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GRANDPARENT SUPPORT?

The Views
of Young
Fathers

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& SOCIAL
RESEARCH
COUNCIL



Following Young Fathers
Briefing Paper No. 3
University of Leeds 2015

GRANDPARENT SUPPORT? THE VIEWS OF YOUNG FATHERS¹

INTRODUCTION

Whatever the joys surrounding the arrival of a new child, the entry into parenthood presents challenges for young fathers. They may have relatively few material and financial resources to contribute and often lack skills and experience in childcare and in managing relationships.

In taking up the responsibilities of fatherhood their needs for family support are likely to be considerable. This is in addition to their own care needs, as young people who are dependent on their families (Swann et al 2003).

In these circumstances, support that flows down the generations from grandparents to young parents and their children is a vitally important resource, part of the 'moral economy' of care. Maternal grandmothers are the most consistent providers of support to young mothers, with up to 60 per cent of teen mothers living with or heavily relying on their own mothers.

In some communities, women may provide kin care (as the main carers or substitute parents) to successive cohorts of young children for many decades. Paternal grandparents also play a vital role in providing practical help and housing for young fathers,

and supporting and enabling ongoing contact between the young men and their children (Shepherd et al 2011).

However, this vital resource, a form of social capital for young parents, is too often taken for granted (Grandparents Plus 2010). The nature of grandparent support, and the extent to which it is sustainable and relied upon over time, is much less clear cut – with implications for the provision of professional support for young parents.

Reliance on the older generation can result in a 'missing generation in the middle', with a double care burden for the grandparents, particularly where they step in to keep families together and avoid their grandchildren being fostered. This, in turn, can impact negatively on the grandparents' health, income and future lives. Concerns have been raised about the stress on younger grandparents who need to balance work and family commitments - this clearly becomes a multigenerational family matter rather than a challenge for younger parents alone.

In this briefing paper we explore the nature of grandparent engagement and its sustainability over time from the perspective of the young fathers in our study. Existing knowledge of grandparent support for young fathers

comes largely from the accounts of the grandparents; there is very little evidence on how it is perceived and experienced by young parents, especially by young fathers (Tan et al 2010).

We draw here on the accounts of 31 young fathers, aged between 14 and 24 at the point of entry into parenthood, gathered over a two to four year period². Nineteen of the young men were from low income families, and the remainder from middle income families. Paternal grandparents were employed mainly in semi-skilled or low-skilled occupations, while in 6 families the grandparents were long term unemployed and in receipt of out of work benefits.

In this briefing we focus on how the pregnancy was disclosed to the grandparents, their engagement in decision making, the kinds of support – practical, financial and emotional – received by the young men, and how intergenerational support evolved over time.

FINDINGS

GRANDPARENT AND FAMILY CHARACTERISTICS

Wider evidence (Quinton et al 2003; Ross et al 2010) has shown that

KEY FINDINGS

- Given their needs and circumstances, support from grandparents is likely to be crucial for young fathers. Such support is likely to encompass housing, practical, financial and emotional support, as well as help with direct care of a child. In most cases it is not supplemental to the care provided by young parents, but a crucial foundation for the care of the new generation.

- The nature and extent of grandparental involvement varies significantly across families and over time. Practices of support, interference or neglect are evident that shape interactions across the generations. While grandparents can be a source of sustained

and reliable support, in cases where relationships are volatile, or grandparents themselves have complex needs, support may be intermittent or not sustainable over time.

- In line with traditional gendered patterns of care, maternal grandmothers may be extensively engaged in decisions to keep the child, and take an active role as co-parent. These high levels of engagement can result in patterns of decision making and responsibilities that run 'vertically' down the generations in the maternal household. This can marginalise the efforts of young fathers to forge relationships of care that run horizontally between

the parents themselves.

- In policy and practice circles a greater recognition of these fluid and contingent patterns of support, the challenges of engagement across the generations, and the constraints that young fathers may face, particularly in maternal households, would be helpful to the young men and the wider families, both maternal and paternal.

- The inclusion of grandparents within family centred services would be beneficial to families across the generations.

most young fathers have strong, locally based kin ties and enduring relationships with their families. This was the case for the vast majority of young men in our study. Only two had tenuous links with their birth families, having spent part of their childhoods in the care system.

The paternal grandmothers, in particular, played a significant and ongoing role in the lives of these young men. Relationships with paternal grandfathers were more variable, with eight young men reporting poor or neglectful relationships with their birth fathers.

By the end of our fieldwork 15 young fathers were living with their parents, while a further three were living with their partner and child in the home of the maternal grandparents. The remaining young men were living independently in the same localities. These patterns had evolved in highly varied ways over the course of our study, with considerable movements in and out of the parental homes, and between the grandparental households (see briefing no.7).

Family circumstances and relationships for the older generation also varied across the sample. The young men reported that eight paternal grandparents were in stable relationships, while in the remaining cases, grandparents were separated or widowed - although the majority had re-partnered and had more children. At least a third of the paternal grandparents were estimated to be under the average age

of grandparenthood, i.e. in their late-thirties to mid-forties, as opposed to their fifties. In at least 10 cases, entry into early parenthood (under the age of 25) was a feature of the lives of the grandparent as well as the parent generation, and also evident among the siblings of the young parents.

Such close layering of the generations is a relatively common feature of family life in disadvantaged communities, generating distinctive patterns of parenting that rely heavily on inter-generational support (Emmel and Hughes 2013).

DISCLOSING THE PREGNANCY

In a context of unplanned pregnancies and fragile relationships with the mothers, it is perhaps understandable that the majority of grandparents expressed dismay or disappointment about the pregnancy. Only 5 grandparents in this study were reported to be happy with the news. As other researchers have found (Shepherd et al 2011) they were particularly shocked or disappointed where the fathers were of school age, or in the early days of further or higher education. These reactions were regarded as natural and a display of care by the young men:

“[It was a] shock for them. ‘Cause at my age, at my point in life, circumstance wise, education wise, that wasn’t the right time for, for me to come with the news that, like a baby was on the way. But I think that’s a natural reaction if they care about someone” (Dominic, aged 18, wave 3).

“Oh, my mum went crazy and she was like ‘if you can’t look after him, I’ll take him on as my own, but he’ll still be calling you both mum and dad’ and all this. ... Her mum and dad wanted me dead, literally!” (Darren, aged 21, wave 3).

Maternal grandparents can be highly influential in decisions to continue with a pregnancy. Seven young men who discussed a termination with the mothers were upset to find their wishes and feelings dismissed on moral or religious grounds:

“Her mother is very religious and Catholic. She managed to persuade my ex-girlfriend to not have an abortion” (Dominic, aged 18, wave 3).

“Her mum didn’t want her to [have an abortion]. My ex girlfriend probably thought, ‘my mum knows best’. You’re going to listen to your mum, aren’t you?” (Callum, aged 19, wave 3).

“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. And now her mum and her nana have a go, saying ‘oh you shouldn’t have had him if you can’t look after him’. But they were the ones that said all that to her. And they seem to forget that” (Jimmy, aged 16, wave 3).

The reactions to the pregnancy by the grandparents indicate the momentous change that entry into young parenthood entails for both generations. Like the young men, they





had to undergo a period of adjustment to resolve their ambivalence over the pregnancy. Regardless of the presence or otherwise of the young men, 11 maternal grandmothers attended the birth. After the arrival of the child, the grandparents were uniformly positive about their grandchildren, often going on to form deep attachments to them (Sadler and Clemmens 2004). The arrival of the next generation can bring families together, creating stronger ties or repairing broken ones across the generations (Ross et al 2010).

In line with traditional gendered roles, maternal grandmothers were most often directly involved in the pregnancy, birth and care of the baby. A high engagement among grandparents during the pregnancy can set the pattern for the subsequent care of the child. While the mother is seen as the primary decision maker in relation to the pregnancy, by extension it is the maternal grandparents – particularly grandmothers – who exercise agency in these decisions, creating a marked contrast with the agency of the young men and their families.

A clear pattern emerges whereby decision-making and responsibility flow vertically down the generations, particularly in the maternal household, rather than flowing horizontally between the young parents themselves. This can serve to marginalise the young men, both during the pregnancy and after the birth of the child.

GRANDPARENTAL SUPPORT

In 23 cases in our study, both maternal and paternal grandparents were described as significant providers of practical, emotional and financial support. In many of these cases such support was sustained and in five cases increased over time.

The provision of a home for many of the young fathers was perhaps the most tangible dimension of grandparental help, although this could also cause difficulties in terms of overcrowding and stretched financial resources within the household (see briefing no.7).

Alongside the maternal grandparents, paternal grandparents also played a significant role as second or co-parents, supporting their sons by caring for, playing with and generally minding the child. For the youngest fathers in the study, and those who were single, such support was critically important.

“She’ll just do everything that a parent does basically, but she’s grandma” (Adam, aged 16, wave 2).

In terms of financial support, this too tended to flow down the generations from grandmothers and grandfathers. For the young fathers this might mean the receipt of funds or material goods from the paternal grandparents, which they could then pass on to the mother as part of the reciprocal exchange between the parents. Similarly, the young fathers benefitted indirectly from help and support offered to mother and baby by the maternal grandparents. Even minimal help from the grandparents was greatly appreciated. However, some frustration was felt at having to rely on the grandparents, especially when their resources were also limited.

“She always took us places we needed to go. ... She did do quite a lot for us money-wise as well” (Callum, aged 19, wave 3).

“I’m the one who’s meant to support the baby. Obviously without my mother’s financial support or anything, I don’t know where I would have got the money from. I’d have been really been stuck” (Senwe, aged 16, wave 2).

Emotional support was also of vital importance to the young men. The paternal grandmothers provided the most consistent source of support, in terms of advice, talking things through and being listened to (Tan et al 2010). They were better confidantes than the young men’s peers, who would not necessarily understand the issues at stake.

Overall, the engagement of the grandparents was not simply a useful

supplement to the care provided by the young parents: it was in many cases a crucial foundation for the care of the new generation. It could also serve to reinforce a pattern of parenting that runs down the generations, particularly within the maternal household, leaving the young fathers feeling rather peripheral as front line carers.

CHANGING PATTERNS OF SUPPORT, INTERFERENCE AND NEGLECT

SmithBattle (1996) observes that grandparent involvement can be experienced as a gift or a curse. Our findings accord with this insight.

Across the generations, shifting patterns of support, interference and neglect were evident over time. While in some families, support was consistent and stable, in others it was variable and intermittent. Living under the same roof could create tensions and a lack of clarity around responsibilities for the child. These blurred boundaries around parental and grandparental care are perhaps inevitable in a context where young fathers are themselves dependents: they are responsible for their children and yet remain the responsibility of their parents.

The support offered by grandparents could be experienced as interference and in some cases it was withdrawn, as we show below. Interestingly, these patterns of support, interference and neglect resonate with the ways in which practitioners engage with young fathers (see briefing paper no. 6).

As Ross et al (2010) note, finding a balance between support and interference could be a challenge. Support was defined in terms of offering advice when asked, rather than ‘taking over’:

“I have to ask for [advice] ... I have to say [to my mum], ‘oh I don’t get this, can you help?’ And she’ll help, she won’t like take over and do it. She’s just like, ‘oh you do that, do this’. And stuff like that. Then that’s really good ‘cause that’s like teaching you. That’s teaching us to be parents instead of, instead of like taking over and just doing it” (Senwe, aged 17, wave 3).

Support could also take the form of diplomacy, actively intervening in positive ways that were beneficial to young fathers and that supported their parenting efforts in relation to the mothers. In several cases where relationships had broken down, for example, grandparents played an important mediating role, facilitating contact between father and child:

"We have no contact. ... I've done everything through [the maternal] grandmother. She's amicable and understands both sides" (Tommy, aged 24, wave 2).

Interference and surveillance, however, were also widely experienced. Maternal grandparents often appeared to "know best" and would take over, or supervise in a way that was described as "annoying" and "upsetting" for the young fathers. Trying to be a father in the maternal household was a particular trial:

"I'd just like her to sit back and be a grandmother instead of a mother. Normally I would argue with people if they've tried to be so controlling ... but it's not in my son's best interest. I just had to bite my tongue" (Jason, aged 22, wave 1).

"I'm going into someone else's territory and I didn't feel like I could be myself around my kids" (Iman, aged 16, wave 2).

"There was quite a hostile relationship with her family ... so I would always have to spend time at her house with [my daughter], and then all of her family and stuff. So it was, it was very uncomfortable because ... there was always a really tense atmosphere. ... If I was changing a nappy or anything everyone would be watching me. ... It felt like I couldn't do what, what I felt would be natural to do. ... It almost felt like it was someone else's baby. ... I could just feel eyes on the back of my neck [laughs]. So yeah it did

feel like I was kind of, it was someone else's child that I was being reviewed on my performance with, I think, yeah" (Ben, aged 20, wave 1).

Even when relationships were generally very good, a supervisory air was often present. This was so even for Martin, one of the two young men in the study who was married and had planned to have a child:

"Generally the maternal grandmother is trying to hold on to being a mum still. She acts like we still need approval or guidance for everything. ... She doesn't treat us properly like adults yet" (Martin, aged 23, wave 2).

"It gives me little niggles sometimes because my parents are always there with me" (Ben, aged 20, wave 2).

In seven cases in this study tensions and conflicts between the generations and between the two households were severe. The young men felt that grandparenting had tipped over into control of the pregnancy and child, policing of the young parents' behaviour and interference in their relationship:

"Her mum won't let me go up to her house no more. ... And, like, I want to see [my son]. ... It'd have to go through courts wouldn't it? [But] I don't wanna do that 'cause then it'll just cause bigger arguments" (Jimmy, aged 16, wave 1).

Such actions were most likely to occur in the context of highly volatile relationships, or where the young parents' relationships were fragile or coming to an end. But they also suggest that grandparents are not immune to the widely held perception of young fathers as feckless, or a possible risk to the mother and/or baby.

Interestingly, if grandparents were critical of young fathers, the reverse was also the case. In five cases, young men expressed concerns about the

behaviour and motives of the older generation, reporting they were leading lifestyles (drug or alcohol abuse) that were not conducive to 'good' grandparenthood, or were mis-using their role as custodians to collect and appropriate their grandchild's benefits.

If interference or inappropriate involvement was a curse, so too was its opposite - a withdrawal of grandparental support, especially if substantial help had been provided and had come to be relied upon (Bunting and McAuley 2004). Such a withdrawal could be triggered by conflicts over household chores, infant care, and the differing priorities of the generations, with both generations perceiving a lack of responsibility in the other (Sadler and Clemmens 2004).

It could also be triggered by the changing circumstances of the grandparents and challenges in their own lives. At various times a substantial minority of young men reported a cessation of support from either a maternal or paternal grandparent.

"You could ring [my mum] and she's like, 'well, I'm busy now, you'll have to ring back tomorrow'. I'm like, 'well I don't need you tomorrow, I need you now'" (Darren, aged 21, wave 2).

"It's hard, just the two of us" (Adam, aged 17, wave 3).

The young men in our study with sustained, consistent support from their parents greatly valued this stability and security in their lives. But where relationships across the generations were volatile, support could be unpredictable and intermittent. It could not, therefore, be relied upon over the long term, adding to the sense of insecurity in these young men's lives.

POLICY AND PRACTICE IMPLICATIONS

Grandparental involvement clearly has an impact on the ability of young men to manage the transition to parenthood and to establish a parenting role and identity. But the evidence here shows that such engagement can be highly variable, may have mixed effects on the fatherhood identities of the young men, and may be unsustainable, particularly in families with complex needs.

If professional support for families is to be effective, it is important that the realities of grandparental care, including in some cases its

detrimental and unstable effect over time, is taken into account. Even where grandparental care and support is of good quality and highly valued, finding the right balance between support, interference and neglect is difficult to achieve, and may result in blurred lines of responsibility that become a burden for both the young parents and the older generations.

A broader approach to policy and professional practice may be needed, that takes into account both inter-generational relationships, and the dynamic relationship between the young parents themselves. There

would be scope for example, to extend the partnership approach for working with parents (DoE 2014), to include grandparents too, and to offer bespoke support that would operate flexibly and in line with the shifting dynamics of kin care in families. Tailoring support for families where the generations are closely layered could lead to a better balance of care across the generations, and between the young parents themselves, enabling young men to play a more effective role in their children's lives.

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NOTES

1. The findings in this briefing paper draw on and update the findings reported in Neale, B. and Lau Clayton, C. (2014) 'Young Parenthood and Cross Generational Relationships: The Perspectives of Young Fathers', in J. Holland and R. Edwards (eds.) *Understanding Families Over Time*, London: Palgrave.
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 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 or Carmen Lau Clayton c.lau-clayton@leeds.ac.uk
4. Acknowledgments: The study was funded by the Economic and Social Research Council, Grant no. ES/J022993/1. We are grateful to the young fathers and practitioners for their valuable contributions to this study.
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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