with my little one I found that it was a bit awkward. I mean, people were friendly and welcoming but it was definitely a space for mums rather than an inclusive space for parents. After that I did a bit of research to see about dad specific groups and saw there were a few dotted around the country but none near me. So I thought, you know what, I'll see what needs to be done to set one up. And so this place was born.

-Group Organiser

Ease of Starting the Group

The organisers of the groups visited found it relatively easy to set up the groups:

The most difficult bit was finding a space I think, but to be honest that didn't take long. I did a bit of research and found that the community centre attached to our local church was used by quite a few groups so decided that this was the best option.

-Group Organiser

Advertising the Group and Attendance

Both of the groups visited made the most out of advertising opportunities made available to them. This included putting advertising flyers in local shop windows, local supermarkets, and distributing to homes in the local area. Following the initial set up, the groups found that their sessions had steadily increased in popularity over the years they had been running, and regularly had 15-20 dads attend the sessions they run on a Saturday morning.

REASONS FOR JOINING PLAYGROUP

Common Reasons and Value

It has been suggested that that parental understandings of the role of playgroups in contemporary society have changed (McLean, 2015). Investigating the roles and purposes of playgroups in Australia and the UK, Needham and Jackson found that playgroups needed to provide for both parents and children's needs. Similarly, a Belgian study reported parents' views of parent support programmes and concluded that meeting places such as playgroups should have relational focus for parents and children (Vandenbroeck et al, 2009). This is in contrast to earlier studies such as those by Statham and Brophy (2006) and Moss et al (1992) in the UK, whose earlier studies reported on parents perspectives on the role of playgroups and their reasons for attending and indicated that adult participants described the role in terms of filling a preschool service gap rather than a role in meeting parent needs. The more dynamic role that playgroups are now playing provides a space whereby parental education and socialisation is now a purpose, rather than a by-product. As such, playgroups are now seen as providing an important function linked to the growing knowledge about the importance of the family environment, of community linkages, and of family support and participation (Oke, Stanley, and Theobald, 2007). According to Dahlberg et al (1999), due to this, the role of the 'expert' has been diminished.

The best practice playgroups are the ones that provide opportunities to build friendships and social support, help children learn through play, take responsibility and work together, and provide a safe and supportive environment and exchange ideas about parenting (Plowman, 2006: 11).

Although playgroups were developed with the well-being of children in mind, their structure also creates positive social outcomes for adults involved and this feeds into the community at large (Oke, Stanley, and Theobald, 2007). Therefore it is no surprise that in this study, the most common reasons given for joining the playgroup were child-related reasons, and reasons related to addressing social isolation for parents:

- Opportunity for child/children to socialise with other children
- Opportunity for father to socialise with other fathers

When asked to comment on the most valuable aspect of playgroups for dads, the participants in this study identified a range of issues but generally focused on the socialisation opportunities for themselves, their partners and their children:

- To have contact with other dads
- To have a place to share concerns about being a dad and parenting in a supportive environment
- A place that provides information about wider services available to them and their families
- To spend one-to-one time with their children, whilst also giving children the opportunity to socialise with others

Building a Supportive Network

The dads in this study narrated that they enjoyed attending and benefited from the opportunities for interaction and socialisation with other parents. The benefits identified included meeting other dads, talking through issues with other dads, and an opportunity to spend one-to-one quality time with their children. Many of the fathers expressed that they had found the transition to parenthood particularly stressful and exhausting. For the majority of the dads in this study, the perception that ‘we are all experiencing the same thing at the same time’ provided a sense of security, and this was found in the playgroups that they attended. They also felt empathy for dads who were experiencing stressful life events, both in terms of parenting problems and relationship problems. In particular, the dads within the groups recognised them as a space whereby they were able to socialise with like-minded people, and from this they were able to view the group not just as a space where they could take their children to socialise, but also build a supportive network around themselves.

It's good to know there are other dads out there in the same boat as you.

-Dad

Being a parent is hard and I think we struggle to admit that sometimes. Being in a group like this gives a sort of safe space for you to say that it's tough sometimes, and people don't judge you for admitting that.

-Dad

Learning about Parenting

As sites for fostering ‘playful interactions between parents and children’ (Evangelou and Wild, 2014; 378), playgroups may offer a cultural context for parental education approaches. The playgroups and clubs provide an opportunity to informally share information and practice about parenting, as well as be among people in similar life-stage circumstances. For the dads studied, these groups enabled them to meet other parents in their local community; the experience of feeling connected to their local community was reported by participants to be generally enhanced. Participating in local groups enhanced opportunities for informal interaction locally between dads.

Sometimes it's good to be able to ask another dad 'Have you ever had this problem and how did you deal with it?'

-Dad

While dads were aware of the breadth of parenting information available on the internet, most of the dads preferred hearing anecdotes of other dads experiences, and found that they learnt more through these than through sources providing ‘expert information’:

Parenting is never as simple as what they write about in book is it? Let's be honest. It's hard work and there's never a quick or easy solution to any problem as a dad.

-Dad

As well as dads being able to offer each other support and advice about parenting, the men we spoke to generally felt that sharing their experiences normalised their child’s developmental changes. This in turn provided reassurance for the dads and helped to alleviate anxiety about their child’s behaviour:

The issues we all face as dads are quite common... but you don't know that until you meet another dad with a kid the same age, especially if it's your first. It helps to put it into perspective a lot.

-Dad

Forging Friendships

Friendship and the formation of social networks emerged as key reasons behind dad’s decision to attend the groups and clubs. Many of the dads we spoke to had formed some friendships through the groups. The groups were seen as providing a good opportunity to socialise with other dads, and from this friendships could be built:

It's an opportunity as a dad to meet other dads with kids of similar ages to your own. Given that, you instantly have quite a bit in common with other guys.

-Dad

Some of the dads spoke about being able to come to a place where they could 'be themselves and chat to other dads', and placed value on the experience of making new friends and sharing common experiences related to bringing up children. Interactions amongst parents were observed and included a mixture of social conversations unrelated to children, and the sharing of advice related to parenting issues. Several of the dads noted that it was their partners who had encouraged them to attend the group and get to know other dads, benefit from their friendship and social support:

I wouldn't have started coming if it hadn't been for my partner suggesting it. Obviously she goes to mother and toddler and has built a good support network with other mums there and she thought it would be good for me to do the same. None of our close friends have got kids really, so you're out on a limb a bit when you're the only one.

-Dad

The extended nature of friendships cultivated within the playgroups and the levels of support resulting from those relationships were described extensively by the group organisers. The capacity of the groups to nurture the dads and promote their confidence in supporting one another was viewed as particularly important:

The friendship that they make, I think, is the most important aspect, and that they can swap phone numbers and sometimes babysit each other's kids, and get together during the week as well. It's rewarding to know that you've created that, and that they've got support outside of the group.

-Dad

CONCLUSION

Positive outcomes for children attending playgroups have been reported in a range of studies and indicate that most of these outcomes are mediated via parental support (Needham and Jackson, 2012). Other studies draw attention to parents' valuing the role of play for their children's socialisation and learning (McArthur et al, 2010; McLean et al, 2014). This research study provides a detailed picture of the demographic characteristics of a group of dad playgroup participants, along with their reasons for attending. The study also contributes to an understanding of playgroup facilitator's views on the importance of these groups. The findings of this group need to be considered as exploratory. The study had a small sample and is not representative of all father's playgroups that operate within the UK. However, there are some useful findings that have implications for the ongoing development of playgroups focused towards fathers.

The development of nurturing, trusting and supportive relationships within groups such as those in this study is dependent on the engagement and ongoing participation of dads. This research revealed that dad-to-dad peer support was a highly significant component of the groups, and the nature of the support and information sharing between the dads in these groups allowed them (in their own eyes) to become better parents.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- 1. The Government and its Departments should recognise the value of community run dad's clubs**

Dads clubs like those visited as part of this research provide important community development opportunities and may help reduce the isolation of fathers with young children. The value and importance of these groups in the provision of networking and supportive engagement with Dads should be recognised.

- 2. Local authorities should support Dads Clubs through the provision of premises / community centres in which they can meet.**
- 3. Third sector groups of charities, churches, etc. can help in recognising the importance of Dad Clubs and encouraging their establishment.**

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