



One-week-old baby Orson has just had his nappy changed by his dad, who was at the birth and has been involved in his care from the beginning.

Both are focused on each other. Dad mirrors Orson's tongue movement and Orson responds by repeating it. The dance of attachment has begun...

PRACTICE IN PICTURES

# Dad's the word

The important role men play in children's lives is increasingly recognised. *Anne O'Connor* explains how settings can better involve them

PHOTOGRAPHS COURTESY OF SIREN FILMS

Baby Orson is one week old. His dad was there at the birth and has played a full part in his care from the beginning. Although mum, who is breastfeeding Orson, is his primary care-giver at this stage – and likely to be his primary attachment figure – his dad, and his older brother, are both actively involved in bonding with him as important secondary attachment figures. Dad has just changed Orson's nappy and is making the most of this precious time for interacting and engaging with him while he is awake. Both are focused on each other, with Orson showing great interest in Dad's face. Dad mirrors Orson's tongue movement and Orson responds by repeating the action. The dance of attachment has begun.

**1** If settings are to involve fathers in a positive way in their children's daycare, then they need to appreciate the varied roles fathers play in the lives of their children.

Men are increasingly involved in the day-to-day care of their own children, their partner's children, or as childminders, and yet they often report that they feel marginalised in schools, settings or parent groups.

The traditional family of a mother, father and their biological children is no longer the norm. Just think of the variety there can be in family composition, for example: lone parents; step-parents; extended families where

older siblings or grandparents are prime carers; same-gender partnerships; adoptive and foster-care families; separated parents with shared custody; parents with limited access to their children. Yet we still tend to think of the mother as the parent who deals with the children and this is often reflected in the interactions settings have with parents and families.

Good partnerships with parents need to acknowledge the different ways there are to bring up a family.

We also need to take notice of the research that tells us that the positive involvement of fathers has a powerful impact on children's later emotional well-being and life chances. Guidance for Children's Centres also makes clear the requirement to involve, engage and support fathers in the community.

**2** There are several barriers to the involvement of fathers in early years settings. These include the presence of a largely female workforce.

Although settings should do what they can to recruit male practitioners, it would be unrealistic to assume that this is the only way to address the issue. Indeed, settings with mixed teams still need to make sure that fathers aren't encouraged to relate only to the men on the team, or that male practitioners are seen as the 'expert' on fathers.

**3** For an early years setting to be 'male-friendly', practitioners need to make efforts to:

- Find out about the significant men in a child's life, whether or not they are in the family home. This may include 'father figures' or other key males. Be prepared to explain why this is relevant and be sensitive to the concerns that people may have.
- Actively encourage men to become volunteers, governors, etc.
- Let them know their contributions are valued and needed.
- Involve fathers or key males in your admissions procedures, home visits or other key meetings or assessments, for example, SEN reviews, parent conferences etc.
- Give families enough advance notice of meetings so they can arrange work commitments/personal schedules etc so both can attend.
- Arrange repeat meetings or sessions so parents can attend separately.
- Ask fathers specifically for their preferences with regard to meetings, social events, parent conferences and family learning sessions.
- Help both parents understand the importance of the contributions of fathers and significant male figures to the lives of their children.
- Advertise support groups and national associations that actively promote the involvement of fathers.

- Raise awareness and provide training for staff so they are better able to overcome the barriers that affect the involvement of fathers and men. Ask fathers to help with an audit, to assess the 'male-friendliness' of your organisation.

**4** The quality of fathers' involvement in daycare will be greater if settings appreciate what can make a difference to fathers.

- Don't assume that the appearance of a father is temporary! Don't see him just as someone to pass on information to the mother – you can't assume he won't be interested in all aspects of the child's care.
- If both parents are present, don't ignore the father and direct your comments only to the mum!
- Make sure displays include images of men engaging with children. Include pictures of fathers and other significant men in family albums.
- Find images and stories that reflect the many different ways there are to create and raise a family.
- Ask fathers and other relevant males to record stories, songs and rhymes for listening to in the book corner.
- Have high expectations of their involvement. Follow up invitations and politely question non-attendance. Show them you value their involvement and are prepared

**FURTHER INFORMATION**

● The stills above are from Siren Films' *The Wonder Year – 1st year development & shaping the brain*. For more information, visit Siren Films at [www.sirenfilms.co.uk](http://www.sirenfilms.co.uk) or call 0191 232 7900

- to make an effort to get them there!
- Be aware of the impact that culture or religious belief may have on gender roles. Be sensitive, but also firm about agreed policies that encourage male participation.
- Don't make assumptions about the kinds of event or group that will attract fathers. Ask them first and evaluate frequently.
- Where appropriate, ask about the best ways for non-resident fathers to be kept up-to-date with information about meetings or a child's progress. ■



**LINKS TO THE EYFS**

- **UC 1.2** Inclusive Practice
- **EE 3.1** Observation, Assessment and Planning
- **L&D 4.1** Play and Exploration

**ORGANISATIONS AND WEBSITES**

- [www.fathers-plus.co.uk](http://www.fathers-plus.co.uk)
- [www.includingmen.com](http://www.includingmen.com)
- [www.fatherhoodinstitute.org](http://www.fatherhoodinstitute.org)

**REFERENCES AND FURTHER READING**

- *Equality in Early Childhood – Linking Theory and Practice*, by Jennie Lindon (Hodder Arnold)
- [www.fathersnetwork.org](http://www.fathersnetwork.org)
- [www.fatherhoodinstitute.org](http://www.fatherhoodinstitute.org)