

Case study: The St Michael's Fellowship's approach to supporting young dads and mums from pregnancy onwards

When the St Michael's Fellowship began to focus on services aimed at fathers, its approach was initially 'tokenistic', admits project coordinator Matt Hay.

Since then, the south London organisation's New Dad project has forged powerful links with Guy's and St Thomas's hospitals. This has led to antenatal education classes being held for both fathers and mothers-to-be, co-led by midwives and fathers' workers.

Matt describes the hospitals' booking-in current procedures as far more father-friendly than previously; young fathers are actively sought and the New Dad project has a presence at antenatal clinics, including at 12-week ultrasound scans. Just before the birth of a baby, St Michael's co-hosts antenatal education classes for young parents.

Why it's important to include dads early on

This focus on father-inclusive antenatal education stems mainly from a Sure Start study carried out in 2005 (as part of a project involving the Fatherhood Institute and a team from Bristol University), which focused on the experiences of 23 young black fathers who attended antenatal services. The results bucked preconceptions about these fathers, revealing that they were committed to fatherhood and to caring for their child.

Their experiences of antenatal care, however, were lacking and left them feeling marginalised, unwelcome and excluded, prompting St Michael's to create the New Dad project.

"If you work with parents at that stage, it makes things so much easier," says Matt. "It would be great if we could say that everyone we meet stays on board but what is important is that everyone we make contact with is familiar with the services we have on offer and it's really just about being on hand to follow that up and, when it's right for them, they are able to get on board later on.

"We also offer postnatal support, such as baby massage for fathers, and also postnatal relationship sessions targeted at young mums and dads about parenthood – how it changes their relationships with each other, and what are their priorities now? How do they share the parenting process and what pressure does it place on them and their peers?"

Getting the message out to practitioners

Also, as part of its remit to support new and expectant fathers, the New Dad project has produced a DVD aimed at practitioners across Lambeth, including children's centre managers, health visitors and employees of Lambeth NHS Trust.

Project coordinator Matt Hay explains: “The film, ‘Think Fathers! Why men matter’, was in response to the work we had been doing in children’s centres for the Early Years agenda and some of the difficulties we faced getting them to fully take on the complexities of working dads – and getting them to have a fully coherent approach to addressing what they need and go beyond the father’s group model.

“People across Lambeth were coming to us saying they had very little experience of working with fathers in general and they had anxiety with working with fathers. They’re working with a client group that they are very unfamiliar with – initially they were focused on mums and children and it is a difficult transition. The film was about hearing fathers’ voices, getting them out there and getting professionals to hear what they could do to make their services more father-friendly.”

Moving on from separate services for mums and dads

As well as educating practitioners, the New Dads project endeavours to engage with young fathers and mothers. Matt acknowledges that St Michael’s had previously tended to work solely with dads, taking what he calls ‘an atomised approach’ to working with families.

“Dads groups on their own can develop their own group speak which, if you are not careful, can reinforce stereotypes and how mums ‘make life difficult for dads’,” he warns. “It can skew the reality of what parenting is like and perpetuate the myth that all mums are bad and dads are good, and vice versa.”

He says that those working on the fatherhood agenda can be so fixated on getting dads through the door that they end up being ‘quite precious’ about those fathers and lower a ‘protective and insular screen’.

“That’s why the whole fatherhood agenda was hijacked by Fathers for Justice,” he adds. “It feels like a men-only thing when actually we find the whole relationship issue is massive for mums and dads. But they are not offered [joint] services that provide an opportunity to discuss the pressures and strains of pregnancy and parenthood upon a relationship.

“With this particular [New Dad] project we found that [fathers and mothers] seem to be coming from the same place – young parents tended to feel quite hesitant and alienated at children’s centres and I think some of the fears and concerns that young dads have about how they are treated and engaged, were shared by young mums, so there was a bit of common ground there. There were also issues around responsibility – we have had debates around whether young fathers are taking on enough responsibility and how much they are culpable for the fact that they don’t get the same access to services as mums do.”

Creating space to support the mum-dad relationship

Matt believes that both mothers and fathers require a space for themselves, which St Michael's provides. But, he stresses, people have in the past failed to realise that there is a strong level of shared interests and views on parenting.

“What emerged from the groups was a desire for dad to understand a bit more from where mums were coming from. I think we need to do more work with mums and dads together because ultimately it all boils down to relationships. We would initially do one-off sessions where the dads would come to the mums' group or the mums would go to the dads' group, and have a debate about the importance of dads, or mums, and we'd discuss what services were available to support them in a relationship and we found that the response was actually 'we want more of this – there isn't enough partnership work'.

“It can be quite incendiary, some of the initial sessions, because there is a lack of understanding. Mums can be gatekeepers as to whether young fathers can see their children, and mums can have legitimate concerns which come from mistrust and a lack of confidence in [the father's] ability to parent because of the way the father responds, and they welcome the chance to discuss relationships. We are trying to get to grips with what the issues are for mums and dads and hopefully make those relationships more stable.”