

## NEW WRITING

### *Dads and Dinghies: How Limelight Fathers and Children's Group engages fathers in a Family Learning Centre*

Tim Neville



Tim Neville has been working within Early Years for over twenty years and has experienced how the workforce has slowly changed in its acceptance of men. He is particularly interested in parenting,

working with men and early support. Within his current work, for the Lewisham Branch of the Pre-school Learning Alliance, Tim has been actively involved in setting up a Fathers' Group which has won an award from Children North East Fathers Plus for its innovative work in engaging dads and their children.

#### **Summary**

In this article Tim Neville describes the work undertaken by the Lewisham Branch of the Pre-school Learning Alliance in engaging fathers into Limelight Family Learning Centre. The article follows various strategies to try and involve fathers in their children's development and learning.

#### **Introduction**

The Pre-school Learning Alliance is a national charity established over forty years ago providing pre-school activities and parent support. The Alliance works hard to engage fathers and other hard-to-reach members of the community in services. Lewisham Branch of the Alliance has been particularly innovative in its work with fathers exploring new ways to involve them. The process has been developing over six years and has now reached the point where there is an active management committee made up of local fathers – who are interested in expanding to include more fathers and families in exciting learning opportunities.

#### **Background**

Limelight Family Learning Centre based in Downham, Lewisham opened its doors in April 2000. Part of the original remit was to involve all members of the family in its learning activities. The Centre had a PreSchool, Drop-Ins, Community Café, Parent Support Scheme and Family Learning opportunities. It soon became clear that fathers were a difficult group to



**Our beautiful sailing boat**

involve and engage in activities. By 2002 we had explored ways of inviting fathers to such traditionally women's activities as Drop-ins and Coffee Mornings. We started up a Dads' Craft and Cooking Session, which had some success and gave us a few fathers who were actively involved and still are today. From this idea we worked on asking local fathers about the kinds of activities they wanted to access with their children, how they wanted to be involved in the Centre and the barriers they had come across.

It became clear from this piece of work that fathers felt that the Centre gave the impression that it was mainly meant to be used by mothers, that the kinds of activities were not appealing to them and that they were not made to feel welcome. We reflected on how we come across to fathers and male carers and revisited our

policies, procedures, environment and staff interaction. We also discovered that fathers wanted to do more challenging activities that were concerned with creating an end result. This could be something that was produced or simply an achievement. We decided to look at outdoor activities and develop ideas in this area.

As luck would have it, myself and another father were invited on a weekend sailing trip on a tall ship in Dartmouth. On our way back we decided

to further explore this opportunity we had had and it was agreed to look into the idea of building a sailing boat from a kit. The 'Dads and Dinghies' project was born!

We arranged a breakfast meeting for a Saturday and widely publicised it. We had 22 fathers turn up, which was unheard of, so we knew we had struck onto something. From this we received funding from Community Education Lewisham and purchased a 13-foot sailing dinghy in kit form. We met every Saturday for around five months and created our beautiful sailing boat. Children and fathers were involved in the task and we made sure that there were activities for younger children so that they had something to do as well as helping with building the boat. An example would be that when the dads were fibre glassing the hull the children could be making a boat out of paper maché. Lunch was offered for fathers and children making it a fun social occasion.

The end result was a launch of the boat by Bridget Prentice MP at the Ahoy Community Sailing Centre in Deptford. Fathers also had the opportunity to train in RYA Dingy Sailing to Level 2 standard. They then had the opportunity of using the boat over the summer as a timeshare.

## Recent Developments

'Dads and Dinghies' was such a success that we wanted to continue on with new ways to involve fathers and create family learning opportunities. We carried on exploring the outward-bound activities and have since put on several camping trips for fathers and children. We have been Youth Hostelling, rambling and have fundraised for our own 5-metre tepee which is used for camping and for publicising our Group at fun-days. In the past year the dads have set themselves up as a management committee and have gained funding from the Local Network Fund to publish the Dads' Activity Handbook. This booklet has a set of 16 challenges set for fathers and male carers. It includes home activities and outdoor activities that fathers can do with their children. The Handbook was launched at a Borough-wide conference. 10,000 copies have been printed and are being circulated to schools, health centres, early-childhood centres and other community establishments. We had 150 fathers and practitioners attending the conference and workshops and we hope to repeat the conference next year.

## Conclusion

Our work with fathers has taken a long time to develop. We have learnt a lot about what fathers want and how to attract them. Often the problem is getting them through the door in the first place. Our experience shows, however, that once fathers are involved in the Centre they will do most activities. Their input has been a major part of the success of the project and we feel we have achieved a lot together. Apart from good planning and ensuring we are meeting an identified need for fathers and families, it is important we show enthusiasm and enjoyment in the activities and work with fathers. When we believe in the services that are offered and are genuinely welcoming to fathers and families it comes across in everything from advertising to delivery. We try to develop new ideas and activities so that fathers can be involved in their development and staff can be re-enthused trying out new opportunities. This keeps the project alive and kicking.

## What fathers say

*Back in September 2006 I was invited to a day out in Richmond boating with a group of dads I vaguely knew. I took just my 4-year-old daughter, not having the confidence to take her younger brother too. We had the best time, messing about on the river, getting to know each other and socialising with new people. That first day was the start of a great adventure. I now go camping, boating, rambling, and swimming with both my children. I have the confidence to cater for their every need and have a great time doing it. I can't believe it all started with a picnic by the river – and the support of a great group of dads! Thank you Tim.*

From Roger Platt



*The Dads' Group has been brilliant for my family. My girls look forward to all the activities and are always asking me when the next session is on. They especially love the camping.*

From Adrian Mosses



*Joining the Dads' Group has meant that I can play a more active role in my community. I get to meet other dads and my children can make friends too. I helped build the boat we made. It belongs to all of us now and we are proud of what we have achieved.*

From Elwood Amey