

Hard to Reach? Engaging Fathers in Early Years Settings



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Abstract

Seeking to build upon previous research, this exploratory report examines the views of fathers and early years practitioners surrounding the everyday encounter at the setting door. Adopting a qualitative method in a range of settings in the UK East Midlands, fathers and practitioners voices express several thoughts; these include settings being seen as intimidating to fathers and factors affecting the encounter such as the importance of fathers' familiarity with and self-confidence in the setting environment.

A section on Methodology maps the landscape of qualitative data collection; efforts are made to avoid an approach which "*freezes ordinary people and everyday life into a neat, coherent, timeless portrait*" (Foley in Holliday 2008:166). Over 40 practitioners and fathers took part in one-to-one and group discussions.

The Findings then articulate some of the quoted views of participants as they are expressed. These are then organised into broad themes. These are developed and, supported by a Literature Review, a Discussion emerges which synthesises some impressions of participants' accounts and their thoughts which contribute to the encounter in the setting.

Moving on, the importance of fathers being part of what, usually, goes on daily in early years environments is emphasised. The report also addresses the perceptions of workers in this respect in settings as part of everyday practice. There is some consideration of some practical initiatives and, behind that, the continuing professionalisation agenda in UK early years workforce development; these build from the authors' particular interests. As usual in this kind of research, the investigation opens up many areas for future development in the summarising Ways Forward section; these include ideas for both practitioner training and practice.

Reference: Holliday A (2008) Doing and Writing Qualitative Research London Sage

Keywords

caring roles, early years practitioners, fathers and dads, early years settings, reflective practice, gender, family, professionalisation, collaborative working

Introduction

Two separate pieces of work were the pre-cursors to this pilot research. Firstly, research at Pen Green Early Excellence Centre in the UK (Malcolm 1994) into the way staff greeted mothers and fathers¹ as they dropped their children off at the Centre suggested that staff unconsciously spent longer greeting, and gave more eye contact to, mothers than fathers. Secondly, a piece of work by the Pre-school Learning Alliance (Kahn 2006), a six-monthly evaluation of four different models of involving fathers in early years settings which was based on settings completing audit forms (with the numbers of male and female carers dropping off and collecting their children from the setting) and questionnaires (with questions relevant to the issue of father involvement) raised questions for further investigation as to whether settings 'noticed' male carers at the door if they did not cross the threshold and actively involve themselves in the setting.

This limited exploratory research is an attempt to start, qualitatively, to make sense of the informal everyday interactions between practitioners and fathers in early years settings. We are seeking here, then, some detail about the reported experiences of practitioners and male care-givers surrounding their everyday encounter in the early years setting.

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Literature Review

There has been little research into how early years practitioners view their relationships with fathers and other male care givers, and vice versa. It was felt that a literature review that addresses wider issues of father involvement in families and well as father involvement in early years settings would be a valuable backdrop. After a survey of the literature on fathers and their involvement with their children, this review will conclude with what other research has found about informal contact between practitioners (mostly female) and fathers in early years settings, setting the scene for the current research.

¹ Fathers. These are male caregivers, this is commonly dads, sometimes brothers, uncles and granddads but can be regarded for the purpose of this Research to include the above and any man who escorts a young child to or from an early years setting.

Father involvement in families

As Lewis (2000:3) points out current policy, research and media interest in fathers is the culmination of three decades of rapid change in the institutions and conventions of family life; specifically these are the increase in the levels of employment among mothers, parental separation and divorce in addition to more babies being born outside of marriage.

Most past research into father involvement with their child(ren) focuses on the levels of involvement and their role outside the family and according to Lewis and Lamb (2007:4), that

across a diversity of mainly industrial societies men have lower levels of engagement than women and there are clear constraints upon their involvement.

Employment patterns are a major constraint. In a report for the Joseph Rowntree Foundation, Lewis (JRF Website 2008) states unequivocally that employment patterns explain much of men's involvement – or otherwise – in childcare. To quote directly from the report:

Across the European Union, 90% of fathers are in paid jobs. In the United Kingdom they work the longest hours of men in all member states. One review found that the average working week for fathers of children aged under 11 was 48 hours and this included regular evening work at weekends and some night work.

At the same time, patterns of paternal involvement seem to be changing. Pleck (1997), for example, suggests that men's accessibility to children and their engagement in care-giving and or direct interaction has increased. This view is supported by Fisher *et al* (1999) that some men are playing an increasing role in the care of their children in the private sphere and are now responsible for around one third of all childcare activities.

In parallel, it has been recognised that fathers play an important role in their children's development with research being undertaken into what fathers do with their children and how their involvement may affect outcomes in the longer term (Lamb 1997, Flouri 2003). Lamb (1997:1) states that

where there is a high level of paternal involvement by agreement between the parents, the child or children have increased cognitive competence, perform better socially and academically.

Furthermore, there is clear evidence that social, emotional, physical and cognitive outcomes for children are better when their fathers are involved with them (Allen and Daley 2007). There is also evidence that low levels of (positive) father involvement are associated with a range of negative outcomes. (Flouri 2005)

Father involvement in Early Years services

As Robson (2006) has commented, relationships between parents and professionals of all kinds play a more prominent role during the period of early childhood than at possibly any other time in a child's life. The increased availability of private and public daycare, from an early age, external to the home setting, affords the opportunity for settings to engage with and develop relationships with parents and care givers.

There is a dearth of descriptive data on the impact of fathers' engagement, involvement and participation when their child or children attend early years settings, as the literature mostly discusses 'parents' or 'mothers' (O'Brien 2004). Lamb (1997) suggests that the individual traits of a father, the support available to him and the practices of the service (in our case, the early years sector) come together and influence a father's behaviour towards his children:

One can conceive of [male] motivation, skills and self-confidence...and institutional practices as a hierarchy of factors influencing paternal behaviour. (1997:6)

In other words, services have a role in either supporting and encouraging – or not supporting and encouraging – a father's involvement with his children.

Surveying work in the US over a number of years, Jim Levine, the then Director of the Fatherhood Project, Families and Work Institute produced a paper in response to the Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) initiative to call for more involvement by fathers and father figures in early years services (1993). Here, he identified four factors that limit Head Start and state-funded pre-kindergarten programmes from encouraging father involvement. These were identified as:

(1) Fathers' fears of exposing inadequacy, (2) ambivalence of staff about father involvement, (3) gatekeeping by mothers and (4) inappropriate program design and delivery. (Levine 1993:14)

Levine's paper led to a re-evaluation of father involvement in early childhood programmes in the US and to several new initiatives to increase father/male involvement. McBride and Rane then developed a training model on the basis of the data collection from the aforementioned project and identified several specific issues related to the four general factors outlined earlier by Levine. Arguably, the

most important was the emphasis on the creation of a climate for father/male involvement:

Creating a culture of male involvement is a long term process. In building such a climate men will begin to feel a sense of acceptance in terms of their participation and the importance of the role they can play within the program, and also an expectation on the part of the program that men should assume more active roles. (McBride and Rane 1997:14)

Since 2004 the Government in the UK has stated an intention to ‘support a cultural shift in all service provision to include fathers in all aspects of a child’s well-being’ (Department of Health and Department for Education and Skills 2004:70). The associated Core Standard 3.6 of the National Service Framework for Children, Young People and Maternity Services (NSF) states:

The role of fathers in parenting their children is frequently overlooked. Their contribution to their child’s development and well-being is important. Good parenting by fathers can significantly promote the child’s development ... Good parenting is associated with better mental health in children, higher quality of later relationships, less criminality, better school attendance and behaviour and better examination results. (2004:69)

These statements in the NSF recognise the benefits to children’s outcomes of father involvement and, as a result, aim to encourage early years and family services to make themselves ‘father-inclusive’ so that they can support positive father-child relationships in the home.

Referring to UK investigations, the most relevant UK studies to the current research are: the National Evaluation of Sure Start (NESS) of *Fathers in Sure Start* local programmes (Lloyd *et al* 2003) and the Pre-school Learning Alliance’s *Fathers’ Involvement in Early Years Settings: Findings from Research* (Kahn 2005).

The broad aim of *Fathers in Sure Start* (Lloyd *et al* 2003), was to describe the role of fathers in selected programmes and identify successful strategies for engaging fathers. This is similar to the aforementioned US research into Head Start. The Pre-school Learning Alliance carried out their research to gather views of practitioners and fathers on father involvement as an evidence base to inform the strategy they then wanted to initiate to encourage father involvement in early years settings (Kahn 2005). This latter research identified a number of factors as impacting on father involvement in early years settings some of which have relevance for this pilot research such as:

- fathers said that their lack of familiarity with the people and the routines of the institution made it harder for them to feel comfortable in the setting (ibid: 51) and
- practitioners stated that older and outgoing fathers appeared to be more comfortable in the setting. (ibid: 62)

The barriers to father involvement in early years settings that were identified by all these studies overlap to a great extent. The list commonly included:

- Fathers' work commitments
- The 9am-5pm opening hours of many early childcare services matching the working day of many men although hours have increased through extended school plans (Surestart website 2009).
- Early years settings are (perceived as) 'female spaces'
- Setting staff's lack of confidence and skills around engaging with men/fathers
- Society's attitudes: these are that men are seen primarily as providers, and looking after young children is seen as 'women's work'. This may discourage father involvement.

Father involvement in Early Years settings – informal communication

All the studies into fathers' use of early years settings cited above explored fathers' actual *use* of the provision. Levine pinpointed an aspect of fathers' involvement which had been overlooked by other research at the time and still forms a gap in the literature of fathers' use of early years settings. This aspect is the communication that occurs at what Levine (citing Powell) called 'transition points', for example when a child is taken to or picked up from a daycare facility. In addition to which are the informal types of communication between parents and staff at the centres (1993:9).

Levine (1993) further suggested that if researchers were to explore transition and other informal types of communication they might

capture a higher degree of father involvement than has previously been reported and may provide naturally occurring opportunities to hook fathers into other types of involvement. (1993:9)

The current study aims to explore the very transition points that Levine identified as 'overlooked' (1993:9). It investigates exchanges between practitioners and fathers and explores how such 'informal' interactions between fathers and practitioners impact – either positively or negatively – on father involvement in early years settings.

Methodology

Our research question is:

“what are the reported experiences of practitioners and male care-givers surrounding their everyday encounter in the early years setting?”

This section identifies some thoughts and principles concerning data collection and analysis.

Data Collection

Our approach was staged as follows:

- one or two introductory visits to the settings to outline our methodology and ethical stance so that settings could make an informed choice as to whether to participate in our research project or not.
- the data collection itself.

We collected the data through focus groups and one-to-one interviews with practitioners and fathers. Each group interview was facilitated by two researchers (one acting as facilitator and the other as moderator), one-to-one interviews were conducted by one researcher alone.

Interviews lasted between 20 and 45 minutes each. The research took place in four counties in the UK Midlands between October 2007 and April 2008.

Groups varied in size from two to seven. In total we interviewed 41 people, 35 female and one male practitioner plus seven fathers in different contexts and from a variety of different sources (such as a nursery, a crèche and a children's clinic in a children's centre - see Table 1)

In addition, four fathers were surveyed by e-mail after expressing interest following an online article about the research. Of these, three responded to a short questionnaire that they were sent; their responses are included in our research (but not counted).

Table 1: Settings Visited and Activities

Setting	P or F	Total
Town Children's Centre (B)	P	4
Urban City Children's Centre (M)	P	5
City Fringe Village Playgroup (T)	P	5
Market town, rural private Day-care (S)	P	7
Fringe urban Children's centre/clinic (H)	P&F	5
Town Day-care Small city (Ch)	P	2
Leisure Centre Crèche (N)	P	5
City Private Daycare (CA)	P	4
Urban Community provision (P)	F	4
<i>Fathers by e-mail (E) – not counted</i>	<i>F</i>	
Total		41

Key: P is Practitioner and F is Father; the letters after settings identify the sources of quotes in the Findings section.

Rather than have a scripted menu of direct questions we chose to have a checklist of areas that we wanted to cover in each interview. Each group and one-to-one interview was presented with the research question as a starting point for the interview and we made it clear to participants that we had a short checklist.

We followed the University of Derby ethical guidelines (University of Derby 2008) and were particularly concerned to explain the issues of prior informed consent, anonymity, data management, right to withdraw and validation. We obtained assent agreements at the beginning of data collection. This enabled us to use participants' words in this report. All interviews were audio-taped, with some additional note-taking.

We decided not to use a rigorous content or discourse analysis but instead chose to analyse the transcripts in terms of 'themes and threads'. This allowed us both to draw out the themes that we felt were present (or implied) by what the participants said (or did not say), while at the same time remaining true to their words.

This approach also values the reality as described by the respondents at the time of the interview, in that context. In addition, we recognised that:

the researched world cannot be reproduced but has to be represented by some form of narrative analysis (Pejlert et al 1999:674)

and that, in principle, people make sense of their roles in their worlds through stories which portray their positions. Our procedure can, therefore, be described as 'informal narrative analysis' aiming to tease out themes (Chass 2008).

We were conscious that the gender of the interviewer may impact on what interviewees said and tried to take this into account when we set up interviews

(most group interviews were conducted by mixed gender pairs and one-to-one interviews by interviewers of the same sex as the interviewee) and when we analysed participants' contributions.

Analysis of the Data Collected

The purpose of this section is to make visible some issues and dilemmas encountered during the analysis process.

All interviews were transcribed. As moderators, we were aware of our own impact in the data collection role. We are part of the process and thus 'socially located' (Cameron *et al* in Holliday 2008:10). We were also aware of 'expectancy' (Hill in Greene & Hogan 2006:69) – the notion that respondents may give the answers that they think the interviewers want to hear.

In our analysis we wanted to *avoid* producing

an abstract, formalistic intellectual language which freezes ordinary people and everyday life into a neat, coherent, timeless portrait (Foley in Holliday 2008:166)

to ensure we reflected the participants' voices, meanings and realities.

Findings: Themes and Threads

We have chosen to present the findings in a way that makes sense to the reader while also keeping as much as possible to the words of the participants. We have categorised what participants said under the following headings which do not relate specifically to the checklist of areas that we originally chose for the focus group interviews.

A Sense of Social Change

Both fathers and practitioners felt that there is a slow and incremental sense of change in what fathers' roles are in caring for their children although they reported various reasons for this.

Several fathers were unsure about the reason for this but referred to some of the recent increased flexibility in working arrangements and paternity leave legislation in the UK (Direct Gov 2009, Gaines 2008).

One father expressed frustration with regards what he considered to be inequitable gender treatment in legislation. His example referred specifically to paternity leave.

You know [paternity leave]'s still now a few days predominantly because when it boils down to it ... the mothers get up to nine

months off which is quite frustrating [for me] ... it was my first child and that first month was exceedingly hard ... I wanted to be part of my daughter's life a bit more and get that bond. (father, H)

Although society considers it to be 'a good thing' that fathers are more involved in the hands-on care of their children, gender expectations still keep many men and women playing traditional roles. Our impressions are that fathers are primarily seen as breadwinners and mothers as child-carers. Services are still predominantly female and two comments illustrated fathers' perceptions of, and possible reasons for, their presence there:

Shifts ... I'm not meant to come [to the clinic] every week but I come when I'm off work (father, H)

and

I don't think it's that complicated really, the reason I'm here is because [firstly,] I'm not at work and secondly, transport provider. (another father, H)

Both practitioners and fathers thought that there was a greater expectation that fathers should be more involved in the care of their children than previously and that this was a good thing. One practitioner described this as:

very much a culture thing ... you can't generalise but it is quite apparent. (practitioner, B)

At the same time, caring for children was seen as a gendered activity so:

[it's] a female thing, definitely, definitely. (practitioner, N)

And seeing a man in the setting with his child would be

very strange, people would look on it as strange (ibid)

but, at the same time, desirable:

I just like to see a man probably coming to the crèche ... more than I would a woman. I don't know why, it's just nice to see them playing with the child or just having a dad role. (ibid)

There was, at times, recognition that caring remains a core task for mothers; some practitioners commented, anecdotally, that efforts to discuss issues with fathers about their child prompted a "talk to mum about that" response. At the same time, some fathers felt that despite all the social changes they were still not properly included in the early years setting.

Stereotyped... the nurseries are stereotyped and yes they are changing but it's still myself who has to make the initial contact, It's

still me who has had to try to speak to the women. (father, P)

Despite pressures to actively enforce written equality guidance and legislation (e.g. DDA 2005), systems are reported to seem rigidly entrenched and unfair (Gerard 2008). One reason put forward was mainly because procedures are implemented by people who appear to embrace (this) change more slowly. An example, from a father from outside the early years field follows:

Before I became a single parent, when I received my benefits book, I had six pages in it and every time I received a benefit slip it only had six pages, but if I had been a single parent and a Mum I would have received a full book. They presumably thought that the children would be going to the Mum at some point... (ibid)

Both groups, then, may be aware of and influenced by these subtle background (yet influential) social factors affecting the encounter in the setting. Respondents suggested that it is the attitude (of both practitioners and fathers) towards this perceived attitudinal shift which informs the interaction. Some people embrace and some reject it; each person has a very individual and pragmatic response.

Being a Male in a Female domain

Intimidating environment

Both practitioners and fathers commented many times on how they thought the female space of the setting impacted on fathers. Practitioners regularly used the word “intimidating” to describe how they imagined fathers would experience the setting

... you’ve got five or six women standing there and it can be quite intimidating coming into that kind of [female-dominated] environment ... If you go into a mixed group, you don’t get the same feeling. (practitioner, S)

The fathers’ perspective commonly echoed this and is illustrated by the following quote:

...It’s dominated by ... women; it’s sort of a feminine atmosphere so you’re stepping into that; it’s standing out in a crowd. (father, H)

However, some practitioners thought that fathers’ individual personalities affected their experience of such, suggesting that shy dads were more, and outgoing dads less, intimidated:

I don’t know how much of a big deal to make about it being a male or a female, whether it’s the personality rather than, you know, the sex [of the individual]. (practitioner, B)

Another practitioner suggested it was the fathers' level of confidence that impacted on how much they engaged with practitioners

I think it will hugely depend on the individual father as well, won't it?...if you have a dad who is confident from the other side [of the nursery gate] to come in and chat with professionals...then you immediately get a two-way conversation. (practitioner, B)

It seems that the individual characteristics of the parent, whether father or mother, play a key part in the outcome (from either side's point of view) of any interactions with practitioners, as per the following quote.

I think it just comes down to that individual parent, erm, I think whether it's male or female..... (practitioner N)

These quotes suggest that some practitioners saw the issue as depending on either the personality or the sex of the individual, rather than on both.

Some practitioners felt that they made efforts to help fathers feel at ease, recognising that fathers may not feel that they belonged and were on 'foreign' territory. Thus comments, such as the following, were made:

I don't just talk to Mum because she's a familiar face Eye contact with the Dad [is important] because I'm talking to him as well. I want him to hear. (practitioner, S)

However, fathers still made statements that suggested that they felt it was up to them to make the first move:

It is very awkward and a funny feeling to be there. You have to push yourself forward. It does not come naturally for [the female practitioners] to converse with you or share information; you have to force yourself into their space to get that communication going. It is difficult. (father, P)

And one dad felt that, were practitioners to ask him, he would have been open to getting involved in the setting in some way:

:

I do know that if the workers approached me asking me to get involved in various ways, I would definitely accept the invitation, pending my availability. (father, E)

One father talked of his fear of his actions being misconstrued:

All you have to do is look wrongly and you can be accused of something. (father, P)

This should perhaps be understood in the context of a climate where many men fear that their caring actions towards young children may be misinterpreted as

inappropriate. However, a discussion in one group, which can perhaps be summed up by the following quote:

I think [a woman] would be more worried about what you thought of her than a [man] would ... Women tend to dwell on that sort of feeling more than a man does, in general. (practitioner, M)

suggests that women were generally more worried about what others thought of them. However, we would argue that these fears relate to different areas: women fear that their parenting is being judged while additionally men fear that they are being perceived as a possible risk to children.

Brief encounter

The duration and nature of the communication between the practitioner and the father tended to be short and purposeful.

The practitioners, who were overwhelmingly female, see fathers as being reluctant to involve themselves in an encounter with them – and the setting. A sample of practitioner-quotes illustrate this:

Men just tend to drop the child off and go. (CA)

[Dads] only talk when approached and don't volunteer stuff. (N)

It's very rare that you'll have a conversation with [a dad] unless you start the conversation going. (ibid)

One practitioner even offered a 'theory of men' as to why fathers said little in their encounters with practitioners in the setting:

I think that men are more comfortable with not saying anything. (S)

This behaviour of fathers was contrasted with the behaviour of mothers:

Yes, I think the difference is ... that mums will stand and talk to you [in] conversation ... you know, as a friend. (practitioner, T)

We can have some of the mums here talking ten to 15 minutes, but the dads don't seem to do it as much. (practitioner, C)

Compared to women, I notice men pick their children up quite a bit quicker. (ibid)

There may have been external reasons as to why the fathers had to leave the setting so quickly, but a number of quotes from the practitioners highlight fathers as feeling ill-at-ease and thus wanting to 'escape':

They can't relax. It's almost like they're on edge, like a cat on a hot tin roof, they tread carefully when they come in. (S)

And one practitioner's description summed up many practitioners' views of fathers:

...head down, trying not to look at anybody, no eye-contact ... (H)

An exception to this perspective seems to be the behaviour of a father who was identified as a full-time father who regularly came into the setting. Practitioners said of him (specifically and in that setting, alone), and generalised from him to all full-time fathers:

*He's the main carer and I think that's why he's very interested.
(N)*

I do find the ones that are at home constantly with their child are very interested in what their child is doing. (N)

Summarising, what these quotes seem to be saying is that this full-time father was more ready to spend time with his child in the setting because he seemed particularly interested in his child. There may have been completely different reasons, of course. Other (working) fathers may have been equally interested in their children but had to rush off to their jobs or elsewhere while this full-time father was not under a similar time pressure.

Familiarity

Fathers recognised that once they were a known quantity in the setting, difficulties that have been discussed above seemed to be less. This is illustrated by the following:

*I'm a familiar face...I guess if I was a dad who had come and I'd never been before, I'd probably feel a bit more uncomfortable.
(father,P)*

It's a familiarity thing, you know, if they are not familiar with you they won't approach you. (father,P)

The impact of not have a pre-existing relationship with the father was mentioned by a practitioner:

... if you know dad ... and you have introduced yourself, you tend to have a better relationship because you have met him from day one. ... If he comes in [for the first time] two or three months down the line, you probably [do] not have the same relationship ... (T)

However, it was not just being a familiar face that helped fathers feel at ease. One issue that was mentioned by practitioners was that fathers who did not visit the setting, did not know the routines, nor did they know what was expected of them. So,

... [if the dads] are not in so regularly ... they don't know our routine. (T)

Along the same lines, a practitioner in another setting gave an example of how she would help a father who was new to setting:

[If dad does not know the ropes] I try to empower [his] child to help, because [the child] knows exactly what to do and ... knows the routines and ... likes showing Daddy what to do ... That seems to work and puts male carers at ease. (S)

Male carers' and practitioners' ages and confidence

A number of practitioners mentioned the greater ease between themselves and older carers. The following quote specifies 'older fathers':

The older fathers, I would say, are more interested in the development side of things and I think they are more likely to query things with us. (M)

This greater ease was also mentioned by practitioners in relation to other older relatives. There is a generalised idea about communication expressed here:

We have a lot of grandfathers and great grandfathers that come in and it's easy, you know, the relationship is easier and a lot more responsive than [with] a lot of the mums. (B)

Granddads are, like, calmer as well. I think they have done it before with their children and they know partly what to expect. (H)

One quote suggested a more 'comfortable' relationship was because of the disparity in age between them and female staff:

It is because [grandfathers] are older and feel comfortable [that] there is none of the awkwardness with [younger] female staff. (S)

Another quote suggested that there was an ease in the relationship with an older brother – this could again have been highlighting the difference in age between the female staff and the male carer:

[His] brother brings him and [the brother] talks quite easily [with us]. (B)

Sexual Attraction

Sexual attraction between the practitioner and male carer during the encounter was mentioned by a minority of practitioner participants *after* the topic was raised in the focus group interviews. We consider this to be important as this issue was also mentioned by one father only, at one setting, talking about the difficulty in talking with mothers at the centre.

I tried to chat to one of the women [a mother] in the nursery and I will always remember this till the day I die. I tried to chat, just a general chat about the kids and things like that and a couple of minutes later I heard her talking to her friend and she was saying that weird bloke over there is trying to chat me up. (P)

This is the only comment from a male that has some sexual connotation and relates to how he believes his behaviour in that space is misconstrued by mothers who use the centre. On the other side, some practitioners commented

I can't explain it, it is awkward like you feel a bit more embarrassed and I don't know why, like you can't feel as relaxed as you would with a woman. (CA)

It can be quite difficult talking to someone you fancy especially when you are talking about their child. I suppose it is unprofessional in a way. (CA)

So, it may be perceived to be unprofessional but, importantly, acknowledged as a reality and one which was subject to some humour and irony

I feel as though we're skirting round it a little bit because it's perhaps a little awkward you know especially if you get a dad that comes in really confident and flirty, you think "God". I think you avoid the eye-contact thing. (B)

It's never interfered with how we interact with them because we are professional here and it would be something that I know from a manager's point of view that if I did see someone was acting, how would I put it, all girly and giggling and flicking their hair I would pull that member of staff aside and say you know, that is not a professional way to act, if you want to flirt with them, fair play, go and flirt with them out of my hours...I have never seen that, touch wood, I never will. (N)

You will always have somebody who sees a dad or mum come into the room and automatically welcome them with a smile or will chat with them, just make them feel relaxed...there is a huge amount of professionalism in the work that we do as well to make sure that that is given to all parents whether, you know, whether it's men or whether it is a lady carer. (B)

Researcher: *Do you think as practitioners you are different towards dads?*

Participant: *If he is good looking (lots of laughter from the group). (T)*

Practitioners' engagement in discussion and their reflection on practice

The majority of practitioners from all the settings actively took part in discussion in the focus groups; discussions were often lengthy and elaborate.

Taking a broader view, practitioners engaged in debates on a number of topics such as gender relations and stereotyping, cultural issues and diversity, family structure and social change and socio-economic backgrounds. Generally:

When I was training I came into contact with one male childcare worker....and I know when I relayed this back to people of a similar age the immediate response was, which I hate, is he gay? Well if he is or isn't gay what does it matter? What has that got to do with whether he works with children? But it seems to be a perception, I think, a completely wrong perception... (M)

Practitioners were also able to discuss their own and others' interpersonal communication skills in terms of how effectively they interacted with parents, grandparents and other relatives. They often mentioned being aware of their own and others' body language and recognising the gendered nature of their relationships:

I have noticed as well that if mum and dad do come in at the same time I do tend to talk to mum, like give mum more eye contact. (H)

It is almost like we have got the ideas up there, what we should be like as a society but actually when you get down to it, a lot of the time these older ideas [about gender roles] are still around aren't they? You know we are liberated but we are still confined by our sex roles, aren't we? (H)

Where female practitioners discussed male practitioners it was in a positive light, with a particular mention of male role models and what they perceived to be the positive impact of male practitioners on children's lives. They also acknowledged the difficulties males have working in this environment:

I do feel that he has a bit of a raw deal, because he was fantastic with the kids and everything, but like when he was expressing himself to parents or other members of staff, they literally just kind of waved him off and said 'no'. (CA)

A recurring theme that came out of discussions also was practitioners' belief that experience is the key factor in determining practitioners' levels of confidence and quality of the encounter with fathers. Some typical accounts are:

I think it is experience as well. I have been here eight years now and I have had a lot of experience with males and females and maybe at first I was a bit embarrassed but it is just part of my job to meet both parents' needs. (CA)

I think it's maturity and experience isn't it?... there is a huge learning curve you know, working with other professionals, working with fathers, mothers, building relationships and just getting a good form of communication between the parents and that does come with maturity and experience. (B)

While experience was often mentioned, training or reflecting on practice was never mentioned as a means of promoting skills and confidence which may lead to a change in practice.

Reflection by type of setting

In terms of comparing the level, depth, type and quality of discussions and reflection across the settings, practitioners from children's centres were more likely to engage in generally high levels of debate and reflection on practice (see examples below) while the level of engagement in discussion from participants from the private sector was variable. It was in this sector, according to the impression of the interviewer, where we found our youngest participants; common-sense suggests these practitioners have less experience and have had the least opportunity to engage in continuing professional development. It was in these interviews (with these youngest practitioners), where responses to our questions were limited. This can be seen in the following two limited exchanges:

Interviewer: *As a centre do you do anything to encourage dads to take part in activities with their child?*

Respondent: *No.*

Interviewer: *Is this anything that has ever been discussed?*

Respondent: *No.*

Interviewer: *This is not an issue then?*

Respondent: *No. (CA)*

There was some evidence from an interview with another member of staff that suggested that engaging with fathers was an issue staff had discussed and there was enthusiasm within the setting about some local initiatives.

Also, another limited response can be seen in the following exchange:

Interviewer: *Is there an issue about men working with very young children, do you think?*

Respondent: *No.*

Interviewer: *Are men viewed in different ways as carers do you think?*

Respondent: *I've never thought about it. (CA)*

While a much more detailed and contracting response can be found in the following:

If you try to act as normal as possible, like you would when the mums are around, ... act as normal as possible when the dads are around then I don't think it is a problem. I think if you go out of your way to make things harder then. That is where the awkwardness comes from, because I could be talking to the [female] parent, then if I go to the male parent and I am completely different, then they are going to think 'why are you completely different with me than you are to a female?' (H)

Discussion

In our Discussion we intend to address a number of different issues. First, we evaluate our methodology, we try to give meaning to what practitioners say and we have attempted, in some instances, to give meaning to the things that that practitioners did not say – in line with Holliday's concept of managing the subjectivity (Holliday 2007).

Evaluating our Methodology

If we were to replicate this study, we would have done many things the same. However, in terms of data collection, we would have additionally done the following:

- Put a greater focus on gathering the views of a larger number of fathers. From the outset we recognised that it would be more challenging to get views from fathers than from practitioners. As we had only been able to speak to a small number of fathers, we did boost their number by asking four fathers who had seen an interim email report of the project to complete a short open-ended questionnaire (three completed the questionnaire). Thus we added a new methodology to our enquiry.
- Collected additional data on our participants, such as age, ethnicity, and (for practitioners) details of their qualifications and the length of

time they had been working in the early years sector. This would then help us put into a broader context some of the things that people said (and did not say) that we have not been able to thoroughly investigate.

- Taken greater account of the fact that we collected data *away* from the context upon which we were focusing – what we had, therefore, were the thoughts of respondents based on their impressions and experiences *after* the event. We felt that we needed to be aware of this, in a sense to safeguard and be healthily sceptical about the validity of what was said.

Secondly, we now address some Discussion themes:

Social Change

What we think our participants have reflected in their comments is the tension between changing social attitudes that support active father involvement with their children and structures that continue to shore up the gendered division of labour. So, on the one hand, NatCen News (2008:1) reports that

...our beliefs about gender are changing. Among men only 17% think it is a 'man's job' to earn money and a 'woman's job' to look after the home and family, down from 32% in 1989

whilst, on the other hand, fathers and practitioners report, through their comments, that the early years arena is still a 'female space' and that fathers are not fully welcome there – and this is backed up by sources cited in the literature review. We conclude that the culture may have shifted in acknowledging father involvement in the private sphere of the family, but it is still struggling with the concept in the public sphere of the early years setting (if not more widely in family services).

Fathers feeling intimidated

Many of the practitioners interviewed spoke of fathers feeling intimidated when they came to the early years setting – this fits in with the findings of other research which has identified barriers to father inclusion in the 'female space' of the early years settings (Lloyd *et al* 2003, Kahn 2005). As a result of an awareness of the possibility of fathers feeling intimidated, these practitioners talked of making an effort to reach out to fathers who came to the setting in order to help them overcome any discomfort that *they imagined* the fathers might be feeling.

A number of fathers in the conversations talked about their experience of being on the receiving end of the same situation, saying that they felt that nobody made the first move to talk to them. Furthermore, they felt that it was they who had to consistently overcome any hurdles if they wanted to enter into communication with either practitioners or mothers. The fathers talked as if they felt separated or cut off

from female practitioners and mothers. So, we have two opposing views of the same situation.

Although this research did not correlate whether the practitioners who reached out to fathers and the fathers who felt they had to make the first move came from the same settings, it would be useful if further research could explore whether there is a direct correlation between practitioners reaching out to fathers and fathers feeling less isolated. Indeed, do other factors impact on the fathers' sense of isolation, for example, ethnic or social grouping? Are particular ways of reaching out more effective than others in particular contexts?.

Familiarity

Both practitioners and fathers recognised that the level of familiarity that a father had with the setting impacted on how at ease he felt in that setting – fathers and practitioners, when mentioning familiarity, included both knowledge of each other and of the routines of the setting. We conclude from this that efforts to increase father involvement in early years settings need to increase the level and depth of contact of fathers with both the setting and the practitioners (and in fact the same is likely to hold true with any group that has minimal contact with the setting). Ways of increasing familiarity might include:

- ensuring that fathers, as well as mothers, are invited as *named individuals* to prospective parents sessions and that such sessions should be seen both as an opportunity for practitioners to start the process of getting to know the fathers as well as introducing fathers to any setting routines they are likely to encounter. Innovative ways need to be used to encourage fathers (as well as mothers) to attend such sessions – such as holding them at the weekend or at other times when fathers are more likely to be around (we recognise that this will vary from one locality to another) – and booklets (which, among other things, introduce practitioners and setting routines) can be given to all fathers and mothers, especially those who are not able to attend such a session.
- further, making a point not only of greeting fathers at the door of the setting every time they come, but also trying to 'engage' with them, recognising that this could play a part in helping fathers to feel more welcomed and less unfamiliar with the setting. This may be important, whether fathers appear to respond to practitioners or not, recognising that the process of building familiarity can include many such exchanges to which fathers may not appear to respond.
- when fathers enter settings, perhaps to help settle their children when they drop them off at the start of a session, intentional attempts could be made by practitioners to help fathers participate in routines with which they may not be familiar while taking care

that they are not made to feel stupid for not being familiar with such simple routines (recognising that the dominant model of masculinity in our society makes it particularly difficult for men to show their lack of knowledge).

Engaging with all fathers

Practitioner Characteristics

Practitioners identified characteristics in themselves that enabled them to engage more easily with fathers; these were: their own age and experience. The greater their age, the more effectively they felt they could relate to fathers. Although the practitioners did not clarify what they meant by experience, we understood them to mean that they had worked for a number of years in childcare and thus saw themselves as 'experienced'.

Some practitioners showed through their comments that they had an understanding and awareness of barriers that individual fathers might face in their interactions in the 'female space' of the setting. We asked ourselves how they had gained such. We imagined that they used all their life experiences (gained through their 'age') and not just their experience in childcare to help them reflect on the difficulties that fathers may face in relating with a predominantly female service. We also imagined that they had reflected on the individual interactions they had with fathers in early years settings over the years. Thus we surmised that an awareness of gender issues coupled with life experience and having worked in childcare for a number of years enabled them to develop their own strategies to help fathers. We discuss this further.

Father Characteristics

Practitioners also identified that *some* fathers and other male carers were easier to engage with than others. The male carers who practitioners found easiest to relate to seemed to fall into categories where there was a larger age differential between the practitioner and the carer; examples of such carers were: older fathers and grandfathers, and also older siblings. We discuss this further in the section on Gendered Relationship.

Practitioners also identified the personality of the father as impacting on how well they could relate him. Confident and outgoing fathers were perceived as being more likely to engage in conversations with practitioners, and thus easier to relate to. Our concern was with what happens to the many fathers who do not fit into the 'easy to relate to' categories because they may have needs too – and possibly greater ones than the fathers with whom practitioners have good rapport. Young fathers and fathers lacking self-esteem come to mind; however, the list could be endless. Fathers are not, of course, a homogenous group and it is important to

recognise that differences in religion, culture and ethnicity can make it harder for practitioners to relate to some fathers.

We felt that early years training, both initial and in-service, should address practitioner engagement with *fathers* and in particular the issues addressed in this section of the discussion. Training can develop practitioner awareness and skills to specifically address such additional barriers to father engagement that have been identified in this research.

The Quality and Dimensions of the Encounter

This section introduces some broader dimensions affecting the father/practitioner encounter; the skills and experience of the practitioner, some thoughts about reflectivity and the gendered aspects of the encounter.

Expertise of the Practitioner

Taking into account the views (mostly female) practitioners and fathers have of each other, as found in this research, it is suggested that the expertise of practitioners is a key determinant of the quality of the encounter. This therefore raises questions about the training opportunities available to practitioners with regard to the development of their interpersonal communication skills and levels of self-confidence. In general it raises questions about the quality of the early years workforce which the Government (DfES 2006) recognises, using evidence from EPPE (Sylva *et al* 2004), as a significant factor involved in providing positive outcomes for children and their families.

What opportunities exist for early years workers to enhance their communication skills and to reflect upon the relational aspects of their work with children and families? The relatively new *National Occupational Standards for Children's Care, Learning and Development at NVQ level 2*, for example, does include a mandatory module entitled *Contribute to Positive Relationships* including a requirement to provide evidence of responding to and communicating with adults (CWDC 2004). However, it is suggested that here lies the difficulty with competency-based training schemes, ones that are usually based on the production of written evidence and verbal questioning from an assessor. It is suggested that successful practice actually requires opportunities for widening one's knowledge of self and others and ongoing opportunities for critical self-reflection and constructive feedback.

Tarrant (2000) suggests that any discussion about the notion of competence involves epistemological, ethical and political considerations. An exclusively vocational curriculum, he suggests, reflects a value position as much as any curriculum choice in education. It harnesses individuals to the demands of the economic system rather than providing them with more sophisticated ways of '*...knowing and analysing the society around them*' (Tarrant 2000:80). He suggests that:

It denies any further development of the student's conceptual framework, whereby he or she can increase their capacity for reflecting on the world and their own future. (ibid:81)

Reflectiveness of the Practitioner and Us

There are some lessons here for us as educators of (potential) practitioners, prompted by this situation, reflective practice and our research experiences here.

The benefits of reflective practice are well documented (Lifelong Learning UK Professional Standards 2006, Moon 2005) and these are précised by Peter Scales (2008). In particular, there are lessons for tutors:

Reflective teachers are more likely to develop reflective learners. If we practice reflection we can more effectively encourage learners to reflect on, analyse, evaluate and improve their own learning. These are key skills in active learning and the development of independent learners. (Scales 2008:14/15)

Without going into the detail, there are a few messages here; one about positive dispositions, a desire to learn and find out (Brownlee and Berthelsen 2006) and element of 'time' (Favre 2008).

In a sense, it is one of our advanced aims to promote an environment where students of early childhood can move along this continuum through deeper collaborative reflective opportunities and dimensions. Some authors are grappling with the challenges students have in their efforts to become more critically reflective. (Papatheodorou and Moyles 2009)

Reflective Practice in Practice

Returning, then, to the practice environment. What opportunities exist for early years workers to enhance and reflect on their practice and receive feedback from others? Indeed, what opportunities exist for such workers to develop reflective skills? When and where do opportunities exist for all members of staff to find space to reflect on their work with young children and their families as well as well as reflecting upon their own relations with one another and the quality of their team working? The success of the current professionalisation agenda (CWDC 2004), it is suggested, will in part be judged on the quality of the children's workforce in full day care settings who currently have the lowest qualifications when compared to those working in the maintained sector (Cooke & Lawton 2008). Without opportunities for practitioners to move beyond competence, to develop and grow their confidence and have opportunities to explore and reflect upon the relational aspects of their work with others, then efforts to raise the quality of the workforce may be thwarted.

It is suggested that our research findings add weight to the views of other writers (Manning-Morton 2006, Moyles 2001, Osgood 2006) in that the relational aspect of the work of early years practitioners plays a significant role in their day-to-day work in connecting with children, parents and colleagues. Early years professionalism unlike many other constructions of professionalism, it is suggested, has an important emotional and affective dimension, a dimension that should be embraced and recognised during this period of development towards professional status. Manning-Morton (2006:50) suggests that:

Developing self-knowledge as well as knowledge about children has to take place in an atmosphere of trust and mutual respect with people you come to know well over time. By providing a training context that is process as well as content focused, a module of relationship-based learning will reflect positive early years practice.

Gendered relationship and other dimensions

Some practitioners generally were prepared to acknowledge the existence of sexual feelings in their dealings with fathers, however they were very relaxed in their discussions about the role of grandfathers in the setting and a number acknowledged they found it easier to talk to confident, older fathers – we interpreted this in part to a feeling of security and lack of ‘sexual frisson’ when there was a greater age difference between practitioner and father.

To acknowledge or recognise flirtatious behaviour or sexual attraction was seen by a few practitioners as unprofessional and younger practitioners, as noted and observed by the researchers, were less likely to engage in any discussion about the topic of communication with fathers all-round. The researchers’ impressions suggest that, seemingly older, more experienced practitioners were much more likely to bring ‘sexual frisson’ up as an area of debate.

Looking at gender from a wider perspective, we consider this possibility of sexual feeling as one aspect of gendered relations in this context. The early years’ setting, is an interesting site or space for such. On the one hand our findings suggest that fathers view that environment as a female space while female practitioners find it a space in which certain males are easier to engage with than others.

The way in which gender operates at different levels and interactions within organisations may provide practitioners with opportunities to consider the development of their own professional identities and what they bring to their relationships with males (whether as colleagues or users) in the workplace. Davies (1996:673) notes:

We need to work with gender in a more analytic way and to work through more fully what it means to claim that social institutions,

including institutions of work organisation, are saturated with gender and that gender is constitutive of organisational relations.

Conclusion and Ways Forward

Our exploratory research focusing on the informal interactions between practitioners and fathers in early years settings has thrown up a number of issues that we believe require further investigation. Rather than making specific recommendations for ways of potentially increasing father involvement in early years settings – recognising that our sample has been small and self-selecting – we have chosen to highlight what we think those areas might include:

- Further research with practitioners that captures age, experience and qualification level in order to identify and comment upon professional practice needs particularly in relation to interpersonal communication, levels of confidence and critical reflexivity.
- Further qualitative exploration of the relationship between practitioner awareness of potential issues for fathers and father responsiveness. In other words, do fathers feel more welcome in early years settings where practitioners are more aware of 'gender', and as a result take action to address fathers' sense of being 'outsiders'?
- Increasing the recognition by practitioners of the value of initial and in-service training on engaging with fathers and not just 'parents'.
- Recognising the importance for practitioners of reflecting on the way they reach out (or do not reach out) to fathers and that this is affected by the personal 'baggage' that they carry and related to this...
- ...Practitioners to consciously recognise that the individual characteristics of the father (such as his confidence or shyness) are likely to affect the way he chooses to involve himself (or not) in the early years setting, and that practitioners may need to make special efforts to engage with fathers who are 'harder to reach'.
- Further research into the interplay between wider cultural issues such as accepted notions of masculinity (and femininity) and how these impact on the involvement of fathers in the female space of the early years setting (popularly one talks about 'masculinity' and femininity but it is perhaps more useful to recognise multiple 'masculinities' and 'femininities').
- Is what fathers report and do and what practitioners do and report (in the everyday encounter) the same thing?
- Are strategies to engage fathers more "successful" if they take local circumstances (in it's broadest sense [social grouping, culture, ethnicity] as well as context-related issues [like having a particularly vocal male committee member, male staff] into account? – this may also include specific areas, like, for example, domestic violence or drug misuse.

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