
It Can Be Done: Letterkenny Fathers' Group

Seamus Gordon

The Letterkenny Fathers' Group evolved out of wider discussions held with focus groups of fathers to look at the lack of uptake by men in the Fas le Cheile programme. That was nearly two years ago now. What quickly emerged from these discussions was that some fathers wanted a space - on a regular basis - to reflect on their lives with other men. The group benefited, in its early stages, from David Simpson's energy and organisational skills. As with any group, this support was crucial in getting onto a solid footing.

Our group quickly found its level. We met as "fathers", yet our shared humanity and life experience came to the fore. We began to open out our reflections. This was about our common fears, desires, frustrations, conflicts ...

Our group works by providing a safe place to come together. The quality of the sharing is matched by a genuine and respectful listening. As a group member said: *"I feel reassured and supported in the group. It's a safe place; a refuge in my life. I need a place like that"*.

Our group meets every six to eight weeks. We take turns to take care of the organisational end of things. We have established a level of trust and of being real that leads to a genuine sense of feeling respected and valued. As another group member said: *"I don't always remember why the group is important, but whenever we do meet together it makes a difference that other men know something about me and my life"*.

What I, myself, have experienced is that same sense that our struggles as fathers, as men, are shared. We have all felt our isolation, our rage, our desire to connect. The Letterkenny Fathers' Group gives me a chance to be with other men in a way that is affirming to us all. We are in this together and, while we may differ in our experience, the very least we can do is bear witness to that experience.

Another group member said: *"It's about being creative as well. The group helps me pay attention to my creativity"*.

As a father I have, through the group, become more aware - in small ways; everyday ways - of how I am with my children. I have learned more ways to be with them and to talk to them. As another group member puts it: *"It's an uplifting experience. I'm raising two sons and the group has helped me with my struggles. I get to listen to other dads and realise that we are in this together; that my efforts aren't so bad after all"*.

I told my 12 year old son that I was coming here today ...

"You're a crap dad", he said.

"How?" I asked.

"You never do the things I want you to".

"Sometimes", I said.

"Yeah, sometimes", he said.

... He wants more. And so do I.

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I asked my own dad, and he says that things are a lot easier now. There are more supports. He says that what would have helped him was to know and feel that he wasn't struggling on his own.