

Case study: Hit the Ground Crawling at St Edmund's Children's Centre in Bradford

Staff at St Edmund's Nursery and Children's Centre in Bradford undertook Fatherhood Institute training to run "Hit the Ground Crawling", a peer based mentoring course for expectant and new fathers. Delivering the course is part of the Centre's ongoing commitment to providing across-the-board support for all of the families in the local area, on top of and besides the more traditional child care facilities.

Prior to HTGC, the centre had a Dads' Day, when dads were encouraged to come into the nursery and work with their children. Last year, following a 'Dads' Ideas Night', at which dads, uncles, grandfathers and carers were invited to share thoughts and ideas over a free curry, they instigated the Saturday Dads' Sessions, wherein dads and their children are able to make use of the centre's facilities to bond and have fun. Before this, many dads had seen the centre as being female dominated, and, although staff had said they were always welcome there, the message that they had a vital part to play in their children lives hadn't always got through.

Hitting the Ground Crawling

Claire Birch, Family and Community Services Leader at the centre, explains the process of accessing the training: "I'd read about Hit The Ground Crawling, and thought that it sounded absolutely fantastic, and my line manager agreed, so when we managed to get the funding we just went for it. On the first day of the training, we looked at the eight different points that the HTGC course had to cover – things like giving birth, weaning etc, and the form it takes, which is that it's based on a group of expectant dads, and what we called the 'experts', dads who already had kids of their own and would talk about their own experiences and offer mentoring."

Imran Hafeez is a Family Outreach Practitioner at the centre and, for him, attending the HTGC training was a vital step: "Delivering HTGC would be my first role working directly with dads. I've done a lot of work with the community, been a development worker in the area, working with 19-25 year old males, some of whom were fathers, obviously, but this is the first time specifically with dads as dads. I'm the only male worker in the nursery to date, and it's a real passion of mine to look at how we shape our services so as to be more easily accessible to fathers. Which is the kind of thing we looked at on the first day of the training, the things to be aware of that might make dads reluctant to access our services. And on the second day we were joined by the two sets of fathers."

Claire takes up the story: "To be perfectly honest, the practice course that we ran was one of the most moving experiences of my life – to hear dads talking about their experiences and emotions was absolutely fantastic. Because you're used to hearing mums talk about, you know, childbirth and motherhood and the dad's just in the background nodding his head, so to hear them open up like that was slightly surreal but absolutely fantastic. And it was very emotional for the dads themselves as well. One of them said to me:

“I’ve never had the opportunity to talk like this, and it’s really reminded me just how much I love my kids, and what they mean to me. I’m really missing them and I can’t wait to get back home to them now.” I have to say that the training was worth every penny, and more.”

Imran was equally impressed by the interaction between the two sets of men: “The key to the trainings success is using the dads, they really did feel empowered to share their experiences, and the dads-to-be didn’t feel as if they were being lectured by experts. It was by their peers on a level playing field. I remember, one of the dads-to-be had never held a baby and didn’t want to because he had a phobia that he’d drop it. One of the dads who had his baby with him let him pick his baby up, showed him how to do it and showed him it was safe and that he could do it. And that was the pattern, experience being shared. On a personal note, HTGC has given me much more direction, a real sense of purpose within the set up, because there’s no doubt it is currently dominated by women and the sessions often reflect that, with most of the service users being women as well. HTGC is the first step on a long journey toward being fully accessible to dads, and we’re the first children’s centre in Bradford to do it, so we feel as if we’re leading the way.”

Preparing for the long term

Six weeks after the training, St Edmunds is on the brink of holding its very first HTGC session*. A Maternity Assistant at the centre is to act as liaison between them and the Maternity services, providing access to new dads who can then be invited onto the scheme. Ultimately, though, the hope is for the scheme to be self sustaining – the dads to be from the training session have already agreed to be the ‘experts’ in a future session and the hope is that, having been accessed at such an early and vital stage in the parenting process, the dads will maintain contact with the centre in the long term. The plan is that this process will be repeated once HTGC is up and running – initially once a month but, particularly if Imran gets his way, moving to once a fortnight.

In the longer term, Claire is putting together a three year plan around accessing fathers and is forming a steering group comprising people from the local community such as imams, priests, small businesses and similar. As she says: “There are a lot of older, wiser males in the community who’ve lived here for a while and whose knowledge and ideas we’d really like to tap into. There is a large Asian population in the area and that does make a difference as regards cultural attitudes towards parenthood. Even simple things, like not holding events on a Friday evening, because the men will be at the Mosque, that’s the kind of thing we have to be aware of.”