

# Small Steps Big Changes

Growing our children together with love and respect



## Think Dads Conference

October 4<sup>th</sup>, 2023

## Opinion Piece

Think Dads: Father Inclusive Practice Conference

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On Wednesday 4<sup>th</sup> October 2023, Small Steps Big Changes (SSBC) invited colleagues, researchers and partner agencies across Nottingham and Nottinghamshire to join the Father Inclusive Practice Conference. The key aim of this event was to support organisations to develop father inclusive practice, so they were providing better support for dads.

In Nottingham, SSBC and partner organisations have been actively collaborating with fathers for over eight years. During this time, there have been many developments including Think Dads training for the workforce, a consultation with Nottingham fathers, a Dad's Information Pack, a Think Dads campaign and the development of Father Friendly Service Standards for organisations to improve their approach when working with fathers.

The first speaker of the day was Anna Tarrant, a Professor of Sociology and a UKRI Future Leaders Fellow. Her presentation on the *'Using co-creation in a qualitative longitudinal programme of*

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research to affect social change: methodological innovations in research with marginalised fathers' explored the pioneering research through the 'Following Young Fathers' (FYF) studies.

The first study was intended to address significant gaps in our knowledge of young fathers and their unique journeys as they transitioned into fatherhood. It identified that fathers were considered to have a peripheral role in family life with the UK support system being highly fragmented and gendered and young fathers not feeling supported to be there for their children. What was needed was a more coherent policy to support father inclusion so that these ongoing challenges could be addressed.

Anna became involved following that study in the 'Responding to Dads in a Different Way Impact Study' working with different professionals across the UK to address and counteract the negative perceptions of young fathers from the FYF study. This was done through productive partnership working to improve local and national policies and practice.

It also provided opportunities for young fathers as experts by experience to be part of this advocacy for change through the Young Dads Collective which was a model of good practice established by Coram Family and Childcare and replicated by the 'Young Dads Collective North'.

This was the seeds for the current study that Anna is leading which is 'Following Young Fathers Further' (FYFF). FYFF collaborated with national organisations and young fathers from the UK and Scandinavia to undertake comparative international research to develop more effective support and shape policy and service systems.

The Young Dads Collective model expanded even further with the creation of the 'Grimsby Dads Collective' who continued to advocate for practice change through training, supporting each other through activities, developing individually and enhancing their skills set and building their confidence so they could speak at policy events to advocate for father inclusive service design and policy change.

There was also the creation of DigiDad by the North-East Young Dads and Lads, a peer led online E-learning platform created by fathers for fathers and full of father friendly content to support young fathers through fatherhood.

The second speaker of the day was Anna Machin, an evolutionary anthropologist and her presentation was called 'The Life of Dad'. The evidence presented looked at the biological and psychological changes upon becoming a father for the first time, the father-child attachment and the father's role in the development of the child.

Interestingly Annas interpretation of fatherhood has nothing to do with biological genetic relativeness but instead a 'father' is somebody who steps up into the fathering role resulting in these incredible biological and psychological changes that help us to understand the context and science that reinforces our commitment to supporting dads.

It is fascinating to learn that fathers go through as many hormonal changes as mothers do. Testosterone at high levels inhibits some of the bonding hormones particularly dopamine and oxytocin which are critical when building a child-parent bond. As a father interacts with his child his testosterone levels will decrease as much as a third and never returns to pre-birth levels as-long-as

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the parent-child interaction continues. This low-level testosterone allows dad to feel more motivated to care for his child and family and increasing his empathic abilities so he can concentrate on his family's needs.

As a father's bond develops with his child, we see something amazing happen in the form of biobehavioural synchrony which is when a father's emotional, physical and neural behaviour becomes synchronised to his child. Anna sees this as the definition of love as two individuals become in sync with each other and essentially become one person.

Structural changes and peaks in activations were shown to the audience and depicted through diagrams of the male and female brain which appeared to captivate the audience. Whilst structural changes were the same, demonstrating increases in grey matter in the core of the brain that support nurture and detect risk and increases in the outer areas associated with problem solving, attention and planning, peaks in activation differed.

This differentiation reflects how fathers build their attachment to their children differently to how mums do. Mums get a hormone head start with birth, pregnancy and breastfeeding so will naturally nurture and protect their child so there is more activity in the lymphatic area of the brain. The core activity in fathers is in the neo-cortex, outer areas of the brain, particularly in the pre-frontal cortex that is associated with social cognition.

So, whilst both parents will nurture and protect, a behavioural element of 'rough and tumble' play is added to the father's role. As father and child reciprocally play the child's cognitive, physical, social and emotional well-being is developing, they learn to nurture their own resilience and learn about themselves and others. Fathers then play an important part in scaffolding their child's entry into the world at key developmental stages such as pre-school and as they transition into adolescence influencing their mental health and self-esteem, decreasing their cortisol levels and helping them to shape their future and become confident, resilient adults.

*Lisa, Mental health Support Worker stated that the conference has empowered her to advocate for father inclusivity as fathers have an important role to play in a child's upbringing and should never be seen as a secondary parent, but an equal partner.*

*Michelle, Health Visitor stated that policy change needs to come from a national to local level and make father inclusivity the norm in our society because every father matters. Fathers need to be supported more right from the start and we all need to show them more compassion.*

*Suzi, Social Worker stated that the scientific evidence was fascinating and added value to the importance of the role that fathers bring to the development of their child as they grow up but also to their own well-being and mental health.*

At the end of the conference, there was a real will and desire for organisations and services to work together to incorporate a more father inclusive culture with a shared understanding and ideology for the benefit of fathers and their families.

Our next steps are to invite services to move towards a Father Inclusive Nottingham, where fathers feel supported in their parenting role. This would include the following-





- Attend our Think Dads training, we have 7 sessions available from January to July 2024 at Trent Conference Centre. <https://ThinkDadsTraining.eventbrite.co.uk>
- Option to register as a Father Friendly Setting- SSBC will provide a toolkit of resources that will support services that want to make lasting changes to service delivery. Link is below: [https://www.smallstepsbigchanges.org.uk/assets/downloads/TD\\_Campaign\\_Toolkit.pdf](https://www.smallstepsbigchanges.org.uk/assets/downloads/TD_Campaign_Toolkit.pdf)

For further information on Father Inclusive Practice please refer to the SSBC website (direct link below) for further information:

<https://www.smallstepsbigchanges.org.uk/knowledge-hub/our-projects/fip-overview>

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