



Centre of a divided world

MICHELLE McDONAGH
The Time 4 Us service in Galway helps parents who don't live in the family home to spend quality time with their children

WITH ONE in five Irish children now living in one-parent families, a growing number of fathers are reporting problems with establishing relationships with their children because of lack of visitation rights.

Even those fathers who do have access to their children often do not get to spend any real quality time with them – dubbed the McDonald's dads, many spend their weekly access visits in fast food restaurants, multi-screen cinema complexes or noisy children's activity centres.

There are 190,000 one-parent families in Ireland today, according to Census 2006, representing 18 per cent of all families and nearly half a million people. The majority of these families are headed by a mother with 14 per cent headed by a father.

The 2007 annual report of One Family, a group which supports single parents in Ireland, highlighted the growing need to help single fathers who often faced "particular challenges".

These included difficulties in establishing relationships where the father was not the primary carer or did not have regular access to his children.

Launching that report, the then Social and Family Affairs Minister, Martin Cullen, promised greater equality in access for fathers who do not live with their children.

One such service already doing this is the Time 4 Us service in Galway which is helping parents who don't live in the family home – usually fathers but also some mothers – to spend quality time with their children in a safe, friendly, non-judgmental setting.

For Mick, the father of two schoolgoing children, and others like him, Time 4 Us has been hugely positive. Not only has he been able to build a relationship with his children, but as a result of attending the service his access has been increased.

"The real success of the service is that many parents using it have been granted increased access to their children. Indeed for some parents who had no access to their children, the neutral venue and supported setting gives them time with their children in a way that otherwise would simply not have been possible," explains Mary Giblin, manager of Galway Childcare Committee.

Claiming to be the first service of its kind in the Republic, Time 4 Us is a joint collaboration between Galway city and county Childcare Committee, the HSE, the Department of Social and Family Affairs and a number of local Galway businessmen.

Time 4 Us is a purpose-built play centre for parents and children to spend time together and develop a more positive relationship. The service is free and, importantly for working parents, is open seven days a week including afternoons and evenings. It caters for babies, toddlers and primary school children and is staffed by qualified childcare workers at all times.

More than 60 families have used the facility since it opened on the Tuam Road in March 2007. It accommodates up to four families at any one time and people tend to stay for about two hours. While initially, it was mainly fathers who used the service, more and more mothers who don't live with their children are now making use of Time 4 Us.

Deirdre Hillary, manager of Time 4 Us, says: "One of the things that we were really keen to do was to provide a friendly and welcoming atmosphere. We have a great selection of toys, books and games, so that parents who, up to now, might have been 'McDonald's parents' can

enjoy playing with their children."

The spacious main play area is equipped with a library, an arts and crafts section, a small kitchenette where parents can prepare meals for their kids and a little cafe area where after-school soup and sandwiches are available.

For the older children, there is a pool table and air hockey. In the baby and toddler room, there are books and toys and a cot where the smaller children can go down for a nap.

Hillary explains: "The cases vary. Some dads may have access all day on a Sunday. After breakfast, they might go into town but it can be a long day to try to keep the kids amused.

"Now they have the option of dropping in here where they can play with the kids and make arts and crafts. A lot of our dads meet their children here now after school, help them with their homework, prepare something for them to eat and catch up with their week."

In some cases, access to Time 4 Us is organised through the courts, in others through social workers, family services and, more and more, through word of mouth. However, Hillary points out that any parent is more than welcome to pick up the phone or drop by to meet the staff and find out about the service.

She stresses the fact that the staff at Time 4 Us are totally non-judgmental and do not get involved in discussions with either parent about the reason for the relationship breakdown or the family background. They are there solely to support parent and child to develop a closer bond during their time at the centre.

"We were initially concerned about how the service would work, but the layout of the premises works so well that there have been no difficulties so far.

"The dad arrives about 15 minutes before the mum drops the children off and he waits in the main play area. The

mum drops the kids off at the reception area so that neither party has to see each other if they don't want to, avoiding any kind of confrontation. If we feel that a parent has drunk taken, we will very politely ask him/her to arrange to visit another time instead," she explains.

Fathers of every age and background from mature students and taxi drivers to business owners are now using the service with some dads having never missed a week since it opened.

In some situations, a father may not have seen his child for six months or even a year and the childcare staff help them to settle the children in. Fathers travel to the centre from all over Galway city and county and as far away as Athlone, Limerick and even Cork.

"All the research proves that contact with both parents is very positive in a child's life. Just last week, The Child and Family Research Centre at NUI-G's evaluation report of the service came out and this was very positive. It revealed the need for the service and great changes for the parents involved in terms of improved ac-

cess," says Hillary.

Since the service began, the Galway centre has been receiving calls of inquiry from parents all around the country and Hillary believes there is a need for it to be expanded nationally.

Noel has been one of the fathers using Time 4 Us since it opened to spend time with his two children aged nine and seven years. His access has improved vastly since he started using the service and he has even been able to take them to see their grandmother overseas for a holiday.

"There was nowhere in Galway providing supervised access outside working hours before this place opened, it has made a great difference. Before this, I had two hours of supervised care with my ex's new partner in Supermacs set down by the court but now my relationship with my kids has come on in leaps and bounds," he remarks.

Noel's children spend their time in the centre writing about how their week went and doing arts and crafts with their dad and he enjoys cooking healthy meals for them there. Being on disability, money is tight for him

and having somewhere to bring the children to play at no cost means a lot to him.

He also enjoys having the opportunity to meet other parents in the same situation who all "give each other pointers in the right direction".

"The great thing about this place is that the kids can be dropped off and the parents don't have to meet so there is no arguing in front of the kids. My kids love it, they call it 'the club'.

"They run in and hug the staff and I usually have a job getting them out afterwards. We get to spend real quality time together - if this place had been available before, maybe I would have had access to my children sooner," he comments.

Noel highlights the need for the family law system in Ireland to be overhauled saying it shows no understanding whatsoever for people in his situation.

☎ Time 4 Us can be contacted at 091-763 510, mobile 086-811 3511 and or by e-mail at time4us@eircom.net



Time 4 Us manager Deirdre Hillary says parents who might have been 'McDonald's parents' can now enjoy playing with their children at this neutral venue. Photograph: Joe O'Shaughnessy