

## Case studies

### Helping expectant dads:

#### Hit the Ground Crawling Staffordshire

Peer-to-peer learning for expectant and new dads has been the key to the success of an innovative fatherhood project in Staffordshire. The Hit the Ground Crawling scheme, run by Staffordshire Children's Services, is engaging systematically with fathers before the birth of their child - when they are particularly open to information and support - and offers them a powerful and informal way to learn about parenting.

The scheme was developed after a number of Staffordshire practitioners expressed a desire to learn more about how to engage fathers and create services that would help fathers develop their parenting skills. The practitioners were aware that while there are many opportunities for expectant mothers to meet other new mums and learn parenting skills from them, this is not always the case for fathers. Staffordshire knew that the vast majority of dads do come into contact with maternity services, and approached the Fatherhood Institute for advice about how to take advantage of this and reach out to fathers in the antenatal period.

With the Institute's help, Staffordshire started the Hit the Ground Crawling scheme. Based on the insight that fathers gain greatly in confidence and skill when they learn alongside and from other fathers, the scheme consists of simple, flexible and cost-effective mentoring workshops that are designed to work well with men of all ages. Each Hit the Ground Crawling session simply involves groups of fathers-to-be spending an afternoon or evening with new fathers and their babies. These 2-3 hour sessions are one-off events for the dads and dads-to-be facilitated by specially-trained staff who are usually Children's Centre workers, health visitors or midwives.

The sessions, always held at a time convenient for dads, are very informal and are designed to allow dads-to-be to discuss their thoughts and concerns with other fathers in a relaxed setting. The dads-to-be can watch their peers caring for their babies and can often learn to change nappies and hold the new babies. The dads-to-be are also encouraged to discuss and think about the need of the mother during pregnancy, labour and the post-natal period and examine the importance of teamwork in parenting. Each session is facilitated by two workers, ideally one male and one female worker, though many successful sessions have been run by two female or two male workers just as effectively.

There are now 20 practitioners in Staffordshire who have been trained and mentored to deliver the Hit the Ground Crawling Workshop. The training was rolled out through Community and Learning Partnerships and the impact on dads, dads-to-be and practitioners has been startling. The workshops have dispelled any myths about fathers not wanting to be involved with their children until they are old enough to kick a football, and the end result is more confident, less isolated dads who are aware of the services available to them.

"We have really positive relationships with our dads, and seeing them building up relationships with their children is easily the best part of my job," says Nicola Ellis, a community development worker at East Staffordshire Children's Centre, and a Hit the Ground Crawling facilitator. "This approach is brilliant - it was great to see the dads so keen to come along and I was surprised how open they were. A lot of the time it's just giving them the confidence to know that they're doing OK."

Fathers who have taken part in the programme have stressed how much they valued the opportunity to learn from experienced dads in a mostly male environment. One dad-to-be said: "Well, at first I was very nervous and I hold my hands up... I was panicking [about fatherhood]. But this session has given me every confidence and [done] me the world of good. I am full of confidence now."

Pat Djemli, an Integrated Services Officer for Children and Lifelong Learning, concludes: "Hit the Ground Crawling has presented Staffordshire with a new way of relating to fathers. The impact is outstanding with dads and dads-to-be gaining a new sense of confidence in their parenting role."

