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YOUNG FATHERHOOD:

Sharing Care
with the
Mother
of the Child

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YOUNG FATHERHOOD: SHARING CARE WITH THE MOTHER OF THE CHILD¹

INTRODUCTION

The complex nature of young fathers' relationships with the mother of the child is not well explored in the current literature and much of what we do know is focused on maternal gate-keeping attitudes. Existing evidence shows that many young fathers want to 'be there' for their children regardless of parental relationship status and often show levels of commitment towards the baby's mother (Neale and Lau Clayton 2014).

Where close and supportive parental relationships exist, it is associated with increased father-child contact time, childcare participation, closer father-child relationships, and improved outcomes for children (Fagan and Palkovitz 2007). The transition into parenthood can be difficult however, with instances of stress and conflict in young parents' relationships whether or not they are still romantically involved (Bunting and McAuley 2004).

Studies suggest that young fathers, in comparison to older fathers, may experience higher levels of stress during the pregnancy and birth (Fagan, Bernd and Whiteman 2007), and many young men report problems with the mother of the child within the first year of the child's life, but some issues may have been ongoing from the time of the pregnancy (e.g. lack of closeness

and the existence of an already fragile relationship; Lloyd 2010).

While young fathers may have poor relationships with the mother of the child and do not live with their children, they may still wish to be involved as parents (Neale and Lau Clayton 2014).

As research concerning the intimacy and longevity of young parents' relationships is lacking, this article draws upon the Following Young Fathers study to explore young men's accounts of the parental dyad whether romantically involved or separated, in terms of commitment and communication levels and the difficulties that may occur. These day to day experiences provide a new understanding of the so called 'package deal' – described as the contingent nature of the father-child bond being dependent upon the father-mother relationship. These reflections by young fathers demonstrate a myriad of factors that can encourage or impede their paternal role, affecting not only fatherhood engagement levels but also fathering identity.

Such findings will be valuable for service practitioners working with young families and has implications for policy, particularly if there are difficulties present between the young mother and father.

METHODS

Our research tracked 31 young fathers over a period of 2-4 years using qualitative longitudinal approaches². The relationship status of the fathers was split with 17 being in a relationship with the mother of the child at the time of the first interview whilst 14 were not. During the project, 5 further relationships had not worked out meaning that 19 young men (almost two thirds) were no longer with the baby's mother by the end of the study.

The young men's intimate relationships ranged considerably in length, from a couple of weeks in one case to four years in duration for 2 young men and conceptions occurred mostly within the 1-4 year mark (11 couples). One father was not in a relationship with the young woman beforehand, instead, describing this association as 'friends with benefits' (friends who have a sexual relationship with no emotional involvement). 11 couples were cohabiting, 2 of which were married.

Young parents' relationship statuses were varied and could be described as being on a spectrum from relatively stable to highly volatile, with multiple instances of flux. Reasons for separating from the father's perspectives were said to include disputes and tensions over childcare

responsibilities, complications with the baby's mother and family, and reduced connectivity and contact between the couple. This paper will discuss four emerging themes from our findings of shared parenting behaviours including: 1) Partnered and supportive; 2) Separated and co-operative; 3) Co-parenting in flux for partnered and separated young fathers; 3) Separated and challenging relationships.

FINDINGS PARTNERED AND SUPPORTIVE RELATIONSHIPS

12 young fathers who were partnered with the baby's mother throughout the study described their partnerships as highly important and supportive, countering the commonly held view of young fathers as being uncommitted to the mother (Jaffe et al 2001). The pregnancy, birth and entry into parenthood were all raised as important transitions for the young fathers in terms of their commitment levels, respect, mutuality and team working skills with their partner. The ability to identify and operate towards a common goal together (i.e. the child's well-being and upbringing) helped to facilitate successful and cooperative childrearing behaviours and decision-making processes between the couples.

"You build a really good respect for each other. .. Before you were just girlfriend and boyfriend, kind of separate, but now you're conjoined, you're going for a common goal" (Zane, aged 20, wave 2).

Many participated in shared domestic duties and child care tasks as it was deemed as important and fair in terms of reducing stress and workload for each parent. Examples included feeding the baby; changing nappies; bathing the infant; play time; general housework; and cooking meals, reflecting examples of active and engaged fatherhood behaviors (Miller 2010).

For some of the younger fathers in the study, such as Adam, the ability to parent co-operatively, supportively and harmoniously developed over time:

"I went to bed, fell asleep for about two, three hours, then [partner] got back, woke me up straight away. I was like 'oh couldn't you have just done him [change the nappy]' ... We just argue constantly" (aged 16, wave 3).

"There are no arguments. It's just getting on with each other ... I think it's because I've started pulling my socks up now and being a proper dad and trying to support my partner better" (aged 19, wave 5).

Although the young men wanted to be practically and emotionally engaged as fathers, they tended to play more of a supportive and breadwinning role (or aspired to do so), as mothers continued to be the primary carers in such households. Such similarities could also be seen within the accounts of separated young fathers with amicable relationships with the child's mother and how shared care was

played out in practice.

SEPARATED AND CO-OPERATIVE RELATIONSHIPS

Young fathers with cordial relationships with the baby's mother understood the necessity to be amicable for the sake of the child and the father-child relationship (6 cases). By prioritising the child, this affected the ways in which the young man saw the baby's mother and his behaviours towards her.

The young fathers described a number of strategies which helped them to work effectively with the young mother after their separation, this included: shared discussions and decisions about the child; communicating clearly; being open and honest; exhibiting good team working skills; recognising the value of the other parent; gaining the trust of the baby's mother; and flexible arrangements (e.g. visiting the child outside of pre-arranged times).

The ability to form and maintain a civil and productive relationship with the baby's mother created opportunities for the young men to spend time with their child away from the mother, leading to deep and intimate father-child relations despite living in different households. Parenting together whilst no longer being romantically involved was not necessarily seen as problematic by these young men:

"I think separating is just a thing people use an excuse. I'm saying it now because we are separated and we do get along and we do what we need to

KEY FINDINGS

- Young fathers who are in a steady romantic relationship with the young mother, felt that reciprocity and levels of commitment increased when the conception occurred and this played a vital part in subsequent co-operative parenting behaviours after the birth.
- For some separated young fathers who have amicable non-romantic relationships with the young mother and regular child contact, they were able to develop the necessary strategies to implement joint parenting mechanisms after the separation. Co-parenting skills were refined over a number of years, and for

some, is work in progress.

- Young men want to be hands on and emotionally engaged as fathers, but they play more of a support and breadwinning role (or aspire to do so), as mothers are predominantly the primary carers of their children.
- For a small number of separated young fathers they described hostile relationships with the young mother and experienced irregular or no contact with their children; the family law court was seen as a means of resolution here but the removal of legal aid was a problematic hurdle.

- Some young fathers who had a hostile relationship with the young mother wanted to parent jointly, but were unable to do so due to unwillingness from the mother's part and a lack of professional and personal support.
- Policy makers and practitioners need to more actively recognise and support a constructive and cooperative relationship between partnered and separated young couples to improve collective parenting which will benefit child outcomes and parenting capabilities in the short, medium and long term.



do ... I probably do more than people who actually live with their kids in the house ... It's like the best bond you can have [with your child]. It gives me butterflies" (Orlando, aged 24, wave 1).

CO-PARENTING RELATIONSHIPS IN FLUX

Joint parenting for partnered fathers could still be demanding, particularly when lacking resources or support from others, and tensions may simmer between young couples despite their attempts to work together and support one another. In many cases these arguments were becoming easier to avoid or resolve as the young couples established better methods of dealing with difficult circumstances and strived to put their child's needs first, as Jax (aged 19, wave 2) commented:

"We've grown up, we've stopped being pathetic and stopped arguing cause it's not nice for our daughter."

For a small number of the younger fathers in the sample, the intervention of professional support was particularly helpful when collaborative parenting did not necessarily develop organically:

"We got put on a parenting course and completed it now ... Not only do we have to stop arguing just for our daughter but for me and [partner] as well" (Andrew, aged 19, wave 5).

For separated young fathers with amicable relationships with the baby's mother, the ways in which young men successfully interacted with the mum was not always easy to initiate. Dominic for example, described a turbulent relationship with the baby's mother when they broke up after the

birth. From 2013 onwards, relations with the mother gradually transformed which enabled a more proactive approach to collective parenting.

Dominic's experience of shared parenting over time:

"She tried to make life as hard as possible for me with our son" (aged 18, wave 1).

"I think she sees me more as a form of support as opposed to being someone against" (aged 21, wave 4).

"I think we're working in [the] right direction. Things aren't perfect or ideal but it's working to a degree" (aged 22, wave 5).

Despite a number of instances where good support and cooperative parenting were described by the interviewees, the young fathers' relationship with the mother could still be challenging and fragile. Nevertheless young fathers here, both partnered and separated, were able to work with the young mother to compromise and resolve issues for the child's best interests, which allowed shared childcare in a satisfactory, and for some, a highly fulfilling manner.

SEPARATED AND CHALLENGING RELATIONSHIPS

Young fathers who described difficult relationships with the baby's mother (13 cases) highlighted a number of discrepancies with regards to contact arrangements, welfare decisions and maintenance payments which led to unstable relations. Due to difficult interactions, young fathers

found it difficult to parent jointly with the young mother and this could be magnified by geographical distance between the young parent's households, creating an additional barrier to child contact arrangements.

For some young men, the volatile relationship led to maternal gatekeeping behaviours, leading to highly infrequent or non-existent child contact. Young fathers appeared highly aware of the mediating role that the young mother could play, leading them to "bite their tongue" (Jason, aged 22, wave 2). Young mothers were seen as the parent with the most power and according to the young fathers, used the children to manipulate them:

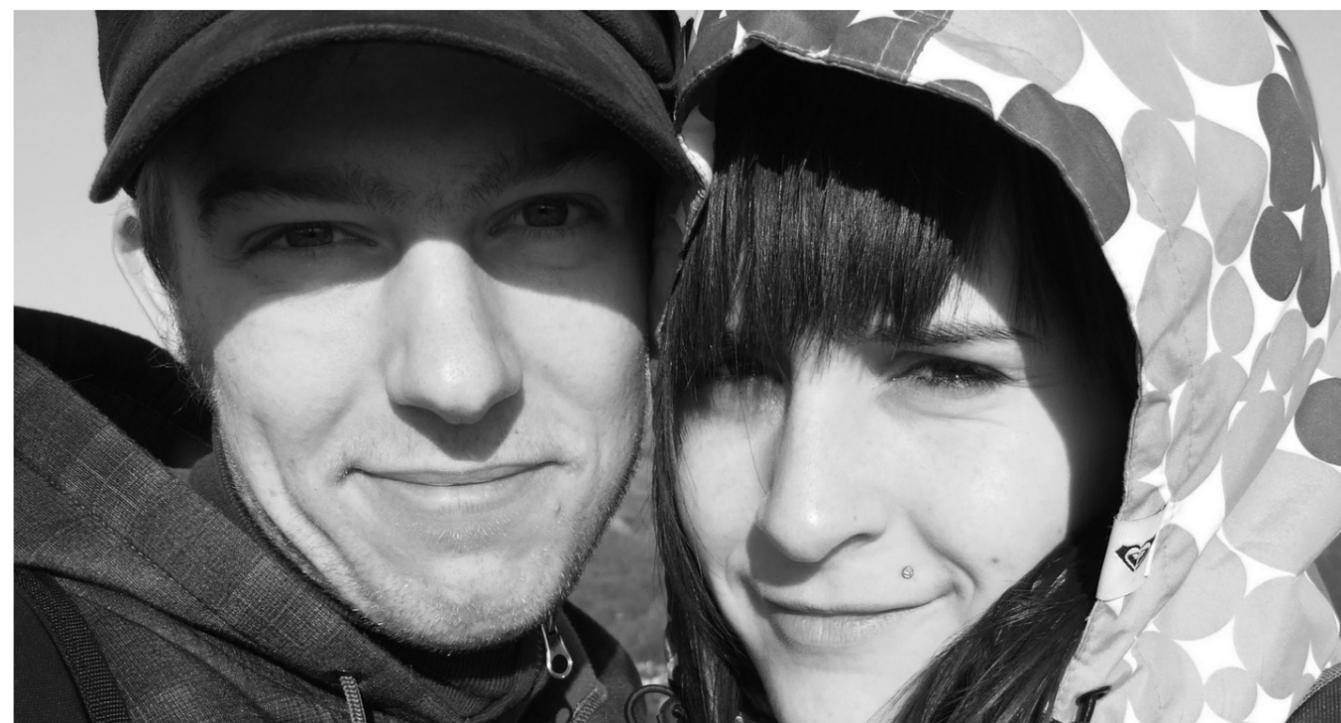
"She tries to use [daughter] as a weapon, playing games and stuff" (Karl, aged 18, wave 5).

Young fathers generally felt that they had a good relationship with their child despite not seeing them on a regular or consistent basis; however such viewpoints did not reduce the level of anguish felt by the lack of contact. Some young men felt that more stable arrangements would enable closer bonds to develop.

Jason experienced ongoing 'heartache' by the lack of contact with his children:

"She uses our son as a weapon when we don't get on. It's the only way she can hurt me" (aged 24, wave 4).

"I don't even know where the kids are, she's got so much power and she knows that ... I'm going through double the heartache [over two sons]" (aged 24, wave 5).



Jason and six others had considered going through the court system to try establish regular contact with their children; for some this was not ideal but the young parents could not overcome their difficulties with one another and felt ill equipped to do so

despite having their child's interests at heart. For others in this group, they felt that a formal court hearing was the only way to bring about necessary change and were less willing to engage with the young mother. The reality of going through the court system

was severely affected by the removal of legal aid since 2013 however, highlighting the significance and need for young fathers to be able to develop positive relations with the young mother in such a context.

POLICY AND PRACTICE IMPLICATIONS

Unlike previous research which suggests a simple binary of young mothers as either gatekeepers or gate-openers, the young men's accounts present a nuanced picture of their interactions with the baby's mother and the implications of this in terms of ongoing co-parenting behaviours.

The 'deal' between young parents, like any contract, is open to change, can be overwritten, and either party can terminate the contract at any point. As such and given the fragile nature of young fathers' relationships, the regular implementation of parenting support and harnessing respectful mutuality for coupled and non-partnered young parents would be particularly beneficial.

As parenting support for young fathers is sparse (Jones, Burgess and Hale 2012), policy makers and practitioners need to more actively recognise and promote a constructive and cooperative relationship between young parents, as part of their routine care to improve collective parenting capabilities and the social-emotional development of children (Lloyd 2010).

As many young partnerships end within the first few years after the child's birth (Smeeding, Garfinkel and Mincy 2011), this may be a vital time for intervention. Young fathers may also need professional assistance when dealing with potentially demanding discussions regarding child access with their former partners, their children's grandparents and the role of the state.

Parenting support for coupled and single young fathers could be incorporated into the CANparent initiative and related relationship schemes previously piloted by the former Coalition government as universal provision (2012-14).

The implementation of such classes on a national scale is yet to be revealed by the new Government but it is based on the premise of early intervention, aiming to enhance parenting and relationship skills for all families to create stability (DoH 2014). An alternative approach would be to develop young people's understanding of healthy parenting relationships within SRE/sex and relationship education provision.

Relationship education which looks at positive and negative power dynamics between parents, particularly the shared power of fatherhood and motherhood (Elly 2013), and the benefits of co-parenting behaviours could help promote co-operative joint parenting for all concerned.

Seemingly the literature suggests that SRE can play an important role in educating young people about their intimate relationships and on the face of it, the inclusion of parenting issues, concerns, opportunities and challenges for young mothers and fathers seems befitting here. Such incorporation would need significant development however, given the poor appraisals of the current SRE system provided, especially the patchy and minimal focus on healthy relationships (UK Youth Parliament 2007).

Given the unknown future of the CANparent initiative and quality of SRE in schools, the role of practitioners who come into contact with young men to support and enhance their relationships with the young mother is further underlined.



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NOTES

1. The findings in this briefing paper are under review in Lau Clayton, C. Young Fatherhood: Shared Parenting and the Package Deal, *International Journal of Social Science Studies*.
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
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5. 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



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