

Making fathers visible in early years services: Shropshire's Fatherhood Champions journey

Laura Pritchard works with the Shropshire Community Health NHS Trust and has been closely involved in the delivery of the Family Nurse Partnership, an intensive programme that supports young first-time mothers from pregnancy until their child turns two.

The programme focuses on helping parents give their children the best possible start in life by supporting parenting skills, relationships, health and long-term life opportunities.

Through their work with young families, Laura and her colleagues began to notice something important. While mothers were receiving intensive support, fathers were often missing from the picture.

Recognising this gap led the service to work with the Fatherhood Institute to strengthen father-inclusive practice and explore how fathers could be more meaningfully included in early years support.

Recognise the missing piece

Family nurses working within the programme had long understood the importance of supporting the whole family. However, in practice, fathers were often invisible within the service.

Visits were primarily focused on mothers and babies, and while fathers were sometimes present, services were not always equipped with the skills or systems needed to engage them effectively.

Laura explained that this gap became increasingly clear during service reviews.

“What we started to notice was a gap in the support for dads. If we're trying to get the best outcomes for a child then where is dad as part of that journey?”

The team realised that while some fathers participated in visits, many others remained unseen or unheard.

These “invisible dads” highlighted the need to rethink how the service approached father engagement.

Putting fathers on the agenda

To address this gap, members of the workforce undertook father-inclusive practice training delivered by the Fatherhood Institute.

For Laura and her colleagues, the training was a turning point. It helped staff understand the evidence around fathers' impact on children's development and encouraged them to reflect on how services could change.

"It absolutely put dads on the agenda for us and helped us recognise that there really did need to be more time and money invested in dads becoming visible."

The training also reinforced the importance of cultural change within the workforce. Staff began to think differently about how they spoke to fathers, how they included them in visits and how they recognised their role in supporting children's development.

Turning insight into investment

The impact of the training did not stop with individual practice changes. It also influenced strategic decisions within the service.

As the team continued to raise the issue during annual service reviews with commissioners, the evidence around father engagement began to shape wider discussions about funding and service design.

Eventually, this led to the development of a business case focused specifically on improving support for fathers.

"Through that, we put a business case forward to our local authority and were able to establish three years of funding for a dads worker to sit as part of our family nurse team."

This new role was designed to reach young first-time fathers who might otherwise remain disconnected from services.

By embedding the role within the Family Nurse Partnership team, the service was able to provide more targeted support to fathers alongside the existing work with mothers.

Strengthening workforce practice

Alongside the creation of the dads worker role, the training helped build confidence across the workforce.

Staff began to feel better equipped to work with fathers and to understand the unique dynamics involved in engaging them.

Laura explained that the training helped consolidate existing instincts within the team and provided a stronger evidence base for change.

“The training supported our recognition of the research and the importance of trying to get cultural changes within our workforce.”

This shift in understanding helped staff feel more confident raising fathers’ needs in conversations with colleagues, managers and commissioners.

Creating momentum across services

The positive impact of the training extended beyond the original team.

In Dudley and surrounding services, other professionals began undertaking father-inclusive practice training and becoming Fatherhood Champions within their organisations.

This growing interest has helped create momentum across the wider system, with local authorities exploring opportunities to expand training to additional services.

Laura notes that the response from staff has been consistently positive.

“It’s had amazing feedback from everyone that’s walked the training journey.”

This momentum reflects a broader shift in awareness. Fathers are increasingly recognised as an important part of early years support rather than an afterthought.

Lasting impact on services

Laura’s experience demonstrates how father-inclusive training can act as a catalyst for wider service development.

What began as a recognition that fathers were missing from the picture has evolved into a more strategic approach to engaging dads within early years support.

Training helped staff recognise the importance of fathers, build confidence in working with them and develop the evidence needed to influence commissioning decisions.

Most importantly, it helped ensure that fathers are now considered as part of the journey to improving outcomes for children.

Evidence of system change

Laura's service demonstrates how workforce training can lead to wider change in early years systems.

Key developments include:

- **Father-inclusive training for the workforce**
Training helped staff understand the research on fathers and build confidence in engaging them.
- **Cultural change within services**
Fathers became more visible in conversations about family support and child outcomes.
- **A funded dads worker role was created**
A successful business case secured three years of funding for a dedicated role supporting young first-time fathers.
- **Momentum across the wider workforce**
Additional professionals across health visiting and early years services have gone on to undertake father-inclusive training.

Together these changes show how investing in workforce development can help services recognise fathers as an essential part of improving outcomes for children.