

'Men at Work'

'This is great, I've had 9 children and 5 grandchildren and I've never done this! It's really great' (Granddad)

Emneth Nursery School and Children's Centre is a rural setting in the heart of the Fens. On the border of Norfolk and Cambridgeshire a team of over 30 multi-disciplinary staff work together to support families, children and each other. The school forms the core of our practice and has been an established part of the local community for nearly 60 years but the children's centre gives us the capacity to co-construct meaningful, coordinated, early strategies within and beyond the setting.

I CAN has been part of our core provision for 5 years and from the start the framework of practice has encouraged a reflective dialogue alongside creative, inclusive practice. The skilling of parents to become (and feel they have become) expert advocates for their children is one of the most vital and moving effects of the programme. This reinforces the need for all parents and carers to benefit from a deeper relationship and understanding of what early education is about.

The promotion of fathers engaging with their children's early education underpins many recognised features of our changing world. Gone are the days when the queue of mothers fell silent at the sight of the lone father collecting his child. Most children are now at some time collected by fathers, uncles and grandfathers as well as aunts, childminders and friends. More and more children do not have significant, positive male role models in their lives either at home or in early years settings or schools. Valuing and celebrating the important part male carers play in the lives of children can greatly facilitate future engagement and parenting support.

In 2008 we were asked to be an ambassador setting for a government sponsored national promotion to engage male carers and begin to get men to think about working in the early years. We were asked to host a 'Take your Father to Nursery Day'. So successful was the day that this year we repeated it. Even the snowiest week could not ruin this event, over 30 fathers, grandfathers and uncles signed up to spending from 1 hour to the whole day with their children. We also contacted the local primary school and feeder high school and 8, year 6 and year 10 boys were selected to join us. Staff did spend time planning combinations of usual learning experiences that fathers would most relate to, so alongside the home corner, play dough, clipboards, small world, books and sand and water play we made sure that the Lego, woodwork and train were enhanced and accessible. Nor did we flinch from a final singing session to round off the morning and afternoon.

The outcomes of this day are both obvious and hidden. Overheard conversations between fathers about how to get their children to sleep through the night are a gem but so is the joy on the faces of the children to have dad in nursery. We did encourage groups of fathers to take a coffee break and staff were more than happy to give over the staffroom for this. Fathers could chat and get to know each other. We noticed after last year's day how fathers were more inclined to chat to each other, staff and other parents when dropping off or collecting their children once they had been on the day. Many

mothers fed back that their partners had been exhausted after their time at nursery and were more appreciative of mum's role as the main carer but also that they had had a great time. Indeed fathers really looked forward to coming again this year, reply slips were returned much more quickly and with much less direct one-to-one encouragement that was a necessary part of last year's promotion. Some male carers did fill in comment slips and these told us that the day had given them an insight into how the nursery developed their children's learning and how important their own play was. We supported this through documented learning displays and through staff talking about what they were doing and why.

Of course many of these men did not seriously consider retraining to work in early years but they may be able to better support male relatives to consider it, certainly the year 6 and 10 boys were fantastic role models and thoroughly enjoyed their time. The future workforce is ours for the grabbing. We are lucky to have 2 men working with our children permanently but it is sad to note that our nursery practitioner who is only in his early 20's was directed away from training in childcare by his college and only came to us after he had worked as a painter and decorator. Maybe next year we will invite the school and college careers advisors!

Next year will be bigger and better we hope, although the mum's are revolting and demanding their own special day and we would like to see more boys applying to do their work experience here. We notice already that parental involvement is increased with better attendance at key person days and new parents' evenings and more fathers at concerts and visiting with mothers. Our breast feeding workshops and baby massage groups are also well attended by fathers. The positive atmosphere seems to have seeped into all aspects of our centre life.

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