

Reaching Out to Fathers



How to include fathers in local and national support groups

Contact a Family understands the enormous benefit of local and national support groups for parents and carers of disabled children. They give parents in similar situations an invaluable opportunity to talk to each other and share experiences and knowledge. However, we often hear from parents, carers and professionals who are unaware that this support is available or do not know how to access it.

Many support groups are mostly attended by mothers. Although some fathers go to group meetings with their partner, dads often find it difficult to get to meetings or feel that the group is not for them. With this in mind, this guide explores some of the things you can do to make your group more accessible to dads.

Contact a Family is extremely aware of the fact that parents and parent groups come in all 'shapes and sizes' and one approach does not fit all. Acknowledging that there are parents who find it difficult to access services, and trying to include them, does not have to involve a massive restructuring of the work that you do. Some simple, minor adjustments may be all that is required. This will take a little time and effort, but may significantly benefit parents who may otherwise feel isolated or left out.



Contact a Family's Group Action Pack

This guide is part of Contact a Family's Group Action Pack. It is also one of a set of three guides to help local and national groups work with all parents to provide a fully inclusive service. Other guides in this set are '**Reaching Out to Black and Minority Ethnic Families**' and '**Reaching Out to Disabled Parents**'.

Our Group Action Pack guides explore a range of issues associated with starting and developing a parent support group. They can be downloaded free of charge from the Contact a Family website at: <http://www.cafamily.org.uk/GAP.html> .

You can also request copies by telephoning our freephone Helpline on 0808 808 3555.

contact a family

for families with disabled children

209-211 City Road, London EC1V 1JN

Tel 020 7608 8700 Fax 020 7608 8701

Web www.cafamily.org.uk e-mail info@cafamily.org.uk

Freephone Helpline 0808 808 3555

(Mon-Fri, 10am-4pm, Mon, 5.30-7.30pm)

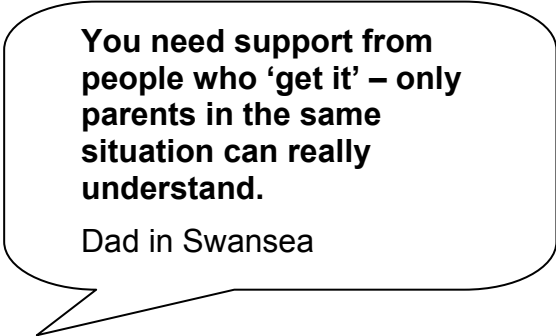
Textphone 0808 808 3556

incorporating

The Lady Hoare Trust

Introduction

Having a disabled child inevitably affects the whole family. Mothers and fathers often react in different ways to the news that their child has a disability or medical condition. Fathers frequently find that their partner and other family members turn to them for emotional support at a time when they too have to adapt to a new set of circumstances. As many dads are the main breadwinner of the household, they begin to feel they have a dual role; both offering support and providing the practical help that is needed. Research has shown that many fathers feel excluded from certain aspects of their child's life and think that support systems are mostly targeted at mums. However, dads need support too and often find parent groups very valuable:



You need support from people who 'get it' – only parents in the same situation can really understand.

Dad in Swansea

Fathers themselves are also keen to stress that support groups are not just for mums:



Both mums and dads can join support groups – they can be a real opportunity for dads.

Dad in Bridgend

However, there are barriers that prevent dads accessing support groups and some fathers may feel there is a stigma attached to attending meetings. It is therefore important to look at the ways support groups can make themselves more attractive to dads and include them in their activities.

What can your group do to include dads?

Speak to dads

If you already have fathers in your group, a good place to start is to ask their opinions:

- What aspect of the group do they enjoy the most and get the most benefit out of?
- Would they like the group to run events and activities specifically for fathers? If so, what kind of events would appeal?
- What initially attracted/persuaded them to attend meetings?
- What do they think would stop them from attending?
- What would make the group easier to attend?

If your group is female dominated, ask dads how they felt about coming along to the first meeting:

- Did they feel intimidated?
- Were they confident that the group welcomed dads – why?

Asking questions like this will help you gauge how accessible the group is to dads, for example, it would be really helpful for you to know whether a dad felt comfortable attending a meeting just because they had their partner with them, or because your group leaflet sends a strong message that both mums and dads are welcome.

Think about the activities your group provides

- If you would like to attract more dads to your meetings, consider running some one-off activities that dads would enjoy and ask mums to bring their partners along. Dads tend to prefer meeting in a more social setting so this could be as simple as arranging to meet in a pub or going out for a meal.
- Support groups don't just have to be focused on sitting and talking and some dads will not want to do this for extended periods of time. Many fathers enjoy the opportunity to socialise with other families at the same time as spending time with their children. For this reason, several local support groups arrange activities such as barbeques and family fun days which are open to the whole family. Once dads have had the opportunity to meet other fathers in this kind of setting, they often make arrangements to meet up, either at the next support group meeting, or independently of the group. This can sometimes lead to the formation of a separate fathers' sub-group.
- If you are a national group, it may be worth putting some time aside during your AGM/Family weekend (if you have one) specifically for fathers. This could be something very informal but it will give fathers the opportunity to talk to each other and share experiences.
- Some national charities and voluntary organisations employ a Fathers' Worker specifically to support and work with dads. If your group has links with a national

organisation, ask whether they have a Fathers' Worker. If they do, you could invite them to be a speaker at your AGM or Family Day.

Case Study

Skegness A Group

Skegness A Group is a local parent support group in Lincolnshire. The group has been running now for 12 years and initially met on a Tuesday night, once a month. At every meeting parents would have the opportunity to have a cup of tea and a chat and a guest speaker would usually be invited.

After a few meetings, the group realised their members were mainly mums, even though they wanted to give support to the whole family. They therefore decided to continue holding their more structured monthly meetings but also offer informal social and family events that could include fathers, grandparents and siblings. They began to hold four family get-togethers a year.

By offering a range of activities that appealed to the whole family (such as barbeques, face painting and crafts) they found that their membership expanded. The get-togethers were always held on a Sunday so as not to exclude people (like fathers) who had to work Monday to Saturday. As a result the dads had the opportunity to meet each other, friendships developed and they started to meet independently to offer each other support.

Include dads in information

- If your group has a website, you might want to consider having a fathers' section. You could also introduce a fathers' page in your group's newsletter.
- When using pictures in your newsletters, publications or on your website, try to use some that show fathers as well as mothers. This will give the message that fathers are welcome and valued. If you are using photographs of group members on your publications or website, please remember to get their signed consent to allow you to do this. If you would like a copy of Contact a Family's consent form, telephone our freephone Helpline on 0808 808 8555 to request a copy.
- If your group has a library of useful publications, include ones written specifically for dads. Contact a Family has written a factsheet for fathers - if you would like a copy call 0808 808 8555 or visit: <http://www.cafamily.org.uk.factsheets.html> to download a copy.
- If your group writes to your members, wherever possible, address both mum and dad.

Promote your group to dads

By making your group more accessible and inclusive you are sending a positive message to all fathers. Having taken the time to be inclusive, remember to reflect this in your literature and when you promote your group.

- If you have the funds, local press and radio stations can be a useful medium to advertise your group. If you are keen to attract more fathers, say so in the advert.
- Your Local Infrastructure Organisation (like your Council for Voluntary Services or Council for Voluntary Action) might be able to include an article about your group in their newsletter. If some dads are already part of your group, could one of them write the article about the group and their own experience of being a member?
- Look out for local or national events (especially ones that are just for dads) which you could attend to promote your group and the fact you welcome fathers.
- Place articles about your group in magazines or publications which fathers may read. If you are a local group, put group leaflets in places like pubs, sport centres and barbers shops.
- If you are a rare condition support group, it might be helpful to send information about your group to all genetics centres.
- Use Contact a Family - we can add your group's details to our database which will assist our Helpline in referring parents to your group. If your group is open to fathers, or you are developing a father's network or sub-group, do let us know as we can reflect this on the database. We can also help promote your group through the Local Parent Support Group Network and email newsletters.
- Let Children's Centres and Community Centres know who you are and what you do. Some Centres might have a fathers' noticeboard; if so, see whether you can put information about your group on it.
- Make links with Fathers' Workers from voluntary organisations that are relevant to your group.
- If you are a local group, consider organising a family outing or activity for Fathers' Day – this will benefit your existing members and may also attract new dads to the group.

Case Study

The Encephalitis Society

The Encephalitis Society wanted to develop their services for fathers and asked Contact a Family for advice to support them in running a workshop as part of a family weekend. The parent advisor involved in outreach support at Contact a Family liaised with the Society to discuss their expectations and facilitated discussions on the day. The Society saw this

event as an opportunity to highlight the issues and concerns that fathers have and clarify how they would like to develop and extend the support they currently provide.

Website: <http://www.encephalitis.info> .

Potential barriers

There are some issues that may create barriers for fathers and prevent them taking part in your group activities or events:

- Think about the time of day you are holding your meetings, AGMs and family events. Many fathers work and will not be able to attend meetings held during the day, others may like to be part of their child's bedtime routine. If you currently meet during the day, you might like to consider holding evening meetings, even if it is only for a trial period. This could encourage more fathers to attend and might lead to the formation of a fathers' support group or individual dads continuing meeting up socially.
- Some men do not feel comfortable sharing personal information straight away when they are in a group setting. They are more likely to open up when activities are based around knowledge (such as a question and answer session with an invited speaker) or over a shared activity with their children.
- Dads also enjoy being given a degree of choice and flexibility in the group activities they take part in. Drop-ins work well for some groups as they let dads come and go as they please while allowing more structured activities to take place.
- It is also important to bear in mind that dads (or any working parent) may be coming to group meetings straight from work. As a result, they may not want to stay for the whole meeting but would rather be there for the elements they receive most benefit from. If your meetings appear quite unstructured, or it is not clear whether parents can "drop-in", dads might be put off attending. Some groups find it helpful to follow the same structure at each meeting to make it easier for parents to manage their time, for example, starting with a speaker for the first hour, followed by chatting and mutual support, or vice versa.
- Try not to assume that all dads have their own transport. A lack of transport may be preventing people from attending meetings, especially if they are disabled, live in a

Disabled fathers and fathers from Black and Minority Ethnic Communities may face additional barriers. For further information about how to make your group more accessible to these fathers, see our Group Action Pack guides 'Reaching out to Black and Minority Ethnic Families' and 'Reaching out to Disabled Parents'.

All Group Action Pack guides can be downloaded free of charge from:

<http://www.cafamily.org.uk/GAP.html>

Alternatively, you can request copies by calling our freephone Helpline on **0808 808 3555**.

rural community or find access to public transport difficult. Do you have a group member who is willing to offer lifts? If you do, highlight this in your group's publicity. Think about the public transport to your meeting venue – does its frequency and finishing time fit in well with the time your group meets?

- Some meeting venues may be off-putting to dads. Choose a venue that is as non-threatening and culturally neutral as possible. Approaching a meeting venue for the first time can be very daunting; try to make signage to your meeting room prominent so that people can see exactly where they need to go. Having a couple of parents just inside the door (including a dad, if possible) to greet new members can also put people at their ease.
- Meeting in a pub may be a good venue for getting fathers together, but groups should be sensitive to those who do not drink alcohol. If you are providing refreshments at meetings and events be aware some religions prohibit alcohol and have strict dietary requirements (see the guide "Reaching out to Black and Minority Ethnic Families" for further information on cultural considerations).

Useful Resource

Fathers Direct

Address: 9 Nevill Street, Abergavenny, NP7 5AA
Telephone: 0845 634 1328
Website: <http://www.fathersdirect.com>
Email: mail@fathersdirect.com

Fathers Direct provide news, training information, policy updates, research summaries and guides for supporting fathers and their families.

Finally...

Ensuring your group promotes equality in everything it does

It is good practice for all groups to have an equal opportunities policy. An equal opportunities policy outlines how you will make sure your group is open to everybody. It shows your group has a commitment to ensuring all people are treated fairly and have the same opportunity to access high quality services. If your group applies for funding, there is a chance the funder will ask whether you have an equal opportunities policy and they may also want to see a copy.

An equal opportunities policy does not have to be very long; the most important thing is to make sure it is useful to your group and is used. Writing the policy is also a helpful way of seeing what your group can practically do to include all parents.

A good starting point is to write a statement which outlines why your group has an equal opportunities policy – you could also print this statement on your group publicity. An example might be:

“Our group believes in the importance of equal opportunities and we are working towards being fully inclusive. We aim to ensure that no family is excluded from our support group meetings, events and activities on the grounds of age, gender, health, sexuality, class, family status, means, ability, colour, ethnic origin, culture, religion or belief.”

Looking at other groups’ policies might give you some ideas about how to set out and word your policy. If you would like to see Contact a Family’s equal opportunities policy, please contact us and we will send you a copy. However, it is important that your group’s policy is about what **your** group wants to achieve and the practical things your group can do.

Useful Resource

Brighton Resource Centre produces a guide for groups on how to write an equal opportunities policy. Copies can be downloaded from their website at:
<http://www.resourcecentre.org.uk>

Alternatively, you can contact Brighton Resource Centre at:

Address: Prior House, 6 Tilbury Place, Brighton, BN2 0GY
Telephone: 01273 606160
Email: info@resourcecentre.org.uk

This guide is part of the Contact a Family Group Action Pack. For more information please visit www.cafamily.org.uk or telephone 020 7608 8700.

Copying of the material within this guide is permitted. Please include a credit to Contact a Family.

Last updated: **December 2007**