

PEER RESEARCH SPOTLIGHT



PROJECT SUMMARY

‘How can culturally tailored community-based interventions support Somali fathers in Ealing to better support the mental health and SEND needs of their children?’

This community-based qualitative project explored the experiences, needs and strengths of Somali fathers raising children with SEND in Ealing. In partnership with local imams, parent forums and community groups, we co-designed accessible supports such as coffee mornings, father-to-father mentoring, and bilingual guidance on navigating schools, EHCPs, and health services. We also engaged fathers in familiar community spaces, including local coffee shops, to strengthen trust and dialogue. Through these activities, the project supported fathers' confidence, reduced isolation and mapped culturally rooted pathways into mental health and wellbeing support.

The project aimed to:

1. Explore the lived experiences of Somali fathers raising children with SEND in Ealing.
2. Identify the barriers Somali fathers encounter in accessing mental health and SEND support.
3. Examine the perceived impact of community-based interventions (e.g., workshops, consultations and coffee mornings).
4. Develop culturally responsive recommendations to strengthen mental health and SEND service engagement among Somali fathers.

Approach & Data Collection:

- **4 father-only focus groups** (6–10 participants each) in Acton, Southall, Greenford, and Northolt to foster peer discussion.
- **20 semi-structured interviews** with Somali fathers, with interpretation available in Somali where needed.
- **6 key-informant interviews** with SENCOs, family support workers, imams to capture service and faith perspectives.
- **Observation** of two coffee-morning sessions and one EHCP workshop, to understand real-life dynamics of support and information-sharing.

PROJECT LEARNINGS

- 1 Hidden Burden & Isolation**
Many fathers described carrying a “silent burden,” feeling pressure to remain strong while privately experiencing stress, worry, and exhaustion. This often led to limited help-seeking. Peer support spaces, such as coffee mornings and father-only groups, quickly reduced stigma and normalised open discussion. *For example, one father noted that simply hearing another dad describe the same struggles made him feel “less alone.”*
- 2 System Navigation Barriers**
Fathers consistently reported difficulties understanding EHCP processes, professional jargon, and lengthy timelines. They valued plain-language, bilingual step-by-step guidance, as well as direct Q&A opportunities with SENCOs. *One participant explained that receiving a simple checklist in Somali helped him feel “in control” for the first time.*
- 3 Service Gaps**
Long waiting times for SEND assessments and a lack of culturally tailored parenting or mental health support were recurring frustrations. Fathers expressed a strong interest in *father-specific CAMHS workshops* and accessible speech-and-language strategies they could apply at home.
- 4 Work Patterns as Barriers**
Many fathers work long and irregular hours, making weekday sessions inaccessible. Evening and weekend activities proved essential. Short, focused sessions were most effective, as longer workshops conflicted with family and work responsibilities.

INSIGHTS

- “ *When they give me letters, I don't understand half the words. But when someone explained it to me in Somali, I felt in control for the first time.* ”
- “ *If this was in the council office, I would not come. Here, I feel safe, like I can ask even a silly question.* ”
- “ *I drive an Uber, so I can't come during the day. But one hour after Maghrib, I can manage. That makes a big difference* ”

**BY PEER RESEARCHER:
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**The Voices for
SEND Support
Network**



EALING ROOTS & WINGS
Grant programme for Black and
community organisations