

Dads' Activities Pack

Getting organised: a guide for dads

Who is this guide for?

This is a guide for dads – to help you create opportunities for your children to enjoy fun, exciting times with other children and their families.

Given half a chance, dads are just as good at looking after children as mums – and are just as committed to their children. That goes for all dads – for example, it's simply a myth that middle class dads are more involved or active than other dads. Millions of dads are already getting together informally with other dads (and mums) to do stuff with their children. Some organise regular activities, in groups that try to foster some community spirit.

But it's not always easy to get together with other dads and their children, or to know what sorts of activities they'd be interested in. The kind of networks that seem to work for mums – toddler groups, school PTAs and the like – tend not to be very dad-friendly.

This guide can help you build up an understanding of what motivates your fellow dads and their children – allowing you to plan and develop local activities that you will all enjoy and remember (and by the way, when we say 'dads' we mean all fathers and other men who look after their children – stepdads, granddads, uncles, etc).

We've compiled it with the help of dads' groups across the country, who've shared with us their ideas and experience of what works. We hope you'll find it useful – and if you have any ideas of your own that you think other dads might find helpful, please post them on the Dads Included website at www.dadsincluded.org.

Why does it matter?

This guide matters because dads matter hugely, and forever, to their children. You don't have to be perfect – or there all the time. No dad (or mum) is patient, warm and loving all the time. But whatever you do, matters to your children. And if you're actively involved, that counts for the rest of your child's life – in all sorts of ways (see box below). British dads spend the equivalent of a full day at work (eight hours) playing with their children every week. This is twice as much as French fathers, who devote only four hours to playtime, and more than Dutch and Swiss fathers who spend five and six hours respectively.



Why dads matter

Children can flourish without a father (or mother...or both) but research shows that the children of highly involved dads – whether living full-time with their children or not - tend to have:

- Better friendships (and with better-adjusted children)
- Fewer behavioural problems
- Better educational outcomes
- Greater capacity for empathy
- Non-traditional attitudes to earning/childcare
- Higher self-esteem and life satisfaction
- Lower criminality and substance abuse
- More satisfying adult sexual partnership.

A 'good-enough' dad can also function as a buffer when his child's life is tough. For example children living in poverty, or whose mothers are chaotic, misuse substances or suffer from post-natal depression, do better when their relationship with their dad is good.

For more details, read our Five-minute guides to why dads matter, online at <http://bit.ly/igEu1x>.

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It's not just the kids who benefit, either. More actively involved dads help mums cope better with looking after their children, and they act as a support for mother-child relationships – all of which leads to fewer depressed mums.

More actively involved dads are also themselves happier and more confident as parents. When dads are more actively involved, there is a reduced likelihood of relationship breakdown. And separated dads are very important too – if they are actively involved, their children do better in life.

All in all, actively involved dads are good news for everyone.

How to get started

If you want your local community to have great stuff going on for dads to do with their children, you are not alone – but how to get it going? A really good kick off is to get talking to some local dads about what you would like to do together. We're not talking about a stuffy committee meeting here - just a few minutes in the school playground, down the pub or at your next barbeque. See the box on page 3 for more ideas about taking this important first step.

Just have some fun coming up with lots of ideas. How and why are less important at this stage than just having the ideas. In the cold light of day half of them may not work, or not without funding you haven't got – but that's OK! Just pick one or two that you and the others think could really work, and agree to get back together in a week or so, to make something happen. You can find lots of ideas to get you started in our activity sheets and the useful books and websites recommended within them. Using these as a starting point could be a good way to tease out ideas of your own. You know better than anyone what you and your children would enjoy, and what you can easily get going.

When you do get back together, be practical, but remember to keep the discussion fun and positive, and not too long. Most dads will not want to get involved in a talking shop. So the goal is to have a plan sorted for what you are going to do before you go your separate ways. The following questions should help focus your minds:

What are we going to do? Be specific. Be practical. Be realistic. Go with what you are all enthusiastic about – and know how to do. And remember to ask yourselves if your own children would be impressed – this is about coming up with activities they'll enjoy and benefit from, remember!

What is so good about it? This will help you get it right. If you cannot answer this question, choose another idea. If you can, your answer will shape what you end up doing – and help you explain to others (adults and children) why they should get involved! It's a great idea to ask your children what they think!

What skills and resources are needed? Your idea might be wonderful – but do you have the right knowledge, equipment or facilities to make it a success? If so, great – if not, think about what or who else you need. BUT it's best to be able to sort out your first activities without outside help. So do keep it simple and cheap! And don't be afraid to change your mind if it looks a bit too much!

Who is it for? Are you going to start small: just the group of dads you are chatting to - and maybe other dads you all know already – and their children? If so, that is fine. You can expand later if you want to. Are you going to invite mums too? Also fine. Many groups run by dads welcome mums, and arrange events for the whole family; some, but not all, still think of themselves as primarily a place for dads. It's all really up to you – just be clear what you want and feel comfortable with.



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How to publicise it? If you want to get other dads (and mums) interested, you will need to figure out how to tell them about it, and to do so in a way that will get them to come along. This is not rocket science. The best way is word of mouth. It's really useful to make sure local children hear about it too - maybe through your own children, their friends, and their schools. See 'Spreading the word' on page 4 for other ideas. Remember – lots of dads have cracked this one before you....but it takes time and effort. Don't expect to have 50 dads at your first session!

When to do it? Weekends are often best for working dads. But remember that some dads will want to spend time as a whole family then. Or have other things going on at specific times. After school is another option. Doing it every week might feel too much to take on – but groups go off the boil if they do not meet regularly. Meeting every 2-4 weeks seems to work well. Ask around to work out the best solution.

Where to do it? You need somewhere dads and their children will feel welcomed. It should be a fun, friendly place to be. The children's centre can work – but it should have posters of dads and their children, magazines men read, etc. Your local area will have indoor and outdoor spaces that men already use. These are often the best place to start. Ask local dads' advice on the best places.

What could go wrong? It's always best to think about what might go wrong before it actually does. For example, your fabulously planned outdoor activity might be rained off - what then? Having said that, do not let every niggling anxiety stop you getting stuck in. And don't turn the whole thing into a military operation! Just use your common sense.

How to get talking to local dads

It's a great idea to ask local fathers about their experiences and their hopes – and ask for their help in planning what you will do. But how can you get this going in the first place? Here are some tried-and-tested ideas:

- Talk to a wide range of local fathers. Ask them to talk to their mates. And be bold – go up to other dads in the playground or park and see what they have to say. You might be surprised how positive a response you get!
- Definitely talk to mothers and children too – they will have great ideas, and will know some dads too.
- Ask the local children's centre or school to help you talk to local dads about what activities they would like to see for them and their children. They might help you organise a discussion or a survey, and offer a free gift for all completed surveys.
- See the box on page 4 for examples of questions you could ask.
- Get some good publicity. Your local paper and local radio might well help. And your local children's centre, community centre, or council, should have lists of the sorts of places you could publicise your discussions / activities – and might help you publicise them too! See page 5 for other marketing ideas.
- Hold the discussion somewhere that is comfortable for men – not the local toddler group! Think pub, café, community centre, church / mosque...anywhere that is already somewhere men hang out. Think beyond places you are familiar with – and then you will reach a wider group of men. The setting will attract other dads by word of mouth.
- Ask your local school or community centre to organise a "Dads and Children" day – or a family day with dads especially encouraged to attend – and run a discussion about dads and kids activities there. You could also organise a barbecue, dads' breakfast, free trip, sports event, Fathers' Day celebration, 'fix up the Centre' DIY afternoon, an information-session on a special topic (eg first aid, improve your child's brainpower, raising boys, fathering teenagers, child support, legal advice). OR you could simply set up a discussion linked to another local event that is already taking place. Hook dads and families in with free food, children's activities, local celebrities, workshops with male-friendly themes. Record every dad's details. Shortly after the event, ask every man on your list to another planned event, and suggest he brings a mate.

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Getting dads' advice on local activities – what to ask in a survey

Many dads will respond to being asked for their advice. List some activities they might like to see (or have already taken part in) and ask them to select their top three. You could include cooking, gardening, exercise / sports, baby massage, photography, storytelling, scientific experiments / activities (eg rocket building), activities in the wild / countryside (eg den building), swimming. Give them space for their own ideas.

Other things you could ask:

- What is your child's favourite activity?
- Should these activities be dad-only? Or can mums come along too?
- When should the activities take place?
- What skills can they contribute to running any of the above activities?
- You could also ask for a bit more information about them and their families, for example:
- How old are your children?
- When do you normally spend time with them? (You could also ask if they are separated dads if you want to. It will give you a better picture of what dads you are talking to.)
- Are you a grandfather, stepdad, uncle etc. (These men are very important for children too – and there are a lot of them about!)
- Remember to ask for their contact details (mobile / email address is enough) so you can get back in touch with them)

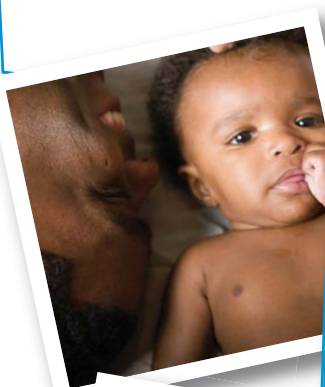
What's in a name?

Choosing a catchy name that "does what it says on the tin" can be really important. Not surprisingly, you will probably want to include the word "dads". And humour suggests it will be fun and you do not take it all too seriously. If you want to welcome mums too – it might be best to reflect that in your name. Google "dads" and "dads' groups" for some ideas.

Spreading the word

You can have the best activities in the world – but there's not much point if hardly anyone shows up, is there? So it's really important to market your activities well:

- A simple upbeat website helps a lot – it is a great way to keep your network of dads posted about what is going on. It helps to have some online accounts from dads and children of what they thought of activities they have been to. And some simple activities to "do at home". Keep the website up-to-date to attract more dads. It's pretty easy to create your own website these days – just Google 'free website' and you'll find free software. One of the dads might know about this kind of stuff, or you could ask at a local college to see if any IT students there would help you. Or ask a local website company to donate their time in return for free publicity.
- Nothing beats word of mouth! Get dads (and children) who come along to tell their mates. Get mums to tell their children's dads about it.
- Always plan at least one activity ahead – so everyone knows about the next one when they go home.
- Put the word out through nurseries, schools and colleges, recreation and sports venues, churches and mosques, employment and youth services, hostels, pubs and clubs, local cafes/burger bars, bookies and barbers, libraries, toy shops, workplaces, contact centres, benefits offices, men's health programmes, shops and supermarkets, local 'shows' and fetes.



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Encouraging other dads and their children to join in

Getting this right is really important – and luckily it's not complicated, if you follow some common sense principles:

- Approach dads who already come into a setting (eg school) and invite them to get involved. Collect their phone numbers and email addresses; many dads like to receive and respond to text messages, so take a mobile number wherever possible.
- Word of mouth usually works really well. Encourage all the dads and children to tell their friends. You could offer a prize for the child (or dad) who gets the most new recruits each month! Children could spread the word at school – and dads at work and down their street. You could also go into your child's school and tell the other children about your activities directly.
- Vary the location of your activities – so that a wider range of local families come across them.
- A local campaign can be a good recruiting tool. You could come up with your own campaign idea – or survey local dads and go with the most popular issues. This could be anything from making local baby-changing facilities accessible for fathers, to improving local playground facilities, or doing a mystery shopping exercise to check whether local children's centres are welcoming to dads.
- Encourage local museums, libraries, children's centres etc to run a family event to which dads get in free. This works especially well around Fathers Day in June each year. Then you publicise your activities there.
- Encourage local nurseries to run a "Bring Your Dad to Nursery" Day, ideally every three months.

- If you produce a leaflet, make sure it is upbeat, simple, fun, and includes a mobile phone number and email address. Cartoons can be a really good way of communicating with dads, particularly those who do not have English as a first language.
- Approach local community groups and centres, churches, mosques etc and ask them to publicise your activities to local families.
- Ask local children's centres and health professionals (GPs, health visitors etc) to spread the word for you – give them a stack of leaflets to help them do the job.
- Get children at local schools to send personal invitations to their fathers or other male carers. One project encouraged children to send cartoon Wild West 'wanted' style posters on which they drew the picture of their dad.
- Taster sessions are a good way to recruit. For example, you could invite fathers to a school assembly or community centre to see examples of the activities you want them to get involved in. Try to talk to everyone face-to-face at these sessions, get their contact details, and tell them about your next event.
- Make use of local media – papers and radio stations will jump at the chance to report on your activities, especially if you give them the chance to interview some local dads.
- Varying the timing of sessions is important. Some dads will find evenings best – others might prefer a Saturday morning. And some might go more for a residential weekend.

Reaching out to diverse dads

Of course, it's up to you who you aim your activities at. But there is a lot to be said for reaching out to dads in different circumstances and communities. So, if you want to do this, you obviously need to make sure that you get the word out about your activities far and wide.

Equally importantly, you need to plan activities that will appeal to a wide range of dads and children.

Dads tend not to want to attend what they might think of as a 'chatting group' – but it can help to build in a bit of space to discuss your experiences as fathers. This can be particularly important for dads from minority ethnic or cultural groups - white British men can find being a father a tough enough challenge, but for these dads, making a success of the role can be an even steeper uphill climb. These sort of discussions will often emerge naturally if you spend time together – but you might want to take on the role of kick-starting discussions, drawing on your own experiences.



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What sorts of activities?

Dads and their children will be drawn to activities that are varied, fun, offer something new and different, involve useful and interesting learning experiences.

Keep it practical and active – not too much sitting about talking. But being active is not all about sport. Consider stuff like mosaics, board games, puzzles, photography and cooking.

A range of activities to appeal to different age groups – and different children – is really important.

So are things to appeal to mums as well as dads (if you want them involved too).

Even if the group is mainly aimed at dads, arrange events and outings for the whole family every now and again – especially in the summer.

Activities that are unusual and daring are popular - and outdoor activities go down well too. For example, children and dads who go to Dangerous Dads in Totnes (<http://bit.ly/1FFZ3F>) visit the local fire station, build dens and campfires, go on muddy walks, cook in the open air, go to zoos and a local aquarium, spot local wildlife, go sheep herding, do 'silly science' sessions led by a dad who is a science teacher, make Chinese lanterns etc.

Activities that involve working together as a team are great ways to break the ice, and for everyone to get to know and feel comfortable with each other.

A bit of competition never hurts either – especially where dads are concerned. It can spice things up that might otherwise seem a bit low-energy. BUT do make sure it stays fun and not too serious – we are not talking Champions League here, or *The Apprentice*.

Ask the dads what they can help out with. Someone might be good at juggling or magic tricks. Someone else might know about gardening or bug hunting. Another dad might have access to some cool local facilities at a reduced rate.

Remember, the dads will value and enjoy the company of other men - but the common factor is the children. Keep the focus there. But also organise social get-togethers regularly for just the dads (eg drinks in the pub or tea at a local café – remember that some dads don't drink alcohol, for religious or other reasons).

Top tips

- Keep things relaxed and with few formalities – the dads and kids are the group.
- Don't let all the organising fall on one or two people – it's everyone's group!
- Make available good refreshments and food – good coffee, bacon butties, whatever people like (don't forget some people don't eat meat, and some have allergies or food intolerances).
- Do plenty of stuff in school holidays, when children need entertaining most.
- The activities should ideally take into account the fact that local dads may speak different languages and have varied literacy levels.
- Visits to local facilities are good – especially free ones! Think art galleries, museums, parks. But even more fun might be the local fire station!
- Think about taking photos to document the group's activities. These can be a great take-home for the dads and kids, and can be good for publicity too. If you do videos, you could upload them on your website or on Youtube.
- Activities that offer new and different opportunities for dads to become involved in helping their children learn are a popular option. Creating animated films together is just one example of how that can work well (<http://bit.ly/mLeczx>). The trick is for dads to know that their children are learning – and ideally that they are learning too (even better if they are getting a certificate or qualification along the way!). It helps if it is fun too!



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Who can help you?

Don't hold back. Seek help from local agencies – this could be a venue and/or equipment, staff time, funding etc. These activities are going to be really important for local children and their dads. And most local organisations will be all for it.

You might want to do a "skills audit" of the adults who are already involved, to help you figure out what other help you need. You could also think about advertising for specific sorts of help, eg on local websites or through local schools, churches, mosques etc.

When the going gets tough...

No-one said it was going to be all plain sailing – it won't be. Here are some tips about handling some of the most common challenges:

- If hardly anyone shows up for your first session, don't give up. This is perfectly normal, and it won't always be like that. The first few sessions are usually the hardest – so take it step by step. Make it your goal to get one more dad and child at the second session. And do share out the responsibility for making it all work.
- There may be differences of opinion about what to do, and who to invite. There is no right answer to this – you do need to find your own solutions. Listen to what the dads and children are telling you – and don't take it all too seriously.

- If some local mums want to get involved too, you need to decide whether that will work for your group. Groups just for dads and children are fine – but having mums involved can be great too. If you cannot agree about this one, you might want to invite mums along for some (but not all) sessions.
- If dads get too competitive about an activity, or try too hard to produce something perfect, you could organise a break every hour or so – so that everyone can calm down, refocus their energies and look at other people's activities to see what they could learn from them.

You won't get everything right from the word go. So ask yourself – and everyone who comes along to your activities – how it's going, and what could be better. And then make it better!

This could be some new activities, better publicity, spreading the load of organising stuff, getting more support from local agencies like children's centres, community centres etc.

Ask your children what they think too. They may love it to bits – but even then they will have ideas worth listening to.

Keep it up

You can use the Dads Included website to tell other groups of dads what you are doing – and to find out about other groups. This online community is intended mainly for professionals who work with dads – but if you're running activities for dads it's a great place to look for inspiration and support. You could set up an online group for your organisation or project.

Go to www.dadsincluded.org and click on Register in the yellow box at top right. All you need is your name, your email address, and a password – but you can also fill in as much as you like of your profile, and this will let other members of the online community recognise you.

