

Single handed

How can early years settings support single fathers and make them feel included without being patronising? **Charlotte Goddard** investigates

Early years practitioners are increasingly aware that modern families now take many forms, but one minority that can sometimes be overlooked is families in which the father is the sole carer of his dependent children. In fact, there are more than 170,000 such households in the UK.

When service providers are confronted with the need to build relationships with fathers, the temptation is often to set up some kind of dad's group, but this is not the only answer.

'It's assuming men are special and different, so we do something special and different for them, and the rest of the time we do what we have always done,' says Jeremy Davies, head of communications at the Fatherhood Institute. 'You might have a dad's group within a mix of other things, but what you really need is staff engaging with dads no differently from the way they engage with mothers.'

Chris Miezitis, programme lead at Fathers Network Scotland, has developed and delivered training to early years settings on 'Understanding Dad'. 'You can have specific work around father

inclusion, if you have the time and resources to do something additional, but what you want is to be in a place where the universal offer is appealing to both mums and dads,' he says.

An informed approach
It is important to find out who is in a child's life without

case study: Tom Bowring, dad to Leighton, Emily and Tobias



'I became a single parent when the children's mother left after my little boy was born and my daughter Emily was two. Our nursery, Spring at Acorn Childcare Centre, has been very flexible, which is helpful as a working parent and sole provider: I work for the Air Force.

'I have no family support nearby and my friends are all also military parents working the same hours as me. Sometimes if the kids need me during the working day it isn't always easy to drop everything and run, and the nursery is very understanding if they call and I can't get there for a few hours.

'I think there is some difference in their approach to me as a single dad, but in a positive way – my daughter used to have her hair plaited at nursery because I am absolutely clueless about hair, for example. I still haven't worked my way up to a French plait.

'A paperwork confusion when we moved house meant the working tax credits office stopped paying tax credits. I appealed but the procedure took three months, so during that time I was under real financial strain.

'The nursery manager is very hands-on, she is the one who lets you in in the mornings, so I felt comfortable approaching her. She was wonderful and said we will sort it out when the tax credits come, and that was a weight off my mind. She was very caring, asking how it was with everything else, how Emily's after-school clubs were going.

'The staff talk to you and engage with the children's life outside nursery. It has been three years since Emily was at nursery but Tobias's key person is the same as hers was, and she is always asking how Emily is. That's great, when children come and go so often, to still have that relationship.'

being overbearing, says Mr Davies, in order to adapt your approach to the circumstances. 'There are all sorts of permutations of being a single dad, and you want to try to paint a picture of who is around that child. What has happened with mum, who has the father got around him to draw on?' he says.

'If there's a really dramatic story – his wife has died and he is suddenly left with three young kids – you may be looking at pointing him towards some quite intensive support,



perhaps including some kind of parenting course, because he might not have any confidence as a hands-on dad. On the other hand, he might just need a bit of help organising timing of pick-ups and drop-offs as a working father.'

Anita Mellor is senior nursery manager at Action for Children's Spring at Acorn Childcare Centre, RAF Cosgrove (see Case study). Ms Mellor is used to supporting dads who are temporarily a single main carer, because the other parent may be on deployment for months.

'We make sure we get the information from the start,' she says. 'We



Tom Bowring and his children (see Case Study)

know who the main carer is and we will ask what they want us to do on Mother's Day, for example.'

Don't make assumptions

Because lone-parent fathers are still relatively rare, early years practitioners can tend to make assumptions about them and their abilities, says Melanie Pilcher, quality and standards manager at the Pre-school Learning Alliance.

'From my experience of managing nurseries, people tend to think "he must be struggling, so we have to do more for him", which can be quite off-putting for the dad who doesn't want extra attention,' she says. 'People will rush across and take the baby from him, because he couldn't possibly hold his own baby and sign in at the same time.'

Mr Davies also cautions against stereotyping. 'Part of it is understanding a man's experience is different from a mother's because of where we are in our cultural history, but also not loading that with a whole load of stereotyping about you as a parent – that you will be useless at multi-tasking, for example,' he says.

'One thing to be careful about is that there can be a "hero" narrative around single dads which you don't get so much with single mums. The workforce tends to be female and, because it is

an unusual situation, they may feel sorry for him. Let's not overdo that, and instead keep the relationship practical and child-focused.'

Support with employers

A single father may struggle with balancing work and childcare. While this is, of course, a situation that will be familiar to most working mothers, fathers may feel less able to talk to employers about flexible working opportunities, and employers may be less inclined to offer such opportunities to men.

'A fantastic early years worker faced with a dad who they thought was struggling to have that conversation with his employer might look at whether there was a way to support him around what to include in that discussion,' says Mr Davies.

Nursery environment

It is important to make sure the nursery is a comfortable place for dads to be.

- Check if your books and other resources take into account that not every child lives with a mother.
- Ensure there are pictures of fathers as well as mothers taking part in a wide range of activities.

- Make sure there are baby-



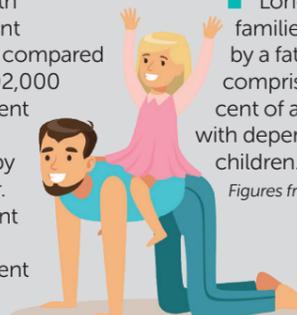
MAIN-CARER DADS: STATISTICS

- In 2017, there were 179,000 lone-parent families headed by a father with dependent children, compared with 1,602,000 lone-parent families headed by a mother.
- 11 per cent of all lone-parent families

with dependent children are headed by a father.

- Lone parent families headed by a father comprise 2.2 per cent of all families with dependent children.

Figures from ONS



MORE INFORMATION

- Fathers Network Scotland has published a practical guide to father-inclusive practice, <https://bit.ly/2wFBnPt>
- *Where's Dad?* by the Pre-school Learning Alliance is a guide for practitioners on how to engage effectively with fathers, <https://shop.pre-school.org.uk/A052>
- *The XY Factor* by the Alliance looks at the inter-related issues of engaging fathers in settings, men working in childcare and young boys underachieving, <https://bit.ly/2Q14eXf>
- *Cash or carry: Fathers combining work and care in the UK* is the first in a series of reports from the Fatherhood Institute exploring the roles of fathers in families, <https://bit.ly/2wC8t3A>

change and toilet facilities that men can use.

- Try to move away from using the word 'parent': while it seems inclusive, many people assume it really means 'mum'. Instead use 'mums', 'dads' and 'carers'.

- Consult with fathers, and make sure parent forums include fathers.

- Set the outcomes you want to see for father engagement and how you will measure your success.

Workforce development

Nursery managers need to ensure that all staff members are well-informed and confident in speaking to lone-parent fathers. This is particularly true of young practitioners. As Mr Miezitis points out, 'A 19-year-old woman just out of college needs confidence to approach a gruff-looking guy who may be older than her own dad.'

A diverse workforce is also key to making nurseries more dad-friendly. 'A bloke coming in with a child will probably gravitate to talking with another man, so a mixed workforce is really important,' says Ms Pilcher.

Bringing more men into the workforce does not just have to be about recruiting more male early years workers. 'We have just employed a male chef,' says Ms Mellor. 'He's really good with the children, we get him cooking with them, and he is part of what is going on in the nursery. Men do feel more comfortable if there are other men in the setting.' ■