

A good start

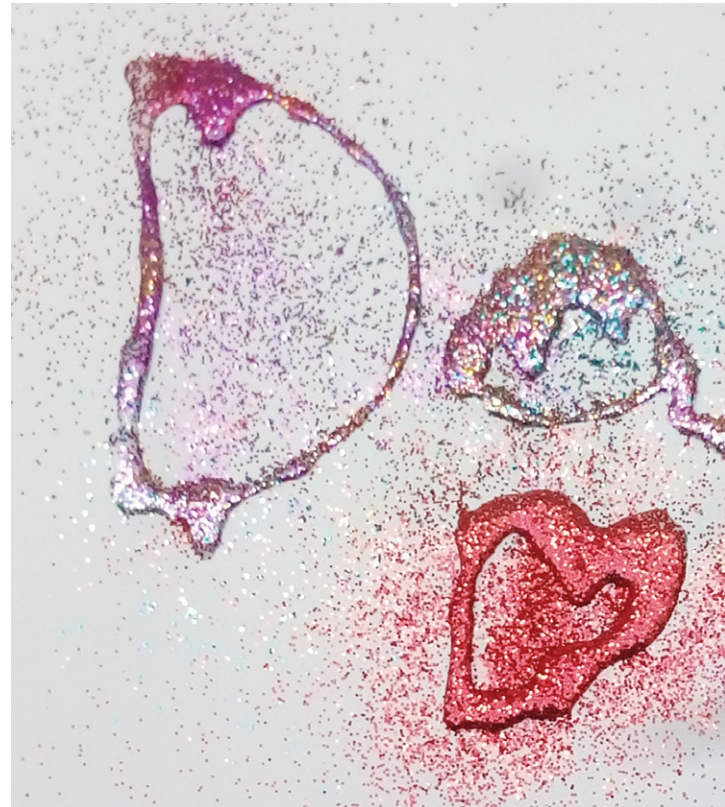
How Midlothian Sure Start is helping new fathers who require extra support. By *Annette Rawstrone*

Supporting a teenage dad who had his own childhood challenges to become a 'security blanket' for his two-year-old son, and reassuring a grandfather of his ability to be a kinship carer for his young granddaughter, are just two standout moments experienced by Midlothian Sure Start (MSS)'s dads co-ordinators Tim Porteus and Keith Smith.

MSS has deliberately aimed to become more 'dad inclusive' throughout its six Family Learning Centres, which are based in a large semi-rural community affected by issues such as poverty and poor housing. The voluntary organisation – which won the *Nursery World Working With Parents Award 2017* – runs a number of successful free

initiatives for parents with a number aimed at dads, including a Dads2b course for expectant fathers and dads' groups such as Dynamic Dads, while also signposting fathers to other initiatives open to all parents (see box, overleaf).

'It's important not to see dads as an add-on but as an equally important part of their children's lives,' says Mr Porteus. 'We provide dads with a friendly space to explore how they want to be as a parent and to meet other dads. I believe that it's vital for the future to break down gender assumptions and for children to see men, including their dads, in nurturing, caring roles. We want children to see men sitting with them and singing songs, looking after babies, changing nappies and preparing snacks.'



The fathers gain confidence in interacting with and caring for their child through activities including outings (above, right)

DADS2B

MSS works with NHS Lothian to provide its five-week Dads2b courses, which supplement existing antenatal classes. Delivered by a dads co-ordinator, with input from a midwife, the course explores the practical aspects of baby care as well as the emotional experiences of fatherhood, including labour.

The course aims to:

- increase men's confidence to support their partners during labour
- provide dads with the knowledge and skills to meet the needs of their newborns, both practical and emotional
- improve fathers' and children's mental health and well-being
- reduce stress and anxiety in caring for babies
- increase fathers' confidence to nurture their babies
- make links with other services to provide ongoing support.

Mr Porteus believes sessions on brain development and attachment are particularly significant. 'We want men to understand how important the early years are and their role in that crucial time. We want them to start singing and telling stories to their children before they're born to start the process of bonding and attachment,' he explains. 'Research shows that children who have involved dads

CASE STUDY: RYAN AND FINLAY

Ryan* – who has one son and two step-children – and his partner were referred to MSS by a health visitor three years ago. A relationship gradually developed through home visits and Ryan started attending the Dynamic Dads group when his son, Finlay, was three months old.

Ryan was very insecure in his parenting abilities and had not actually held Finlay at that point. Other young dads helped model behaviour for him in the group's supportive atmosphere and he began to feel more comfortable holding and interacting with his son. Being picked up by the service's bus and

attending the group every Saturday morning became an important routine for Ryan and Finlay.

Soon Ryan became a role model himself for other dads and completed a Raising Children with Confidence course which, he says, opened his eyes to how to raise a child, as his experience of being brought up was very different. It made him keen to 'get it right' for Finlay. In particular, he recognised his role in 'developing my son's brain and his secure feelings' and that he needed to be present for Finlay. MSS supported the parents to get a two-year-olds' childcare

place for Finlay at one of MSS's Family Learning Centres, which prepared him well for starting nursery.

Ryan and his family still have major challenges but Dynamic Dads eases his anxiety and helps him feel confident and relaxed. He regularly attends the group outdoor trips with Finlay and they particularly enjoy woodland visits – exploring nature and cooking on fires. Ryan believes that the dads' group has massively benefited Finlay and also helped him to recognise his own responsibilities and abilities as a father.

**names have been changed*



dads are not instructed or told solutions but raise enquiries. For example, a dad raised the issue of sleep and that he'd been told controlled crying was the best way to get a child to sleep, but how long should he let his child cry for? Rather than giving instructions, we discussed what other dads thought, fed through information on brain science and introduced ways to help children to self-soothe,' explains Mr Porteus. 'Some dads question why we don't just give them an answer, but

we aim to develop the skills to critically analyse and think because it's an important skill for parenting.'

Dads from all walks of life are engaged in the MSS service and Mr Porteus says many are 'hooked in' by other dads or referred by other agencies. The main challenge is gaining funding to deliver all the services that they'd like, including maintaining dads' groups in schools for primary-aged children. The granddaughter of the kinship carer mentioned is now approaching seven years old. Mr Smith says she is a 'confident, expressive young girl'. It is time for her and her grandfather to leave Dynamic Dads and develop new experiences. The group is losing two very valuable assets, which is paradoxically both sad and joyful. ■

in activities and provide a safe place for them to explore parenting (see case study). The group is user-led and they also arrange outings.

'Men attend from a mixture of backgrounds and it's interesting to see how they can all come together, respond to each other as dads and discuss their children,' says Mr Porteus. 'They have fun with their children – play in the sand, sing and tell stories – with professional early years workers there for support or guidance if needed.' Importantly, the dads become good role models for each other.

Through the dads service, MSS seeks to promote the empowerment of male carers to be the 'inquisitors of their own questions'. 'We aim for a learner-centred approach where



MORE INFORMATION

- www.midlothian.surestart.org.uk

'Rather than giving instructions, we discussed what other dads thought'

have higher self-esteem and wellness and do better at school.'

DYNAMIC DADS

Male carers are invited to attend weekly Dynamic Dads Saturday morning drop-in sessions with their early years children to engage them

HOME GROWN: ATTACHMENT PROGRAMME

The universal attachment programme for parents with babies from eight weeks old is described by programme co-ordinator Jackie Davidson as 'home grown' because it was set up by MSS some eight years ago in response to parents asking for more support with baby massage, brain development, weaning and play. The programme is in line with MSS's vision to give children the 'best start'.

Staff developed the course in collaboration with parents, in line with the organisation's strong ethos of working co-productively. The programme was then tested and refined before being rolled out across the local area, with priority given to areas defined by the Indices of Multiple

Deprivation. The eight-week course is underpinned by a strong theoretical base of attachment theory and baby massage, with Ms Davidson saying that this provides a 'good hook' for attracting parents who may not otherwise attend sessions. Approximately a third of parents of newborn babies in Midlothian – equating to around 330 each year – attend the sessions.

The course is built around the core component of baby massage and includes sessions on baby brain development, weaning and play – treasure baskets, messy, heuristic and schematic. Funding cuts resulted in a first-aid element being dropped last year, but parents are signposted to information and given a

paediatric first-aid book. The programme is delivered by early years practitioners and volunteer instructors with family support workers offering individual support to more complex families.

'We work with small groups of around six to eight parents, which helps us to consider what further support each parent may need by picking up on signs or conversations,' says Ms Davidson.

'Being able to offer baby massage sessions is a really lovely way to give people an opportunity to get out with their new baby. It helps to bring new mothers and fathers together and tackle issues such as isolation – with a lot of new houses being built in the area – and mental health

issues. We're able to create a welcoming environment where we can offer support and signpost to other services.'

An evaluation by the Universities of Stirling and Edinburgh Napier found that parents benefited, with around half who started from a low baseline feeling more skilled. They found: 'Parents valued the opportunity to meet with other parents for peer support, undertake a practical activity to enhance the bond with their baby which relaxed them both, build their confidence and reduce their anxiety about caring for an infant and learn about and feel more confident in accessing local services, particularly beneficial to those with no extended family or friends nearby.'