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Parents could be put off using children's centres because of perceived cliquishness and fathers in particular can be overlooked, a report seen by Children Now reveals

The as-yet-unpublished research, conducted by Ipsos Mori on behalf of the National Audit Office, has said it is important that children's centres maintain a neutral and welcoming image, and appear to be available to, and suitable for, all parents.

The Children's Centres Value for Money Study states:

"While building social friendships appears to be a 'spin-off' benefit from using children's centres, in some cases parents have been put off by perceived cliquishness among existing users."

It adds that fathers are often overlooked and not catered for, but acknowledges that they are less easy to engage in the female-dominated environment.

The study looked at the views of parents at five centres and canvassed the views of national children's charities. It found that children's centres reach families often overlooked by mainstream services.

However, long-term funding and clear goals are needed to achieve Government aims.

In the report, children's charities said long-term funding was needed and that performance assessments need to consider the long-term benefits of centres rather than immediate results.

Alison Garnham, joint chief executive of the Daycare Trust, said:

"It is vital that children's centres do all they can to welcome parents, and really important to support fathers in being involved with their children's early years care and education.

"For children's centres to reach as many parents as possible, good outreach is essential. This can include leafleting local estates and offering taster sessions, including some specifically for fathers."

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