Better Start BRADFORD

2015-2025

SHARING KNOWLEDGE, SHAPING FUTURES

Engaging Dads and Male Carers

A toolkit by Better Start Bradford

November 2025

Contents

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About Better Start Bradford

Better Start Bradford is part of the ten-year A Better Start programme set up and funded by The National Lottery Community Fund in 2015.

Since 2015, A Better Start partnerships in Blackpool, Bradford, Lambeth, Nottingham and Southend-On-Sea have supported families to give their babies and very young children the best possible start in life, specifically to:

- Improve children's diet and nutrition to support healthy physical development and protect against illness in later life.
- Support children to develop social and emotional skills so they can develop positive relationships and cope with difficult situations.
- Help children develop their language and communication skills, so that they can engage with the world around them.
- Bring about changes in systems, practice and behaviour that increased the focus on the first 1001 days of life and invest in preventative and early intervention approaches that have been demonstrated to have impact.

In Bradford, we created over 20 evidence-led projects and services for expectant families and families with children aged 0-3 in Bowling and Barkerend, Bradford Moor and Little Horton (the Better Start Bradford area).

Each one was designed with, and for, our specific communities, delivered by commissioned partner organisations, and evaluated throughout by the Better Start Bradford Innovation Hub (BSBIH).

Better Start Bradford set up the Innovation Hub with Born in Bradford at the Bradford Institute for Health Research (BIHR) to be our evaluation partner for the whole programme. We also commissioned the additional birth cohort, Born in Bradford Better Start (BiBBS), to allow a more extensive and longer-term evaluation. The findings of the BSBIH evaluation of each of the projects are threaded through these Impact Reports and are credited to BSBIH.

This work has been supported by complementary strands of work, including community engagement, workforce development, campaigns and volunteering.

Introduction

Better Start Bradford has produced a series of materials and learning toolkits to share our ways of working.

Beyond individual interventions, our programme aimed to deliver change in how we work locally with our communities by placing parents and families at the heart what we do, improving outcomes for children now and for generations to come.

The purpose of this toolkit is to:

1. Outline a model for working with dads and male carers.
2. Share successful approaches that have been based on our experience.
3. Signpost people working with dads to other learning materials and resources.

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Element 1: Why Dads?

- There is plenty of evidence that involving dads in early childhood has positive impact throughout a person's life.
- The evidence shows dads' parenting influence is a separate, positive factor in childhood development at all ages (Fletcher et al, 2014).
- Dads have a strong desire to be fathers and are motivated to be good ones (Smith, 2008) and dads are becoming more involved in parenting.
- It is important to work with dads to identify their role for example where dads are the sole or main carers.
- When dads have positive involvement, this leads to positive impacts on mums/ partners, and the children in their life (King, 2010).

Outcomes for dads

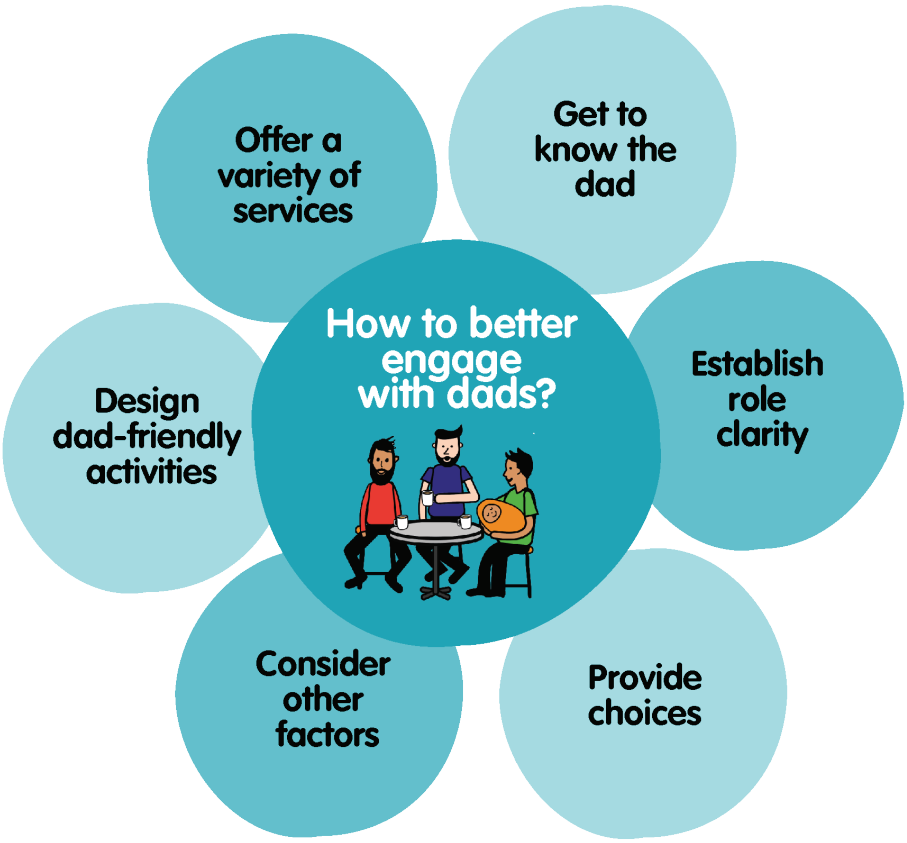
- Better understanding of early childhood development.
- More confident to engage with key organisations, such as children's schools, early years provision and with other parents.
- Improved self-perception and identity as a father.
- Communication and emotional expression with their children.
- Own development in terms of parenting skills and positive parenting attitude.
- Parenting satisfaction and self-efficacy.

> "The activities through Better Start Bradford have helped me understand how much my little boy is learning through play. It's made me more hands-on as a dad."

Barriers to engagement

- Becoming a dad isn't always easy. Many new fathers experience feelings of anxiety, low mood, or being overwhelmed — and around 1 in 10 face mental health challenges during early parenthood.
- Fathers are generally not used to receiving help from services and may be reluctant to ask for help (Forrest, 2005).
- Existing services are rarely geared towards supporting dads and may in fact institutionally discriminate against them (Smith, 2008).
- Professional practice within child and family-based services remains gendered, with a focus on mothering and neglect of fathers (King, 2010).

Element 2: How to better engage with Dads



The diagram above (adapted from Australian Government Department Social Services publication - Support for Fathers: Healthy Relationship for Dads) provides a visual checklist of what needs to be considered when engaging with dads. Each checklist point is expanded below:

Get to know the dad

- Welcome the dad to the service.
- Explore the dad's understanding of the service.
- Understand the dad's past experiences of engaging with services.

Establish role clarity

- Explain and ensure a mutual understanding of your role as the professional.
- Explain and ensure a mutual understanding of the dad's role in accessing the service.

Provide the dad with choices

- Offer the dad a range of information, consultation, support or referral options.
- Ensure that the dad understands what each of the options involves.

Design dad-friendly activities

- Focus on designing activities that involve dads doing things with their children that are relevant and accessible.
- Consider the location of activities to ensure that they are held in places dads are comfortable to attend.

Offer a variety of services

Dads are looking for a choice when engaging with your service and are keen to try out different things. Provide a range of options such as:

- One-to-one support (for example, with a father-focused worker).
- Small group activities (for example, dads' parent education programmes).
- Large group activities (for example, dads' and kids' catch ups).
- Community events (for example, Father's Day BBQ, dads' days).

Other important things to consider

- **Work on building the trust:** Dads, like mums, work more openly in a trusting relationship.
- **Work towards changing behaviour not beliefs:** Behaviour can be changed, however beliefs are much more ingrained and harder to shift, particularly in short periods of time.
- **Be mindful that men often seek support after a crisis:** If a dad is presenting to your service, there may be a small window of opportunity to support them. The next opportunity may not present until the next crisis occurs.
- **Capture data and information:** For the purpose of re-engaging, understanding reach and carrying out evaluation to improve the service (for example demographic information, parental role of the dad, referral or engagement source, employment status and availability).
- **Accessibility:** Address language and cultural barriers.
- **Engaging marketing:** Use positive images of dads on promotional material.

At Better Start Bradford we found both the barriers and the methods of engagement with dads consistent across all programme areas. Many Dads want to be involved in their child's development, but they may not always feel welcomed or know how to connect with early years services.

Here are some of the simple ways you can engage more effectively with dads:

- Invite dads to your service and let them know that they are welcome.
- Use word-of-mouth advertising, for example, promote in person.
- Reach out to places where men already gather.
- Identify a 'community leader or a role model' (for example key contact at local mosque or other faith institute) who can influence dads.
- For dad-focused activities, use the word 'dad' instead of 'parent'.
- For general activities, use 'dad and mum' instead of 'parents'.
- Make the service relevant to the dad's immediate needs and situation.
- Build dad's faith in their abilities and adopt a strengths based approach.
- Have honest and direct conversations.
- Have a dad-focused worker in your team.
- Offer male-specific activities and have more dads in leadership roles.
- Provide flexible working hours and venues.
- Adopt a trauma informed approach.
- Do things outdoors or fun activities with children.

Why it matters

- **Low-cost, high-impact:** Micro-funding and community facilitation lead to meaningful, long-term engagement.
- **Scalable model:** With strategic investment, this model can be adapted and replicated in other communities.
- **Behaviour change:** When given the opportunity, dads step up — improving child outcomes and reducing family pressure.

Reaching and Engaging Dads

A Better Start Bradford Case Study

Overview

Better Start Bradford has pioneered innovative, dad-focused community engagement. This case study captures the personal journey of a young father, showcasing the wider impact of father-inclusive programming — from improving confidence to strengthening parent-child relationships and building community leadership.

The Challenge

Young fathers often face exclusion from early years services. There is limited tailored support, few peer spaces, and a lack of practical advice. This leads to isolation and reduced confidence during a crucial stage in their child's development.

The Solution

Through Better Start Bradford's Happy Early Years (HEY!) Fund Dad's Cook and Eat session, I discovered a welcoming space that recognised and valued dads. This led me to:

- Applying to the HEY! Fund to launch Dad's Army, a stay-and-play session led by fathers.
- Receive hands-on support from the Better Start Bradford team to deliver sessions confidently.
- Attend workshops on child behaviour and development.
- Connect with over 150 dads via WhatsApp.

The Impact

- **Increased confidence:** I felt an increase in my confidence to engage in parenting and community leadership.
- **Stronger father-child bonds:** I felt a stronger bond with my child through play and learning.
- **Peer-led sustainability:** I am continuing to meet with other dads, share resources, and support each other.
- **Emerging leadership:** We're now exploring forming a constituted group to carry the work forward post Better Start Bradford.

> "This experience showed me how vital dads are. We just need the right tools and support."

> "As a new dad, I felt invisible. Services focused on mums. No one asked how I was coping."

Element 3: Connecting Dads – Local Professional Networks

Creating strong professional networks focused on engaging fathers is key to bridging service gaps and improving outcomes for families. This guide outlines how to set up a local professional network that brings together practitioners, community members, and dads themselves.

1. Understand the landscape

Existing networks

- Research if a 'working with dads' network already exists in your area.
- Engage with it or consider how your initiative could align or fill the gaps.

Identify gaps

- Reflect on how your own organisation currently engages with dads.
- What's missing? Where could improvements be made?

2. Collaborate and connect

Find partners

- Reach out to professionals across health, education, early years, and community services and identify individuals or organisations interested in father engagement.

3. Include lived experience

Recruit dads

- Invite dads from your services or community to join the network.
- Their lived experiences add depth, relevance, and credibility.

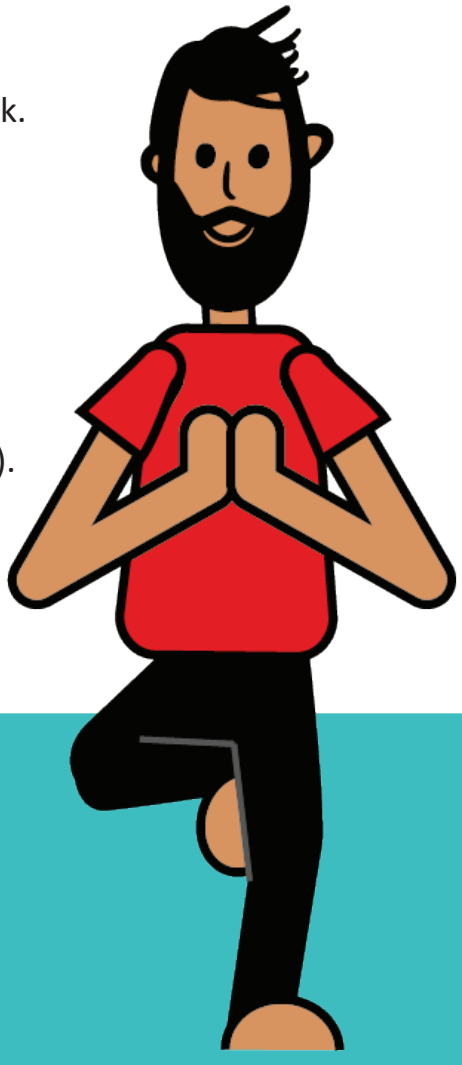
4. Launch your network

Plan a high-impact first meeting

- Invite guest speakers with expertise or lived experience.
- Set a clear theme or key message for your launch.
- Name your network (for example, Working With Dads Network).

Set priorities

- Identify the top 5 topics to focus on.
- Workshop these with attendees during the launch.



5. Plan ongoing engagement

Hold regular meetings

- Aim for 4–6 meetings per year.
- Host them in accessible venues where dads already gather, such as libraries, schools, community centres, sports clubs.

Use storytelling

- Share real stories about fatherhood — both from dads and practitioners.
- Use video (for example, YouTube) and social media to amplify voices.
- Engage across levels
- Bring together professionals from all tiers, for example early years, support staff and senior leaders.

6. Influence and advocate

Shape local services

- A strong network of professionals and dads can drive change.
- Use insights and evidence to influence local strategic plans.
- Position the network as a partner in service design and delivery.

Outcome

By building a cross-sector, dad-inclusive professional network, you foster a culture where fathers are recognised, supported, and empowered — creating long-term impact for children, families, and services.

Call to Action

As Better Start Bradford comes to a close, the need for father-focused work does not end here. To build on this momentum, we are calling on:

- **Funding partners** to support grassroots dad-led groups.
- **Commissioners** to embed father-inclusive approaches in future early years and family services.
- **Collaborators** to replicate this model.
- **Partners** to create a local directory to support dads in your area (see example on the Better Start Bradford website).

I didn't really know what was out there for dads until I came here. Better Start Bradford made me feel welcome and showed me how important my role is in my child's early years.

This group has helped me build a stronger bond with my child. Without Better Start Bradford, I don't think I'd have had this opportunity.

It is my first time attending this cook and eat sessions with my daughter, we had lots of fun and I will definitely be coming back.

“I wasn’t aware that there was Dad’s only sessions out there until I joined the Better Start Bradford WhatsApp group. Through this I have not only spent quality time with my children but also met other great fathers.”

“Attending the Saturday morning sessions with other dad’s has allowed me to give my wife a well-deserved break!”

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COMMUNITY FUND

Resources

Insight piece on the National Lottery Community Fund A Better Start learning pages:Working with dads in Bradford:
https://www.betterstartbradford.org.uk/blog/working-with-dads-in-bradford/

The Earliest Year of Life Better Start Bradford podcast: Episode 3: Is Dad Okay?
https://www.betterstartbradford.org.uk/earliest-years-of-life-podcast/

Better Start Bradford blog: Hitting the nail on the head and engaging dads in Bradford:
https://www.betterstartbradford.org.uk/blog/hitting-the-nail-on-the-head-and-successfully-engaging-dads-in-bradford/

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Dads Matter Dads Mental Health Mental Health Foundation:
https://www.mentalhealth.org.uk/explore-mental-health/statistics/family-parenting-statistics

Sharing Knowledge, Shaping Futures at:
www.betterstartbradford.org.uk