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BECOMING A YOUNG FATHER:

Transitions into
Early Parenthood

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BECOMING A YOUNG FATHER: TRANSITIONS INTO EARLY PARENTHOOD¹

INTRODUCTION

The entry of young people into early parenthood has long been regarded as an issue for social policy and for professional practice in the UK. Despite a steadily falling trend, the UK has one of the highest rates of teenage pregnancy in Europe, concentrated in the most disadvantaged areas of the country (ONS 2014).

The majority of young fathers (defined as those under the age of 25, a quarter of whom are in their teens) live in highly disadvantaged circumstances and their entry into parenthood is unplanned (Quinton 2002, ONS 2015).

Young men may face a variety of relational, socio-economic and environmental challenges that can constrain their ability to gain a foothold as a parent. They are likely to have few material or financial resources to contribute to parenting, while their youth can lead to negative perceptions of their capacity to be responsible and trustworthy, to sustain positive adult relationships, or to take a direct caring role (Neale 2015).

In policy and practice circles such evidence has fed into a widespread view that early parenthood is a social ill that needs to be prevented or, at the least, its worst effects ameliorated (Duncan et al 2010). As part of this perception, the notion of ‘feckless’ young fathers, who are assumed to

be disinterested in ‘being there’ or, worse, regarded as a potential risk to their children, continues to hold sway, particularly in popular, media and some political discourses (Neale 2015, Neale and Davies 2015).

As a result, young fathers are rarely perceived as a resource for their children, and there is little emphasis on how the entry into parenthood may affect their own life chances or be of benefit to the young men themselves (Quinton et al 2002).

Part of the reason for this state of affairs is the paucity of research evidence upon which to build robust policy and practice responses. Over the past decade small pockets of evidence have begun to coalesce into a fledgling evidence base, but the overriding focus of research and policy has been on young mothers.

The ESRC funded Following Young Fathers study (2010-15) was designed to address this gap in knowledge. We set out to explore the lived experiences and support needs of young fathers, and to generate much needed dynamic evidence, gathered over a two to four year period, on their varied pathways through early fatherhood.²

Summary findings are reported in the papers in our policy briefing series.³ In this introductory paper, we chart the transitions into parenthood of the 31 young men recruited for our longitudinal study. We explore

whether their entry into parenthood was planned; what, if any, choices the young men were able to exercise; and to what extent they were able to adjust to their new role and develop a long term commitment to their child.

PLANNED CONCEPTIONS?

Twenty nine of the young fathers in our study conceived their children without advanced planning, and most often in fleeting or fledgling relationships with the child’s mother. In the 2 cases where the pregnancies were planned, the young men were in longer term relationships, in 1 case within a marriage, and with sufficient resources for parenthood.

In the vast majority of cases, however, the accounts reflected the tempo of young lives lived ‘in the moment’, with a discernible lack of agency and planning for the future:

“I think she were on the injection but I weren’t sure. I didn’t ask her, we didn’t use condoms” (Adam, aged 16, low income, partnered).

Initial reactions to the news of the pregnancy varied, but the overriding response was shock or disbelief, particularly where fleeting relationships had already come to an end:

“I found out that she was pregnant and ... I just kind of freaked out for a bit ... cut myself off from the world. ... I was terrified to be honest” (Ben, aged 20, middle income, single).

KEY FINDINGS

- Very few young fathers actively choose to have a child at a young age. They are more likely to conceive ‘in the moment’ and they may have little choice over decisions to terminate or continue with a pregnancy.
- Despite this, an unplanned child does not mean an unwanted child. The arrival of a new generation can be transformative, providing a fundamental source of meaning and identity for young men, and opening up new pathways and aspirations for the future.
- In the vast majority of cases, young fathers make a significant commitment to their children, regardless of their age, relationship with the mother, or socio-economic background.
- Whatever their aspirations to ‘be there’ as parents, school-age fathers and those from low income families face significant challenges in fulfilling a role as a father, borne of their youth, lack of skills and resources, and often fragile relationships with the mother and maternal grandparents.
- A policy and practice framework that more proactively acknowledges, supports and encourages young fathers-to-be, regardless of their age and relationship status, would be beneficial to young fathers, their children and wider families.

“Accidents happen. ... We didn't have our own place, no job, no income or anything. Really rock bottom” (Peter, aged 17, middle income, single).

“My mum, she was disappointed in me. It's not the fact that I did it ... but that I am so young” (Trevor, aged 15, middle income, single).

With the benefit of hindsight, young fathers felt that, given the choice, they would have delayed entry into parenthood:

“The problem is I am still growing up, I am discovering who I am and what I want to do. If I was 25, 26, I'd know who I am a bit, and would have a more established life” (Ben, aged 18, middle income, single).

KEEPING A CHILD?

The young men had limited agency over the decision to keep a child; in only 7 cases was abortion actively considered and discussed with the mother. An anti-abortionist ethos was evident among lower income families:

“I said, you know, ‘whatever you want, it's your body’” (Dominic, aged 18, middle income, single).

“Abortions – I don't believe in all that. So at end of the day you have to cope” (Darren, aged 22, low income, partnered).

“It's up to the girl, obviously, they're bringing it [up]. But, be good to have opinion [from] lads as well, 'cos at sixteen, you've still got all your life to live aint you. ... If I'd have known

straight away, I'd be – definitely told her to have an abortion” (Simon, aged 16, middle income, single).

“I were a bit annoyed 'cause, obviously I didn't want a kid then. 'Cause, obviously, I'm still only young. ... She just texted me and said, 'I'm keeping it'. ... Her mum started saying 'oh you need to think about it because if you get rid of it, it's just like killing somebody'. So she just decided to keep it” (Jimmy, aged 16, low income, single).

ADJUSTING TO AND ENGAGING WITH THE PREGNANCY

Simon and Jimmy, introduced above, would have preferred a termination and found it difficult to adjust to the pregnancy. Jimmy had multiple problems in his life, including ongoing conflicts with the mother of his child and maternal family.

Simon was estranged from the mother and her family and discovered he was to be a father just two weeks before the birth. He was the only father in the study who was not involved to some degree in the pregnancy.

In the remaining cases the young men tried to come to terms with their impending fatherhood, to support the primary caring mothers (for it was taken for granted that the mothers would be the primary carers), and to take responsibility for the arrival of their child. They held strong values about the importance of ‘being

there' for their children and mothers, and not running away from their responsibilities

As other research has found, the process involves a sense of loss: they regretted the impending end of their youthful identities and practices as they strove to curb smoking, drinking, soft drugs, nights out with their mates, and physically dangerous pastimes (Reeves 2006).

“It's just that challenge of growing up, manning up, knowing you've got a child on the way” (Senwe, aged 16, middle income, single).

“My mum ... was disappointed ... but if I take responsibility for what I've done then that'll be ok” (Trevor, aged 15, middle income, single).

“It's like, sugar, it's happened, I need to grow up major now. So, like, you try to do the best you can to be able to support your baby and your girlfriend, or whatever it is, with your relationship. So it kind of hits you, 'Oh God, I've gotta do this, I've gotta do that'” (Adam aged 16, low income, partnered).

“I just thought, if this is going to come about, this is some thing that I am going to take on and I am going to be responsible because I don't understand how, when a child comes along, you can't have that love for him. As much as you don't expect it, it just hits you” (Dominic, aged 17, middle income, single).



In all but one case, the young men were engaged to varying degrees with the development of the pregnancy, attending hospital scans and antenatal classes:

“I just go round there and make sure she’s alright. And we do talk, daily ... like every two hours, I’m texting her. ... Well she’s carrying a precious load ... so that kind of connects us, although we’re not together. ... So she’s bonded to me and my family” (Iman, aged 16, middle income, single).

“I’ve been to the scans and antenatal classes, all the doctors appointments that she’s had ... I didn’t want her to feel like, just ‘cause we’re single, like, I can’t come and help her” (Orlando aged 24, low income, single).

“[The hospital staff] involved both of us. ... There was a lot of laughing and joking. ... The staff and the scans ... they was all fantastic. ... They explained what the pregnancy’s going to be like and giving birth. ... It was really good” (Kevin, aged 24, low income, single).

“When my girlfriend saw the midwife I could hear my baby’s heart beat, or at night time I’m listening to her belly ... how she’s moving. ... and I can feel that she’s kicking. ... It was just, wow, ‘that’s my child in there’ ... I just couldn’t wait to meet her” (Marcel, aged 24, low income, partnered).

The birth itself, attended by 26 of the young men, was regarded as a culminating event in a significant transition. It was described as an emotional moment, where the enormity of bringing a new and fragile life into the world was brought home to them:

“Well if I’m honest, before he was born I was a bit negative ... I didn’t want to be a dad ‘cause for starters I’m unemployed. ... And living in a council flat in a block of smack head flats in [deprived area of the city] wasn’t ideal. ... So I can’t give him the best possible life. But it’s quite crazy. Once he were born and I seen him, like, it changes everything. ... Nothing else matters. Everything you do is for him. ... It’s impossible to describe, I think. It’s just overwhelming. You are responsible for something that can’t be independent and needs help. ... You have to be there for him, don’t you - sacrifice things to make [his] life better. Like I used to ... smoke weed. But I just stopped. ... I’ve got a crap dad, so obviously I want to be total opposite and be a good example to him” (Jason, aged 22, low income, single).

“It were just like the biggest joy I’ve ever had in my life. ... it hits you like a ton of bricks when, when they’re born and you realise that it’s not about you any more” (Callum, aged 19, low income, single).

These accounts reflect the rise of a new emotional literacy that goes hand in hand with ideologies of engaged fatherhood (Dermott and Miller 2015).

STRONG FATHER-CHILD RELATIONSHIPS

The accumulation of such experiences during the pregnancy and birth were instrumental in generating new paternal identities for these young men. Whatever the circumstance at the point of conception, by the time of the birth, these children were far from unwanted. The young men desired to ‘be there’, as emotionally engaged and active carers of their children, motivated, in some cases, by the wish to be a more ‘hands-on’ father than their own fathers had been.

Echoing the findings of other studies, many of these young men described parenthood as an accomplishment, a source of pride and responsibility, and a potential source of giving and receiving love (Ayoola et al 2010).

In the years following the birth, 21 of the 31 young men established stable and ongoing relationships with their children, gradually developing their skills and confidence to care for their children. Ben, for example, was heavily supervised by the mother and only saw his daughter at the mother’s home during the first year. But eventually he was able to take his child out on his own, and care for her at his parents’ home. Over time, one of the fathers became the primary carer for his child



where the mother was incapacitated, while 10 of these fathers, 4 partnered and 6 single, developed a shared care arrangement with the primary caring mothers across two households.

“I want to be the person who [my son] can turn to. And who, obviously, who is always gonna be there for him. ... You know, when I've got him, and when he does something, when's he's growing up, you know, it's the happiest emotion cause you just wanna give him a kiss and a cuddle. He's my little man. ... He's so - you feel really proud, really, really proud” (Dominic, aged 18, middle income, single).

“People say it ruins your life, but it doesn't. It makes you a better person” (Orlando, aged 24, low income, single).

“I was only 18, so it was ... a shock, like I said, it forced me to grow up, to take responsibility. ... [A good dad is] one that listens, always there, no matter what. And teach you things ... bed time stories and just spending time, that important time. It's not just about buying them clothes, buying them this and that. It's - it runs a lot deeper than that. It's having that bond. ... My son ... wants to be like me ... get my hairstyle, support the same football team. ... It's wonderful to see 'cause I never had that ... I grew up with [my dad] in and out of my life. ... My advice [to other young dads] is just keep positive. Having kids is going to be the most exciting and terrifying moment of your life. ... They're always gonna be your babies and just, just love them. ... Enjoy every minute of it” (Kevin, aged 24, low income, single).

FRAGILE FATHER-CHILD RELATIONSHIPS

The remaining 10 young men had unstable or intermittent contact with their children in the years following the birth. Establishing and sustaining a parental role and identity could sometimes be overwhelmingly difficult. Contact was disrupted in two cases by the young men's custodial sentences, while in a further 4 cases, safeguarding issues arose, with the young men and/or the mothers regarded as a potential risk to their children. In these circumstances, contact for the young men was supervised by child protection teams, and in one case a child was taken into care.

In 5 of these fragile cases, mothers had blocked contact between the young men and their children, leading the young men to consider or seek legal redress through the family courts.

An accumulation of anger management problems, blocked contact, court applications and safeguarding issues eventually led to a loss of contact for Jimmy. By the close of our fieldwork he had not seen his son for 18 months, although he hoped to rekindle supervised contact in future:

“I haven't got [a relationship with son]. I couldn't describe it. ... I don't know if he actually does remember me. ... At first it were like upsetting and that but now I'm just getting used to it, 'cause I know I'm not going to see him for a while, so just come to terms with it. ... I just won't think about it, just do something else. ... I don't really feel nothing anymore. ... Sometimes I even forget that I haven't seen him, cause it's that normal to me now. I feel like disappointed in myself, like ... that I don't feel upset. ... It don't come into my mind hardly any more. Very rarely.

To get through each day and just wait till I see him eventually” (Jimmy, aged 19, low income, single).

These circumstances were not of Jimmy's choosing, but reflected the extensive emotional, practical and relational challenges that he faced as a parent.

Contact had also ceased for Simon, who had been unaware that he was to become a father during the pregnancy. Estranged from the mother and her family, Simon was only allowed occasional and tightly controlled contact with his son. As a result he had been unable to establish any meaningful relationship with his son. He felt his status as a parent was not real:

By the end of the study what marked these two young men out was their emotional disengagement from their children, and their matter of fact acceptance that, currently at least, they did not have a role in their children's lives.

“I do think about the future and I'd be happy to have a future, obviously as a dad. But just not with [son]. It's not real. I don't feel - it don't feel any different” (Simon, aged 16, middle income, single).

POLICY AND PRACTICE IMPLICATIONS

A basic insight from this study is that young fathers matter (Kiselica 2011). In the vast majority of cases they care about and attach importance to 'being there' in a loving, personal relationship with their children. Moreover this commitment is evident regardless of their age, their relationship with the mother, and their socio-economic background.

The arrival of a new generation can be transformative, providing a fundamental source of meaning and identity, and opening up new pathways and aspirations to enhance young men's life chances (Edin and Nelson 2013:211). There is mounting evidence to suggest that where young men are positively

engaged in these ways, this is beneficial to them, their children, the mothers, and the wider families (Quinton et al 2002, Duncan et al 2010, Fatherhood Institute 2013).

These findings from our research provide a strong challenge to the notion that young fathers are 'feckless'. They also have implications for service provision during the crucial journey into parenthood. As we show elsewhere (Briefing paper no. 6), young fathers are too often marginalised by ante-natal services that are focused on the physical health and well being of mother and child, and assume that only young men who are in a relationship with the mother have a full stake in the

process.

A policy framework that proactively supports and encourages young fathers-to-be as they undergo the transition into parenthood would be beneficial to young fathers, their children, the mothers and their wider families. As a crucial first step, the key challenge for policy is to see beyond the 'feckless' image of these young men and, regardless of their age and partnership status with the mothers, to acknowledge their efforts in striving to develop a parental role and identity.

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NOTES

1. The findings in this briefing paper are reported in full in Neale, B. Patrick, R. and Lau Clayton, C (2016 forthcoming) 'Becoming a Young Father: Transitions into Early Parenthood', *Families, Relationships and Societies*. Under Review
2. The methodology is reported in full in Neale, B., Lau Clayton, C., Davies, L. and Ladlow, L. (2015) *Researching the Lives of Young Fathers: The Following Young Fathers Study and Dataset. Briefing paper no 8*. Available on the project website. www.followingyoungfathers.leeds.ac.uk
3. The Following Young Fathers Briefing Paper Series: edited by Carmen Lau Clayton and Bren Neale; designed and produced by Jamie Knipe. The full series is available on the project website: www.followingfathers.leeds.ac.uk
4. The accounts of the young men were gathered at varied points in time. After each quotation we have recorded their ages at the time of making their reflections, and their socio-economic status and relationship status with the mothers of their children at the end of our period of fieldwork.
5. The Following Young Fathers research team: Professor Bren Neale, Dr. Carmen Lau Clayton, Dr. Laura Davies, Linzi Ladlow, and Dr. Ruth Patrick. For further information about this briefing paper please contact [Bren Neale b.neale@leeds.ac.uk](mailto:Bren.Neale@leeds.ac.uk)



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