

Case studies

Getting dads involved: Coopers Lane School, London

A pub in Lewisham, South London, is the unlikely setting for a 'Dads Matter' group, set up by a local primary school to help make fathers more aware of the importance of their role in their children's education. However, this was just the first of a range of initiatives introduced by the school to involve more dads in their children's education.

Steve Davies, the head teacher at Coopers Lane School and the driving force behind the initiative, believes that schools can and should do more to enable fathers and male carers to get more involved. "At Coopers Lane we believe it is crucial for dads to become more visible and more active in their child's learning," says Steve Davies. "Once, all of our voluntary help in classes used to be provided by mums and even though dads are now getting more involved we still believe dads are a relatively untapped resource."

At the monthly sessions, fathers discuss how to help their child with homework and home reading tasks, and each dad is given a task to complete with their children between meetings. Past tasks have included a cookery session at home or giving a 'gift voucher' to the child promising to spend an hour doing a fun activity together. Each father then shares their experiences of the task with the group. The group also debates issues around the impact of fathers on their children's education and examines the latest research on the topic.

As a result of the group, more and more fathers are becoming actively involved in school life. Many local dads now take part in regular school and community events such as the annual 'Bring Your Dad to School Week', a 'Party in the Park' each autumn term for parents and children, and the school's annual summer fair, which the group helps organise. One dad has started a weekly Maths Booster session for Year 5 children, along with one other dad and four mums. He took this on after the school told him his own daughter needed extra support in maths: "I realised then I had to get off my backside and do something about my daughter's maths".

Fathers also lend their expertise to school building and maintenance projects, and successfully coach and run the school football teams. And some of the group's members are receiving training from the school and local authority to become male mentors, recognising the importance of male role models in children's lives.

Steve Davies continues: "When I first came to the school the male presence in the playground was minimal, with hardly any men dropping off or picking up their children. But [once the group began] we started doing head counts to monitor more regularly how many men were actually physically present in our school. At the last count there was approximately a 60:40 split of mums and dads picking up their children."

The difference the group has made to dads is clear, as one of the group's members explains: "I used to think that I gave a lot [to my children] before I joined the group. But sitting there with the other dads, sharing their experiences, I've realised I've got so much more to give. That's the magic of our meetings – it's a forum."

