

Case study: A dad-led dads' group in south Devon

Dangerous Dads is a group for fathers and other male carers in Totnes, south Devon. Commissioned by the local children's centre but run by dads, the group offers men and their children a range of learning experiences through 'daring' and fun, mainly outdoor activities.

The group was launched in December 2007 in response to a recognition by Totnes Children's Centre, working in partnership with Devon County Council Children's Services and South Hams District Council, of the need to support the needs of fathers and encourage them to become more actively involved in their children's learning.

The aim of the group is to promote good parenting by involving fathers in activities that are enjoyable and stimulating both for the adults and the children – and to bring fathers and other male carers together to encourage social networking.

Events are open to all fathers/male carers of pre-school children, but with a particular focus on dads who are the main carer, dads who don't use the children's centres, and dads who are regularly away from their children. The group now has a database containing contact details for around 120 dads, and puts on an event roughly once a month.

The activities Dangerous Dads have offered – many of which are now regular events in the group's calendar – include:

- Fire Day – where the group visits the local fire station, touring the fire engines and learning about fire safety at home, then heads for the woods and learns about cutting and sawing logs and how to build, start and extinguish fires; and then cooks on an open fire
- Clay Day – an afternoon in the woods, digging for clay in the stream, making clay faces on trees and building dens
- Apple juice/cider making at a local farm
- Aquarium and zoo trips
- Kingfisher watching and badger watching
- 'Silly science' days led by a dad who is a science teacher
- Muddy walks, with input from a Forest Schools practitioner (www.forestschools.com)
- Den Day – making dens in the wood, helped by a woodland craft specialist
- Summer Camp – including sheep herding on a local farm, playing in the barn with wool, clay and willow, Chinese lantern making and camp fires

Ian Blackwell, a self-employed museums consultant and local dad, acts as coordinator of Dangerous Dads. He meets with the children's centre manager three to four times a year to plan and feedback on events, and estimates the total cost of the project is around £2,500 per year.

Mr Blackwell admits that Totnes, a relatively affluent market town, has a lot of active, middle class fathers, and that it might therefore be better-equipped than many places to

host a successful dad-led project. But he believes passionately in the dad-led approach, and says that with the right local leadership, the breadth and depth of Dangerous Dads' activities could be replicated across the country:

'The fact that it's led by dads gives it a different dynamic. We're always very clear what our objectives are, we evaluate everything we do, and we're good at marketing – we've got a good name and the local press love us,' he says. 'You need to keep things simple and build your activities around what skills dads themselves can bring – if you've got a scientist, they may want to help deliver a science day; if you've got an artist, go with that.'

'We've been deliberately targeting dads in the less affluent areas, some of whom are unemployed, and having some success with that – it's harder to get them along, but it's not impossible.'

To find out more about Dangerous Dads email Ian Blackwell or call him on 01803 840990.