

# Fathers in Sure Start

by

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**Where names are cited in quotations in this report they have been changed to preserve the anonymity of respondents and their children.**

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# Fathers in Sure Start

## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

### INTRODUCTION

This report presents the findings of the second themed study in the Implementation Module of the National Evaluation of Sure Start. The aim of this study was to provide an in-depth, largely qualitative account of the nature and extent of men's and fathers' involvement in selected Sure Start local programmes. As a themed study, the aim was not to measure the effectiveness of individual programmes but rather to describe the role of men and fathers in selected programmes and identify successful strategies for engaging fathers.

The objectives of the study were to assess:

- ? attempts to involve fathers and the extent to which service providers and parents themselves felt that these were realised;
- ? whether and how programmes differed in their approaches to involving fathers;
- ? the experiences and attitudes of service-users and staff experiences towards men's involvement in Sure Start;
- ? whether men in Sure Start local programmes responded to encouragement to participate (albeit often early in the development of such services for fathers);
- ? the roles of fathers in Sure Start local programme areas, both in their families and in terms of their involvement in Sure Start;
- ? men's feelings about Sure Start services and services for fathers;
- ? the implications of focusing attention on fathers in Sure Start local programmes in terms of individual projects and intervention/support structures as a whole.

### METHODOLOGY

The study built on the variation in father participation between programmes identified in the first Implementation Module National Survey in 2001. Results from this survey of local round 1 and round 2 programmes (N=118, 92% response rate) revealed that 36% of programmes were classified as having 'low' provision for fathers, 52% 'as having moderate/ intermediate' provision and 12% 'high' levels of provision. A sample of 25 was selected from each of

the 'high' and 'low' provision groups in order to compare variation in father involvement. The study was conducted in two phases:

Phase 1: Interviews with 73 programme staff at 25 selected Sure Start local programmes.

Phase 2: Interviews with 42 fathers/male and mothers/female carers from 5 of the 25 'Phase 1' programmes.

The study used a mixed method approach to information, data collection and analysis.

- ? Qualitative analysis of in-depth interviews
- ? Informal observation
- ? Secondary analysis of NESS Implementation study national survey data
- ? Collection and analysis of programme level quantitative data

## **KEY FINDINGS**

### **Attitudes towards father involvement and male involvement in Sure Start**

The majority of programme staff and service users stated that they welcomed more father and male staff involvement in Sure Start local programmes. Typically, staff said that they wanted to encourage the idea that Sure Start was there to support fathers as well as mothers, and discourage the notion that Sure Start was only for women and children. Key reasons for wanting to encourage greater father involvement included:

- ? the potential benefit to children of being presented with positive male role models (mainly reported by mothers);
- ? the potential importance for child development of supporting fathers in their parenting (mainly reported by programme staff);
- ? the benefits to children and families of fathers participating in Sure Start sessions (reported by fathers, mother and programme staff).

Although the majority of staff stated that greater father involvement in Sure Start was desirable, interview data suggest that involving fathers may be peripheral to the work of some Sure Start programmes. This was particularly the case early on in programme development when concerns about getting the programme operational sometimes led to the sidelining of initiatives to encourage father involvement.

A small number of staff members voiced concerns about the reaction of female service-users to male presence in Sure Start buildings and sessions (e.g. in cases of domestic violence). However, other staff cited domestic violence as reason to include fathers so as to address violent and abusive behaviour in the family when it occurs

## **Fathers and Family Life in Sure Start local programme areas**

One of the clearest findings to emerge from interviews with fathers in this study was the importance they placed on fatherhood. All of the fathers interviewed said that being a father was important to them and that their children were a vital part of their lives. Fathers generally took part in all aspects of childcare, though usually to a lesser degree than mothers. According to parents, long working hours and maternal gatekeeping had a constraining effect on some fathers' participation in childcare.

### **Father/male carer involvement in Sure Start**

The majority of programme staff stated that there were generally low levels of father and male carer involvement in their Sure Start programme. A key theme was the difficulty that they had in engaging with local fathers. Sure Start activities and sessions were usually attended by all-female service-users.

When fathers were present in Sure Start programmes their engagement tended to centre around, and was sometimes limited to, certain types of activities. In particular, fathers' preference for fun and active sessions over discussion-based ones was a recurrent theme in staff interviews. Staff at stated that it was easier to involve fathers in outdoor, active, Funday-type activities than in indoor sessions with children or in sessions related to parenting skills.

Father involvement in programme management was higher: forty four per cent of selected programmes had at least one father involved in management at some level. Where fathers were involved with Sure Start management, it tended to be at a parent forum or similar level, rather than board level.

### **Male staff involvement in Sure Start**

Programme staff typically reported that there were few male members of staff working at their local Sure Start programme and the majority of managers had found it difficult to recruit male staff for childcare positions. Where male staff were present, very few were employed in roles working directly with children. The majority tended to be concentrated in traditionally 'male' positions (for example, as caretakers or handymen).

### **Barriers to father involvement in Sure Start local programmes**

The interview data suggest that fathers in Sure Start local programme areas may be committed to being fathers, play a key role in the lives of their children, yet tend not to engage with Sure Start programmes. A number of barriers to fathers' involvement in Sure Start were identified:

- ? predominantly female environment/lack of male presence;
- ? Sure Start opening hours and fathers' employment hours;

- ? traditional, gendered attitude towards childcare and male-female roles: 'mother knows best';
- ? female-centred orientation of services;
- ? lack of knowledge about Sure Start.

### **Programme approaches to father and male carer involvement in Sure Start**

Five practice components differentiated those programme with high provision for fathers, so tending to promote greater father involvement:

- ? Early identification of fathers as a priority.
- ? Programme-wide commitment to father involvement.
- ? A strategy for involving fathers.
- ? Provision of services specifically for fathers.
- ? Presence of a dedicated staff member (often a dads' worker) for encouraging father involvement

The provision of services specifically for fathers and the presence of a fathers' worker appear from programme staff accounts to be particularly useful ways of encouraging father involvement. Some programmes have provided services exclusively for fathers or men and children, in the hope that they would act as a "stepping stone" for fathers to become involved in integrated services for families. Often, fathers' workers facilitated the delivery of these services. Staff at programmes with a dads' worker typically reported higher levels of engagement with local fathers than at those without dads' workers.

### **CONCLUSIONS – Policy and practice recommendations**

This study revealed a strong maternal focus in service management and delivery. Programmes welcomed increased involvement from fathers and male staff but were often unclear about how best to pursue this aim. However, a small number of programmes in this study used innovative strategies to involve fathers. Policy and practice recommendations are listed below.

- ? Increasing the visibility of male workers at all levels to make the Sure Start environment male friendly.
- ? Early programme focus on involving fathers where father involvement is deemed desirable.
- ? Collection of quantitative information on father attendance at Sure Start activities to provide a baseline and to monitor progress.



- ? Broadening programme 'office hours' opening to include evenings and weekends.
- ? Developing outreach Sure Start strategies to engage fathers pre-natally and around childbirth.
- ? Increasing provision of 'father-focused' services - building on men's interests (e.g., carpentry, sports or 'fathering').
- ? Guidance for programmes on strategies/approaches for encouraging father involvement in collaboration with specialist fathering practitioners and voluntary sector partners.
- ? Developing sensitivity to the needs of different groups within the community of fathers: lone fathers, sole carers, estranged or separated fathers, disabled fathers, fathers working shifts, fathers from minority ethnic and faith groups. Fathers with differing experiences and different requirements may respond best to services tailored for them.
- ? Utilization of mothers/female partners as potentially important facilitators of fathers' involvement in Sure Start activities.
- ? Use of mixed gender practitioner group leaders to model collaborative working between men and women.
- ? Carrying out local evaluations of the impact of father involvement in Sure Start on child, maternal and paternal well-being.

# **1. THE NATIONAL EVALUATION OF SURE START AND THIS SECOND THEMED STUDY: FATHERS IN SURE START**

## **1.1 The National Evaluation of Sure Start**

The National Evaluation of Sure Start comprises five integrated components: an implementation evaluation, an impact evaluation, a local community context analysis, a cost-benefit analysis and an evaluation of support for local programmes.

Themed evaluations, of which the present study is the second, are one of the three methodological components of the implementation evaluation. The other components are a national survey of the first 260 Sure Start local programmes and in-depth case studies of 26 programmes. While the national survey of local programmes allows for a national overview and the in-depth case studies a more detailed look at the implementation process, themed studies aim to “investigate local policy and practice issues within a purposive sample of programmes in order to explore a number of overarching themes” (National Evaluation of Sure Start, 2001, p.16) which may not necessarily be common to all local programmes. Thus, themed evaluations are a flexible “component” of the implementation study and allow for new issues to be explored as and when the need is identified.

Themed studies aim to:

- ? address gaps in data from the national survey and the in-depth case studies;
- ? examine issues that are agreed to be Sure Start priorities;
- ? examine issues that are particular to groups of Sure Start programmes (but which do not apply to all of them);
- ? examine areas of implementation which are recognised as problematic in local programmes generally, (for example, issues of confidentiality; child protection issues);
- ? to identify and follow-up any unforeseen issues for policy and practice that emerge during the six years of the National Evaluation of Sure Start.

(Source: National Evaluation of Sure Start, 2001)

It should be noted that this report relates to Sure Start local programmes in rounds 1 and 2 only, that is 128 programmes in total.

## **1.2 The Second Themed Study**

The choice of fathers for the second themed study was in response to a range of factors, in particular, an early awareness within the Sure Start Unit that father involvement may be low and a wish to share effective strategies to promote greater involvement across local programmes. Confirmation of the

relatively low levels of father participation in Sure Start programmes and the need to address the issue emerged from the first themed study: *Getting Sure Start Started* (National Evaluation of Sure Start, 2002b). This study showed a maternal tendency in Sure Start services, despite best intentions locally and Sure Start national Guidance suggesting a broader service delivery perspective.

The Guidance documents issued to help local Partnerships plan first and second round Sure Start programmes contained advice about including parents in every aspect of planning, managing and running the services. Programmes were expected to *“Involve parents, grandparents and other carers in ways that build on their existing strengths,”* and to *“avoid stigma by ensuring that all local families are able to use Sure Start services”*. How this was to be done was left to Partnerships to decide, though the Guidance did include examples of ways in which services might be developed, which illustrated parental involvement – as ‘community parents’ in one example. The examples were not gender specific and the Guidance refers to ‘parents’ throughout. (Sure Start: a guide for second-wave programmes: DfEE 1999)

In exploring fathers’ involvement in Sure Start, the present study adds to the limited amount of knowledge gained about father involvement from the first Implementation Module’s National Survey (2001) of round 1 and 2 programmes. This survey provided an early snapshot of service development in the Sure Start initiative.

Data from the first Implementation Module’s National Survey, completed by 93% of programme managers, show that indeed fathers were a significant target group for local Sure Start programmes. When programme managers were asked to place the importance of their work with fathers on a seven point scale (with 1 equalling ‘not very important’ to 7 equalling ‘extremely important’) the majority of the responses to this global question were at the high end (see Table 1.1) :

**Table 1.1: Programme responses to National Implementation Survey question indicating importance of fathers N=117**

SCORE	N/A*	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Number of programmes	26	0	1	5	8	17	14	46

\*= No father provision to rate

From a broader perspective, when put alongside other target support services to families, service delivery to fathers was perceived as of middle range importance, placed above, for example, developing new family centres and telephone lines, but below parenting programmes in general and the extension of existing home health visiting (given the highest importance in 2001).

When managers’ responses to a series of specific questions about fathers’ work were assessed, the actual level of provision was uneven. For example:

? 53% of programmes had made special provision to reach fathers;

- ? 54% of programmes had a key worker with responsibility for fathers;
- ? 76% reported that they provided some named service specifically for fathers

The NESS Implementation team devised a measure of the relative operational provision of services to fathers in programmes based upon responses to a variety of implementation survey questions. As described in Methods Appendix A, five question areas made up this measure: the number of fathers contributing to local programme management; the degree of gender sensitive advertising; the extent of provision for fathers as a hard-to-reach group; presence of a father's worker; activities for fathers or a fathers' group. Using this measure, 36% of programmes were classified as showing 'low' involvement of fathers, 52% as showing 'moderate/ intermediate' involvement and 12% 'high' involvement. In the current study this variation in father participation between programmes was used as a foundation to explore the range of roles of men and fathers in Sure Start local programmes and to identify successful strategies used by some programmes for engaging fathers.

## **1.2 Aims of the Second Themed Study**

The aim of this second themed study was to provide an in-depth, largely qualitative account of the nature and extent of men's and fathers' involvement in selected Sure Start programmes. As a themed study, the aim was not to measure the effectiveness of individual programmes but rather to describe the role of men and fathers in selected programmes and identify successful strategies for engaging fathers.

The objectives of the study were to explore the following areas:

- ? Whether men in Sure Start local programme areas responded to encouragement to participate (albeit often early in the development of such services for fathers) in a Sure Start local programme.
- ? The origins/aims/objectives of such attempts to involve fathers and the extent to which service providers and parents themselves felt that these were realised.
- ? Whether and how programmes differed in their approaches to involving fathers.
- ? Service-users' and staff experiences of and attitudes towards men's involvement in Sure Start.
- ? The roles of fathers in Sure Start local programme areas, both in their families and in terms of their involvement in Sure Start.
- ? Men's feelings about Sure Start services and services for fathers.

- ? The implications of focusing attention on fathers in Sure Start projects in terms of individual projects and intervention/support structures as a whole.
- ? The identification of good practice in working with fathers in all these areas.

As discussed in Chapters 2 and 3 there is academic debate about how father involvement can be conceptualised. In terms of this study, father involvement in Sure Start is operationally defined as fathers' participation in local programme activities such as attendance at group sessions, meetings with a professional or involvement in a management group.

## **2. THE POLICY AND RESEARCH CONTEXT**

Since the first wave of fatherhood research in the late 1970s and early 1980s the role of fathers in family life has been under debate and scrutiny (Lamb, 1976; Lewis, 1986; McKee and O'Brien 1982; Lewis and O'Brien 1986). While some commentators portray a model of 'fatherhood in transition' through the emergent caring father ideal (Bjornberg, 1992), others focus on the idea of 'fatherhood in crisis', a state where men are unable to either care or provide cash for their families (Hobson, 2002). In this chapter we review the policy context and research evidence on fatherhood in Britain.

### **Policy Context**

Family support services operate within a governmental framework. The current Labour government's family policy agenda (Supporting Families, 1998), framed by family support on the one hand and child poverty reduction on the other, implies an endorsement of men's child-caring and breadwinner responsibilities. In an early Home Office Ministerial Seminar on fatherhood (Home Office, 1998: 3) the Minister's opening comments stressed that "Probably the single most effective way of helping young men was by encouraging the involvement of their fathers in their lives".

Since the cross-Government Ministerial Group on the Family was formed in 1998 several practice and policy developments have been promoted to support involved fathering, including: programmes supporting contact between fathers and children; young father's parenting programmes; and the development of contact centres providing places for children to meet with non-resident fathers. Similarly a raft of work-life balance initiatives have been developed to support employed fathers, with the symbolic arrival of paid paternity leave in April 2003. As Clarke and O'Brien (2003: 6) argue: "A policy turn to support fathers in general in the both their child-caring and breadwinner functions appears to be emerging although a preoccupation with 'deadbeat' and 'deadbroke' dads remains, reflecting perhaps the diversity of fathers in contemporary Britain."

Changes in employment and family structure and the growing multi-ethnic and multi-faith character of contemporary Britain are creating new socio-economic and cultural contexts for negotiating what it means to be a father. In every-day life traditional dimensions of the good father, such as providing for the material welfare of the family, take place alongside practices, previously considered solely maternal, such as bathing infants. British fatherhood is therefore in the process of reconstruction and transformation.

### **2.2 Research Context: The Economic and Emotional Significance of Fathers**

Research suggests that despite cultural ideals of caring fatherhood, father as provider and breadwinner remain powerful sources of identity, particularly for working class men (Warin, Solomon, Lewis and Langford, 1999). While the role of fathers in family life continues to be debated, there is growing research evidence to show that economic and emotional support fathers provide for

children influences children's lives

### **2.2.1 Economic Support**

Studies in the U.S.A show that for two-parent families, fathers' earnings are positively associated with children's educational attainment and their psychological well being, even when mothers' earnings are controlled (Marsiglio et al. 2000). A UK review of evidence also indicated that fathers' earnings are uniquely linked to many positive outcomes for children, even when mothers' earnings are taken into consideration. (e.g. Burghes, Clarke and Cronin, 1997). For non-resident fathers, the amount of child support paid to children is positively associated with educational attainment and psychological well being.

It should be remembered that for men, parenthood is associated with higher levels of economic activity whereas for women, parenthood is associated with lower levels of economic activity. In 2001, 89 per cent of fathers were in employment compared with 76 per cent of men without children. By contrast, 67 per cent of mothers were in employment compared with 74 per cent of women without children (O'Brien and Shemilt, 2003).

### **2.2.2 Psychological Support**

In general, psychologists suggest that the gender of the parent is less important in affecting child development than broader parenting style. A review of 72 US studies of father-child relationships in two-parent families (Marsiglio at al. 2000) concludes that child outcomes are best when fathers and mothers show an 'authoritative' parenting style. This is one where parents:

- ? spend time with the child;
- ? provide emotional support;
- ? give every-day assistance;
- ? monitor the child's behaviour;
- ? consistently use non-coercive discipline.

Buchanan and Flouri's (2002) new British evidence examines the impact of father involvement on later adult outcomes (through a secondary analysis of 17,000 children in the National Child Development Study born in the UK in 1958 and followed up at ages 7, 11, 16, 23 and 33). The key findings from the study show that when fathers were involved with their children when the child was 7 years of age:

- ? there was a positive relationship to their later educational attainment;
- ? children were less likely to be in trouble with the police;
- ? there was association with good parent-child relationships in adolescence and also with later satisfactory partnerships in adult life;
- ? there was protection against an adult experience of homelessness in sons of manual workers;
- ? children in separated families were protected against later mental health problems.

'Involved' fathers were defined as those who took an equal role to the mother in the management of their children, were interested in their education, and spent time going on outings with their children. They included resident and non-resident and biological and non-biological fathers.

Buchanan and Flouri also found continuity over the life course, in that early father involvement with a child was associated with continuing involvement with that child throughout childhood and adolescence (Flouri and Buchanan, 2003). For non-resident fathers, parenting style is a more important predictor than frequency of visits of good child outcomes (e.g., reports by the parent or child that the child has fewer symptoms of psychological disturbance), especially if 'authoritative' parenting is shown in the context of a co-operative relationship between the parents (Lamb, 2001).

Short term early interventions with fathers have provided little evidence that they increase paternal involvement with children or more skilled interactions by fathers (e.g., Belsky, 1985). However, longer intervention suggested below show different results and Sure Start provides possibilities for more sustained support for men as fathers. The evidence suggests that once they become involved with their babies men's involvement shows considerable stability, at least over the first three years (e.g., Lamb, et al., 1988). Such involvement is important because evidence is emerging that suggests that father-child interactions at the age of 2 predict the child's feelings of security at age 16, while mother-child play and parental measures of attachment in the early years do not (Grosman et al., 2002).

The data show, however, that not all men provide a secure and healthy environment for their children's development. Phares (1996) has charted a series of studies that show that a range of negative developmental outcomes are associated with poor parenting or psychopathology in the father. Such patterns are replicated in studies which look explicitly at fathers' antisocial behaviours (Jafee et al., 2003) or their symptoms of psychological disturbance (Leinonen et al, 2003). However, singling out fathers in this way often distracts attention from the fact that a larger body of evidence which shows that:

? the relationship between the parents is as important as parent-child relationships in influencing children's adjustment (reviewed in Lamb & Lewis, in press);

? negative maternal influences are equally in evidence (Leinonen et al, 2003).

Such studies could be seen as an impetus to exclude men from Sure Start programmes on the grounds that men are damaging to children, particularly from impoverished circumstances. However, an alternative way of interpreting these findings (and one that is voiced by programme managers in this report – see Chapter 5) is that the very association between paternal mental health problems and child problems accentuates the need to work with fathers within Sure Start.

The inclusion of fathers as well as mothers in developmental psychology



research designs is beginning to highlight the interaction of mother and father influences on children's lives. For instance, Dunn et al. (2000) in their longitudinal study of parent-child relationships have shown that children are at risk, or benefit, from the life histories both parents bring to their parenting, summarized as the 'double dose' impact. That is, positive and negative dimensions of fathers' and mothers' early lives can jointly influence their children's well being. Affectionate relations between fathers and children are more common in families where fathers and mothers have fewer life course changes (e.g., relationship changes, negative life events). Negative influences on children are amplified when both parents experience adverse life histories suggesting that the quality of fathering as well as mothering mediates children's psychological outcomes (Dunn et al., 2000, p.965 - p.966).

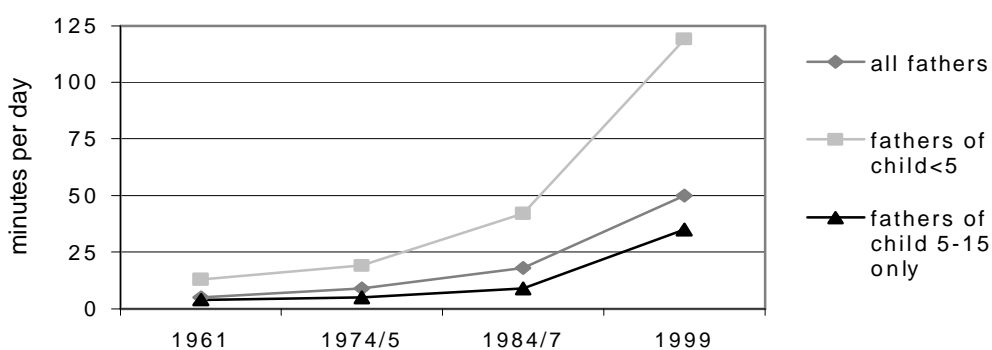
## 2.3 Fathers' Time with Children

Time use surveys have been an important quantitative indicator of father involvement, displaying the amount of daily or weekly time devoted to childcare activities (with the advantage of charting change over time where the survey has been longitudinal). Quantitative measures of fathers' involvement in childcare can be examined in *absolute* and *relative* terms.

Absolute measures cover the actual time a father directly interacts with a child (the amount of paternal engagement, Pleck, 1997). In time budget diaries the amount of time spent on child-related activities as the 'main activity' is the typical measure adopted. Relative measures of father involvement estimate the proportion of time spent in childcare by fathers in comparison to mothers.

In terms of absolute measures of father involvement, most estimates have indicated an upward trend since the 1970s (Bianchi, 2000; Gershuny, 2001; Fisher, McCulloch and Gershuny, 1999; Sandberg and Hofferth, 2001; Yeung, Sandberg, Davies-Kean and Hofferth, 2001). Gershuny (2001), using international time budget diary comparisons, has shown increased childcare time spent by British fathers since the mid-1970s, with increases especially sharp since 1985 and in particular for those men with children under age 5

**Figure 2.1: Fathers' time spent on childcare**



Source: Fisher, McCulloch and Gershuny, 1999

years, mirroring similar trends in father childcare in the USA. As shown in Figure 3.1, fathers of children under the age of 5 years devoted less than a quarter of an hour per day to child-related activities (as their main activity) in the mid-1970s in contrast to two hours a day by the late 1990s. While this might reflect a greater commitment to fatherhood, the likely explanation is that young mothers are far more involved in the labour force and they and their partners often work complementary shifts to share out child care (Ferri & Smith, 1996).

## **2. 4 Fathering Under Adversity**

Despite the policy interest in supporting young and vulnerable fathers there is surprisingly little British evidence to review (Speak et al 1997; Quinton and Pollock, 2002). Quinton and Pollack's (2002) recent research on British first time fathers aged 17-23 suggests that, despite past disadvantage, "fatherhood may help young men at high risk of social exclusion to create a new identity and a more positive engagement in social life". Over sixty per cent of young fathers in their study had significant involvement with their infants at nine months, with 37 per cent showing disengagement. The researchers found that the quality of men's relationship with their partner during pregnancy, and not adverse family and social background, was the most important factor predicting men's post-natal involvement with infants. They argue that health care professionals could be more proactive in supporting young fathers in both their couple and parenting roles. The young men reported feeling excluded from antenatal and post-natal care and in turn health care professionals described a distant relationship to the fathers. '[They] often knew little about the fathers, did not see them as central to their task, and felt they lacked the skills to engage with men.'

## **2. 5 Supporting Fathers- risk or resource?**

There is a growing amount of health and social care research exploring how care professionals can become more male and father-sensitive and encourage father involvement with children (e.g. Daniel and Taylor, 2001; Featherstone, 2001; Ghedini, Chandler, Whalley and Moss 1995; Levine, Murphy and Wilson, 1998; Levine and Pitt, 1995; Ruxton, 1992; Ryan, 2000).

Much of this work has been prompted by a wish to understand the under-representation of men and fathers in health and social care settings as users of services. For instance, Walters (1993) found that only a third of fathers attended the first session at a community sleep health clinic in contrast to the majority of mothers. It is possible that men and fathers are less likely than women and mothers to seek help for individual health or family related problems. In addition the recognition and communication of personal, couple and family malaise can be influenced by gendered health beliefs and appraisal (Pennebaker, 1982). Moreover, men may be more likely than women to seek help only when the perceived problem becomes serious (O'Brien, 1988).

Research also indicates that family support services may be insensitive to the needs of fathers. Ghate et al (2000) recently found that many workers at family centres felt unease about engaging fathers. Fathers also expressed

dissatisfaction with the activities on offer at family centres preferring more active and practical activities including DIY and play. Reviewing child protection cases involving physically and sexually abusive fathers, Ryan (2000) traces the problems that can emerge when professionals are too mother-focused in their practitioner work. Most importantly fathers may be lost to the social care system and go on to make new relationships with mothers of young children potentially repeating previous patterns of abusive behaviour. As Featherstone (2001) has argued, professionals are still juggling with constructions of father as 'risk' and father as 'resource'.

## **2.6 Does Involving Fathers in Family Support Services make a difference?**

Despite earlier anxieties about the 'matri-centredness' of the Head Start initiative, in the US, (Levine, 1993), concerted efforts have been made to involve fathers in interventions and evaluate child and family related outcomes. In the last decade attempts to initiate and test the effectiveness of Head Start programmes specifically for fathers have intensified. Within controlled experimental, pretest-posttest conditions, traditional Head Start parent involvement has been specifically modified to be targeted at men. Under such a regime, men report higher levels of confidence in their parenting skills (Fagan & Stevenson, 2002) and greater involvement in child care and interaction. Follow up investigations over six months after the intervention ended suggest that men continue to be more supportive of their children's educational development and their preschool children seem better prepared on education-readiness measures (Fagan & Iglesias, 1999).

Interventions to promote parenting skills in fathers have been in evidence since the 1980s in the US (Beitel & Parke, 1986, McBride, 1990). While evaluations of these were open to methodological criticism (Hawkins & Roberts, 1992), they suggested that parenting courses specifically for fathers had the desired effect of increasing their routine child care experience and skill (for reviews see Cowan & Cowan, 2002; Fagan & Hawkins, 2000; McBride, in press).

This Head Start research builds on the earlier work suggesting the positive impact of father participation in antenatal and postnatal classes and playgroup activity (Cowan 1988; McBride, 1990; Nickel and Kocher, 1987) as many of these studies did not incorporate control groups in their design.

Evidence on the additional benefits of father involvement for children is still at a low critical mass. However, a recent international meta-analysis on early childhood interventions suggests that those involving fathers as well as mothers may be more effective in enhancing parental sensitivity and children's attachment (Bakernans-Kranenburg, van IJzendoorn and Juffer, 2003).

The study focused on interventions (pre-54 months) aiming to enhance positive parental behaviours such as responsiveness and sensitivity rather than on those studies aiming to reduce negative parental behaviours. Strict inclusion criteria generated seventy published studies with three allowing an

examination of the impact of involving fathers (Dickie and Gerber, 1980; Metzl, 1980, Scholz and Samuels, 1992).

Bakernans-Kranenburg et al (2003: 211) noted the 'surprising outcome' that 'interventions involving fathers appear to be significantly more effective than interventions focusing on mothers only.' In the three studies generating this conclusion all the interventions were active, home-based ones taking place during the child's first year on non-clinical samples. The focus was on encouraging sensitivity to infant communication and emotional needs. For instance, Metzl's (1980) intervention consisted of three, one and a half hour sessions when the infant was 6,12 and 18 weeks old led (and modelled) by a trainer covering such themes as: 'quiet talk'- rocking, holding and talking to the baby at a special time each day; 'back talk' – imitating and responding to infant vocalizations; 'let's go'- exposing the infant to sounds, sights and people outside the home. At six months infants from the intervention group showed significantly more intellectual gains than control group infants with the greatest gain for infants whose parents had simultaneous training.

The evidence from interventions on improving other aspects childhood behaviour is less clear although several evaluations comparing father inclusion in the domain of conduct disorders have shown fathers can be as effective as mothers in implementing any intervention (Firestone, Kelly and Fike, 1980; Adesso and Lipson,1981). Many of these interventions have used Behavioural Parent Training (BPT), a very structured approach to teach parents how to manage child behavioural problems through learning theory-reward/punishment regimes. Only one BPT evaluation study has compared father only groups with mother only and mother and father together (Adesso and Lipson,1981).

Fagan and Iglesias's (1999) study is important as it is one of the few to explore a dosage effect for father involvement in interventions, that is whether higher levels of exposure to the intervention improves outcomes for children. Children's educational outcome scores were significantly better in the high dosage group, where fathers experienced more than 21.5 hours in the programme in contrast to moderate dosage (5-21-5 hours) and the low dosage group (1-4 hours). The intervention included a range of traditional Head Start activities: classroom volunteering, father sensitivity training, involvement in father support groups and father-child recreation activities. Reading and playing together were central components of the intervention (children's average age was 53 months) and all the staff workers were male.

However, in general, despite these emergent studies, we still know little about the effectiveness of the quantity or quality of fathers' participation in treatment across the wide range of problem areas. Although several studies suggest fathers' emotional involvement and enthusiasm for therapy, particularly in cases involving adolescent children and in child abuse cases, can improve outcomes (Phares, 1996).

## **2.7 Why Involving Fathers in Family Support Services may Improve Outcomes for Children**

The empirical base on which to judge the efficacy of father involvement in family support services is still small and in need of further development. However, there are several reasons why such an inclusion may improve outcomes for children. Any family intervention or 'treatment' involves information-sharing, reflection, and a supportive environment to facilitate application of the general philosophy and specific techniques of parenting. Mutual support, understanding and practice opportunities may be more likely in settings where both mothers and fathers have been exposed to the intervention at the same time. When in a position of simultaneous exposure to an intervention both mother and father are 'novices' or 'apprentices', together, and no one member of the couple has the responsibility to initially explain or instruct the other in the philosophy or practical aspects of the approach. In this setting, couples may be more likely to encourage each other rather than work against each other. Problems in interpretation will of course occur but may be less likely than in interventions operating in a mother or father only mode.

However, family interventions do not take place in a gender-neutral context. Although fathers' involvement in child care has been increasing in most western countries since the 1970s, as outlined above, in many families, mothers remain the principal carers, particularly of younger children. Perhaps more significantly maternal identity is still strongly linked to a sense of special female expertise (Raphael- Leff, 2001). Therefore while involving fathers in family support services may improve outcomes for children, how 'involved fathers' are received by mothers may not always be straightforward. In fact, in their meta-analysis, Bakernans-Kranenburg et al (2003:211) suggest that 'paternal involvement may be counterproductive as far as the mothers are concerned.' because in co-parenting settings mothers receive less attention from practitioners and may begin to underestimate their own parenting skills.

More sensitive research designs and practice interventions, with a greater appreciation of parental interaction and negotiation about childrearing itself, are beginning to evolve - a focus on 'the parental alliance' (McBride and Rane (2001). The quality of the parental alliance, that is the extent to which parents 'acknowledge, respect and value the parenting roles and tasks of the partner' has been found to be associated with greater levels of father involvement in families McBride and Rane (2001: 230). The challenge for family support practitioners, in general, is to provide a gender-collaborative framework which is sensitive to the preferences of mothers and fathers but also produces the best outcomes for children

### 3. METHODOLOGY

This chapter outlines the methodological approach used in this study. Further tables can be found in Appendix A.

#### 3.1 Overview

In order to explore the roles of men and fathers in Sure Start local programmes and identify successful strategies for engaging fathers, the study built on the variation in father participation between programmes identified in the first Implementation Module National Survey in 2001. Results from this survey of local round 1 and round 2 programmes (N=118, 92% response rate) revealed that 36% of programmes were classified as having 'low' provision for fathers' work, 52% 'as having moderate/ intermediate' provision and 12% 'high' levels of provision. On the basis of this classificatory framework, with some adaptations recommended by the NESS Implementation Survey statistician (see section 3.2.1) 25 local Sure Start programmes were selected for the study. Phase 1 consisted of interviews with 73 programme staff from the 25 selected Sure Start programmes and Phase 2 consisted of 42 interviews with father and mother service users.

The study used a mixed method approach to information, data collection and analysis.

- ? Qualitative analysis of in-depth interviews
- ? Informal observation
- ? Secondary analysis of NESS Implementation study national survey data
- ? Collection and analysis of programme level quantitative data

Alongside a national level analysis of published documents relating to fathers' involvement in Sure Start, programme level data (for example, staff and service-user accounts) were also collected.

During visits to local programmes, informal observations were noted (for example, level of visibility of fathers and male staff within Sure Start buildings). These field notes provided additional information to help build a picture of 'on the ground' experience of local programmes. Data from other NESS modules (for example, local context analysis data) and local programmes' own quantitative data were also used during the course of this study.

The research process involved two phases of sampling and data collection. Figure 3.1 presents a schematic representation of the sampling and data collection process

## 3.2 Phase 1: Interviews with programme staff at 25 round 1 and 2 local programmes - July/August 2002

### 3.2.1 Sampling

Programmes' ratings on an adapted version of the Implementation National Survey's *Father involvement in the Sure Start programme* scale (National Evaluation of Sure Start, 2002a) were used to categorise programmes as having 'high', 'intermediate' or 'low' father provision. Exclusion of twenty-six programmes without father provision up and running was recommended by the NESS Implementation Survey statistician (The National Survey questions are listed below and original scales can be found at Appendix A, Figure 1 piii)

The adapted measure rated programmes on a wider scale than the original of 0-10 where 0=minimal/low involvement and 10=highest level of involvement. As with the *Father involvement in the Sure Start programme* scale, a positive answer to question 73 was taken as the minimal requirement for inclusion in the analysis and a value between 0 and 10 calculated for each eligible programme based on responses to questions 8, 40, 53b, 67 and 73. Programmes were able to score between 0 and 2 for each response to questions 8, 40, 53b, 67 and 73. The new measure was the sum of these five scores. Scores were allocated as follows:

*Question 8: The number of father's contributing to the management of Sure Start.*

- 0: No fathers involved in SS management
- 1: One father involved in SS management
- 2: More than one father involved in SS management

*Question 40: Whether or not programmes publicise Sure Start in gender sensitive venues.*

- 0: No
- 1: Not yet
- 2: Yes

*Question 53b: Whether or not special provision is made for fathers as a hard-to-reach group.*

- 0: No
- 1: Not yet
- 2: Yes

*Question 67: Whether or not the programme has an outreach team member with responsibility for addressing fathers' involvement.*

- 0: No
- 1: Not yet
- 2: Yes

*Question 73: Whether or not projects/groups for fathers is a component of programmes' support for families and parents.*

- 0: 1-2
- 1: 3-5
- 2: 6-7

Programmes were placed into 'high', 'medium/intermediate, and 'low' father involvement categories based on the sum of their score. Thus, as figure 3.1

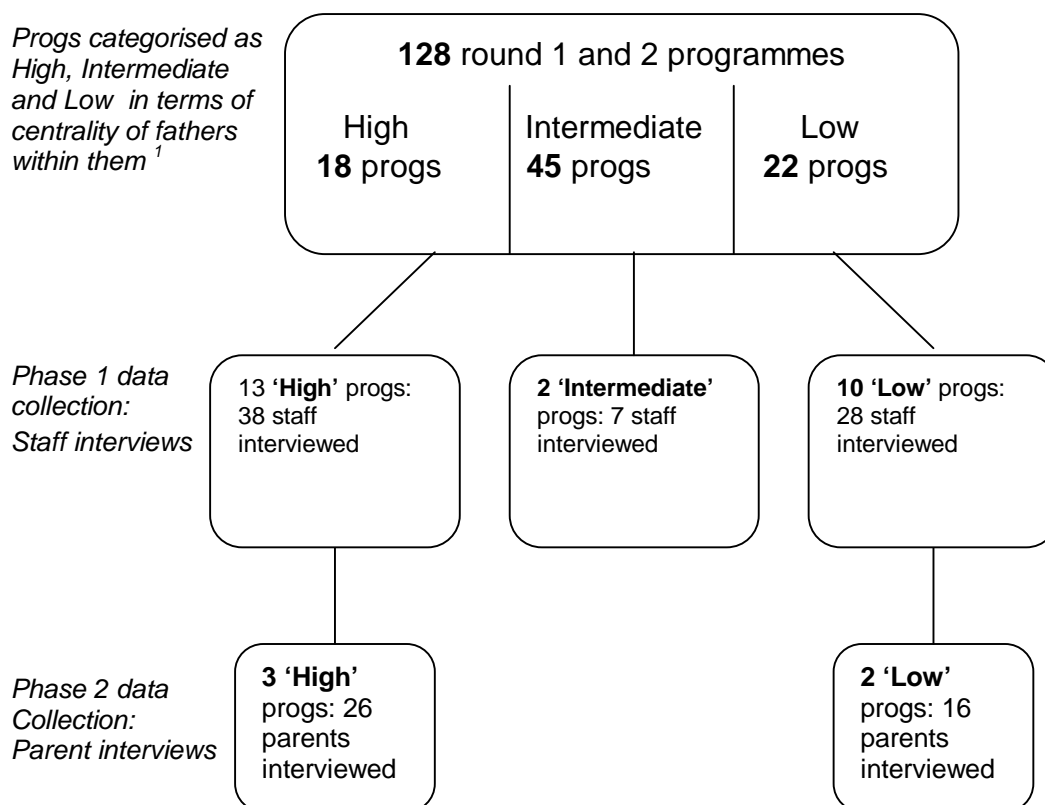
shows, 26% (22 programmes) were classified as placing low importance on father involvement (scores 0-3), 53% (45 programmes) 'moderate' importance (scores 4-7) and 21% (18 programmes) 'high' importance (scores 8-10). Table 3.1 presents a frequency distribution of scores on this scale.

**Table 3.1: Frequency distribution of scores on amended father involvement scale**

Score	N/A	Missing data	0	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
Number of Programmes	26	7	0	2	8	12	8	13	11	13	12	5	1

This adapted classification system enabled us to sample programmes that held a greater range of varying positions on father involvement (although it should be remember that 26 programmes with no provision for fathers at the time of the first Implementation survey were excluded from the sample).

**Figure 3.1: Schematic representation of programmes involved in each phase of data collection.**



<sup>1</sup> 118 of the 128 round 1 and 2 local programmes responded to the Implementation study national survey. Of these, only 85 were admissible for categorization (for 7 programmes there was missing data and 26 were excluded by NESS as there was no fatherwork activity on which to base the rating.)



A sample of between 10 and 15 programmes was selected from each of the 'high' and 'low' provision groups of programmes in order to compare variation in father involvement. A small number of 'intermediate' programmes were also included as they were so numerous in the frequency distribution profile. The dimensions of geographical spread, size of programme and ease of researcher access were also considered in the sampling process. An effort was made to ensure that the sample included a wide geographical spread, thus, programmes from the North East, North West, South East, East and West Midlands and East of England participated in this phase of the study, although there were no South West programmes. The final sample of programmes consisted of 13 from the 'high' provision group, 2 from the 'intermediate' group and 10 from the 'low' provision group. As the sample was drawn from programmes that had responded to the national survey, it was made up entirely of round 1 and 2 programmes.

### **3.2.2 Participants**

In-depth interviews were conducted with programme managers (or an equivalent nominee) in all 25 selected programme areas. In addition, between two and five key workers at each programme were interviewed. The decision as to which members of key staff to interview was made in consultation with programme managers. Staff members interviewed included:

- ? Family support workers
- ? Fathers' workers (always interviewed where there was one)
- ? Community participation workers
- ? Health visitors
- ? Parent volunteers
- ? Crèche workers

Interviews focused on the nature and extent of father involvement, the nature of programmes' commitment to involving fathers, and specific attempts made by programmes to involve fathers. Interview topic guides for staff interviews can be found in Appendix B. In all, interviews were conducted with 73 members of programme staff.

## **3.3 Phase 2: Interviews with mothers/female carers and fathers/male carers – October to December 2002**

### **3.3.1 Sampling**

Interviews with fathers/male carers and mothers/female carers took place in 5 Sure Start programmes (three programmes that had high levels of provision for fathers and two where provision was categorised as low). These programmes were selected from the 25 programmes that participated in Phase 1 of the study. Factors influencing the choice of which 5 programmes to include in this phase of the study included:

- ? programmes' categorisation as either 'high', 'intermediate' or 'low' father involvement on the basis of national survey responses;
- ? information gained during interviews with programme managers and programme staff;
- ? geographical location of programme;
- ? number of children of Sure Start age within programme area;
- ? type of area (e.g. urban, large town, small town, rural);
- ? ethnic mix of families targeted by the local programme;
- ? type of lead partner.

### **3.3.2 Participants**

Individual, face-to-face, in-depth interviews were conducted with at least four mothers/female carers and four fathers/male carers at each phase 2 programme. Interviews focused on participants' experience of and attitudes to male (carer and staff) involvement in Sure Start. A copy of the interview topic guide for phase 2 interviews can be found in Appendix C.

In total, 42 service users (21 fathers/male carers and 21 mothers/female carers) were interviewed during this phase of data collection (including six married or co-habiting couples).

### **3.4 Methodological Note**

It became clear during interviews with programme staff that the distinction between programmes categorised as 'high', 'intermediate' or 'low' was blurred. Programmes' account of father involvement in the survey questionnaire often did not always concur with the developments on the ground. This gap was due in part to the fact that, as noted by the authors of the first National Survey report, the survey provided a snapshot of programmes as of the last quarter of 2001 (National Evaluation of Sure Start, 2002a). As data collection for this second themed study took place primarily during July and August 2002, much had changed at a number of programmes by this time. For example, some programmes had appointed fathers' workers since completing the National Survey questionnaire. There was, therefore, some mismatch between what programme managers had filled in on the National Survey and real practice, 8-11 months later. Thus, broad similarities were often noted between the attitude/approaches to father involvement of programmes with different categorisations, and differences noted between those with the same categorisations. As one programme manager commented:

*"We've done a little bit of work around that [the involvement of fathers] but we're nowhere near where we should be or where we'd like to be and we felt that it was inaccurate that the programme was reflected as having a high rating for dads involvement."* (Programme manager).

Although categorisation of programmes as 'high', 'intermediate' and 'low' did aid us in sampling programmes with a range of approaches and attitudes to

father involvement, lack of distinction between the 13 'high' and 10 'low' programmes made comparisons between the two groups problematic.

On the basis of interview data (in conjunction with local records and observations made while visiting programmes) however, it was possible to identify some commonalities among programmes which emerged as more effective in involving fathers in service delivery and planning, regardless of categorisation (although even within these programmes there was often a great amount of variation in approach). Our final analysis eventually centred around the identification of common themes in programme approaches rather than a reliance on a statistically-derived 'high-low' distinction taken at one point in time.

### **3.5 Data Analysis**

All interviews were tape-recorded and transcribed verbatim. Interview transcripts formed the basis for analysis and a thematic analysis was conducted with the aid of a specialist computer package (NUDIST) for the analysis of qualitative data.

### **3.6 Conceptualising 'Father Involvement'**

#### **3.6.1 Within Families**

A more holistic appreciation of fathering with its multiple dimensions and diversity of styles and relationships has greater acceptance among researchers.

Most researchers operate within the classic father involvement construct model developed by American father researchers in the 1980s (Lamb, Pleck, Charnov, & Levine, 1987). This tripartite topology of father involvement includes:

- ? **'Engagement'** - refers to caretaking and shared activities with the child, involving direct contact.
- ? **'Accessibility'** - concerns the father's potential availability for interaction by being present or available.
- ? **'Responsibility'** - includes making sure the child is taken care of and arranging for resources to be available for the child.

#### **3.6.2 Within Sure Start Local Programmes**

In terms of this study, father involvement in Sure Start is operationally defined as fathers' participation in Sure Start local programme activities such as attendance at group sessions, meetings with a professional or involvement in a management group. That is, father involvement is being explored in terms of service use and service planning. These themes map onto engagement/accessibility on the one hand (being a service user) and responsibility on the other (involvement in service planning)

## **4. FATHER/MALE CARER AND MALE STAFF INVOLVEMENT IN SURE START**

### **4.1 Introduction**

In order to ascertain the level of father<sup>2</sup> involvement in Sure Start local programmes the starting point was to determine whether they were present in routine activities as service users or indeed visible in the buildings in which the activities took place. The physical presence of fathers and other male carers will be the focus of this chapter, alongside a discussion of the visibility of male Sure Start workers in general.

### **4.2 Overview of Father and Male Carer Involvement in Sure Start**

Potential sources of data for this were local programmes' own monitoring records, interviews with staff and users, and observation.

#### **4.2.1. Local Programme Monitoring**

Although the 25 sampled programmes collected some information that allowed the level of father involvement to be monitored, programmes did this in a variety of ways. At some programmes, staff took registers of parents attending every Sure Start session. However, not all of these programmes made special note of the gender of parent attendees or analysed attendance at sessions by gender. For example, one programme took a register of children and parents attending each activity, but only entered children's attendance on their database. Clearly, at this early stage in Sure Start local programmes development databases for monitoring parents were still in formation.

Therefore, systematic standardised data on father participation in Sure Start activities across programmes were not available. Accordingly, the following sections rely on indirect estimates of father involvement gathered from programme staff and parental interviews, supplemented by contemporaneous records of attendance when available.

#### **4.2.2 Perceptions of Staff and Service-users**

The majority (about 80 per cent) of programme staff interviewed stated that there were generally low levels of father and male carer involvement in their Sure Start programme. A key theme was the difficulty that they had in engaging with local fathers. As the programme manager of a round one programme commented:

*"I mean take for instance, we did a Christmas party last year and I think we had 4 dad's...we must have had, well there were 200*

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<sup>2</sup> Throughout this report, the term 'father' is used to refer to fathers and male carers. Similarly 'mother' refers to both mother and female carer.

*children there so there were you know perhaps 70 or 80 families represented.” (Programme manager).*

Sure Start activities and sessions were usually attended by all-female service-users, although on occasion one or two male service-users did attend. According to programme staff, programmes might typically have one or two fathers or male carers who regularly access services (perhaps on a weekly basis) and another one or two who access Sure Start services more sporadically. The level of father involvement described by the following programme manager was similar to that described by many programme staff:

*“It’s a kind of typical drop-in, we’ll have like maybe one or two dads as opposed to about you know 10 to 15 mums.” (Programme manager).*

However, staff at some programmes described far lower levels of father involvement than this. For example, the programme manager at one programme commented:

*“When I first came I was introduced to ‘the dad’.” (Programme manager)*

A parent volunteer at another programme stated:

*“In the last year I have become almost identified as ‘the Sure Start dad’ that’s always there.” (Father).*

The nature of engagement varied greatly. While some fathers had no contact whatsoever with Sure Start local programmes, although their female partner did, a small number of others were regular service users, accessing a range of Sure Start services and facilities. For other men, their only contact with Sure Start was when leaving or collecting a child from Sure Start childcare facilities. In such cases, fathers typically stated that they were in the Sure Start building for a short period of time and participated little in any sessions or activities. For example, one father-of-four stated:

*“I just drop Kelly off at nursery here and that’ll be it. And then sometimes if [my wife] is at a club or something I will just come for the last fifteen minutes or something and be with Kelly, it wouldn’t be to actively participate it would be more really just to pick my wife up.” (Father).*

Sure Start staff and service-users, however, attested in particular to the generally low level of direct usage of Sure Start services by men and the lack of presence and in some cases invisibility of men in Sure Start buildings. All of the mothers interviewed and about 75% of the fathers stated that in their experience there were usually very few fathers present in Sure Start buildings.

### 4.3 Patterns of Father Involvement in Sure Start activities

When fathers were present in Sure Start programmes their engagement tended to centre around, and was sometimes limited to, certain types of activities.

In particular, fathers' preference for fun and active sessions over discussion-based ones was a recurrent theme in many staff interviews. Staff at most of the programmes in this study stated that it was easier to involve fathers in outdoor, active, Funday-type activities than in indoor sessions with children or in sessions related to parenting skills. For example one programme manager said:

*“When we run Fundays or have big family trips, big events, dads like to get involved in helping with that...they like to be the ones going up the ladders and putting the posters up. But they're not so keen on being the ones who were sat on the floor reading to the children.” (Programme manager).*

Another programme manager commented,

*“The odd dad'll come along to toddler groups or that...They'll come along to a Funday and be quite happy to come along but when it comes to what do you need as a father to help you be a better father you get difficulties [involving fathers].” (Programme manager).*

As Sure Start local programmes often scheduled one-off fun events and trips at weekends or evenings, fathers' apparent preference for these types of activities may be related to activities being provided outside 'traditional' working hours<sup>3</sup>. However, some programme staff did state that childcare and parenting related courses were particularly badly attended by dads, though male attendance at other courses was more common. As one programme manager stated:

*“Where we would like to see more dads is the kind of parenting skills group, which is predominantly mums.” (Programme manager).*

Another programme manager suggested that fathers' perceptions of their role in childcare coupled with their perceptions of the nature of parenting courses may influence whether they attend sessions or not. She said:

*“ If we call them a parenting course we don't get very many dads, if we call it something like 'managing your child's behaviour' then they come along. So obviously they are seeing managing bad behaviour as part of their job.” (Programme manager).*

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<sup>3</sup> See chapter 8 (8.2), for a more detailed discussion of the potential importance of the scheduling of Sure Start services.

Two programme managers also stated that fathers tend to be keener to engage in activities with older children than younger ones and felt that this provided some explanation for the lack of father involvement in certain activities. These programme managers reported that activities with small babies such as 'baby massage' were particularly poorly attended by fathers. One key area of father involvement in Sure Start was in services specifically for fathers and male carers. (See Chapter 10 (10.3.1) ) According to the accounts of the programme staff and service-users interviewed, where sessions and groups specifically for fathers were available, the number of fathers attending them tended to be consistently greater than the number attending 'mixed' sessions. Indeed, apart from one-off events, the vast majority of cases cited by programme staff of more than two fathers/male carers attending a session at the same time were where the service was specifically for fathers.

Although interviewees typically described rather limited father involvement in Sure Start activities and sessions, for example - *"You see some of the men dropping off kids but you never see them really on the courses."* (Mother), - the interview data suggest that at some programmes fathers do access a broader range of Sure Start services. For example, there were reports from some areas that fathers make regular use of crèche and childcare facilities or use the Sure Start building's café facilities.

One possible way for male partners to become 'indirectly involved' with Sure Start was in supporting their female partner's involvement. For example, at one local programme staff commented that fathers rarely used the main Sure Start building. However, the programme manager stated that fathers from the Muslim community appeared to be particularly committed to supporting their wives' involvement. For her, Muslim fathers driving their wives to and from the programme's main building was a key feature of their commitment to Sure Start:

*"The men will bring their wives and partners, drop them off but not come in. So very supportive in terms of bringing their ladies to the activities but not engaging once they're there."* (Programme manager).

#### **4.4 Fathers' Involvement in Programme Management**

Data from the first Implementation Study National Survey show that although parents contribute to the management of almost every round 1 and 2 Sure Start programme, these parents are overwhelmingly mothers. Forty-four per cent of round one and two programmes had at least one father contributing to Sure Start management but when the frequency distribution of actual numbers of fathers involved in management for the whole sample was considered the most frequent score was zero (National Evaluation of Sure Start, June 2002). Interviews with programme staff and parents for this study paint a similar picture of father involvement in Sure Start management. Programme managers at 12 of the 25 programmes in this study said that they had at least one father involved in management at some level, but all staff agreed that mothers far outnumbered fathers (again the most frequent score was zero).

As noted in the first Implementation National Survey Report, systems to ensure parental representation vary from programme to programme (National Evaluation of Sure Start, 2002a). Interviews with programme staff also found this to be the case. For example, at one programme, a manager cited a number of ways in which fathers could become involved in management of the programme:

*“Obviously there’s the board which we’re aiming to have fifty per cent parent involvement...we’ve also got an open door policy where parents can drop in and people do drop in to those meetings. We’ve just appointed a parent chair. We’ve got a series of working groups about family services. We’ve got a parent only group.” (Programme manager, round 1 programme).*

This pattern, offering a variety of forums to which parents can make a contribution, is common in local programmes. There was no gender monitoring of attendance at the ‘open door’ structures, including stakeholder forums and parents’ forums. Programme boards, which are comprised of named individuals, are easier to monitor.

Father representation at programme board level does occur as described above. Of the 25 programmes in this study, 12 had some father involvement in management, and in five of these a father was on the programme board. However, interview data suggest that where fathers were involved with Sure Start management, it was most likely to be at parent forum or similar level.

#### **4.5 The Involvement of Male Staff in Sure Start**

Programme managers were asked in interviews about the number of male staff working in their programmes employed by Sure Start or partner agencies. Figure 4.1 shows the frequency distribution for numbers of male staff at the 25 programmes involved in this study, based on their responses. Data from programme manager interviews suggest that male staff typically account for fewer than 10% of total programme staff, but Figure 4.1 reveals some variation in male involvement.

Where male staff were present, very few were employed in roles that involved working directly with children. The great majority tended to be concentrated in traditionally ‘male’ positions. For example, male staff were often caretakers or handymen. In addition, a few programmes employed male tutors to deliver training to parents. Only three of the 25 programmes in our sample employed a male worker primarily to work directly with children. The 2001 DfES Childcare Workforce Survey of Employment in the English Childcare Sector also found few men employed in childcare posts. The survey found that men made up only 2% of the childcare workforce (DfES Childcare Workforce survey, 2002). In response to the under-representation of men in childcare posts, the DfES has set Early Years Development and Childcare Partnerships a national target of increasing male recruitment to 6% by 2004 (DfES, 2001)



**Figure 4.1: Frequency distribution of numbers of male staff employed at 25 Sure Start programmes**



#### **4.6 Difficulties in Attracting Male Staff to Sure Start Local Programmes**

The majority of programme managers stated that they had found it difficult to recruit male staff for childcare positions despite attempts to do so. Most reported having few male respondents for advertised posts. For example, one programme manager who had tried unsuccessfully to recruit male childcare workers stated:

*“We haven't had men applying for posts...the ideal thing is to appoint more men but if they don't apply for the post they don't apply for the post.” (Programme manager).*

In addition, where male respondents did apply, programme managers sometimes felt that they lacked the skills and/or experience of female applicants.

The main reason given by programme managers for the lack of male applicants was the ‘traditional’ societal conception of work with children as ‘women’s work’. Programme managers felt that this deterred potential male candidates. In addition, one programme manager pointed out that the poor wages associated with childcare work were also a barrier. She felt poor pay meant that childcare positions were often taken up to provide a family’s second rather than primary household income and that since many local men were the main breadwinners, a childcare-based job was too poorly paid to be a viable option.

One strategy that some programmes are currently pursuing to increase the number of male staff is to encourage local fathers to become volunteers, access training and move on to work for Sure Start. This has already been a

successful strategy for a small number of programmes. As one programme manager stated:

*“We have been quite successful in recruiting male workers. One who came along and was engaged through the fathers’ project...he’s actually now in our employment, came on as a trainee play worker now he’s a fathers’ project worker.”*  
(Programme manager).

#### **4.7. Conclusion**

Systematic standardised data on father participation in Sure Start activities across programmes were not available, because programmes varied in the information they collected and recorded. It is therefore difficult to reach categorical conclusions about levels of involvement in services. It would be helpful for programmes to collect this quantitative information both to provide themselves with a baseline and in order to monitor whether they are expanding their work with fathers. Information on the presence of male staff was easier to access. There is an interesting link between the latter and the numbers of fathers accessing services which could be explored in more detail if there were more widespread gender monitoring by local programmes.

Indirect estimates of father involvement were gathered from programme staff and parental interviews, supplemented by contemporaneous records of attendance when available. From these it was clear that most programme staff had had great difficulty in engaging with local fathers/male carers and that few fathers/male carers directly accessed services for families. There was very limited regular, direct contact between programme staff and local fathers/male carers.

Few, if any, fathers/male carers or male staff were found to be present in Sure Start buildings. Where fathers regularly accessed Sure Start services it was usually a small number of fathers (one or two) who were making use of a range of services.

One route into expanding numbers of male staff was to recruit male volunteers, thus increasing the number of male faces seen in Sure Start. There is a Catch 22 situation in many areas: fathers appear not to access services because there are no fathers visible at Sure Start services. Given the nature of current programmes, particularly the gender imbalance in staff, fathers were most likely to engage in outdoor, active, Funday-type activities.

## **5. ATTITUDES TOWARDS FATHER INVOLVEMENT AND MALE STAFF INVOLVEMENT IN SURE START**

### **5.1 Introduction**

Given that men are under-represented as staff members and users of Sure Start programmes, it is important to identify just why this is the case and to explore the ways in which individual programmes have attempted to incorporate fathers into service delivery. This chapter examines the positive and negative attitudes toward greater father involvement in Sure Start local programmes among a range of types of employee, before reporting on the accounts of the mothers and fathers who were interviewed.

Discussion about the involvement of fathers in Sure Start local programmes raises fundamental issues about the aims of individual programmes, particularly the ways in which these might contradict one another and how to prioritise services within available resources.

### **5.2 Staff Aspirations for Father Involvement**

The vast majority of Sure Start programme staff interviewed stated that they and their programme wanted to encourage greater involvement of fathers as service users. Typically, staff said that they adhered to the belief that Sure Start was there to support fathers as well as mothers. They wanted to encourage this idea and discourage the notion that Sure Start was only for women and children. The following quotation from a programme manager who was actively working to promote father involvement is indicative of the views of many of the staff members interviewed, across the range of types of employee that was sampled:

*“We’re having a new building soon and I really want these men and all the other men to feel like this building is as much theirs. There’s a bunch of women who’ve already decided that this is their building which we want that, but I want the men to feel it as well.”  
(Programme manager).*

A number of reasons were given for the belief that fathers should be included. Their main focus was on the potential importance for child development of supporting fathers in their parenting. As one programme manager commented:

*“What we want in the long run is for dads to improve outcomes for children. And I don’t know how we do that other than slowly drip, drip, drip saying it’s OK for dads to be seen with their children and come to support children in activities.”(Programme manager).*

One Sure Start early years’ worker commented:

*“The main one for us is dads being able to play with their children. A lot of dads sort of play rough and tumble but don’t know how to actually sit and play with their children... Obviously reading as well.*

*Get them to use the library. Another project that we've read about is getting dads to read once a month and perhaps work with the librarians." (Early years worker).*

Although the majority of programme staff stated that they viewed greater father involvement in Sure Start as desirable, interviews with staff suggest that working with fathers may have been peripheral to the work of some Sure Start programmes early on in their development. For some programmes, then, a commitment to involving fathers may be a relatively recent phenomenon. For example, two managers of round 1 programmes stated that pressure to set up programmes and meet early targets meant that there was initially little time to consider involving fathers:

*"We had such tight time-scales in just getting the programme established, getting it up and running. Huge amount of work involved in that. That was kind of a priority and getting parents involved. Whether they were men or women it didn't matter... We had nothing. No office, no staff, no anything... we had to deal with all those kinds of things. So trying to get more dads on board there was just not time." (Programme manager).*

And,

*"We made very little initial attempt to specifically engage dads. I mean, yes I mean because I think you need to redesign how you offer your services if you are really seriously wanting to engage dads. And so I think that the project first was let's see something for this money." (Programme manager).*

Thus, in summary, father involvement was viewed by most as desirable, but at the same time for some programmes it was not seen as a central issue. One programme manager commented:

*"We haven't done anything specifically for dads and I think that's been because we've been inundated trying to set up services for women and children, 'cause that's like, the core business. And it's like: 'when we get time we'll do something for the dads which everybody knows is an important element but it's always the bit you do after you've done the main bit.'" (Programme manager).*

### **5.3 Staff Resistance to Father Involvement in Sure Start**

Although the majority of staff stated that greater father involvement in Sure Start was desirable, at four of the 25 programmes in this study at least one interviewee expressed some resistance to father involvement. At three of these programmes, the managers stated that this was a result of concern about how female service-users would respond to the presence of fathers. In one such case, a programme manager was concerned that high levels of domestic violence in the local area and the provision of rape counselling services within the main Sure Start building, made it possible that mothers might feel uncomfortable about men using the building. In two other cases,

programme staff had been concerned about whether or not to allow fathers to participate in certain Sure Start sessions. As one programme manager said:

*“I had one worker who leads on domestic violence, for example. She runs a group for families who have been victims of domestic violence around how to support them and she is quite adamant that she doesn't want men in that group even when they have been the victims of domestic violence.” (Programme manager).*

A higher rate of reported domestic violence did not lead immediately to programmes excluding men. Indeed in these few cases staff interviewees tended to stress addressing violent and abusive behaviour rather than excluding these fathers from Sure Start. For example, one fathers' worker stated:

*“You think about domestic violence and you've got to stop the cause not the victim. It's no good seeing the victim and then sending them home again for another beating. That's the kind of things we should address, what about the perpetrator, and how do we stop him.” (Fathers' worker).*

Where a potential risk from a father is identified, the programme may put strategies in place to address this risk. At one programme, a local father had informed Sure Start staff that he had a history of abusing children. This man, who had a one year-old daughter, had undergone treatment to control his behaviour. The programme held a Funday in a local park and rather than exclude the family, the programme made resources available to allow the father to be supervised on a one-to-one basis for the duration of the Funday. A member of Sure Start staff also accompanied him for the duration of any visits that he and his daughter made to the local Sure Start programme.

At one other programme staff described a culture of 'female-focus' among a few female Sure Start staff. In this case staff identified a lack of support for the idea of involving fathers among some members of staff who had been used to focusing their work at women and children. The manager at this programme commented:

*“I think that you know it's a culture change for the female staff...so it [involving fathers] is tolerated and in many cases it's sort of embraced but you know there's undercurrents of resistance.” (Programme manager).*

#### **5.4 Mothers' Attitudes to Father Involvement in Sure Start**

More than three-quarters of the mothers interviewed stated that they would like to see more father involvement in Sure Start. Mothers typically stated that they were in favour of encouraging both father and male staff involvement in Sure Start. One stated:

*“I think it's nice to have representation of both genders and I think if there are men out there who are looking after their children then*

*obviously it's a great place to bring your children and it's just nice to have the different role models." (Mother).*

Another mother said of father involvement:

*"I think it should be more men, because I'm sure there's a lot of single dads out there, and dads that don't work and the mums work or whatever, where they could bring their children instead. They're probably just sat at home or whatever." (Mother).*

The remainder of the mothers interviewed took a more neutral stance, commonly stating that the level of father involvement in Sure Start was of little importance to them. The comment: "It doesn't really bother me either way." (Mother, round one programme) is typical of this viewpoint. None of the mothers stated that they did not want fathers involved with Sure Start or that they favoured less male involvement.

The main reason given by mothers for favouring greater levels of father involvement in Sure Start was the potential benefit to their children of being presented with positive male role models. In addition, about one-third of the mothers interviewed stated that fathers could benefit from childcare and parenting training provided by Sure Start. As one mother said:

*"I hope after doing the nurturing course, he'll realise what sort of needs to be put in to get a happy family as I call it. A perfect family if you like...when I was doing the courses I was saying: 'Look we've got to do this, this, and this' and it's: 'Why?' and I'd try to explain. But it's not the same as getting it first hand." (Mother).*

Mothers' accounts not only reflect positive feelings about including fathers, they also further illustrate the problem of integrating men into a predominantly female environment. One mother who attends a number of Sure Start activities and sessions with her male partner commented on the reaction to him from other mothers:

*"Well in the first stage I'd say [female members of the group were] a bit shocked...Because they don't really see many husbands or boyfriends, so it's that...more surprised really than anything that somebody's turned up – 'there's a man here!' (laughs)...then everybody's talking to him, they thought: 'I wish more [fathers] would get involved.'" (Mother).*

There is a negative side to increased paternal involvement. As female environments, Sure Start programmes provide time away from family life. For two mothers, their positive attitude to father involvement in Sure Start did not extend to their own partners. Although they felt that more father and male staff involvement was to be encouraged, one said of her own partner:

*"I don't want him coming in though, I see enough of him." (Mother).*

The minority of mothers who expressed resistance to paternal involvement in Sure Start activities were either concerned that the presence of fathers may

exacerbate pre-existing difficulties with male partners or mean that husbands are encroaching on 'their space' (two mothers).

*"No [I wouldn't like my husband to be more involved in Sure Start], because I see my friends up here and we sit and yap and he wouldn't be interested in what we're on about...He never used to come to ante-natal or anything like that with me because I didn't want him to though." (Mother).*

A further two mothers were suspicious of men's motives for being around children. Although the mothers felt that fathers and male staff should be encouraged to become involved with Sure Start, they noted that an air of suspicion sometimes surrounded the notion of male involvement with children and childcare. One of these mothers said:

*"It would be nice to see a lot more men getting involved [with Sure Start] but they've always got that stereotype. I think a lot of men think that way themselves: 'I'd like to work with children but what are people going to say? And how's it going to look?'. And you have to take that on board. And I think that in itself is more a society thing and hopefully it will change in time...You wouldn't expect a man to walk down the street and say 'Oh your baby's so cute'. Because you'll think: 'What on earth are you doing looking at my baby?' I suppose if you were in the park playing football and the guy kicked the ball to the little boy you're not going to mind that so much. I think there are boundaries for men...It would take a while for you to feel comfortable around them with your children. Whereas with a female you just feel fine." (Mother).*

In conclusion a majority of the mothers interviewed said that they would like to see more father involvement in Sure Start, although many of them had thought little about the topic prior to being interviewed. In general there was a recognition that few fathers were involved in the programme, and for some this reflected an acceptance that this pattern was often the case in services for children and families.

## **5.5 Mothers' Attitudes to Male Staff Involvement**

*"I didn't think much of it [the lack of male staff involvement]. It seems to be mainly populated by women and that's the way it is. I think it would be great if there could be more male staff but I don't have anything against it. It just seems to be that whatever playgroups I have been to with him they are always led by women so you sort of get used to it. But I think it would be great if they could get more male staff involved. The same as with fathers. It's great when they can be involved." (Mother).*

Mothers' attitudes towards male staff involvement in Sure Start were also predominantly positive. Mothers typically commented that there were few male members of Sure Start staff and that they would welcome more male

staff involvement. Often they cited the benefit for children of being presented with a positive male role model as the reason for this. One mother said:

*“I think it would be good to have a man there as one of the play leaders along with the women...Just as a role model for the child because I think there’s so many female role models in a child’s life and there’s not enough male role models.” (Mother).*

However, some mothers stated that because of the lack of male presence within Sure Start, it had taken them or would take them a while to become comfortable with male staff. As one mum commented:

*“It was a bit of a shock when I first saw X [the fathers’ worker] because of how tall he is. Once you get to know him, it’s fine... because of how tall he was, my first thought was “he’s too tall to work in here with kids” y’know, but the kids get on with him, mine do. They love him to bits.” (Mother).*

Another mother said:

*“If I’m totally honest I think it might take a bit of getting used to, asking for advice from a [male] health visitor. That’s just because I’m used to having lots of females and talking about personal things might be a bit more difficult with a male...It’s like the midwife who delivered [daughter] was a man and I was quite shocked when he walked in the place. It doesn’t really make any difference but it’s just getting used to it really I think.” (Mother).*

## **5.6 Fathers’ Attitudes towards Male Involvement as Users and Providers of Services**

All of the fathers’ interviewed appeared to perceive Sure Start staff as supportive of their involvement. In all cases, fathers stated that staff had made them feel welcome and some fathers said that staff helpfulness and support had helped them to overcome initial uncertainty. Several fathers noticed a difference between the welcoming atmosphere provided by Sure Start and their previous experiences of using services for children. One father who felt unwelcome at a non-Sure Start service that he regularly attended with his daughter, compared it to the Sure Start service that he accessed in the following way:

*“If I wasn’t pretty flipping intent on going I would go: ‘Well this is a place where men are not welcome full stop’. Just from the feeling within the room. Obviously an aspect of it is ‘Who is this man, where is the mother, why does he always come?’ And my fantasy is that they’re all going: ‘Well he’s obviously a kind of paedophile who’s borrowed a child to come along’...It’s a sense of suspicion just that it isn’t kind of done...But I haven’t ever felt it here [at Sure Start]. Not even in a tiny degree. I’ve felt very welcome...I kind of like the smallness of it. It’s lovely to come into a room and they know your daughter’s name. Its lovely.” (Father).*



The majority of fathers who had attended Sure Start sessions stated in interviews that they had initially felt some apprehension about engaging with Sure Start. In the majority of cases, however, they said that once they had participated they found mothers to be welcoming towards them. However, for one father, the initial reaction of mothers to his participation at Sure Start sessions was less than welcoming:

*“You get there and the Sure Start workers were nice but the mums...you could see in back of their eyes they’re thinking to themselves, ‘Yeah, I bet you don’t come next week.’ They’d not say it but you could see what people were thinking...I stuck to it then they got to understand and got to know me and trust me. And it’s to gain their trust over is the hardest part.” (Father).*

Similarly, the vast majority of fathers interviewed were in favour of more fathers and male staff being encouraged to become involved with Sure Start. Level of involvement may be an important factor here since all but two of the fathers interviewed were directly involved in using Sure Start services. These fathers overwhelmingly viewed Sure Start as having a positive impact on their families and felt that other men could benefit from engagement with Sure Start. The benefits of involvement in Sure Start reported by these fathers included:

- ? feeling better able to cope with their child's upbringing (for example, disciplining their child or dealing with difficult phases of child development such as weaning) after attending a father-only parenting course or session about child development;
- ? Sure Start involvement (and in particular attendance at fathers' groups) providing much-needed social support and networks;
- ? Sure Start helping them to gain access to services that they had previously been waiting a long time to access (for example, speech therapy);
- ? involvement with Sure Start activities (particularly services specifically for fathers) raising their level of self-confidence.

For example, one father of two who had attended a parenting course for fathers summed up the benefits by saying:

*“I’m able to deal with the problems they might have, like the fighting over a toy. You can have a major row with two children pulling a toy from side to side and it can escalate from being a little argument to being full-blown tears...and it doesn’t now. You can calm it down without shouting. And I think that they’ll benefit from that as well because when they get older I think they’ll be calmer. Because I’m a bit of a hot head sometimes...But I’m not any more as much as I was. I’m not tearing my hair out...I was getting to the point where I didn’t want to look after the kids any more and I wasn’t enjoying it. But after I’d been on the course I’ve started to enjoy it.” (Father).*

The two fathers interviewed who were not directly involved in using Sure Start services were interviewed while trying services for the first time. One father was uncertain about how female service-users would respond to more male members of staff and ambivalent about the prospect of more male staff involvement:

*“I mean some women don’t like the kids talking to strangers and what not. Women, they tend to get along with them more than male staff. I suppose you could give them a chance, a few more male staff wouldn’t hurt.” (Father).*

## **5.7 Conclusion**

Sure Start programme managers, programme staff and users of both genders expressed positive attitudes towards the greater involvement of men within Sure Start programmes, as service users, contributors to programme management and as staff members.

Nevertheless, programmes have to prioritise the issues to be addressed and were under pressure to consult with families and get services up and running as quickly as possible. Because of this, the business of involving fathers often gave way to more pressing matters, and consultation with mothers alone was usually considered adequate in gauging the views of families. These findings concur broadly with those of Gary, Beatty and Weaver’s (1987) survey of father involvement in the early stages of US Head Start. They found that although fathers, mothers and staff all agreed that father involvement was desirable, a majority of fathers had little or no participation in Head Start activities. Some staff mentioned that domestic violence within a community might make any provision for fathers problematic. However, others suggested that fathers should be even more a focus of the programme’s attention in order to address the central issues surrounding family violence. Programme staff, mothers and fathers highlighted the problems of involving men in programmes that were clearly run by women for women.

## 6. FATHERS AND FAMILY LIFE IN SURE START AREAS

### 6.1 Introduction

In this chapter we examine men's perception of their fathering role and their adaptation to early parenthood. Paternal and maternal accounts of fathers' involvement in childcare itself are also explored. A key theme in the chapter is the pivotal position of mothers as both facilitators and gatekeepers of father involvement in family life.

### 6.2 How Central is the Paternal Identity in Sure Start areas?

One of the clearest findings to emerge from interviews with fathers was the importance they placed on fatherhood, and this, of course, is likely to have been their prime motivation for becoming involved in Sure Start. All of the fathers interviewed said that being a father was important to them and that their children were a vital part of their lives. The following quotation from a dad sums up well the views of the dads:

*"Being a dad is important for me. As I say he's my first child, I love him to pieces and I'd go to the end of the earth for him." (Father).*

The men typically stated that becoming a father was a joyous event in their lives, although most found this role difficult at times. Coping with childcare responsibilities, parenting, extra financial burden, and lack of sleep were commonly cited by fathers as key difficulties that they had encountered. A recurrent theme among fathers interviewed was that being a parent was more difficult than they had imagined it would be. As one parent of two boys said:

*"[Being a dad is] Probably the most important thing to me ever. It's made me realise how much work is actually involved in raising a kid - sort of things I used to think you have the kid, feed it, raise it. It can't be that much of a job. Foolish me! Nowadays I realise it's a full time job. There's no way you can make it into a part time job or that, you've got to put the whole of you into it." (Father).*

Most fathers stated that fatherhood had led to a change in priorities for them, and that their child or children had become the focus of their lives. Typically, fathers spoke about being extremely committed to being part of their children's lives. For some, becoming a father had meant drastic changes in their perspective on life and on their lifestyle. One lone father with two young children said:

*"[Being a father has had] Quite a major impact. Before my son was born I was like Jack the Lad always going out. I drank. I used to smoke weed. But then as soon as my son was born I just kind of fell into a pattern where I don't drink and the only vice I've got is that I smoke cigarettes. It just came naturally...I didn't actually sit down and say to myself I've got to stop this, it just came. I just started focusing on my son...There have been times when it has*

*been really hard. Especially being a lone parent. But generally being a father is a wonderful thing. I really enjoy being a dad. (Father).*

Those men that found being a father difficult typically commented that the positive elements of fatherhood far outweighed the downsides. One father of two said:

*“It was difficult at first but he’s grown up and he’s lovely, he’s great. He’s affected our lives in a good way, a brilliant way, he’s fantastic. He’s the best little lad you could ever imagine.” (Father).*

### **6.3 Fathers’ Involvement in Childcare**

Fathers generally took part in all aspects of care of the child (including, preparing bottles, cooking, bathing children, nappy changing, reading and playing) though usually to a lesser degree than mothers. The most disliked childcare task among fathers was nappy changing and in a small number of families fathers refused to change nappies.

In two-parent households the amount of time each parent spent caring for children varied from week to week, often dependent on the different working patterns of each partner. According to fathers’ and mothers’ accounts, in these families fathers were typically involved in direct child-related activities for between 30 minutes and 2 hours of childcare per day, Monday to Friday, (two hours daily contact time being average for UK men with children of this age, O’Brien and Shemilt, 2003).

While mothers tended to take on the bulk of the responsibility for childcare-related tasks, in a minority of cases (N=5) fathers were the primary carers. Of these, two were also carers for their wives; two were lone fathers, and one was a main carer as he worked part-time and his female partner worked full-time. In couple households, unemployed fathers and fathers who worked part-time tended to spend greater amounts of time with their children during the week than those who worked full-time. As this father of two who is employed part-time explained:

*“Each day is different in our house...This week Monday my wife was working. She went away Sunday night so I woke up Monday morning and I had Harvey and Sally, got them up, made their breakfast and got them ready, got Harvey ready for playschool, dropped him off. Came home with Sally, we played, I did a bit of tidying and things. Then I got her ready for nursery, took her to nursery at half eleven, picked Harvey up at half eleven and I spent all day with him until my wife got home. Tuesday, which was yesterday, I worked all day...I never saw them at all really, yesterday, save for half an hour...Today I’ve had him since he woke up this morning to come in here and I’ve had Sally this morning as well but she’s off to nursery this afternoon.” (Father).*

According to parents, long working hours had a constraining effect on fathers’ participation in childcare, confirming other research showing the difficulties

fathers often face balancing work and family life (see for example, Warin et al, 1999)<sup>4</sup>. In some of these cases, mothers stated that their male partners had to work long hours in order to make ends meet. For these fathers, work commitments meant that they saw their children for as little as 20 minutes per day during the week. As one mother, when asked how long her partner spent looking after their 8-month-old child on an average weekday, stated:

*“Probably about half an hour. But he doesn’t get home till about 6 at night. If he’s not going to his second job because otherwise he doesn’t get home till eleven at night so then he doesn’t really see him that much at all...He works on weekends as well...Half the time when he is at home he’s tired because of working.” (Mother).*

Although a number of the fathers in dual-parent families worked weekends and/or variable shift patterns, in general the level of father involvement in children’s lives and in childcare tended to increase greatly at weekends. Giving children more time and attention at weekends is a compensation strategy used by many working parents, especially fathers (O’Brien and Shemilt, 2003).

A recurring theme within parental interviews was that fathers tended to spend less time caring for and engaging with very young babies. The reason given for this by both father and mothers were typically that young babies were more dependent on their mothers (for example, for feeding) and that fathers felt that there was little they could ‘do’ with a young baby. In addition, there were indications that some fathers saw the nurturing of small babies as a mother’s role. These fathers commented that they envisaged spending more time with their children as they got older. One father of a ten-month-old baby said:

*“I think when they’re small and they’re completely dependent on the mother it is sort of a more motherly thing. Because they need to be fed all the time or changed or held. But now he’s nearly walking and taking in more stuff. As he gets older it’s getting better and better really.” (Father).*

Another father of a 10-week-old boy commented:

*“Well I can’t really do a lot with him at that age. I mean, I take him to my mum’s all the time to see her but that’s about it really. I mean you can’t really do much with a 10-week-old baby can you? When he gets to about one then you can start doing more things with him. When they start toddling then you can do more with them but up until that point what can you do really? You can make funny faces at him and all that, but that’s about it.” (Father).*

One mother of a three-week-old boy and a 21-month-old girl said about her husband’s involvement with daughter:

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<sup>4</sup> Of the 17 dual-parent family dads interviewed, five worked full-time, three worked part-time, five were unemployed, three were full-time parents and one was a full-time student. Please see Appendix A for further details of participants’ employment characteristics.

*“He’s been more involved now she’s more communicative and responds to him. He prefers that sort of age anyway. I don’t know whether that’s him maturing into the role or if it’s just because he prefers the toddler stage because they’re a bit more fun.” (Mother).*

These early patterns of paternal involvement replicate studies of men’s adaptation to parenthood in non-Sure Start areas (e.g. Lewis 1986). However, as discussed in Chapter 3, since the quality of father-child interaction has some stability over time, deferring active engagement and caring until infants ‘get older’ may establish a degree of unnecessary distance between fathers and infants. Indeed, Flouri and Buchanan suggest that: ‘engaging fathers in their children’s lives from an early age should guarantee that they remain involved throughout their children’s childhood.’ (Flouri and Buchanan, 2003: 95)

## **6.4 Maternal Attitudes Towards the Amount of Father Involvement**

Five of the 15 married or cohabiting women in our sample were dissatisfied with their partners’ level of involvement with the children. These women felt that their partners would take part in looking after their child if prompted but often failed to act on their own initiative. For example, one mother of four children describes her partner in the following way:

*“Yeah, he’ll take them up to bed - only if I ask him though. I have to say: “Can you take Rachel to bed now,” .....and he’ll do that.” (Mother).*

Seven of the mothers in dual parent relationships were either satisfied with their partner’s level of input in childcare or resigned to it, typically because work commitments meant that it was difficult for any more involvement. Some of these mothers commented that they were satisfied with their partner’s fathering role because by working, he made a valuable contribution to family life.

*“Oh yes, I’m very happy with it [the level of partner’s involvement in their child’s life]...it’s our first child and everything was new and he’s still quite small so we try to adapt to things. Within the time that he has outside work I think that he’s fine. He does a good job.” (Mother of one).*

And:

*“I think there have been times when I’d sooner he wasn’t at work. But that’s not possible. I mean I wasn’t very well after Darren [was born] so that was hard on all of us and I would have like him to take some leave off work but he can’t.”(Mother of two).*

## 6.5 Maternal Gate-keeping

Although most of the cohabiting or married parents interviewed stressed the importance of flexibility and shared responsibility in childcare, there was evidence from interviews that some mothers found it difficult to relinquish responsibility for childcare to their male partner. Such reluctance to share responsibility is one of the key elements of what researchers have called 'maternal gate-keeping' (see for example, Allen and Hawkins, 1999), a process whereby the behaviours or beliefs of mothers may limit fathers' opportunities to participate in family life. One mother stated:

*"He'd like to have more time with them [the children] on his own. I'm quite happy for him to do that and I do trust him to do that but it's me that can't let go. I find it really hard to let go of the children. Especially my daughter. I find it really hard to leave her. I've said to him, I know he's capable and everything but it's me." (Mother of two).*

Another mother gave the following reason for her partner never having sole responsibility for caring for their seven-month-old son:

*"I can't imagine it. Not until he's older. No. Perhaps it's me, perhaps I don't trust him enough. Not because he'd hurt him but because he doesn't do it the way I want it done...I'm not very confident in him! No. But then I think I'd probably be like that to anyone. ." (Mother).*

One father commented:

*"I would look after them six hours a week sometimes and I have to push my wife out the door. She's very, very caring and she finds it hard to leave them and I have to push her out the door to get rid of her." (Father).*

## 6.6 Conclusion

This examination of men's perceptions of their fathering role suggests a strong commitment to becoming and being a father. Men's accounts of their adaptation to early parenthood resonates with responses from men in other non-Sure Start neighbourhoods and social groups going through the same transition (see e.g., Lewis, 1986 for a comparison). Balancing earning and caring was a significant theme in parental interviews. In most families, mothers were the primary carers, whilst fathers spent more time working, however there were a minority of families where fathers were the main carers. Mothers emerged as important appraisers of fathers' relationships with their children suggesting that any Sure Start father-centred work needs to be sensitive to the dynamics of 'the parental coalition' (McBride, 2001).

These attitudes offer some clues to ways in which early years services can work towards expanding participation by fathers. Discussion with mothers alone about the role of fathers, and about the attitudes fathers express about their wishes to be involved with the rearing of their children may be a helpful

prelude to the development of services for fathers. The marrying of support services for women with activities for fathers and children together, demonstrating to mothers the benefits of respite provided by fathers may also help to shift attitudes. And the use of fathers who have engaged with services for families as publicity vehicles among their peers, especially in places of leisure and work – may be a way of extending the ‘engaged father’ role model,



## 7. BARRIERS TO FATHER INVOLVEMENT IN SURE START

### 7.1 Introduction

While most fathers in this study showed a keen interest in their children's lives they appeared not to be engaged in Sure Start activities or to visit premises. In the definition of 'involvement' used in this study (See 3.6.2) fathers would be attending programme activities, like parenting sessions, or family groups, or contributing to the running of the Sure Start local programme.

This chapter examines a range of factors that appeared to act as barriers to paternal engagement.<sup>5</sup> A number of barriers to fathers' involvement in Sure Start were identified, some of which overlap with those found by Ghate, Shaw and Hazel (1999) in their study of fathers' access to family centres.

Ghate et al (1999) suggested that these barriers acted on three levels: *cultural/social level* (for example, traditional gendered attitudes to men and women's roles within the family); *individual or family level* (for example, parents' individual circumstances); *family centre level* (for example, the nature of family centre service provision). This chapter further develops Ghate et al's helpful typology.

### 7.2 Predominantly Female Environment/Lack of Male Presence

The most often-cited reason for male non-involvement in Sure Start centre-based activities was the predominantly female environment within Sure Start centres and fathers' reactions to this environment. This reason was given by:

- ? mothers for their partners' lack of involvement in Sure Start;
- ? involved fathers for their initial reluctance to become involved;
- ? fathers involved only in services specifically for dads for their lack of engagement in 'integrated' services (that is, services open to mums and dads);
- ? programme managers and staff as a key barrier to wider engagement with fathers.

There was broad agreement among respondents that entering a largely female environment could be an extremely daunting and intimidating experience for fathers. Fathers stated that the large number of women and lack of male presence within Sure Start buildings (and correspondingly low levels of male service use) made them reluctant to engage with the services

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<sup>5</sup> It is important to note that fathers interviewed in this study do not constitute a representative sample of fathers at the 25 selected programmes. This point is highlighted by the fact that 19 of the 21 dads interviewed stated that were involved in Sure Start in some way, despite low reported levels of involvement in Sure Start from dads generally. Please see Appendix A for further discussion of this point.

provided. Such fathers stated that they felt uncomfortable being the only father (or one of a very small number) within a large group of mothers, feeling that their parenting skills were being assessed by the mothers in the group. A small number of respondents related instances of fathers returning home with their children because they felt uncomfortable entering Sure Start buildings. The following quotation sums up the feelings of many of these fathers:

*“I just found it really difficult...I mean some people were friendly but I just found it really hard going...I was the only bloke going there. It is like that you know, in some places. I suppose it would be pretty tough if a woman came to an all male environment.” (Father).*

Similarly, several mothers cited the predominantly female environment as a reason for their partners' unwillingness to engage with Sure Start. As one mother stated while attending a play session for the first time with her husband and son:

*“I didn't think so [that he'd come into the Sure Start building], no. But he's here. Whether he'll come again or not, I don't know. I'd want him to come again but I won't know until we go outside the door whether he'll come again. But I didn't think he'd come in here in the first place. I thought he'd drop me at the door and go. Because I thought he'd think 'oh it's all women in there', I thought he'd think like that: 'I'll be the only man'. I really am shocked that he came in. But I did say to him outside that there were men here so maybe that helped.” (Mother).*

### **Tony's experience of Sure Start**

Tony, is married and the primary carer for his two daughters, aged 2 ½ years and 11 months. His wife works full-time, Monday to Friday. The family moved into the programme area recently.

Tony found out about Sure Start after contacting a number of local agencies about playgroup availability. Although he previously attended Sure Start sessions with his daughters three times week, he now only attends twice. He stopped attending one group because he felt uncomfortable being the only man. A male childcare worker in the groups he attends helps to put him at ease:

*“Yes, it's good that they've got a male worker here...he's always a help and that's a really big thing for me when I joined. I thought 'Wow a bloke, great!' Because it can be pretty daunting walking into a group with twenty women and they're all looking at you. You can see questions on their faces like 'Why?'”.*

Tony feels that the predominantly female environment is a barrier to more men attending Sure Start activities:

*“People are sussing you out...You feel like you're being watched...I do think for a man here, I can see it being intimidating”.*

Two programme managers mentioned instances of fathers being the target of sexual joking and teasing from mothers. Although these were reported to have been light-hearted, they led to feelings of embarrassment for the fathers concerned. In addition, some programme managers and parents stated that the presence of fathers in predominantly female groups sometimes led to suspicions (from mothers and their male partners) about whether these fathers had sexual motives towards the women. One programme manager commented:

*“Our single fathers said it’s really hard for them because if they come to any women things there’s a lot of talk about them whether they are trying to pick up women. There’s a lot of...they have a really hard time. And some of our dad’s have done like shopping for the different mum’s and stuff and its caused a lot of comments [from mums]...the dads got very uncomfortable.” (Programme manager)*

One father said of his experience of attending Sure Start sessions:

*“People do look a bit strange at you. It’s very difficult with all the women. I suppose I would do the same, you know partners questioning it. ‘Is he just doing it to get to know the women?’ you know.” (Father).*

### **7.3 Sure Start Opening Hours and Work as a Barrier to Involvement**

The majority of sampled Sure Start services were only available during the day, Monday to Friday. Although some programmes did provide services during the evenings and at weekends, this was usually occasional and for one-off events (for example, day-trips or open-evenings). This standard office hours style of service provision clearly made it difficult for parents who worked full-time during the day to engage directly with Sure Start. NESS Local Context Analysis statistics indicate that economic activity rates for working age adults in the sampled Sure Start areas ranged from 78 per cent to 86 per cent. About two-thirds of the parents interviewed cited work commitments, compounded by relatively restricted Sure Start opening hours, as a reason for the lack of father involvement in Sure Start. Mothers in particular often stressed the barrier that their partners’ working hours presented to their engagement with Sure Start. One mother gave the following reason for her partner’s (who works full-time) lack of involvement in Sure Start:

*“Most playgroups we have around here are open in the morning from 10 to 12 or in the afternoon from 2-4 so it’s just not possible [for him to attend] basically. Otherwise I think he would [attend].” (Mother).*

The comments of an ethnic minority inclusion worker suggest that in that Sure Start area, lack of evening and weekend provision may be a barrier to engagement with fathers from minority ethnic communities in particular. She reported that fathers from minority ethnic backgrounds were more likely than

white fathers to be in paid employment and that when families were visited in the home, white fathers were more likely to be present. She said:

*“I have to say that most of the families that we do visit they’re [the fathers] generally at work. You find with the white families that a lot of the dads aren’t working so the dads are around a lot of the times. But with the ethnic minority families the dads are out working. Generally.” (Ethnic minority inclusion worker)*

Another programme manager stated that funding and staffing issues precluded the provision of services outside Sure Start core hours. In addition, the benefits of such provision may not be apparent to all programmes since attempts to offer services during the evenings and at weekends, sometimes specifically to target fathers, appeared to have been hit-and-miss. While some programmes have found this an extremely helpful strategy in helping to engage more fathers, others have found that it has made little difference to the number of fathers they are able to reach. For instance, one programme manager stated that:

*“At that point we knew about 25 dads and we invited them specifically. And actually it was an evening thing because we thought that would suit them. There were only...there were two people who were able to come and there were another 7 or 8 who responded and said that they couldn’t make that meeting but they were interested and they wanted all the feedback.” (Programme manager)*

In some cases the impact of programmes’ attempts to involve fathers appeared to be related to community-specific factors such as local working patterns. For example, one programme manager told of the lack of impact that attempts to widen the time during which Sure Start offers services had made:

*“A lot of people do 6am – 2pm, 2pm – 10pm, 10pm - 6am [shift patterns at work]. There are so many different patterns that you could never satisfy all of the things because all of the factories work in different ways. So there is not like a regular system ...Like we did originally set up an evening session hopefully to get like working parents to come along to those. But again it was like, it just didn’t work. But it is a major factor all over [this area] the working patterns.” (Programme manager)*

## **7.4 Traditional Attitudes Towards Childcare and Male-Female Roles**

As noted in chapter 4, the majority of parents interviewed welcomed more father involvement in Sure Start. However, traditional attitudes towards men’s and women’s roles in families were often cited by mothers, fathers and a range of programme staff as a potential reason for the lack of father involvement in Sure Start. Perceived societal expectations about the roles of men and women in the family or the ‘traditional’ culture of the local area were

given as explanations for the existence these attitudes. Mothers typically attributed such attitudes to other men in the local community rather than to their own partners (although a small number did feel that their partners held traditional views of male and female gender and childcare roles), often stating that their own partners were more involved in their children's lives than most fathers in the area. Similarly, the majority of fathers interviewed cited traditional, gendered attitudes to childcare and male-female roles as a potential barrier to involvement for other dads in the area, though rarely for them. As the majority of men interviewed were involved with Sure Start in some way, it may be that they have relatively non-traditional views on gender roles when compared to most fathers in their local programme areas.

A number of fathers stated that local men tended to view involvement in childcare and especially attendance at a family centre as a mother's job. For some of them, the predominantly female nature of much of Sure Start acted to reinforce this view. One father who was taking part in a Sure Start play session for the first time commented:

*"I think most of them would think it's a bit soft and most men don't like that. I mean, it's got a reputation as a rough area. People walk around as if to say 'I'm hard I am'. Well, I don't see them wanting to get involved in this. I mean, I've lived round here all my life and not many men I've known would get involved in this."* (Father).

When asked about their views on the role that fathers should play in a family, the overwhelming response from both mothers and fathers was that the parental roles should be as equal as possible. Very few parents stated rigidly gender-stereotyped views on the role of parents in families or had firm, strongly-held opinions about what the role of each parent should be. Parents tended to emphasize the diverse and constantly changing needs of different types of families and the feeling that parental roles should vary depending on the needs of the family at particular points in time. As one mother commented:

*"I just think it depends on the people. I think whatever works best for that partnership...I don't think it particularly matters if it's a blood relative as long as there's somebody caring for them. But I do think it's nice to have a mother and father figure together and I think it's a lot for one person to cope with on their own..."* (Mother)

## **7.5 Female-Centred Orientation of Services**

There was a feeling among most of the fathers interviewed that few of the services provided by Sure Start lent themselves to father involvement. Sessions and activities in particular were reported by many fathers to have an implicit female orientation. One programme, for example, encouraged attendance by offering supermarket-style reward points to service-users. These were redeemable against a range of services. However, during informal discussions, some local fathers stated that they perceived these services (for example, massages and facials) as female-orientated and felt

excluded from the reward scheme. A number of fathers and mothers commented that they felt Sure Start centres had little to offer fathers.

One mother said of Sure Start:

*“As I said before, it’s mainly women. Women and babies. So, there is the Dads’ Group...but there’s not a whole lot I don’t think. I think it’s more at women’s level.” (Mother)*

In addition, some parents suggested that the provision of more male-orientated sessions (for example, father and child reading groups or providing space for fathers to play football during breaks) along with pro-active moves to convince fathers that they were welcome at ‘mixed’ Sure Start sessions, would help to increase levels of father involvement. As one mother said:

*“Perhaps something should be aimed solely at fathers as I’m sure new fathers must be terrified of what’s going on. .” (Mother)*

## **7.6 Lack of Knowledge about Sure Start**

Lack of knowledge about the Sure Start programme’s existence or its specific services were another potential barrier to father involvement. Some fathers who used Sure Start services stated that that they would have used them sooner had they been aware of their existence. This suggests that in some areas knowledge of Sure Start may not be widespread among men. For instance, a father who had been attending Sure Start activities with his partner and child, gave lack of knowledge as the reason for their not using Sure Start services earlier:

*“Even the health visitor didn’t tell us much about it. Wasn’t until we came to the baby clinic and we just saw the Sure Start poster then we just asked about it and we just came along...Even the fathers group, I didn’t know anything about it until a few weeks ago.” (Father)*

For fathers who had had little direct involvement with Sure Start, lack of knowledge about the nature of Sure Start services coupled with preconceptions about the nature of the Sure Start environment (sometimes based on previous experience of childcare environments) appeared to be an important influence on their decision about whether or not to engage with Sure Start. Interviews suggest that lack of knowledge about Sure Start and the perception that Sure Start was ‘for women’ appeared to act together to deter father involvement. As one dad said:

*“It’s just the men thinking it’s for the women and blokes aren’t welcome. I thought that at first...I thought it was just for the women to chinwag and I thought just let them get on with it...It wasn’t till my wife asked me to go and I said ‘Will it be alright for me to go?’ and she said ‘Yes, they don’t mind fathers turning up,’ that I thought I’d try it and go up there and I was made to feel quite welcome up there so I went a few other times and that. It was really good fun actually.” (Father)*

As with the father quoted above, fathers who did engage with Sure Start typically commented that the experience was far more positive than they had expected.

## **7.7 Other Barriers to Fathers' Involvement in Sure Start**

Fathers' personal characteristics were also identified as a factor that might act as a barrier to father involvement in Sure Start. Shyness and lack of confidence were described by some mothers as a reason why their partners did not attend Sure Start activities. One gave the following explanation for her partner's lack of Sure Start involvement:

*"[He doesn't attend Sure Start sessions] Because he'd rather spend time at home with the children. It's his individual choice of doing that...He's one of those who just can't go in and speak to a total stranger." (Mother)*

One father who did attend some Sure Start sessions said:

*"If I can get to know people I don't mind where I am...I'm kind of erm, suppose I'm conscious about myself and sort of my life and coming here sort of thing makes it awkward." (Father).*

In contrast, fathers' level of confidence appeared to aid some fathers in overcoming some of the barriers to father involvement:

*"I've done drama in the past so it's brought me out of my shell so I can stand up in a group of people and talk or do whatever. I can walk in a group if it's all women, just walk in say 'Yeah I'm her [daughter's] dad and I'm proud of it.'" (Father).*

## **7.8 Conclusion**

This section of the study shows that a number of barriers appear to prevent or hinder fathers' involvement in Sure Start. These help to explain the reported lack of father involvement. In the following chapter attention is given to factors which encourage involvement, and clearly if programmes are to increase the numbers of fathers using services, they will need to strengthen these factors in operating services. But it will also be important to minimise barriers where possible.

The predominantly female Sure Start environment was cited by parents and staff as the major barrier to father involvement. The fact that there are many mothers using local programmes is clearly desirable, and reducing these numbers in the interests of attracting fathers would not be a good idea. But raising consciousness among users of the importance of welcoming minority groups (including men in this context) needs to be a part of the equal opportunity policy of all programmes. To this end, some discussions with female users about ways in which they can encourage and support fathers to come into Sure Start buildings and join in activities, especially those active, fun-type activities many like, are a good idea.

In addition, parents' working hours combined with Sure Start 'office hours' opening, may further restrict fathers' opportunities to engage. Once they get properly established, many local programmes are considering more flexible opening hours for premises and services, and greater flexibility may make it easier for fathers to participate.

'Traditional', gendered attitudes towards male and female roles in families were cited as a potential barrier to father involvement. However, married and cohabiting mothers said that they and their partners employed a flexible approach to childcare responsibilities, tending to attribute 'traditional' attitudes to 'other men'. There were signs of a shift in these attitudes in many areas, and Sure Start may well be contributing to a change in habits which are deep-rooted and will take time to change. It is unlikely to affect this change single-handed, however, and in the interim will need to make sure that all Sure Start publicity is scrupulous in its presentation of men as equal carers with women.

Fathers and mothers commented that Sure Start services were aimed predominantly at women and children and that few services were aimed at fathers. Where local programmes were tackling this perception, the basic approach was to develop some activities specifically for fathers and gradually to encourage fathers to participate in more general services and activities.

Increasing fathers' knowledge and experience of Sure Start may help to encourage father involvement. There was some disappointing evidence about the marketing and publicity of local programme activities which suggests that these need attention. Some fathers had negative preconceptions about what engaging with Sure Start would be like. Typically, the reality of engagement was more positive than they had expected.



## 8. WHY DID FATHERS BECOME INVOLVED IN SURE START?

### 8.1 Introduction

In this brief chapter we explore two of the main reasons why fathers were reported to become actively involved in activities organised by their local Sure Start programme. The first, encouragement by their partner, was the most commonly stated, while the second, the nature of fathers' need for family support services, was a strong impetus among a visible minority of men. Active involvement is also stimulated by the approach of the local Sure Start Programme. This aspect of the reasons for involvement is explored in Chapter 9 below.

### 8.2 Influence of Female Partner

For fathers who were regular Sure Start service users (either of services specifically for fathers or of integrated Sure Start services), encouragement and in some cases reported coercion by a female partner was often a key reason for them becoming involved. Mothers' greater levels of involvement in Sure Start meant that they often acted as sources of information for their partners about the programme's services and activities. Often, fathers' initial contact with programmes was as a result of information given to them by their partners. In addition, pressure from mothers for their male partner to engage with Sure Start appeared to be particularly important in influencing fathers' decisions about whether or not to become involved. In some cases encouragement or pressure from a female partner was enough to outweigh some of the barriers to involvement outlined in Chapter 7. One father who was initially reluctant to get involved in a fathers' group but became involved after being encouraged to do so by his partner and now uses the Sure Start centre on daily basis commented:

*"I'm always sort of encouraged to come to these things...um...so I mean, Tracey's always collaring me...When I first started coming I didn't really want to come. It was only the effect of my partner basically dragging me up here that I came up...I didn't want to keep coming up here every time she was asking me to come up here. But now I don't even think about it...just sort of got used to it sort of thing. (Father).*

This finding about the pivotal role of mothers in influencing paternal behaviour has been a consistent finding in family research (Allen & Hawkins, 1999). Maternal facilitation can act to promote father involvement in Sure Start by reinterpreting or communicating its relevance to partners. However, the importance of mothers' role in mediating fathers' involvement does, of course, mean that there is potential for mothers to act as barriers to fathers' involvement as shown in the discussion of maternal gate-keeping within the domestic sphere in Chapter 7. The interviews provided little evidence of this happening<sup>6</sup> in terms of attendance at Sure Start sessions.

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<sup>6</sup> None of the fathers interviewed stated that their partners had discouraged their involvement in Sure Start.

### **8.3 Fathers' Circumstances and Level of Need**

Fathers' individual circumstances and their level of need emerged as a key factor in whether or not they became involved in Sure Start. Of the fathers interviewed for this study, those that reported the greatest amount of Sure Start service use tended to be lone fathers or the main carers for their child or children. In addition, one father who reported extensive use of Sure Start services was a non-resident parent who had recently gone through a relationship breakdown and felt that he needed Sure Start's support.

The five fathers in the sample who were lone fathers or main carers for their children all stated that they had made use of Sure Start services because they had needed the support that Sure Start offered. This had not always been easy for them at first. Interviews with these fathers suggested that their level of need might have acted to outweigh barriers, such as opening hours or lack of other fathers :

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

The support they received included childcare, parenting classes and the social support of other parents.

### **8.4 Conclusion**

One of main reasons why men become actively involved in Sure Start activities is pressure from their partner to take up the opportunities on offer. Clearly the nature of the relationship between parents is significant in this decision. There is some evidence from evaluations of parenting courses, for example, that shared learning about behaviour modification can have a beneficial effect on adult relationships, as well as on the parent-child relationship.

However, local programmes need to be alert to the possibility of maternal gate-keeping, and to work with some sensitivity to prevent it becoming the 'culture' of the local programme. If mothers are keen to have 'time out' from partners, it might be appropriate to suggest an equivalent opportunity for fathers.

For a minority of men who are primary carers of a young child, Sure Start may provide a vital support to their parenting. Since Sure Start is a general programme, available for all families with 0- 3year olds in the programme area, it is particular important that all minority groups feel they can access and benefit from services. The evidence from this study was that men who were primary carers were doing so – though local programmes need a mechanism to check whether they are reaching all fathers in this category.

## **9. PROGRAMME APPROACHES TO FATHER AND MALE CARER INVOLVEMENT IN SURE START**

### **9.1 Introduction**

Although there was widespread agreement among programme staff that involvement of fathers was desirable, because it would benefit the development of children in the area, actual practice varied considerably. Setting up Sure Start programmes was often a complex and time-consuming process with programme managers juggling multiple tasks (National Evaluation of Sure Start, July 2002). Other priorities were deemed more immediate than addressing father involvement. For example, one programme manager who was developing work with fathers felt it necessary to put that work on hold when the programme area was expanded. She said:

*“So obviously all the developmental issues had to get put on the stand while we got up and running in those new areas as well. So it was almost like another delay in doing this [father involvement] work. So we've now picked it back up again.” (Programme manager)*

From the analysis of programme staff interviews, inspection of local records and observations whilst visiting programmes five components differentiated those programme with high provision for fathers and those with lower levels or provision.

- ? Early identification of fathers as a priority.
- ? Programme-wide commitment to father involvement.
- ? A strategy for involving fathers.
- ? Provision of services specifically for fathers.
- ? Presence of a dedicated staff member for encouraging father involvement

This chapter describes how each of these factors was used to incorporate fathers into individual programmes.

### **9.2 Early Identification of Fathers as a Priority**

Staff in high provision programmes reported that involvement of fathers had been identified as a key area of work early on in the programme's existence. Typically, this was done before or during the writing of the delivery plan and was usually the result of community consultation. The nature and extent of this community consultation varied between programmes. Often it was mothers rather than fathers who had drawn attention to the importance of encouraging father involvement during the consultation process. As one programme manager stated:

*“It was something that was very clearly identified by women during the period of consultation. What they were saying was, that they wanted a worker to make sure that their partners became more involved in child-care, and more involved in bringing up the children, more involved in the community...We worked very hard on trying to include dads in the consultation period. But the main ideas I would say did come from the women.” (Programme manager)*

Lead agencies' or other key partners' attitudes to father involvement may also have been a key factor in whether or not programmes identified father involvement as important early on in their development. One programme manager commented that the programme's lead agency had a history of working with fathers and that this had been the major factor in the early prioritisation of father involvement. This commitment had resulted in a focus on father involvement being part of the initial delivery plan.

In addition, some programme managers found it difficult to increase the focus on father involvement once programmes were up and running. They felt that an attempt to establish an explicit focus on father involvement had to battle against established ways of working even early on in the programme's development.

For example, one newly appointed round 2 programme manager stated that the programme's lack of focus on involving fathers prior to her appointment may have given some local fathers the impression that Sure Start was unconcerned about them. Although she was now focusing on involving fathers, she felt that this lack of earlier work had made the process more difficult. She said:

*“Talking to the men now they all say this [a focus on involving fathers] should have happened months ago. Not just now. And because it's now they might feel it's harder because they think we're not that bothered really we just want to make the numbers up...I've managed to get round that by saying 'I don't know what's happened before I wasn't part of that but I'm here now'. But yes, every father has mentioned the fact of 'Why now? It's taken a year or whatever to start thinking about us now. So why should we be part of something now?' I'm talking about fathers who have partners who have been doing all sorts of things with Sure Start and nothing was targeted at the fathers....” (Programme manager)*

### **9.3 Programme-wide Commitment to Father Involvement**

Commitment to father involvement within low provision programmes was patchy. In one case, for example, a male worker had been striving to encourage more local fathers to access Sure Start services but did not feel that there was broad support for his work among other programme staff. Interviews with members of staff at this programme suggested that while more father involvement was viewed as desirable, there was not strong commitment to it among all members of staff. The programme manager for example, commented that:

*“We're getting a good kind of core of people coming in. And it's mostly women that look after their children, so we're reasonably sort of satisfied with that. And it seems like, and then people are saying, ‘Well what about men?’ Well it's kind of like, ‘Give us a break’.” (Programme manager)*

In contrast, high provision programmes tended to have a broader, programme-wide support for involving fathers. Often this was the result of very early identification of father involvement as a priority and its subsequent influence on programme ethos and practices. In such programmes support for father involvement could be found among a range of programme staff with differing job roles (for example, health visitors, crèche workers, community participation workers) as well as at management board level.

In order to increase father involvement it is essential that commitment to father involvement permeates the whole Sure Start programme. Interviews with staff and parents indicated that one of the main ways that fathers came to engage with Sure Start was through being referred (often very informally) by Sure Start partner agency staff. A programme-wide commitment to father involvement meant that team members supported each other in attempting to engage with fathers. This was reported to be an important part of most ‘high priority’ programmes’ approach to this strategy. As one programme manager noted:

*“The biggest strategy I'm just trying to work on is making this link between families where we know there's a dad and people are doing home visiting. And actually making sure that that engaging happens or that the person whose doing the home visiting actually links ... [dads' worker] in with that and that and they go and meet families together.... introduce people. We really want to strengthen that.” (Programme manager).*

Thus programme managers at high provision programmes typically wanted to encourage all staff to be sensitive to the needs of fathers. One programme manager stated:

*“I think from the point of view of health visitors and midwives to start with, traditionally we've engaged with female carers in the house...But what we're trying to do is get them to remember that quite often there is a partner, a male partner in the household”. (Programme manager).*

### **Involving Fathers in Sure Start, Round 1 programme**

The programme's lead partner is a voluntary organisation that supports children and families. The organisation has an ‘involving fathers’ policy statement and is actively attempting to increase the number of men accessing its family support services. It was working to support fathers within the Sure Start programme area prior to Sure Start being implemented. The programme manager says: *“Our value base is one of including fathers.” (Programme manager).*

The programme employs a full-time fathers' worker (Tom) who has been in post for two years. As well as providing one-to-one support for fathers at drop-ins and home visits, Tom has facilitated four fathers' programmes, lasting for between seven and ten weeks. These programmes have involved fathers attending a three-hour weekly session. The Sure Start programme provides free childcare for fathers who attend. Most of the sessions on each course take place in a Sure Start centre and involve a learning activity (for example, a talk and discussion about parenting issues), but two or three sessions involve 'out of centre' activities, (for example, a family trip to the zoo). Tom has attempted to ensure that the learning element of the fathers' programme is father-led. He says:

*"Part of building the support [for the programme] is encouraging the men to take responsibility for their own learning and direction. So, for example, we provide a list of topics that they may like to select from as learning topics and we also leave blank cards so they might have a few of their own. They might identify things that might seem outside physical care of children or parenting. IT skills for instance...it's learning around parenting, but it could also be learning about anything the fathers wanted to learn about."* (Fathers' worker)

Discussion topics suggested by fathers have included:

- ? Child development
- ? Building self-esteem in children
- ? Anger management for fathers

Each individual fathers' programme has been evaluated at the end by fathers filling in an evaluation questionnaire.

Tom says that there is a general commitment to father involvement among programme staff. For example, members of Sure Start partner agencies (social workers and health visitors) play a key role in promoting Tom's work, and Sure Start generally, to local fathers. Most links with fathers begin from their initial contact with another member of the Sure Start team. Team members have also visited fathers' programme sessions to discuss their work. Tom summarises the programme's approach to involving fathers: *"It's about 'To what extent are we trying to reach out to fathers?'... 'When we do a home visit do we ask what time is the father going to be there?'. So it's [about] making a conscious effort to include fathers."*

*"We have plans to really get out there and engage more fathers through parents' forums and fun activities, also with the community parents' programme...we'd like to have a parenting group just for fathers as well. The other thing I would quite like us to develop is to really look much closer at the men's health issue. I know that men's health is often neglected...And it's not just about developing services for fathers, we very much want to see the integration and actually look at families holistically."*

## **9.4 Strategy for Involving Fathers**

One of the clearest findings about most programmes' approach to involving fathers was the apparent lack of a clear strategy. The majority appeared to

adopt a piecemeal approach and their attempts to involve fathers typically involved one or more ideas (for example, inviting mothers and fathers to an open evening or involving fathers in a gardening project) but had no overall plan for developing work with fathers.

Analysis of staff interviews highlights a lack of knowledge about fathers' work in many programmes. A number of staff members, including programme managers, stated that although they wanted to involve fathers, they were unclear about how best to proceed. As one fathers' worker stated:

*“Supporting fathers is really new territory and nobody knows what is going to work and what isn't.” (Fathers' worker).*

Although most programmes lacked a clear strategy, the most common approach among high provision programmes was a joined-up, multi-pronged approach to involving fathers. This typically involved drawing on a programme-wide commitment to father involvement to enable a number of different approaches to father engagement to be implemented simultaneously. These included:

- ? Ensuring that positive images of fatherhood are visible within Sure Start buildings (for example, by displaying photos of fathers with their children).
- ? Providing services in the evening and at weekends to encourage participation from working fathers.
- ? Raising awareness among staff (for example, health visitors and midwives) about the importance of attempting to engage fathers.
- ? Starting up a fathers' group.
- ? Putting up posters and leaflets advertising Sure Start services in venues where fathers may gather (for example, pubs, social clubs, and bookmakers).
- ? Consulting with fathers to ensure that service delivery is meeting their needs.

Two further key components of programme-wide strategies for involving fathers used by Sure Start local programmes are examined in the following sections: services specifically for fathers, and fathers' workers.

## **9.5 Provision of Services Specifically for Fathers**

One widely used strategy for involving fathers was to provide services exclusively for men or fathers and children in the hope that they would act as a “stepping stone” for fathers to become involved in integrated services for families. Ten of the programmes involved in this study provided services specifically for fathers and a further three planned to provide them in the future. These services were of differing types and included:

- ? drop-in sessions for fathers
- ? fathers' discussion groups
- ? fathers' coffee mornings
- ? courses for fathers<sup>7</sup> (for example, parenting skills, parent-child verbal communication)

There is some evidence from interviews with programme staff and parents to suggest that providing father-only sessions and activities may encourage father involvement. It may be the case that such sessions act to help men overcome their apprehension at entering a predominantly female environment. One mother said:

*"[Sure Start is welcoming for men] But until they come they're not going to find out. I think they're just scared. Maybe if they had just a men's group, and got them to start coming to just the males group and then gradually bring them together as one big group, it's just getting them in." (Mother).*

Programme managers' accounts suggest that the 'stepping-stone' approach to involving fathers may be a useful way of increasing involvement from men. For example, one programme manager cited an example of a father whose first experience of Sure Start involvement was attending a course for fathers concerned with verbal parent-child communication. He had subsequently become involved in other Sure Start activities:

*"It took time with one [father]. With his lack of confidence really. And I do honestly believe that if he hadn't have done this course with all the dads that he'd not have come on the literacy course. But he always said I'm not coming if it's a room full of women. And he came so it was really quite a start for him and his confidence has come on and he's top of the class in literacy. There's no stopping him now." (Programme manager).*

Another programme manager commented:

*"Dads we're working with are lone parents that are actually with the children on their own. They don't come into contact with females very often...I think a lot of them have come to these [father-only] groups to build up their confidence then moved on to other things which has been absolutely fabulous...But now we are actually coming up to the level where they're perfectly happy now to go on courses which are run by other centres. ." (Programme manager, ).*

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<sup>7</sup> An example of a course for fathers used by one of the programmes in this study can be found in Appendix D.



### **Jerry's experience of Sure Start**

Jerry is 37 and has been separated from his wife for 18 months. He has three daughters aged three, four, and six, whom he sees for a few hours twice during the week and all day on a Sunday.

The break-up of his marriage was a traumatic time for Jerry and he feels that Sure Start was instrumental in helping him through it. He says: *"When we first split up I didn't see my daughters for 5 months it was quite a bad time that, I had a full breakdown and everything...I was in bits really I'd just split up with my partner, lost my kids that sort of thing and they [Sure Start staff] helped me. It just built me up really to deal with all the stuff that was going on in my life at the time...They [Sure Start staff] are the ones who came up to me and said 'Are you alright?'"*

Jerry became involved with Sure Start by chance after speaking to a mother who used Sure Start services: *"I sat in the café one day and another mum came and spoke to me because her daughter played with my daughter and I just got involved. I just didn't know what the place was...it was all just being in the right place at the right time."*

During the past year, Jerry has participated in Sure Start courses to deal with relationship breakdown, parenting and confidence-building and attended a weekly fathers' group. He has found all of the Sure Start courses very useful. Jerry is now a regular attendee at partnership board meetings and feels that this gives him and other parents the opportunity to feed into the Sure Start decision-making process. Jerry considers parent input to be extremely important in ensuring that Sure Start helps his community and thinks that parent input is valued and acted upon:

*"If the parents have got a problem you bring it up here, you have your voice, it gets aired and it gets sorted out."*

## **9.6 Presence of a Staff Member for Encouraging Father Involvement**

A staff member with particular responsibility for encouraging father involvement was usually responsible for coordinating father-only services. Results from the Implementation national survey of round 1 and 2 Sure Start programmes indicate that 53% of these programmes have an outreach team member with responsibility for involving fathers. However, during fieldwork it became clear that there was a great deal of difference in the role adopted by these members of staff.

One key difference was the relationship of father involvement work to the staff member's role within Sure Start as a whole. Whereas some father involvement workers are employed full-time or part-time primarily to work with fathers (and indeed, their fathers' work is part of their job title), for others responsibility for involving fathers is a small part of their overall role within Sure Start. Six of the 25 programmes involved in this study had employed a fathers' worker primarily to work with fathers and encourage father

involvement. A further three programmes were in the process of appointing a fathers' worker. The work of fathers' workers was central to their programmes' strategy for involving fathers and as such the work that they do warrants closer examination and a more public face.

The motivation behind the decision to appoint a fathers' worker varied from programme to programme. For one programme, the lead agency's history of working with fathers was the driving force behind this decision. For four others, the appointment of a fathers' worker was largely the result of consultation with the local community and identification of the need to involve fathers. The needs of families were usually central to this decision. For example, at one programme consultation revealed that mothers wanted a worker to help ensure that their partners were involved in their children's lives and in childcare. At another programme, child protection issues were an important factor in the decision to have a fathers' worker:

"We looked at why children were re-registered for child protection and often it involved domestic violence in the home. And so again it was something that was an indicator that we needed to do more work with dads. And so that was when we applied for funding for a fathers' worker." (Programme manager, round 1 programme)

Most of the fathers' workers interviewed said that when they began work with Sure Start programmes they were unclear about how best to approach involving men. This would seem to reflect similar uncertainties among many programme managers who often knew that they wanted to increase father involvement in Sure Start but were unclear about how to do it and precisely how a fathers' workers could help them achieve this goal. Job descriptions were typically very general : 'to support and encourage fathers' participation in Sure Start activities'. The following quotations sum up the early experience of most of the fathers' workers interviewed:

*"It was clear to me what I had to do but it was um, what wasn't clear was how I was to do it. Because obviously it had never been done so it's making it up as you're going along." (Fathers' worker).*

and:

*"Well, initially I was saying 'What do you want me to do?' and it was like "Well I dunno - what do you want to do?" because we didn't have much experience of working with fathers...it was a question of having a model for a fathers programme...it was quite a struggle at first." (Fathers' worker).*

Some fathers' workers were left to work through themselves how best to approach their work with men and develop their role. Others, however, received training from organisations such as Children North East and Fathers Direct, which they found invaluable. A fathers' worker who had attended a three-day Fathers Direct seminar reported that it had been extremely useful in giving him a starting point for arranging group sessions with fathers:

*“The actual activities were great. It was a curriculum for fathers’ development, about 25 modules, some you wouldn’t use, but it had lots of building self-esteem, child-development, communication...it was a great resource.” (Fathers’ worker).*

Fathers’ workers carried out a range of tasks, including:

- ? co-ordinating and facilitating fathers’ groups (for example, arranging guest speakers for weekly fathers’ groups or facilitating weekly fathers’ discussion groups or coffee mornings);
- ? conducting home visits to provide support for fathers and families;
- ? taking the lead in publicising Sure Start to local fathers (for example, stopping fathers in the street to tell them about Sure Start);
- ? raising the level of awareness of fathers’ work among programme staff (for example, fathers’ worker visiting each Sure Start session to introduce himself and publicise the existence of a fathers’ group);
- ? Running drop-in sessions for fathers where they can get support with a range of issues (for example, job-seeking, parenting advice, literacy support);
- ? advocacy and advice work with fathers (for example, helping/advising them in their dealings with benefits agency or social services).

#### **Involving fathers in Sure Start: Adrian, fathers’ support worker**

Adrian has been in part-time post for 9 months. He has a background in community work. When interviewed as part of our phase 1 research he had been in post for less than six weeks. His work up to this point included:

- ? visiting Sure Start groups and introducing himself to staff and (predominantly female) service-users to raise awareness of his work;
- ? walking around the local area and introducing himself to members of the community;
- ? looking for courses to attend in order to enhance his ability to work with fathers;
- ? working on flyers and posters to publicise Sure Start to fathers;
- ? finding out about local services to which he could signpost fathers.

According to Adrian, few men were engaging with Sure Start prior to his appointment. However, he said that during his first six weeks in post, local fathers had responded positively to his attempts to involve them. *“The need for fathers is there. They want to talk, they want to be heard, they want to be supported, they want to spend more time with their children...Men do want to be reached.”*

He described some of the issues that fathers had raised with him: *“I met a father last week, he’s a lone parent father, he’s got two children and he’s not*

*sure whether he's doing it right or not: 'Can you look for a parenting course for me?' I've then gone away and spoken to my colleagues and this afternoon I'm going to see him and get him onto this parenting course...I've found there's quite a lot of lone parent fathers out there. Another dad was wondering if he was feeding his child properly and I'm getting one of the dieticians that we have here to go and see him and work with him and write up a food and diet sheet for his child...I've spoken to fathers who've said they feel forgotten about once their partner has a baby and they get into a depressive state... I'm getting that from most fathers, that they've been forgotten when they have a newborn. ."*

In the 7½ months since the phase 1 interview with Adrian, his work has included:

- ? facilitating a weekly coffee morning for fathers;
- ? helping fathers find work by putting them in touch with employment agencies;
- ? organising talks for fathers on topics such as child nutrition, smoking cessation, men's health and personal safety;
- ? organising a smoking cessation programme for fathers;
- ? arranging one-to-one sessions for fathers with housing association managers to discuss accommodation issues;
- ? arranging day-trips for fathers and children

A 'core' of about 12 men now attend a weekly coffee morning and Adrian is hoping to set up another fathers' group in the next few weeks to target young fathers (under 20 years of age) who he has found particular difficulty in to engaging with. Adrian would also like to engage with more African-Caribbean fathers – although more than 10% of the local community is from an African-Caribbean ethnic background, only one father from this group attends the coffee morning. Adrian says:

*"The young, black generation I feel is the hardest group to reach basically...I feel they've been let down by different groups coming in and promising them this that and the other and when it's come down to it it's not happened...I've spoken to a lot of young black fathers and they say they're not interested in attending a dads' group."*

Adrian says that in order to engage with African-Caribbean fathers, programmes need to take account of the diverse needs of different cultural and ethnic groups and frame attempts to involve them in terms of these. For example, he feels that although fathers' groups might help to attract some white fathers, such groups may not represent the sort of activity that African-Caribbean fathers in the area are interested in:

*"Different communities have different expectations so you've got to go out of your way to get them [Black fathers] involved."*

He feels that the part-time nature of his post makes it hard for him to achieve all that he would like to in the job: *"...thirty hours a week is just not enough."*

## 9.7 The Impact of Fathers' Workers

The presence of a dedicated fathers' worker was reported by staff and parents to have a number of benefits for fathers and families. In particular, there is evidence from interviews that it has allowed programme staff to identify issues affecting fathers and their families that may have been otherwise overlooked. For example, through his work with local fathers, one worker identified bereavement and relationship loss as key issues and was able to work to give support to fathers and in some cases refer them to bereavement and counselling services. Other areas of need that have been identified and supported by fathers' workers include:

- ? concerns about child development and parenting;
- ? anger management;
- ? basic skills/literacy and numeracy support;
- ? post-natal depression;
- ? feelings of isolation.

All the programmes that employed a fathers' worker also provided services specifically for fathers. Staff at these programmes typically reported higher levels of engagement with local fathers than at those without fathers' workers. Although there was evidence that the 'stepping stone' approach described in section 9.3.1 encouraged the involvement of fathers in 'mixed' services, staff reported that much of this engagement from fathers actually occurred in father-only services (for example, fathers' groups and drop-ins for fathers) facilitated by the fathers' worker.

### **Stuart's experience of Sure Start**

Stuart is 33, divorced and a full-time lone father. He has three children, one of whom, his 2 ½ year-old daughter Charlotte, lives with him. His other children live with their mothers. He found out about Sure Start when he went to see a health visitor to enquire about local playgroups and happened to meet a member of Sure Start staff who gave him a leaflet and invited him along. Before this he was not accessing any family support services and was unaware that Sure Start existed.

Stuart currently attends a weekly Sure Start playgroup with his daughter and weekly fathers' group meetings. He also attends a weekly parenting course that the Sure Start fathers' worker put him in touch with when he mentioned that Charlotte was having problems sleeping.

Before becoming involved with Sure Start, Stuart felt isolated at times:

*"I was stuck at home all day with Charlotte and I was starting to snap at Charlotte and I wanted to get out of the house and being a single parent you can't have an intelligent conversation with a two and a half year old. It doesn't*

*work... I said well this isn't fair on Charlotte, so we've got to get out and do something".*

Stuart says that Sure Start has made a huge difference to his and Charlotte's lives. His involvement in the parenting course has helped him to develop his parenting skills and Charlotte's attendance at playgroup is helping her future development and preparation for school. The fathers' group has enabled him to share his experiences with other fathers:

*"It's been top. I can't fault it at all. I can't fault it one bit. I mean everything. For instance Dave's [dads' worker] come up to me and said I'll get you involved in this, I'll get you sorted with that, I wanted to get on a course and he's done it. He says there's a playgroup there bring her along it's there. There's nothing that's been told to me and it's not reached my expectations. If anything it's gone over the expectations that I started with... People are ready to jump in and help out, you know it's there"*

Stuart sees a desperate need for local fathers to access family support services but feels that they may often be reluctant to ask for help:

*"You stand here and ask most of the blokes who walk down here with a pushchair, most blokes will tell you, but they won't tell you in front of the missus but they will tell you that they don't know how to cope."*

Very few interviewees identified any actual or potential risks associated with employing fathers' workers and providing services specifically for fathers. One fathers' worker suggested that employing such a worker might weaken the feeling among staff that that involving fathers is a programme-wide pursuit - having a fathers' worker might give the impression that work to involve fathers was solely his or her responsibility. Two programme managers interviewed suggest that although mums were generally supportive of involving fathers, the implementation of 'father-only' services could make some single mothers feel that they are being excluded from service provision. However, neither programme manager suggested that there had been widespread feelings of exclusion from local mothers.

## **9.8 Conclusion**

In this chapter we have suggested that there are clearly some Sure Start local programmes in which fathers are much more centrally involved than in others. These are characterised by the five components of practice that have been the central focus of the chapter – early identification of fathers as a priority; programme-wide commitment to father involvement, a strategy for working with fathers, the provision of some services specifically for fathers and the presence of a dedicated staff member to encourage fathers to participate. While a few staff had reservations about giving fathers a central role, most in these programmes gave firm support to an inclusive policy that involved men from the outset, for some in a gradualist "stepping stone" style, and with dedicated workers and activities. A range of innovative practice strategies are described in this chapter. Such innovations have been recent and we gained the impression that they are increasing in their number and their

effectiveness. In these programmes fathers appeared to be very responsive to the services and programmes provided for them.

## 10. CONCLUSIONS

### 10.1 Introduction

This exploratory study of Sure Start in its early phase has revealed a strong mother focus in service management and delivery. As in the early phase of US Head Start 'parent involvement' has implicitly meant maternal involvement (Levine, 1993). In the original scoring of 'father involvement', used in the Implementation survey, only 12 per cent of programmes were categorized as 'highly involving' fathers. From interviews with programme managers, inspection of local programme records and fieldwork observations in this study it is clear that in some areas father involvement was even lower than reported in the Implementation survey. However, we gained the strong impression that this was in large part because programmes were relatively young – towards the end of our study the highly father-involved appeared to be developing systematic and successful ways of engaging whole families and catering to the needs to single fathers. The main factors promoting fathers' participation in local Sure Start programmes are summarized in Table 10.1

**Table 10.1 FACTORS PROMOTING FATHERS' PARTICIPATION IN LOCAL SURE START PROGRAMMES**

<b>PROGRAMME LEVEL</b>	<b>FAMILY LEVEL</b>
Early identification of fathers as a priority	Female partner facilitation
Programme-wide commitment to father involvement	High paternal caring responsibilities
Strategy for involving fathers	
Provision of services specifically for dads	
Presence of a dedicated staff member for encouraging father involvement	

### 10.2 Policy and Practice Recommendations

A series of policy and practice recommendations about how fathers can be more fully integrated into early intervention, preventative services for young children emerged from the study. These recommendations are summarized below.

- ? Increasing the numbers and visibility of male workers at all levels to make the Sure Start environment more male friendly. Lack of male presence was identified as a key barrier to father involvement.



- ? A broadening of programmes' 'office hours' opening times to include evenings and weekends where possible.
- ? Developing outreach strategies to engage fathers pre-natally and at the birth of their children in the hospital environment. Neonatal scanning and childbirth can be effective times at which to enlist fathers.
- ? 'Hooking' fathers at key transitional periods in the day (for example, where dropping off partner or collecting children from childcare). Such times may provide good opportunities to raise awareness among fathers of the range of services offered by Sure Start.
- ? Using outdoor and fun activities (for example, Fundays, community events) as ways of encouraging fathers to engage with Sure Start.
- ? Increasing the provision of 'father-focused' services. Consulting with fathers to inform service-delivery and building on men's interests (e.g., carpentry, sports or 'fathering').
- ? Using techniques which celebrate becoming and being a father (in all its diversity) using peer support, videos and role models.
- ? Increasing knowledge of Sure Start among fathers. Key to this may be utilizing female partners as potentially important, initial sources of fathers' information about Sure Start.
- ? Encouraging programme partnerships to focus early on involving fathers where father involvement is deemed desirable.
- ? Training and guidance for programme staff on strategies/approaches for encouraging father involvement.
- ? Using mothers' encouragement and support to increase fathers' involvement in mixed gender activities. Working with parents together to emphasise the collaborative nature of parenting.
- ? Identifying areas where encouragement of father support could stimulate their interest in further involvement in Sure Start activities – at the ante-natal and breast-feeding stage, for example.
- ? Use of mixed gender practitioner group leaders to model collaborative working between men and women.
- ? Working on increasing men's confidence in core care-giving tasks with infants.
- ? Developing sensitivity to the needs of different groups within the community of fathers: lone fathers, sole carers, estranged or separated fathers, disabled fathers, fathers working shifts, fathers from minority ethnic and faith groups. Fathers with differing experiences and different requirements may respond best to services tailored for them.

- ? Collection of quantitative information on father attendance at Sure Start activities to provide a baseline and to monitor progress.
- ? Undertaking local evaluations on the impact of father involvement in Sure Start on child, maternal and paternal well-being.

As the proliferation of support groups working with fathers and father figures occurs this will increase the need for knowledge about 'best practice' and further resources will be required to support reflection on professional and personal development for practitioners working with fathers. Some of the sampled Sure Start local programmes used existing or developing programmes for fathers (e.g., Fathers Direct, Children North East) and these were very favourably received. However, some areas had little access to father support services of this kind.

Inevitably as father involvement in family support intervention becomes more of an issue or even more commonplace, managers of services will become concerned to examine cost-effectiveness. The sorts of questions that might emerge include: for what types of treatment are fathers most necessary? Can fathers act as proxies for mothers for instance in parent-training programmes? When is the extra effort involved in reaching fathers (staff-time, recruitment strategies) value for money? Generalist remedies will not always be applicable. Future practice innovations for work with fathers will rely on research-minded critical appraisal of current work practices and regular access to new findings from fatherhood and family studies research. In addition, fathers in their consumer roles will also need information on the most appropriate type of advice and support for themselves and their families.

It should be borne in mind that these conclusions have been based on an investigation that took place comparatively early in the life of Sure Start. More current data about services for fathers will be available later in 2003, when the national survey has been applied to rounds 3 and 4 of local programmes, and when the rounds 1 and 2 have been surveyed for a second time.

## Appendix A: Methodology

This themed study was designed in keeping with the principle that all thematic studies should be conducted within a similar methodological framework (National Evaluation of Sure Start, 2001) and adhered closely to the following methodological guidelines for themed studies.

- ? Location of the respective theme in the context of existing research and practice;
- ? Document search;
- ? Review of appropriate data from the national survey and case studies, (where it is relevant to the theme);
- ? Collaboration with the Local Context Analysis in the selection of local Sure Start programmes in order to illustrate the subject of the theme, with the aim of exploring the widest possible variety of local experience;
- ? Face-to-face and group interviews with key personnel in local programmes;
- ? Face-to-face and group interviews with stakeholders, including parents and local people, both linked with and outside local programmes;
- ? Face-to-face interviews with informed respondents based elsewhere;
- ? Reports on the evaluation.

(National Evaluation of Sure Start, 2001)

### **Phase 1: Interviews with programme staff at 25 round 1 and 2 local programmes - July/August 2002.**

**Sampling** (further information on original *Father involvement in the Sure Start scale*)

The Implementation study national survey includes a number of questions that relate to programmes' provision for father involvement. Using these questions NESS statisticians and the Implementation national survey team constructed a scale of *Father involvement in the Sure Start programme* to rate local round 1 and 2 programmes according to their responses (National Evaluation of Sure Start, 2002a). The questions covered the following areas:

- ? the number of father's contributing to the management of Sure Start;
- ? whether or not programmes publicised Sure Start in gender sensitive venues;
- ? whether or not special provision was made for dads as a hard-to-reach group;
- ? whether or not the programme had an outreach team member with responsibility for addressing fathers' involvement

? whether or not projects/groups for fathers were a component of programmes' support for families and parents

The scale is presented in Figure 1 below.

Figure 1: Father involvement in the Sure Start programme: (Management and Services)

1	Minimal Father Involvement <sup>8</sup>	3	Moderate Father Involvement	5	High Father Involvement
	<p>? Programme indicates that 'projects or groups for fathers' is one of the components of their Support to Parents and Families aspect (Q73– Projects or groups for fathers)</p>		<p>? Programme indicates that some kind of special provision (i.e. targeted events, programmes) is made for fathers – considered a hard-to-reach group (Q53b)</p> <p>? Programme has an outreach worker with specific responsibility to address father involvement in the programme (Q67)</p> <p>? There is evidence that programme <i>publicises</i> SS in 'gender sensitive venues' (e.g. football matches, local pubs) in order to try and reach fathers (Q40)</p>		<p>? Programme indicates 'projects or groups for fathers' is one of the components of their Support to Parents and Families aspect (scores 6+)</p> <p>? Any number of fathers represented in management board</p>

<sup>8</sup> This is the original scale developed by in the first National Implementation Survey. Programmes receiving a 'negative' item (about projects for fathers) was a minimal requirement and a large percentage of programmes answered this question in the implementation survey the other items were then moved upward in the scale.

**Source: Early Experiences of Implementing Sure Start** (*National Evaluation of Sure Start, 2002a, pg 12*)

In Phase 1 the size of programme varied between those serving Sure Start areas between approximately 350 to over 950 target group children. The proportion of minority ethnic individuals resident within the programme areas varied from less than 1% to more than 25%, with a range of ethnic groupings represented. Programmes with health, local authority and voluntary organisation lead partners were represented in the sample.

**Table 1: Numbers of round 1 and 2 programmes involved in Phase 1**

Round	Round 1	Round 2
Number of programmes	11	14

**Table 2: Geographical location of programmes involved in Phase 1**

North East	North West	Midlands	South East <sup>9</sup>	East England
4	2	11	5	3

**Table3: Size of programmes involved in Phase 1**

<500	500-750	751-1000	>1000
4	11	7	3

**Table 4: Type of lead partner of programmes involved in Phase 1**

Health	Local authority	Voluntary	Other
4	9	8	4

The majority of programmes were initially contacted by telephone. A small number of programmes, which were also included in the sample for the Implementation module case studies, were introduced to the study at a face-to-face meeting. In these cases, a joint meeting was held between the programme manager, the researcher working on the fathers' involvement themed evaluation and a member of the case study research team to explain details of both projects. Shortly after initial contact with each programme was made, a letter of explanation was sent to programme managers.

In all, interviews were conducted with 73 members of programme staff - 17 males and 56 females. Thirty-eight members of staff were interviewed by telephone and 35 face-to-face. All interviews were tape recorded with the participants' consent. Interviews lasted for between 20 and 45 minutes.

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<sup>9</sup> Including London

**Phase 2: Interviews with mothers/female carers and fathers/male carers – October to December 2002**

Characteristics of programmes that participated in phase 2 research are given in tables 5 to 8.

**Table 5: Numbers of round 1 and 2 programmes involved in Phase 2**

Round	Round 1	Round 2
Number of programmes	3	2

**Table 6: Geographical location of programmes involved in Phase 2**

North West	Midlands	South East <sup>10</sup>	East England
1	1	2	1

**Table 7: Size (children under 4) of programmes involved in Phase 2**

<500	500-750	751-1000
1	2	2

**Table 8: Type of lead partner of programmes involved in Phase 2**

Health	Local authority	Voluntary
1	2	2

**Participants**

Individual, face-to-face, in-depth interviews were conducted with at least four mothers/female carers and four fathers/male carers at each phase 2 programme. Participants were contacted with the help of programme staff who either advertised for volunteers, contacted potential participants on our behalf to arrange interviews, or passed on participants' details (with participants' consent). Programme staff were asked to help us select, as far as possible, a sample of 'typical' service users as well as fathers that did not engage with Sure Start services. Sure Start programme staff commented that they had difficulty in accessing 'non-engaged' fathers on our behalf. Despite low reported levels of involvement in Sure Start from fathers generally, 19 of the 21 dads in our sample stated that were involved in Sure Start in some way. This suggests that our sample of fathers may not be representative of fathers in the communities served by phase 2 Sure Start programmes. Further, given the small size of our sample and the diversity of the communities served by phase 2 sample programmes, our sample of parents

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<sup>10</sup> Including London



generally, cannot be considered representative of local communities or local programmes' service-users.

Forty-two service users (21 fathers/male carers and 21 mothers/female carers) were interviewed during this phase of data collection (including six married or co-habiting couples).

A copy of the interview topic guide for phase 2 interviews can be found in Appendix 3. All interviews were tape recorded with the participants' consent. Interviews lasted for between 30 and 60 minutes.

Further details of Phase 2 participants' characteristics are presented in Tables below.

**Table 9: Reported ages of participants involved in Phase 2**

	Mean age	Min. value	Max. value	St. deviation
Mothers	30.57	22	45	6.38
Fathers.	33.81	22	45	6.38

**Table 10: Reported ethnic background of participants involved in Phase 2 (N)**

	Black Caribbean	Mixed ethnicity	White British	White European
Mothers	1	2	18	0
Fathers	0	1	19	1

**Table 11: Reported marital status of participants involved in Phase 2 (N)<sup>11</sup>**

	Married	Cohabiting	Divorced or separated	Single
Mothers	7	8	2	4
Fathers	11	6	1	3

**Table 12: Reported employment status of participants involved in Phase 2 (N)**

	Unempl'd.	Full-time work	Pt-time work	Full-time parent	Parental leave <sup>12</sup>	Full-time student
Mothers	2	2	2	14	1	0
Fathers	6	5	3	5	0	2

**Table 13: Reported parental status of participants involved in Phase 2 research (N)**

<sup>11</sup> Both partners from 6 married or cohabiting couple were interviewed.

<sup>12</sup> Usually works full-time

	Couple	Lone parent	Non-resident parent
Mothers	15	6	0
Fathers	17	2	2

## **Appendix B: Topic guide for phase 1 interviews with programme staff**

### ***Topic Guide***

#### **? *Model of father involvement in local programme***

How is the role of fathers thought about in this Sure Start area?

What model of fathering are workers/ service providers adopting?

Are there any different views on the role of fathers amongst service providers?

[Attempting to capture their implicit theory of father involvement- e.g. father as 'risk ' and/or father as 'resource'; actual practice; variation].

#### **? *Reasons for adopting model***

What were the reasons behind your approach to fathers and how did it emerge (or the reasons why no such policy is in place)? Establish chronology.

Have you ever involved fathers in programme planning?

Have fathers ever been involved in the Sure Start partnership?

#### **? *Fathers and wider community context***

Do fathers in general play any significant role in the wider community of the neighbourhood? [Probe: on neighbourhood culture – church/faith communities; sporting activities; other cultural/ ethnic activities.]

#### **? *Types of father figures in local programme***

What categories of fathers has the team been in contact with/ attempted to target? [Probe:

Resident/ non-resident fathers; young fathers; lone fathers; minority ethnic fathers; unemployed fathers.]

Are there any key workers assigned to fathers, including 'hard to reach' men? What is their role?

#### **? *Current fatherhood related projects***

Are there any specific projects to support fathering in your area? [Also explore generic programmes which may involve fathers e.g. substance abuse, domestic violence].

Could you describe its aims and activities? [Get information on each programme if more than one].

[Establish: What they are trying to train, encourage or change. How are they *applying* fathering model in the actual intervention?]

How did you attempt to involve fathers in the project?

What have been the *most* successful aspects of your work with fathers?  
[Establish: Examples of 'good practice']

What have been the *least* successful aspects of your work with fathers?

**What moves have been tried or needed to maintain father involvement in the projects?**

**How have mothers reacted to the fathering support work?**

? Local programme fatherhood indicators and outcome measures

**Do you have any way of monitoring your work with fathers and father figures in the local area?**

**What are your indicators for successful work with fathers?**

**What are your indicators for poorer outcomes for work with fathers?**

[Probe: Establish whether any paper or computerized records are kept of referrers, presenting problems, attendance data, worker assessments, and follow-ups.]

? **Future work on Fathers**

Is there any future work on fathers being planned in your local programme?

Is there anything else you would like to say about working with fathers in your local area?

## **Appendix C: Topic guide for phase 2 interviews with parents and carers**

### Topic guide for interviews with fathers and mothers Interviews with fathers/male carers

#### **Fathers' involvement in Sure Start**

1. In what ways are you involved with Sure Start? [Probe: contact with programme/programme staff, attendance at activities, use of facilities, supporting 'involved' partner/carers, length of involvement, changing nature of involvement]
2. How did you become involved in SS? [Probe: reasons for becoming involved check who was referrer if not self/reasons for not being involved sooner, barriers/obstacles to involvement, factors encouraging involvement, process of becoming involved/chronology]
3. What programmes or activities do you take part in? Could you describe it/ them to me? [Probe: whether activity specifically for dads? Children? Families? accessed alone or with partner/mother of child/carers.]
4. Have you been involved in the management side of this Sure Start programme? [Probe: on extent of father involvement more generally- What about other dads etc? What's this been like?]

#### Fathers' feelings about (his and men's) involvement in Sure Start

5. How useful has involvement with SS been for you? [Probe: personally and for the children/ the partner?/ other family members, particular services that have been of use. 'What was the most successful aspect of SS for you? or your family/your neighbourhood, 'other dads']
6. How did you get on with the staff?  
  
[Probe: Male staff? Female staff ? Elicit descriptions of specific experiences/ any incidents. Do you think your experience was similar or different to other dads? To other mums?]
7. How did the place feel to you? Did you like it or not? Probe: what was it like as a place to hang out? As a place to be with your kids? Atmosphere? Do you think your experience was similar or different to other dads? To other mums?
8. Have you experienced any difficulties or problems with the SS service?
9. If not spontaneously covered: How did you get on with the other dads? The other mums? Other people's children?
10. What do you think SS is all about? What do you think SS is trying to achieve?

## **Involvement of men in child's daily life (FOCUS ON TARGET CHILD 0-2)**

11. GENERAL OPENING: using birth of target child.  
How did the birth of (child's name) influence your life? What sort of changes, if any, did becoming a father make to your life at the time?

**12. What about now, what's it like having a young child around in your life? Could you describe a TYPICAL week-day. A TYPICAL week-end. Probe: good things; difficult things.**

13. What sort of things/ activities do you enjoy doing with your child?

14. What sorts of things/ activities are less enjoyable?

15. On a typical weekday how much time do you spend with (child's name)?  
Find out separately about 11a. Being around the house at the same time?  
11b. Directly caring for/ playing/ feeding child. Probe: week-ends?

16. Does the child's name mother want you to be involved in raising the children? [Probe for how / how not – if the account all rosy probe for any ways in which women prevent men from parenting]

**17. How do important decisions (for instance about child's health) get made?**

[Do you play a part in making these decisions?]

18. Do you ever have any serious disagreements with (partner) about how to bring up (child's name)?

19 How important is being a father to you? Is there something you can give your child that (child's mother) can't?

20 Thinking about dads in general, what role should dads play in families?  
[Probe: on extent to which fathers can realise goals, barriers, support]

### **Interviews with mothers/female carers**

#### **Mothers' experiences of and attitudes towards men's involvement in Sure Start programmes**

1. To what extent would you say men (dads and male staff) are involved in Sure Start? What are your experiences of male (staff and dads) involvement in Sure Start? [Probe: nature and extent/frequency of involvement, reactions to male involvement – own partner and other males (including staff), perception of male reactions]

2. What do you think of the level of involvement from dads in SS? How much involvement would you like to see from dads in the area (own partner and other males)? [Probe: nature of involvement, extent/frequency of involvement, is there a perceived optimum level of involvement?] [Probe: own partner and other males]

3. What do you think of the level of involvement from male staff in Sure Start ? [Probe: nature of involvement, extent/frequency of involvement, is there a perceived optimum level of involvement?]

4. Are there any areas of SS where you feel male involvement could be developed -for example, where men could be more involved or involved in a different way? [Probe: perceptions of contribution that men (dads and staff) can make to SS, perceptions of the needs of dads/men and extent to which SS meets these, specific father v men in SS area generally]

5. What do you think about more men (staff and service users) getting involved in SS? Do you think there are any advantages/disadvantages? [Probe: benefits for fathers, benefits for family, risks associated with male involvement, specific father v men in SS area generally]

6. Why do you think more men (dads and staff) don't get involved in Sure Start? Do you think there are any particular barriers to men getting involved? [Probe: Reasons for current low/high level of fathers' involvement,]

7. What do you think could be done to get more men (dads and staff) involved in SS? Could anything be changed about this SS programme that might encourage more men to become involved?

#### Mothers' Understanding and Experience of Paternal Involvement

8. How did the birth of (child's name) influence your partner's life? Did you notice any particular changes in him?

9. On a typical weekday how much time does your child's father/partner spend with (child's name)? [Being around house at same time? Directly caring for/playing/feeding child?] [probe: week-end, reasons for level of partner's input]

[Probe: Changes over time? Partner v men in SS area generally]

10. What sort of things/activities does your child's father/partner enjoy doing with your child?

11. What sort of things does he tend to find less enjoyable?

12. How do you feel about your child's father/partner being involved in raising (child's name)? How do you feel about his level of involvement? [Probe: reasons for feelings?] [Probe: adequacy/appropriateness of role, hopes for development of mother's/father's role, specific father v men in SS area generally]

13. What do you think the role of fathers should be in the family? How involved do you think they should be with their children?

[Is there something special that a father can give to his child that a mother can't? How important are fathers in families these days?] [Probe: own partner and other males]

14. Do you think there are any factors that stop your partner/other dads from being more involved in their children's lives? [Specific father v men in SS area generally]

15. How do important decisions (eg about child's health) get made? Does your child's father/partner play a part in making these decisions?

16. Do you ever have any serious disagreements with your child's father/partner about how to bring up your child?



## **Appendix D: Summary of a course for fathers used by one of the programmes in this study**

The following course focuses on parent-child communication and child language development. It was designed after a few fathers contacted during home visits by a member of Sure Start staff were told about similar, 'mixed' courses being run by Sure Start. They stated that they were interested in participating in a similar, father-only course. The worker said:

*"When I was doing home visits telling them about the courses that were available in Sure Start quite a few of them were saying to me: 'Well if you get something going specifically for dads we'll come.'...so we just thought: 'Right lets do one for dads' because they were asking for it." (Family support worker, round 1 programme).*

The course was 6 weeks long and involved fathers and children attending a two-hour session once a week. One member of programme staff facilitated the course. The course involved activities such as:

- ? play sessions for children and fathers;
- ? singalong activities for fathers and children;
- ? fact-based sessions (for example, stages of language development);
- ? fathers raising issues that they found problematic regarding verbal communication with their children;
- ? fathers sharing ideas about how to cope with communication problems with children;
- ? discussion of tips for talking to children (and production of Sure Start tip-sheets for fathers).

Sure Start staff tried to make the course responsive to issues raised by fathers. For example, one week a Sure Start nursery nurse facilitated a story-telling session after fathers had asked for tips on telling stories to their children. Throughout the course, feedback from fathers was welcomed and fathers were encouraged to share their reflections on the course during each weekly session.

During the final session, fathers completed an evaluation questionnaire. These evaluations of the course were overwhelmingly positive. The evaluation indicated that the particularly positive aspects for them were:

- ? learning many new ideas;
- ? meeting other fathers;
- ? watching their children interact in a learning environment;

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