

Speaking up for dads

If it wasn't for the Lone Fathers project, manager Kenny Spence (pictured) believes there are dads who would have given up the hope of ever seeing their children again.

"Many of the fathers we have worked with have been extremely isolated, lacking friends or family support," he says. "They are unlikely to meet other lone fathers and may be cut off from friends because of child care. By bringing the dads together, they realise they are not alone."

The project is a partnership with One Parent Families Scotland and Gilmerton Child and Family Centre, providing support to single fathers with young children and 'contact fathers' who look after their children for short periods of time.

This year is the tenth anniversary of the project which recently won an 'Opportunities for all' award at the Children and Family Achievement Awards. Kenny has also picked up an award in recognition of his work as the Champion for Men and Children, from the American National Association for the Education of Young Children in 2010.

He originally set up the project after finding that few fathers were interested in coming along to more traditional social activities like coffee mornings.

"We had invited dads to coffee mornings or sat them down with the support worker to talk but they didn't want to open up about personal stuff. Then, while I was on holiday I noticed fathers jumping about with their kids on the beach and I realised that the way to get them involved was to make it practical."

Rather than using centre-based group work for support, a programme of sport, visits and outdoor activities is on offer every Saturday and sometimes during school holidays - all activities allow the fathers to spend time with their children and make friends with one another.

When it started, the first dad to come along had five kids so they filled up a mini bus with just the one family. There are now 15 dads and 18 children who come in regularly to use the service.

Support network

Parenting support is available from both the project worker Tom Carroll and by the other dads taking part in the project. Kenny thinks that having role models is extremely important to the group.

"The guys support each other," he says. "Once they get to know one another and build up a friendship, they are more likely to talk about their children and what it's like being a father. It takes time to build relationships."

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"We had a dad that worked as a chef, so when we were doing healthy cooking he stepped forward to give some tips to the others. It helped the group and the dad with his own confidence. We have had a number of fathers that have contributed to the group this way."

Over the years, Kenny has met many fathers who are struggling to overcome what can be overwhelming barriers without the right support. "Most services are still geared towards women and the bulk of parenting is still done by mums but if we accept that looking after a child is down to both parents we need to provide support for fathers as well."

"Kids learn better and do better in life if they have more than one adult in their life and there's plenty research to show that if a dad is involved in the early years, he will play a part right through the child's life. Children benefit from positive interactions with their fathers and play is crucial for their development. The positive outcomes are so massive, you can't really quantify them."

Dads are quick to praise the project. In one recent case, a man who had been going to court for two years to get access to his child was granted a court order for contact on a Saturday morning with the Dads' Club. The father, who did not wish to be named, said:

"The Dads' Club offered the opportunity for me to demonstrate to the courts that not only should I have contact with my children but also that I was more than capable of looking after them. I nearly gave up hope and can't thank the Dads' club enough for helping me rebuild the relationship with my children."

Kenny says his own positive experience of fatherhood gave him a firm belief in the benefits to the child of a strong relationship with their father.

"I love being a dad," he says. "It's a wonderful experience. Since my daughter was little I have spent a lot of time with her, reading to her if she couldn't sleep in the middle of the night and taking her to football games. You have to work at keeping the relationship with your child alive. I hope the project will support fathers to do that for many more years."

