

Community Learning Reform

Support and Resources for Providers

Greenway Dads Group Hull Training and Adult Education

Introduction

This case study concerns a Dads' Club that has been running for over two years, firstly through a Family English programme, then in 2012-13 a Family Maths programme. This was followed by another Family English Programme that commenced in September 2013, where the majority of dads are now working towards L2 Functional Skills English. These courses have been a tremendous success and have attracted national recognition from NIACE National Learners' Week with the dads being shortlisted for a national award and also locally, with a recent feature on BBC Look North which showed the dads in the classroom.

The activity

The Dad's club is a family learning activity designed to attract male family members and support them to succeed in family learning. This case study outlines some of strategies that helped make this a successful male learning group, who not only worked towards learning new skills themselves, but also worked with their own children in the classroom in English and maths learning activities.

Male participation in Family Learning has traditionally been much lower than female so some of the typical learner recruitment and engagement strategies had to be revised, both on a planned and pragmatic basis, in order to be successful. The group is men only. They were recruited through a variety of methods that included: promotional flyers sent home with children; school teachers and Family Learning tutors speaking to dads on the school playground; and dads and children creating posters advertising the Dads' club which were positioned around the school.

The ethos of the group was carefully managed so that men who were wary of education felt comfortable and included, and their trust in the process built. The group approach was designed to appeal to the priorities of the members, for example competition and friendly rivalry was used to foster their motivation, commitment and involvement. This was specially important initially, then as participants started to succeed, their appetite for the learning elements increased. Employment related learning was added as an interest in this emerged. School staff were involved in the group to facilitate and improve understanding and parent school relationships.

The differences this approach has made

The programmes have resulted in wide reaching benefits for all stakeholders; the parents and children, their learning relationships, the schools and parental engagement, the family learning team and the community through promoting positive intergenerational learning.

Learners

Two of the dads have since found permanent employment and, most remarkably, have arranged their shifts so they can still come to the Dads' club. Another dad, who is long term unemployed, has been spurred on by this and has been bringing in job applications to the class for assistance and advice in filling them in. Another dad is now back on speaking terms with the mother of his daughter through the shared time he has spent with his child at the 'dads' club'.

The dads have made huge progress since joining the first accredited Family English. They weren't interested in attending an 'academic' literacy course. Their interest and reason for attending was to spend time with their children through joint activities they regarded as 'fun' more than, explicitly or implicitly, educational. So, undertaking a course they perceived as 'academic' was a culture shock. The dads held negative preconceptions, fuelled by their own past experiences in academic subjects at school and, by and large, seemed unenthusiastic and perhaps passive at best.

The 2011-2012 ended with dads receiving accreditation which inspired them to undertake a maths course in 2012-13. The dads literacy competition was won by a dad who, by his own admission, could 'barely read or write' before taking the course. He was presented with his own trophy – the first he'd ever won.

Managers, staff and volunteers

Family Learning has a low uptake of male participation, and the dads programme has enabled the team to gain a credible insight into engaging male learners as a group as well as individuals.

The cascading and sharing of good practice has been paramount to staff development and training in this area of work.

Additionally the retention, success and achievement rates of males have increased within Family Learning. This also provides positive and increased outcomes for the children concerned.

The organisation

The school and dads have spoken of a marked change in behaviour in some of the children who previously have displayed behavioural problems. Staff at the school have also noted a behavioural and attitudinal shift in the dads toward and in the school, with one dad in particular, who in the past used to come into the school using abusive language and intimidating behaviour towards staff. Now, his behaviour in school has completely transformed: he is polite and gets involved in school events.

The group is now stronger than at any point before. So much to the extent that they are actively determined to bring in new dads to increase membership for 2013-14. One new dad joined in September 2013 and has been readily welcomed by the rest of the 'club'.

Challenges and solutions

The main challenges have been keeping the Dad's group engaged and focussed on developing their skills in Functional Maths and English as well as supplying time for them to work with their children and support their emerging literacy and numeracy.

Real fears of the group disintegrating came to the fore within the first few weeks of the course in 2011 when one of the members left but the group did not know why. The tutor had genuine fears about the negative psychological effect this might have on the group, although it later emerged the reason was a positive one of taking up employment. The initial uncertainty and the real danger of failure forced a rethink of the planning and delivery strategy.

The promotion of how the course could contribute to gaining employment was discussed with the dads and a broader delivery spectrum was embedded that covered Functional Skills transferrable into employment. This process was successful and the dad leaving the course for employment became a success story for the dads to work towards.

Additionally as dads have succeeded and achieved Level 2 accreditation or progressed to employment the challenges have been to engage and retain new dads onto the programme. using the methods described in the activity section.

Critical factors for success

For this course to be a success the tutor had to focus upon an element or concept that would reach out to the dads and act as a motivational tool. From speaking to, and listening to, the dads as a group, it was clear that they all enjoyed competition. The tutor used this notion of competition to retain and reach the dads and build relationships with each of them so they would accept the tutor as a facilitator of their group (and one of them) rather than a distant teacher of literacy from the 'establishment'.

The tutor devised a simple system of incentive and competition that allowed the dads to embark upon inter-group rivalry through classroom activities whilst simultaneously learning English. This was a simple points based system: dads could 'earn' points from both individual and group work giving them an incentive to actively participate. The points system the 'points system' adopted didn't just recognise and reward the high achievers in the group; it was a system that recognised the distance travelled by individual dads from their own starting points and rewarded and recognised effort and personal progress. The points system also incentivised attendance as points could also be accrued by attending each week. At the beginning of each session, the dads' 'leader board' is revealed to the group so they can chart their progress in the realms of friendly rivalry culminating with a trophy for the winner and recognition of the progress of all.

This new methodology clearly had a positive impact and manifested itself in attendance, participation and learning. The dads initially became engaged in literacy by proxy of competition and whilst the agenda of competition was still prevalent throughout, its importance became secondary to their children's and their own progress in English.

The "golden moment"

The dads initially did not want to participate in academic studies and portrayed defensive attitudes due to their past experiences in learning. The 'golden moment' came after 6 weeks when a passionate debate erupted between 3 of the dads around the topic of sentence construction and the impact it has on success in the labour market and the achievement of their children. This led to the rest of the group reflecting upon their own speech and syntax and how it has contributed to the shaping of their lives, past and present.

The remarkable progress and journey these men have already undertaken, accreditation seems almost a by-product of something far more wonderful and positive that has happened and is happening at The Greenway Academy.



Contacts for further information

Jayne Maltby jayne.maltby@hullcc.gov.uk

Lee Rawlings lee.rawlings@hullcc.gov.uk