

Dads Outdoors



Who let the dads out?

Oxfordshire
Parenting
Forum

By Rob Beal

“Networks of family and friends are often an underused resource that could enable more opportunities for children to connect with nature”

Reconnecting Children with Nature, The National Trust

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The growth of virtual, as opposed to reality-based, play is, not surprisingly, having a profound effect on children’s lives; indeed, it has been called ‘the extinction of experience’

Natural Childhood, Stephen Moss

Foreword

I am pleased and excited to welcome this new publication about engaging with fathers and children through outdoor learning. It charts the development of a ground-breaking project for Oxfordshire, focusing on how outdoor learning can be a popular and dynamic way of increasing the involvement of fathers in their children's lives and also in their local children's centres.

We know that strong parental involvement will enhance children's early learning and, if sustained, their life chances can be improved. For parents too, and in this case fathers, outdoor learning has proved to be an informal, practical experience, both fun and profound, that helps them to develop self-confidence as prime carers and educators. (In using the term 'father' we mean both fathers and male carers, be they step-parents, relations, carers or foster carers, with responsibility for a child).

Rob Beal's report is a good read, well researched, informative and inspiring. It is grounded in both theory and practice. As an Early Years Professional, he has brought to the project a wealth of knowledge and experience.

The Dads Outdoors project owes much to the many innovations in outdoor learning that Oxfordshire Early Years and Childcare has pioneered over the last decade, several in partnership with the voluntary sector. These projects, such as Forest School, Connecting Naturally and Without Walls, have all prepared the ground for Dads Outdoors. We have been privileged to have been funded by the County Council and would like to thank Annie Davy in particular for her vision and her confidence in us to deliver this creative project. Finally, we must thank Rob Beal himself and the staff of our eight participating centres for their energy and imagination in making this project a success and a model for future work.

Chris Sewell

Chair, Oxfordshire Parenting Forum.

The Roundabout Children's Centre, Oxford

East Street Children's Centre, Banbury

South Abingdon Children's Centre, Abingdon

Witney Children's Centre, Witney

Marston Northway Children's Centre, Oxford

Elms Road Children's Centre, Oxford

Wantage Children's Centre, Wantage

North Abingdon Children's Centre, Abingdon

"Just as children need good nutrition and adequate sleep, they may very well need contact with nature..."

Louv, 2005

The Dads Outdoors Project

Dads Outdoors was a small scale project that ran from September 2011 to December 2012. It involved 8 children's centres from across Oxfordshire. Its aim was to encourage fathers, their children, their families and their children's centres to make full use of their local environment for outdoor play, adventure and discovery. This booklet documents some of the work completed by the 8 children's centres.



The project was the work of Oxfordshire Parenting Forum (OPF), using funding from Oxfordshire County Council. The funding paid for a part time Outdoor Development Worker to coordinate the project, providing guidance and support to the 8 centres but limited to 6 hours work per week. This meant that the onus was on the children's centres to develop the project themselves and as such, it developed very differently in each centre. A small grants programme (of up to £350) was also set up to support the centres in delivering a programme of outdoor activities.

In recent years, dads' groups in Oxfordshire children's centres have increased in number and size. Although numbers generally fluctuate throughout the year, many centres report regular attendances of between 10 and 30 dads and male care givers. The dads outdoors project was designed to build upon the work that has already gone on in these centres and offer a different approach to engaging with fathers. It was hoped that the focus on outdoors would increase male participation in children's centres, particularly amongst more vulnerable groups.

The Fatherhood Institute website cites research that demonstrates the link between a father's involvement in his children's learning and the child's educational outcomes. A key predictor of positive outcomes for children's learning is the father having been involved in their care from a very early age (Goldman, 2005). Anecdotal stories from members of the ThinkDad task group, and the success of the annual Dads Go Wild events, suggest that by focussing on outdoor play opportunities, children's centres could be more successful at engaging with fathers during the children's early years. In addition to this, outdoor play experiences are important for children's development and this was promoted through the project.



The Great Outdoors

Natural England published a report (January 2013) which examines three years of data (2009 - 2012) captured by the on-going monthly 'Monitor of Engagement with the Natural Environment' (MENE) survey, to analyse trends in the visits to the natural environment by adults, taken with children.

This work contributed to the Government's Natural Environment White Paper (July 2011), which set out its ambition 'to see every child in England given the chance to experience and learn about the natural environment'.

The Natural England report found that between 2009 to 2012, there were 8.1 billion visits taken by the English adult population to the natural environment. Of these, 1.8 billion were taken with children - an average of 22 % of the visits taken each year.

'To play or entertain children' was cited as a motivating factor for 15% of the visits taken each year. In a questionnaire completed by fathers prior to engaging in the Dads Outdoors project, 56% of fathers stated that they regularly play outside with their children (most identified this as taking their children to the park). Before the project, only 29% of fathers indicated that they had previously attended an outdoor event through the children's centre.

The Natural England report found that visits taken with children involve significantly higher spending. During 2009 to 2012, the average amount spent during visits taken with children was £11.50, around 70% higher than the average of £6.60 spent during visits taken without children. The emphasis for the Dads Outdoors project was to organise activities for no or low cost. Families were not charged extra for the Dads Outdoors sessions and where trips were organised to venues requiring a fee, settings used the Dads Outdoors grant scheme. In some cases (such as at Blenheim Palace) this paid for entry for a whole year meaning that the dads could return for no extra cost



'For a new generation, nature is more abstraction than reality. Increasingly, nature is something to watch, to consume, to wear - to ignore.'

Richard Louv, 2005 *Last Child in the Woods*.

Understanding the diverse benefits of playing and learning in natural environments

The benefits of outdoor play are well documented, and include:

- increasing physical activity
- increasing the body's vitamin D levels
- reducing anxiety and improving mood (wellbeing)
- improving concentration and focus (involvement)
- enhancing communication and social skills and developing imaginative and creative play
- promoting problem solving and leadership skills
- growing the next generation of stewards for the earth
- developing stronger immune systems



Yet, despite increasingly robust evidence of these benefits, many children are losing their connection with nature (Louv, 2005). Worse still, children in urban environments are particularly disadvantaged. For example, nowadays 10% of children play in the natural environment compared to 40% of adults when they were young (England Marketing, 2009). This 'extinction of experience' has a detrimental long-term impact on environmental attitudes and behaviours. A King's College report (2011) advocates for a 'cultural shift... both at home and at school, before the situation can be reversed'.

Within Oxfordshire, initiatives such as Forest Schools and Walking Maps have encouraged settings to work with young children and their families to increase their play and learning in the outdoors. The Dads Outdoors project built on the successes of these initiatives and promoted the forest school ethos through the children's centres. Some of the Children's Centres involved in Dads Outdoors employed Forest School Lead Practitioners and their experiences of outdoor play opportunities was invaluable.



In the beginning...

The 8 children's centres which took part in the project were selected on the basis that each had an existing dads' group and that, where possible, they had not received previous funding through outdoor learning projects. Before taking part, the centres were asked to conduct a questionnaire with their fathers. This would provide a baseline of what current outdoor activities fathers and their children were engaging in. A survey was then completed at the end of the project to identify how the project had impacted on this.

The impetus of the Dads Outdoors project was to develop a father-led monthly programme of outdoor activities. This began in each children's centre with a consultation with the dads and children in the 8 dads' groups. A combination of the fathers' and practitioners' local knowledge and walking maps were used to identify possible play spaces. Ideas of interesting activities were also sought with many fathers recalling their experiences of outdoor play as a child as a starting point for discussions.

Early Challenges

The 8 children's centres varied dramatically in terms of their experience and use of the outdoors. Some centres had already developed a strong outdoors ethos and were simply extending this to their provision for dads. Other settings were developing their use of the outdoors and had very little experience of operating sessions away from the centre.



There was a wide range of activities organised by the children's centres with some centres choosing to focus on the outdoor aspect of their current provision. However, where the project worked best was with settings who took their provision into the local outdoor environment and organised activities such as kite flying, pond dipping, story telling and much more. A residential was offered at the end of the project which was taken up by two of the centres. The Oxfordshire County Council booklet by Jo Ord, 'Give Us a Break: Outdoor Adventures in Family Work' was used as a model of good practice.

Some of the children's centres involved in the project had limited or no experience of holding sessions away from the children's centre. Some confident and experienced practitioners were initially concerned about the time and effort involved in going out into the community and the inherent risks that go with such activities. Risk assessments were key to overcoming these barriers and ensuring that families remained safe. By completing risk assessments and thinking through eventualities, practitioners felt more confident in organising activities away from the centre. It is important to recognise that by completing a risk assessment, practitioners are not trying to create a risk free environment but are assessing the benefits of the experiences, against the potential risk, before determining how the risk could be managed to ensure no harm came to the group.

Nowadays, 10% of children play in the natural environment compared to 40% of adults when they were young

England Marketing, 2009

There is an important distinction to make between the organisational risks and the risks involved in the experience. The organisational risks concern the planning of the sessions, (safeguarding concerns, traffic dangers, first aid considerations etc.). Once these were considered and strategies put into place/documentated to minimise the risks, they could easily be adapted to each activity that the centre provided, as many of the principles stayed the same. Much more important than merely putting down the risk assessments on paper was the consideration of how to communicate the potential risks to the dads. This needed to be very clear and consistently reflected on prior to the activity, during and afterwards. By doing this you are ensuring the safety of the group during the session and also encouraging the dads to think about why risk management is so important. Fiona Danks and Jo Schofield argue that 'life is full of risk, so the best way to prepare children for life is to ensure they know how to judge risk for themselves'. By gradually learning what is safe and what is dangerous, especially with regard to their own actions and behaviours, children develop their own ability to assess risk. Giving children the freedom to explore natural environments inevitably incurs an element of danger. Yet we should put this in perspective: three times as many children are taken to hospital each year after falling out of bed, as from falling out of trees (Moss, 2012).

During the project, many children's centres were responding to budget constraints by sharing the responsibility of staffing sessions for fathers and children amongst all their staff. This may sound like good integrated practice, but the result is that the centre doesn't have a dedicated fathers worker and dads' group sessions, often held on Saturdays, are covered by a staff rota. This means that fathers may only see particular members of staff once or twice a month (or far less frequently if the dads' group only operates once a month). This causes several challenges:

1. Continuity in maintaining the ethos and programme is often lost as a result.
2. It is harder to consult and listen to fathers (and to follow it through) if the member of staff changes each week.
3. The planning and coordination of events is much harder. Staff from partner organisations may not know who to contact to get specific messages to fathers about forthcoming events. Messages sent to a senior manager may not get through. The centre's staff will naturally focus on the here and now rather than on the session in a fortnight's time when they are not on duty.
4. Fathers have difficulty in developing a relationship with ever-changing members of staff.
5. Issues that may have been discussed in confidence with a father one week may not be followed through in subsequent weeks. Even if the staff are briefed on these matters, the father may not want to keep changing from the person he originally chose to speak to.



If we never took a risk our children would not learn to walk, climb stairs, ride a bicycle or swim; business would not develop innovative new products... scientists would not experiment and discover, we would not have great art, literature, music and architecture.

Learning points:

1. Fathers respond better when they have specific dedicated members of staff leading on father-focused activities.
2. All centres need a named person responsible for overseeing and leading on fathers work.
3. Messages to fathers in-between sessions, by email and text, work well in maintaining the group but require one dedicated member of staff to take this responsibility on a permanent basis.
4. Referral agencies and partners feel more confident if they have one named member of staff to refer to rather than a rota.
5. If a rota of staff operates, a log book should be kept each week of key events, messages, feedback etc. and be shared with all staff on the rota. Notices of future events should be kept in the book.

Beyond the walls

By organising activities in the local outdoor environment, the children's centres involved in Dads Outdoors were able to make themselves more appealing to fathers and male carers. Children's services are more often than not confined to buildings; the children's centre, the school, the nursery etc.. This small scale project went beyond the walls of the children's centre and took the service for fathers into the community, rather than expect the community to come to the service. This could be a key development for fathers' work where often the aforementioned establishments are considered female premises and can act as a barrier to father's engagement. The feedback from the dads who took part in the project was equally positive as the results of the final questionnaire completed by the dads demonstrates;

- 57% stated that their knowledge of places to go had increased.
 - 57% of fathers stated that they spent more time outdoors with their children
 - 49% stated that they increased their visits to outside places as a family
 - 68% of fathers believe that their children increased their self confidence and self esteem
 - 80% felt their children had developed a positive attitude to outdoor play and learning
- (A more detailed project report is included on page 18)

The following pages outline case studies from some of the children's centres involved in the project

Children who learn outdoors know more, understand more, feel better, behave better, work more cooperatively and are physically healthier. Not a bad result from simply changing the location where they are being taught.

Natural Childhood, Stephen Moss

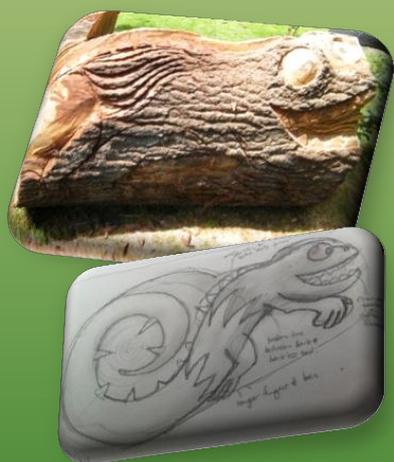
Telling Tales with Dad

The East Street Children's Centre, Banbury

The East Street Children's Centre has been running a dads group since 2008. A 2 hour session is held on the first Saturday of the month for fathers and male carers and their children. The numbers of fathers regularly attending this group has fluctuated over the years but we currently have a stable group of around 12 fathers who regularly attend.

In recent years, the centre has been involved in numerous projects that have focussed on involving parents in the outdoors. We currently have a Family Forest School programme which many dads regularly attend. Increased father involvement has also been noticed in other outdoor activities such as the Connecting Naturally events organised by Earth Trust. For this reason, we were keen to get involved in the Dads Outdoors project and hoped that we could use the project to continue the successes that we have had with our Fathers Story Week events.

The idea of the *Telling Tales with Dad* project was to encourage fathers' involvement in their children's early literacy experiences through a physical and active engagement with the outdoors. Over the last few years, the East Street Centre has always taken part in the annual '*Fathers' Story Week*' event, created by the Fatherhood Institute, and we have used poster campaigns and held events to increase fathers' awareness of their importance in children's literacy development. In June 2011 we organised a celebratory Fathers' Day overnight camp out at the centre which had a focus on telling stories around a camp fire.



Tim Jones, a local artist, has been instrumental in the development of this work. Tim and his family regularly use the East Street Centre and Tim had previously been involved with some puppeteering work for the centre. Being able to use the skills of somebody from within the dads' group was fantastic as the other dads were already familiar with him and engaged more readily from the outset. Using money from Oxfordshire County Council as part of the Every Child a Reader grant, Tim was commissioned to create a story telling chair and lead some story telling workshops with the group. The centre has always advocated the importance of sharing stories and we hoped that through the creation of a story chair we could create an 'outdoor space' that would promote sharing stories in the outdoors.

"Researchers have shown that frequency of fathers' reading to 1-2 year olds is linked with their greater interest in books later, and that time spent by fathers in reading to very young children is the strategy most consistently associated with their emergent literacy outcomes"



Tim led three storytelling workshops, one at a local town event, one in the main hall and one in the garden. These workshops included dramatic storytelling performances, puppets, story board/comic strip creations, making masks and a whole host of fun and exciting story themed activities. These workshops challenged fathers to think imaginatively as well as informing them about the importance of early literacy experiences and providing them with ideas and storytelling techniques.

Dads and their children were asked what they would like to see on a story telling chair and the children came up with some imaginative ideas including pirates, dragons and monsters. Some of the children drew their own designs which have been incorporated into the design. We managed to get hold of a giant oak log from an Oxfordshire tree surgeon company, 7 foot long and 4 1/2 foot wide, and asked the tree surgeons to use their equipment to cut a 90° angle into the log which would be the seat. You only pay for the delivery of the log so we even got a few logs thrown in which will be transformed into accompanying stools. Tim then went about carving the log during the dads' group sessions and the children and fathers would always go out to see how it was developing and chat with Tim. During one of the workshop sessions, some of the fathers also had a go at carving the log using some of the hand tools. We have now got an exceptional piece of art work that will inspire children and their families to tell stories and share books together in the outdoors for many years to come. The children and their fathers were involved in the designing and creating of the log and this involvement has resulted in a real sense of achievement and ownership of the story chair.

"My children and I have greatly enjoyed the outdoor sessions at the East Street Centre, cooking food and story-telling and also trip to environment centre. The organisation and keenness of the staff has always been really good and my children genuinely look forward to the regular monthly dad's club as well. I thought the idea of the story chair was amazing. Seeing the log being transformed into a dragon really inspired my children's imaginations and they were very interested in reading about dragons as a direct result, and keen to read stories in a more theatrical way! Great fun, very educational and personally rewarding".



'The outdoors is bursting with health benefits – it takes away stress, it increases physical activity, and it gets people meeting each other...'

Dr William Bird, Outdoor Nation Interview

Dads Outdoors at Elms Road Children's Centre 2012

Elms Road Children's Centre has been running a dads' Saturday group for 4 years and for the last 2 years has also run outdoor sessions for families. Parents and children spending time outdoors together has always been a high priority because of the increased learning which occurs when children experience natural environments and have the space and time to enjoy outside. Outside spaces are also often free and a valuable source of fun and learning for children. We are keen to promote to parents the value of being outside with children. The outside sessions in previous years have taken place at Hill End Outdoor Centre which is close to Elms Road. Paul Fisher, our dads' worker, has also organised trips to other places such as Science Oxford, the Ashmolean Museum, Oxford Fire Station, Abingdon Police Station and Oxford Airport.

Elms Road got involved with the project for two reasons. We wanted to share ideas and tips for working outside with dads and we wanted to explore how many of the local outdoor spaces dads knew about and used. Although Hill End is a great resource for outdoor sessions, it was not somewhere dads could go back to at a later date without being part of an organised group. Talking to families it also became clear that many families do not know the wealth of free local outside places that they can go to with their children. This will be developed into a local guide for families giving information and ideas about the sort of activities they could do in local outside places.



Making rope swings on
Cumnor Hurst



The following activities took place with dads in 2012:

Tree planting in the school outdoor learning site and cooking soup over an open fire. The experience of seeing vegetables cooking over the fire and then eating delicious soup was enjoyed by all. Parents were involved in the tree planting.

Cooking over an open fire at the Centre- making dough from self-raising flour and water, wrapping it round a stick and then cooking over the fire. The children enjoyed making the dough themselves, adding the water and mixing and kneading the dough.

Making kites and flying them at Hill End - A4 paper/some string and newspaper for a tail made great kites to run along with. The hill at Hill End gives that extra lift.

Making rope swings and cooking over an open fire on Cumnor Hurst (a local open space). This was a place that few of the participants had been to before and they all said they would go back. A few lengths of rope and some sturdy sticks provided the swings and a great deal of problem solving and discussion as to how to get the rope over the branch. We also took tarpaulins for shelter building but the rope swings were by far the most popular.



Dads and children enjoying a tractor ride at Roves farm



Making tree faces at Botley Park

Trip to Roves farm- a coach trip to a local farm provided lots of opportunities for tractor rides, feeding animals and quality time for dads and their children.

Cray fishing at Botley Park- this activity had to be cancelled because the river was too high, so instead we made clay masks on the trunks of trees and decorated them with natural objects such as grass, sticks stones etc.

Pond dipping at Hill End, using identification charts to find out about the wildlife in the water, prompted lots of discussion

What next?

We have already planned the programme for next year and plan to use some more local parks and nature reserves as the locations for the outside work. We are planning to get the pocket guide out early in the New Year.

Dynamic Dads

at Marston Northway Children's Centre, Oxford

Marston Northway has been running the 'Dynamic Dads' group since September 2009. The centre is committed to providing services and activities for our male users which ensures that the Children's Centre is an inclusive environment and a place that gives dads quality play experiences with their children. The group is run monthly by two female workers

We applied for the dads outdoors project so we could give our fathers the opportunity to explore outdoor spaces in the local community and also to support the staff to plan more outdoor experiences and activities for the fathers. We had previously noted that dads would often prefer to use the outdoor space in the centre rather than be inside and we were keen to build on this. We did not feel as confident in planning for our outdoor area as we did the indoors. We had sometimes ventured out into the community but it was definitely not a regular feature in our monthly sessions. We also wanted to get involved in the project in the hope of engaging more of our hard to reach fathers. We hoped that by being prominent in the community and having regular outdoor activities, we might attract new fathers to the group.

Over the past year we have ventured on many outdoor adventures! We started by hosting some outdoor based sessions at the Centre; breakfast barbecues (cooked by one of our dads), gruffalo hunts and stories in the garden, an outside drumming session and den building in the garden. Gradually we extended the outdoor adventures to include activities we could do first together at the Centre and then take to local outdoor spaces. For example, kite making and then flying them in the local park, making rocket water shooters and also using a local sports centre. One dad in our group then offered to host a session at his house as he had a large garden with pet goats and chickens. It was a wonderful morning and the sense of our fathers' 'community' spirit was certainly evident that day.



We incorporated trips into our planning to outdoor spaces that dads had not previously explored and chose places that the dads could revisit with their children in their own time. These are described overleaf. For the finale of the project, the dads were offered the opportunity to go camping and stay the night prior to the Play Day event at Hill End (see page 19).



Farmer Gow's

One of the fathers had visited Farmer Gow's with his son and daughter and recommended it as an outdoor learning trip for the rest of the group. Farmer Gow's put together an excellent group timetable for our day so we could feed the animals, handle the chicks, climb hay bales and go on tractor rides to see the animals.

Blenheim Palace

With the jubilee (June 2012) we felt that a trip to our local palace would be appropriate! The grant allowed us to hire a coach and subsidise entrance to the palace for the fathers. This included an annual pass that enabled them to visit the palace as many times as they wanted to for a year. During our visit we were able to play in the grounds, go on train rides, visit the giant maze and outdoor area and visit butterflies in the butterfly house.

Kite making

At the beginning of the project we consulted with fathers and male carers and asked them which activities they would like to do in the dads' groups. We suggested that this could be something they had done previously that they would like to share with other fathers or something they had always wanted to do with their child. One dad mentioned kite making. The grant enabled us to buy simple kite making kits that the fathers and children could do together and we then went, as a group, to fly the kites in a local space...luckily there was a bit of wind that day!

The project has been a huge success in our centre. We already knew that the dads enjoyed spending time outdoors with their children but the project has allowed us to extend these activities and bring a variety of learning and quality play experiences to the children and their fathers. The project has also allowed fathers to access new outdoor community spaces that they have revisited outside of sessions and visit places they would not have otherwise been able to access due to financial restraints or transport needs.



What worked well for us as staff at the centre was the project forced us to plan and run sessions slightly out of our comfort zone and we had to really throw ourselves into the mind-set of learning in the outdoors. Planning for these sessions put the emphasis on the outdoors and we had to be prepared to be outside for the majority, or all, of the sessions which in turn brought new learning experiences for parents and children.

At first, a challenge for us was how to manage the events that may not be held at the Centre; we were concerned if a new dad came to a session and found no one there then it might be off putting to new members. It would also be an issue if fathers did not arrive at the beginning of the session but we found that by using the advertisements, texts and emails we were able to prepare families. The attendance data showed that the trips attracted some of our hard to reach families, so we had met the target of bringing new families into the sessions.

As a Centre we are really pleased that we were part of the Dads Outdoors project and we will be planning lots of outdoors events in the future!

'This is Oliver's first time on a train and he has loved it, he loves trains!'

'We have a better understanding of nature and animals'

'It has been so nice to have quality father and children time'

' A guy at my work makes kites with his son all the time, I've always wanted to give this a go - thank you!'

'We've been back to the palace three times since last group! Its brilliant, now we have the pass it's a free day out and my son loves it there'

Forest School at North Abingdon Children's Centre

North Abingdon Children's Centre has been running forest school inspired sessions for 2 years. The project was set up to encourage children to play outside and learn through outdoor play. The children's parents are with them at all times and 2 members of staff are around the site for help and guidance. Children can play freely or join in the activities set up by the workers. The activities that we have run in the past include fishing, mud slides, leaf collecting, hedgehog house making and bird watching. The majority of the activities were suggested or chosen by the children and parents the week before.

We felt this project was a great way of getting the most from our parents and children. We could learn together while having lots of fun. Our Dads' Group on Saturdays had shown an interest and we made the 1st Saturday in the month our Dad's forest school. We had been trying to encourage dads to visit the centre and the project helped us achieve this. Some of our families had been hesitant to allow the children to play outside and get messy but with forest school, because it was expected that the children would get messy, the parents seemed to accept it. The waterproof suits were a huge success because the children stayed dry and clean.



The dads outdoors project offered us an opportunity to extend on our forest school activities. We asked the dads what activities and events they would like to see at the Dads' Group. The dads expressed an interest in camping. We researched local campsites and found this to be a huge expense so we asked the dads if the school field would be suitable. Everyone agreed that this would be a better solution due to the security given by the site safety barrier and the availability of all the Centre facilities. Because the children were quite young, dads felt more comfortable being close to the centre and as it was also close to the families' homes, dads feel more confident about the wellbeing of their children.



We sent out an e-mail to all of our dads and let them know the times, dates etc. We had a good response but some of the parents felt their children might be too young to take part. We decided that if this was the case, dads and their children would have the option of joining us for the day time activities, at Wittenham Clumps, before heading home whilst others put up their tents. A month before the camp out we sent another e-mail to remind dads of the details including what to bring. Frequent reminders and clear communication was key to the events success.

On the day of the camp out, we met at Wittenham at 10am and stayed until 3pm so the younger children were very much part of the experience. We organised some activities which included searching for wildlife and identifying plants within the woodlands. We had provided crowns for the children to make 'leaf and stick' crowns, clay to create hedgehogs and crayons for rubbing on paper with a leaf or plant underneath. The dads and their children were also keen to play the old favourite games of hide and seek, football and cricket. The dads and children had a brilliant time with these activities and we saw a new energy in the dads.

After the events at Wittenham, we all went back to the centre where we had a barbeque and set up the tents with the children. The group worked really well together with some dads entertaining the children with games and paper airplanes whilst others worked together to set up the tents. After the tents went up we played in our forest school site and continued most of the activities that the children had begun at Wittenham Clumps. Once the families which opted not to stay had left, we had a story and a hot chocolate in the forest school site, before the children got ready for bed. In the morning we all had breakfast in the Children's Centre and the children had an opportunity to play before we took the tents down.

We asked the dads to fill in a questionnaire regarding the weekend. All of the dads were very positive in their feedback and have expressed a wish to go camping again. We are now hoping to make this an annual event.



Through going out with families we discover the true potential and scope of family support services when they are not limited by a building of four walls
Give Us a Break – Outdoor Adventures in Family Work, Jo Ord

A walk on the wild side

at the Roundabout Children's Centre, Oxford

A jogger, on his weekly run through the woods at the CS Lewis Nature Reserve, was stopped in his tracks on a mild December morning. Had he stumbled across a Teddy Bear's Picnic? Spotted the notorious Gruffalo? Or worse still, the Big Bad Mouse?

In actual fact, the jogger had come across a band of little explorers and their fathers from the Roundabout Children's Centre, Oxford. A group of 13 fathers and 23 children had ventured down to the CS Lewis Nature Reserve in Risinghurst to take part in the Centre's first Dads Outdoors session.

The Roundabout Centre's first Dads Outdoors event made the usually tranquil forest come alive with activity as the children and fathers explored their surroundings, looking for creatures, and made Christmas decorations. It was a big surprise to the jogger who runs that route every weekend and rarely encounters another person.

Despite living within minutes of the Nature Reserve, many of the group had never been there before. However, after spending the morning in the woods, all the dads vowed to come back again with the whole family. One father commented '*I experienced a different aspect of play with my child... the wild side.*' The centre had planned to use the pond at the Nature Reserve to go pond dipping, but had to make some last minute rearrangements after discovering that pond dipping in winter can damage the pond life's habitat. Instead, with a little bit of wire, the dads got creative and made Christmas stars, wreaths and even a forest crown in the woodland next to the pond. The children used magnifying glasses and small pots to search and collect mini-beasts that ranged from earthworms to millipedes.

"I will take my children (to the CS Lewis Nature Reserve) more regularly"

"We enjoyed collecting worms and making a star out of twigs"

"I shall visit the pond with my wife and family"

I shall go out next weekend with the children, just like today

"We loved the fresh air and adventure: feeding ducks, finding bugs and playing in an adventurous environment"

Fresh air, good mix of dads, friendly, fun in the woods...it was great!



18 Camp Out

Dads Go Wild at the Playday

As the sun rose on a cold September morning, 10 bleary eyed dads and their children slowly emerged from their tents. On the 14th September 2012, dads from Marston Northway Children's Centre and Witney Children's Centre had stayed overnight at the Hill End Centre in Oxford as a celebratory event which was part of the Dads Outdoors project. It was a crisp, clear morning and temperatures had plummeted overnight but all dads and children had kept warm in their tents and sleeping bags (many thanks go to Sue Dowe from Elms Road Children's Centre for helping to source some of these tents). For many of the children it was their first experience of camping and a blanket of calmness seemed to have settled over the Hill End field as the fathers and children slowly put their tents away. This calmness was in sharp contrast to the frivolity and fun of the events the evening before and indeed the events that were to follow as Saturday the 15th was the Hill End Playday.

Dads and children began to arrive at Hill End from 4pm on the Friday and immediately started putting up their tents. This task was completed by the dads and children with such aplomb that it was hard to believe that they were not all seasoned campers. Indeed for some of the dads this was their first experience of going camping. All of the children were notably excited and the children's sense of adventure continued right the way through the weekend's activities. The sense of adventure has been a common theme for the dads and children who attended the Witney and Marston Northway Dads' groups where they have enjoyed activities such as cray fishing, kite flying, outdoor storytelling, den making and much more. Dads and their children were able to discuss the fun they had in the outdoors whilst they explored the Hill End site before settling down for their evening meal.



Cooking for 35 people was quite a challenge, and in the spirit of Dads Outdoors, the menu was very adventurous. The dads and children helped to prepare and cook the food on an open fire which included jacket potatoes, lentil dhal (curry), sausage casserole and a variety of marinated halal meats. You could really sense the children's awe and wonder as they sat round the fire and watched the food cook. There was a real sense of achievement from the dads who had helped cook the food and everyone was really full after what surely amounted to a full scale feast. After eating, songs were sung around the fire and stories told before everyone retired early to their tents (the children were so keen to sleep in the tents that many asked to go to bed - surely a first).

Networks of family and friends are often an underused resource that could enable more opportunities for children to connect with nature

Reconnecting Children with Nature, The National Trust

Whilst we were packing the tents away and eating breakfast, the Hill End Playday 2012 was being set up around us. Oxfordshire Parenting Forum once again organised the Dads Go Wild area which the children and dads from the overnight camp helped to set up. Many of the dads and children stayed to join in the fun of the Playday and some were joined by the rest of their families. The Playday at the Hill End Centre was the last hurrah of the summer playdays and is becoming a firm family favourite as more and more people hear about how good it is. Organised by the Oxfordshire Play Association, the Playday is a free family event and 2012 was more popular than ever, with early estimates suggesting well over 1,200 people in attendance.

The Dads Go Wild area was a constant throng of activity with the water play feature keeping children and their families amused for hours. Around 20 metres of guttering, donated to us from the East Street Centre (Banbury), was set up in two opposing lines with a tray of water either end. The children loved pouring water down the guttering and watching ducks, cars and small balls race down. It was fun for all ages and an activity that dads in particular seemed drawn to (and an activity that parents found difficult to drag their children away from).



Inside the Dads Go Wild tent, Amy from Marston Northway Children's Centre was helping children to create their own paper aeroplanes. With various different colours and creative ways of folding, the tent was soon filled with fantastic looking planes hanging from the tent poles.

The third activity in the Dads Go Wild area was den building. This was very much a child led activity with ropes, camouflage nets, tarpaulins and trellising used to make some awesome hideouts.

This was the 5th year of Dads Go Wild and was another massive success with positive feedback from all members of the family. We tried to give everyone who played with the Dads Go Wild activities a sticker which said 'Dad Gone Wild' for dads, 'Wild About Dad' for children and, so that they were not left out, 'Mum Gone Wild' for mums. In total we gave out over 400 stickers and they were an excellent way of approaching parents so that we could talk to them about the work that Oxfordshire Parenting Forum does and point dads in the direction of the Oxon Dads website and blog.



According to a 2008 study by Play England, half of all children have been stopped from climbing trees, one in five banned from playing conkers, and almost the same number told they cannot play games of tag.

Natural Childhood, Stephen Moss

Project Report

At the end of the project, fathers and practitioners were asked to complete a survey designed to elicit responses that demonstrate how successfully Dads Outdoors met its intended outcomes. All 8 of the centres responded (one centre had two respondents as they had both jointly led the project).

What level of involvement do you think your centre had in the Dads Outdoors project	Percentage	Number of respondents
High - We have organised regular activities away from the Children's Centre	33.3%	3
Medium - We have organised some activities away from the Children's Centre	33.3%	3
Low - Our Dads' group sessions have had a heavier focus on the outdoors but have remained at the Children's Centre	22.2%	2
None - We haven't been able to engage in the dads outdoors project	11.1%	1

Regional Events

Part of the project plan was to organise regional events that would draw participating centres and others in the area into a network of support for outdoor activities for dads and their children. Unfortunately these did not happen to the extent we wished. An event was held in Witney attracting approximately 25 fathers and settings in the South were offered the opportunity to attend an Earth Trust event, although take up of this too was low (approx. 10 fathers from one of the three settings). Events were planned and postponed in the City (due to a clash with other fathers events organised on the same weekend). The East Street Centre is planning a celebration event on the completion of their story telling project.



Volume Report

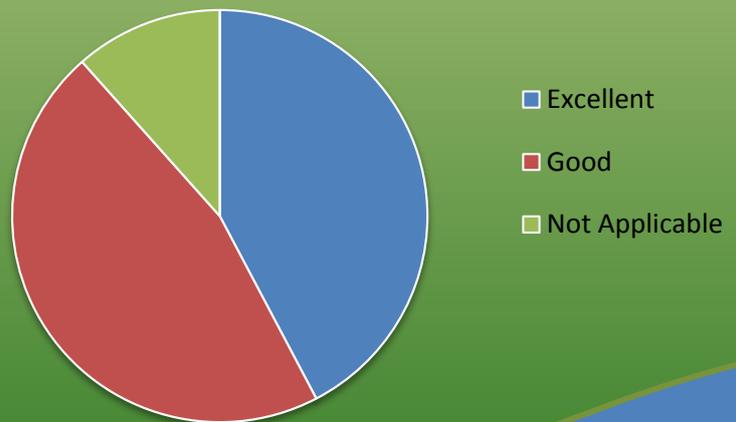
The initial planned target of 90 fathers and 135 children regularly accessing outdoor activities was revised to 80 fathers and 120 children to reflect the revision of the number of settings involved in the project from 9 to 8. In the first four months of the project, the spread sheet below demonstrates that these targets were easily exceeded. However, June onwards saw a decline in numbers. A total average across the 9 month period comes out at 78 fathers (almost achieving the target) and 106 children (falling short of the target). Dads workers have anecdotally stated that younger children did not always accompany fathers on the dads outdoors activities explaining why the number of children may have fallen short of the intended outcome.

Children's Centre	January		February		March		April		May		June		July		August		September	
	Fathers	Children	Fathers	Children	Fathers	Children	Fathers	Children	Fathers	Children	Fathers	Children	Fathers	Children	Fathers	Children	Fathers	Children
North Abingdon Children's Centre	18	23	16	23	22	29	16	19	13	18	7	10	4	4	6	8	11	15
South Abingdon Children's Centre	4	6	3	3	10	12	4	5	3	3	4	5	6	8	4	4	5	7
Wantage Children's Centre	13	18	10	16	7	10	5	6	5	7	3	3	7	9	7	8	3	3
Witney Children's Centre			19	28	23	30	27	39	18	23	26	34	7	7	8	10	7	9
Marston Northway Children's Centre	17	22	17	17	15	18	14	16	14	17	10	10	12	14			10	12
Elm's Road Children's Centre	9	10	8	11	13	18	14	19	14	18	5	9	6	7	4	4	6	7
The Roundabout Children's Centre	18	30	20	33	17	26	11	15	13	19	14	25	15	27				
The East Street Centre	6	10	6	10	5	12	6	10	6	10	5	7	10	14	7	11	6	10
Totals	85	119	99	141	112	155	97	129	86	115	74	103	67	90	36	45	48	63
	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x
Revised Totals *1	80 Fathers		120 Children															
Target Average *2	75 fathers		113 Children															
Mean average attendance across 9 months	78 fathers		106 children															

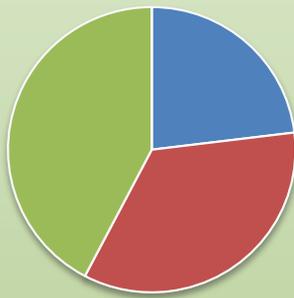
*Revised from 90 fathers and 135 children due to 8 settings taking part
 *Taking into account that on four occasions dads groups did not take place)

Fathers' rating of the Dads Outdoors activities

- 42% of the fathers who answered the survey stated that the outdoor activities provided by the children centre were excellent
- 46% of the fathers who answered the survey stated that the outdoor activities provided by the children centre were good



Since taking part in the dads outdoors project, has the amount of time you spend playing with your children in the outdoors...



- Increased Considerably
- Increased a little
- Stayed the same

57% of the fathers surveyed stated that the amount of time that they spend playing with their children outside increased a little or considerably over the last 18 months

Increased awareness and use of local and regional outdoor resources by groups and individual families in their own free time

All Oxfordshire Walking Maps were used with the settings when consulting with fathers during the planning stage of the project. Elms Road Children's Centre, which was not part of the Oxfordshire Walking Maps project, has used the dads outdoors project to develop its own walking map (an online version is available and the paper copy is underway).

The following maps demonstrate the places that settings have visited as part of Dads Outdoors

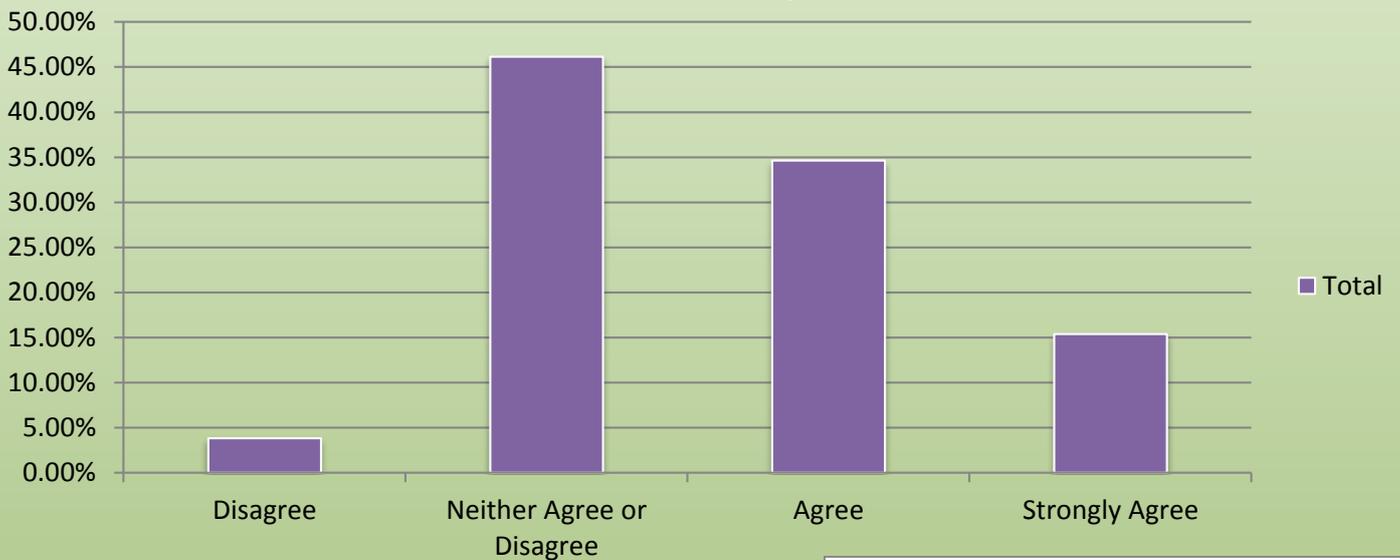


Pins mark the location of some of the outdoor activities provided by the 8 centres. The colour of the pin indicates the centre organising the activity

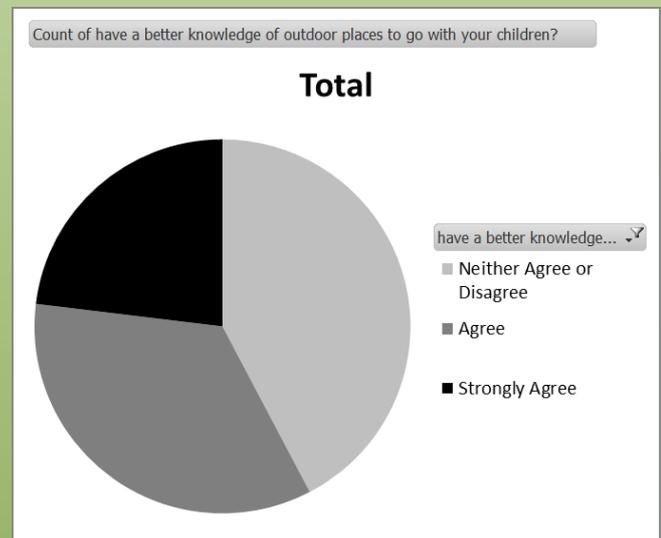
East Street	The Roundabout
Witney	Marston Northway
Elms Road	Wantage
North Abingdon	South Abingdon



Over the last 18 months, we have visited more outdoor places as a family



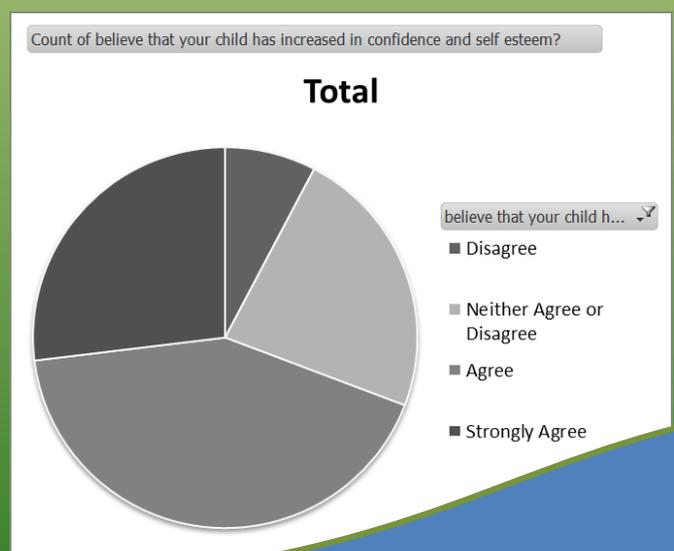
Before participating in the project 30% of fathers stated that they would like to get out more with their children but did not know where to go. In their evaluations, 52% of fathers either agreed or strongly agreed that they have a better knowledge of outdoor places to go with their children.



Children gain in self-confidence, self-esteem and developing positive attitudes to outdoor learning, and learning as a whole

80% of fathers felt that their children had developed a positive attitude to outdoor play and learning.

66% of fathers believe that their children have increased in self-confidence and self-esteem since participating in Dads Outdoor activities (7% disagreed)



How successful has the project been at engaging with vulnerable and minority families?

100% of settings stated that they felt the project had been 'somewhat successful' at engaging with vulnerable and minority families.

Comments from Practitioners**Marston Northway**

The project has given families the opportunity to try new activities and to visit places they may not have thought about visiting or could not afford to visit. We had one completely non engaging vulnerable family that have really started to engage with staff and the Centre due to the trip to the farm, something they had always wanted to do with their children.

East Street

Our dads group has always fluctuated in numbers but during this project our numbers stayed steady which meant that we were able to engage better. 2 families that we work with have particularly got on board with the outdoor theme and these dads always attend outdoor events in the centre which aren't specifically for dads (including forest schools and trips)

Elms Road

We have had some success engaging some of the ethnic minority families in attending outdoor sessions. In particular we had a number of dads who had not used the Centre before come to the Hill End session. We have been doing outside events for a number of years and there has not been a huge increase in the numbers attending. We were keen to encourage dads to go back to public open spaces and so used some public spaces for sessions. The sessions will continue next year.

North Abingdon

We have a strong group of Dad's which come from all different backgrounds and minorities. Some of the Dad's which are part of our outdoor projects are non-resident fathers and they have the contact time during Forest School. For our Camp Out the majority of the dads were were not from our target groups but they still had some issues with regards to child care/ finances/ play opportunities and general day to day family issues.

Witney

I have had dads with very low self-esteem engage in activities they would never have had the confidence to participate in on their own with their children, had it not been for the outdoor sessions. A number of dads particularly enjoyed story telling in the outdoors as they could do it themselves but would not have thought of it!! Dads are already asking when we are next having a camping trip as the last was such a success.

South Abingdon

Some of the dads involved in the visit mentioned they were keen to help develop the outdoor play area and volunteered practical skills and time.

Wantage

It has brought to our attention where our focus needs to be re our target areas/families etc.

The Roundabout

Vulnerable families have engaged with activities. Within the dads group we have captured more minority families

Participation by fathers in Children's Centre activities

66% of the settings believe that the project has led to greater father participation in Children's Centre activities

South Abingdon

The parents who were initially excited by the possibilities of outdoor development were put off by changes of direction and the low level of staff commitment.

Witney

Dads have heard by word of mouth what fun we have and how different our group is from the ordinary parenting group run in the week. Our dads love being active.

Marston Northway

Some of the fathers that have attended the dads group/outdoors project are now using stay and play sessions during the week.

The project has given the Dads something to focus on and the funding allowed us to gather ideas from them that we could then implement.

East Street

We regularly get more fathers coming along to outdoor events within the centre (especially at family forest school and trips further afield).

Elms Road

We were already doing a number of outdoor events which were well attended. We are still working on producing a booklet of local parks/open spaces to go to and this will hopefully increase the use of outside places in the future. marginal effect I think but staff shortages meant that we have not been able to put in as much effort as required to market the events.

North Abingdon

Yes we are getting fathers to many of our groups during the week and getting strong numbers for our Dad's groups

Wantage

We have had the same number of fathers attending

Some Comments from practitioners regarding how they feel the project has impacted on fathers and their children

North Abingdon

The dads have become more confident in taking their children to play outside during their time off work or weekends. Some of our dads meet up outside of the centre with their children to play outside.

The children have started taking more risks in their play. The dads also recognised their children gaining confidence in getting muddy or wet and using it to start a game or play.

South Abingdon

(The project) has made some fathers consider the play opportunities their children get outdoors. Others have been pleased to find that their skills, opinions and time are valued.

It has brought the importance of outdoor play to the forefront of carers thoughts, meaning that children have had more positive and more frequent experiences outdoors

Wantage

(The project) has given us a greater awareness of the outdoors and how you can incorporate it into family time. .. Most importantly the children had fun!

Elms Road

Dads, on the whole, enjoy having a clear focus to the time they spend with their children. All the outside trips have had a clear focus. Exposure to different places and experiences helps children's development and relationship with their dad. It is hoped that dads and other adults will take children back to the public open spaces such as the Hurst.

East Street

The storytelling project has given fathers the confidence to tell stories with their children in an outdoor environment. Children have developed their confidence in the outdoor environment.

Witney

Dads have been encouraged to explore outdoor and have gained confidence in activities they would not have tried with young children on their own

The Roundabout

The project has shown fathers places to take their families. It has benefited the children as they have been able to experience different activities and have been able to explore the outdoors

Marston Northway

(The project has) given (dads) more opportunity for quality time with their children. I have seen fathers really having fun and 'getting stuck in', participating in activities and remembering their own childhoods, for example making water rocket shooters and making/flying kites. They have also had more time to build relationships with other fathers. Fathers have been able to bond over outdoor tasks, camping etc. and we now know our fathers better and have a better idea of ways of working with them. The children have been exposed to new outdoor activities and venues.

If we want to improve our children's physical fitness through increased activity, and begin to reduce the epidemic of childhood obesity, an important thing we can do is to get them to play outside.

Natural Childhood, Stephen Moss

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