

Fathers And Children Together (weekend away at Arethusa)

Take 8 fathers who don't know each other – from 4 different cultural backgrounds – ranging in age from 30-53.

Add in 14 (aged between 5 and 13) of the children they have between them.

Put them on a bus and head to an adventure centre in Kent.

Within an hour of arriving tell them they are going for a swim at a time when the younger children would be heading to bed.

Watch them walk uncertainly to the pool – carefully getting in with their children – THEN –introduce a goal post and a number of balls and SUDDENLY differences between age/backgrounds disappear as they form informal teams and throw the ball at the goal. Children get involved but it's the dads that make the noise!

Later that night over hot chocolate, with their tired children curled up on chairs watching a dvd, the oldest father says “listen everyone – we are all the same – we wash each others cups, we play with children, we laugh – we are not black and white – we are dads who have fun”.

As the weekend progresses – add in shelter building in the woods (how many dads does it take to build a shelter!?), archery (one of the youngest children got the highest score!), the challenge of walking across a pole 20m from the ground on the high ropes course – each dad encouraging all the children and giving confidence to one father who has a physical disability who, after a hesitant start, managed the high pole and was rewarded by his son (12) saying “you're the best, dad”.

Then introduce a bonfire on the beach and dads helping children find drift wood and crabs amongst the rock pools.

Over the late night dvd – fathers discussing their different families, work experiences, faith and, of course, cricket and football!

Could it get better? On the Sunday they had a second swim and, as they and their children were more confident with each other, started pulling one another under the cold shower/hose that the lifeguard had set up!! I thought I was safe as a woman and that Muslim men wouldn't pull me under the cold shower – I was wrong. They got the two oldest boys to pull me towards the cold shower and then formed a chain giving them the strength to pull me under!

A session of initiative games where dads and kids had to work out how to use floats and tyres to 'cross a river'. Once again footballs broke through the barriers and the competitiveness of the teams brought lots of shouting and laughter!

A final motor boat trip on the river and a sleepy journey home!

What was achieved?

An opportunity for dads to have fun with their children – three dads are now thinking of going swimming with their children regularly. A time to face challenges together and there is interest in going rock climbing at Mile End as a fathers and children group.

Children had to go to their dads for support and care rather than turn to their mums – one dad said “my son likes me now – before he was always with his mum!”
And conversations/discussions across cultural/social barriers that will help promote social cohesion in our schools and community.