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# HARD TO REACH?

Re-thinking  
Support  
for Young  
Fathers

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# HARD TO REACH? RETHINKING SUPPORT FOR YOUNG FATHERS<sup>1</sup>

## INTRODUCTION

There is a widespread view in research and practice that young fathers are 'hard to reach':

"They do not push themselves to the front of the queue to be engaged by professionals. They will often do the opposite and make themselves scarce" (Nicoll et al 1999: 4).

This perception is pervasive; it has become part of the orthodoxy of professional knowledge and thinking about young fathers. However, as Reeves (2006: 80) notes, while young fathers are said to rarely turn to professionals for assistance, fathers themselves report that their needs as service users often go unacknowledged.

Further, across a variety of professional contexts, practitioners report a lack of knowledge of young fathers, while young fathers report feeling excluded by professionals (Ross et al 2010; Ferguson 2015). This gulf in perceptions implies that practitioners and young fathers are operating in parallel universes, with limited understanding on either side.

This is of concern because it is clear that young fathers value their children, wish to 'be there' for them, and that where they are engaged positively this is beneficial to all (briefing paper no. 1). It is also clear that they may face a raft of challenges in 'being there', and that they both need and

value professional support. This is particularly so for fathers in their teenage years, or where entry into parenthood is unplanned, parental relationships are difficult or contact with the child is tenuous.

Where young fathers are living with material disadvantages and/or a lack of family support, their needs may be extensive, ranging from parenting, relationships, legal, sexual and mental health guidance, to practical help with education, training, employment, housing and finances.

Effective provision, however, is likely to be hampered where practitioners do not routinely collect information about young fathers or necessarily see them as clients of their services. They may have little knowledge of their lives, and lack strategies and the confidence to engage with them (Deslauriers et al 2012).

In this briefing paper we provide an overview of the support needs and experiences of the young men in our study (31 young men in our longitudinal sample and four others recruited as clients of particular services, aged between 14 and 24 at the point of entry into parenthood<sup>2</sup>).

Drawing on both client and practitioner accounts, we consider how young fathers are perceived and treated in their various encounters with professional agencies.

In seeking to contribute new insights

on the effectiveness of such support, we address a key question posed by Hadley (2014): Are young fathers hard to reach? Or is it more the case that services are hard to access?

## ENGAGEMENT WITH SERVICES

The young men in our study were engaged with a wide variety of agencies (specialist and generic, statutory and voluntary) across different dimensions of their lives, and at different times in their parenting journeys.

The needs of these young men varied greatly, as did the nature and extent of this engagement over time. All the young men had encounters to varying degrees with universal health services during and after the pregnancy. Some also had specific needs relating to their parenting circumstances, for example, those who had sought legal advice over contact issues, or help with housing or employment.

Some had extensive needs that brought them into the orbit of a wider range of agencies. Adam and his partner were involved with 11 separate agencies over time. While this engagement was appreciated it was not well co-ordinated; the young man was at saturation point. At the other end of the spectrum, those engaged primarily with statutory agencies such as Social Services, the Child and Family Court Advisory and Support Service (CAFCASS), or the Criminal

## KEY FINDINGS

- Young fathers aspire to 'be there' for their children and to be treated as clients of services. In the right circumstances, they place a high value on professional support.
- Their engagement is hampered by widespread assumptions in policy and practice that they are 'hard to reach' i.e. that they are 'risky' and/or 'feckless'. The 'hard to reach' label stigmatises them and places the responsibility for engaging with services firmly with them. Turning this notion around

requires a focus on the services themselves and how far they are 'hard to access'.

- Interactions between young fathers and practitioners may take the form of surveillance, side-lining, or support. All three may be combined in the same service.
- Side-lining creates a vicious circle of disengagement and distrust. Turning this into a virtuous circle of engagement and support requires mainstream

services to address their side-lining practices, and to adopt some of the creative strategies used in specialist services to build trust and support.

- This process would be helped by seeing young fathers in a different way: replacing negative images of their risky and feckless behaviour with more positive images of their commitment to their children and their capacity to care.



Justice System (CJS), reported feeling unsupported and isolated as they grappled with a raft of parenting issues:

“I haven’t got no-one really to speak to in terms of, like, talking about what’s happening with [my] son and all. So ... I’m on my own now pretty much. So I don’t like speaking to people I know ... like ... my family. If you say something to them, they’d come back and say, ‘oh blah blah blah’. ... They don’t really listen to what you say. I’d like someone to speak to. ... Someone to listen and give me advice, but ... I wouldn’t know where to start” (Jimmy, former recipient of Local Authority mentoring scheme, engaged with CAFCASS and the CJS).

In terms of specialist parenthood and relationship guidance, 4 young men had been referred to community based parenting programmes by social services protection teams or magistrates, while a further 2 had benefitted from such provision while in custody. Seventeen young men in the study had received specialist mentoring, including parenting classes for young fathers, part of an expansion of provision for young parents under New Labour’s ten year Teenage Pregnancy Strategy.

### **SURVEILLANCE, SIDE-LINING, SUPPORT**

Practitioners used varied strategies to engage with young fathers - characterised here as surveillance, side-lining or support. These create striking differences in the way young fathers experience, respond to and, in turn, shape these encounters.

These varied approaches are not mutually exclusive or confined to particular services. They are part of a repertoire of responses used by professionals within and across different agencies and in varied circumstances. As we show below, they may be combined in creative ways, for example where surveillance is tempered by a supportive, redemptionist ethos. These complex and overlapping patterns reflect the considerable degree of discretion used by practitioners in their dealings with young fathers.

In exploring these different approaches below we have tried to move beyond blanket categorisations of fathers, or the practitioners who work with them, as ‘good’ or ‘bad’, and to recognise the complex constellation of dynamic factors - institutional, organisational and interpersonal - that create distinctive interactions between young fathers and practitioners over time (Delauriers et al 2012; Maxwell et al 2012; Ferguson 2015).

### **SURVEILLANCE**

The notion that young fathers are irresponsible and a potential risk to themselves or to their children is widespread in professional practice (Maxwell et al 2012); While a risk framework is necessary, indeed essential where there are safeguarding issues, this perception is not limited to child protection or youth justice agencies, but pervades generic health and social care services.

Eleven young men had been referred to the CJS, to social services child protection teams, or for supervised contact through the Child and Family Court Advisory and Support Service (CAFCASS). Of these, five had been in custody. There were significant underlying fears among these young men that their parenting credentials were discredited or not recognised, that contact would be denied or that their children might be taken away. Interactions with these ‘surveillance’ agencies were experienced as unsupportive.

They felt stigmatised by what they perceived as a lack of respect from professionals. The fathers described having to ‘jump through hoops’ to try to get these professionals ‘off our case’. Supervised contact made young fathers feel uncomfortable, removed their confidence and inhibited their spontaneity as parents. There were

few opportunities in these settings to talk through problems, acquire skills, gain confidence or work out alternative strategies for managing their parental roles and relationships.

The young men talked of these encounters as a subterranean battle of wills that required them to outwit their interrogators. Whatever the rationale and need for these interventions, these attitudes among the young men were counterproductive, with a greater likelihood that the interventions would be ineffective:

“If I say summat they don’t really know what I’m on about. ... They’re using all these big fancy words and I’m using this slang and all that. ... They [should] use more sort of jolly words like just ‘hey’ instead of ‘hello’ and what have you. You know what I mean? ‘This is a recorded PPI’. Just speak more English! ... They do a lot of that when they want to confuse you. ... I feel like I’ve got to act perfect ... do what they say and if I don’t then summat bad is gonna happen. ... So I’ve got to just listen and keep it in (Adam, Social Services Case Review).

“I don’t like it ... when someone’s watching you. ... You feel stupid ‘cause ... you’ve got people looking down on you. You can’t, you can’t play with your kids properly. You don’t want to start pulling dodgy faces and that, you know what I mean. You can’t have a proper laugh with [your kids]. ... You just, you [want to] feel more confident. You ... don’t [want to] feel like a bloody criminal” (Callum, supervised contact, CAF/CASS).

“[They should] try to speak on their level. Give everyone a chance. Don’t judge people, you know what I mean. But most [practitioners] did just look down at you a little bit, like, especially midwives” (Cade, Ante-natal services).

### SIDE-LINING

A more subtle, pervasive and arguably pernicious way in which negative perceptions of young fathers find expression is through side-lining – passively ignoring or neglecting young men or actively excluding them. Side-lining can occur at an organisational level, through failing to publicise services to young men, keeping them in ignorance about what support is available, whether they are eligible, and how to access it. But more active and targeted exclusion is also evident.

In settings such as children’s centres, young men may be politely shown the door, effectively barred from establishing their credentials as a parent, let alone being invited to express or discuss their needs (Osborn 2015; Davies and Neale 2015).

There are several underlying explanations for side-lining that, taken together, reinforce and entrench this practice. It is most often explained as gender bias - a perceived need to focus resources and services on mothers as the primary carers. As Gilligan et al (2012) note, while the stigma of early parenthood touches both mothers and fathers, young mothers alone are usually seen to have a legitimate claim to their children, and the right to determine the nature and extent of the father’s involvement, particularly where

the parents are not in an ongoing relationship. This leaves a great deal of ambivalence about the credentials of young fathers to be seen as clients of parenting services.

Indeed a gender bias can be accompanied by a deeper suspicion, distrust, and lack of knowledge of young fathers. This creates further ambivalence over their motives and credentials as parents, and fosters a culture in which they are seen as either too risky to work with, or too feckless – disinterested and irresponsible - to bother with (Deslauriers et al 2012; Ferguson 2015).

Where young fathers are school age, single, or from low income families they are particularly likely to be viewed in this way. As a result, young fathers may quickly become invisible or at least, unseen in practice circles (Osborne 2015).

These negative perceptions of young fathers, in themselves, create a major barrier to their positive engagement. The young men, on their part, may also engage in side-lining. They are more likely to avoid services or disengage when they keenly feel the stigma of their early entry into parenthood, and when they are aware of the general ambivalence of professionals towards them (Deslauriers et al 2012).

An experience of being side-lined in one setting can colour their perceptions, fuelling distrust in other settings. Their reluctance to engage may also be reinforced by a traditional masculine reluctance to appear ignorant or in need of help (Osborn 2015).





“I said [to the midwife], ‘how come you never ever address me? When you’ve got anything to say about my son you never tell me, it’s always my girlfriend. And I’m left in’t dark, you’re just talking in riddles’. ... She just said it’s easier and she’s mum after all and all this” (Jason, Antenatal services).

A vicious circle may ensue: public perceptions of young fathers feed into organisational and personal mistrust or neglect, which triggers and promulgates reluctance among young fathers to engage. This, in turn, fuels further side-lining on both sides:

“[It was like] I weren’t there. They didn’t speak to me. They didn’t involve me. ... Instead of just leaving me sat there, like, they could have engaged in conversation with me. And ... instead of just talking directly at [mother of the child] and [maternal grandmother] telling them what’s going to happen, [they could] tell me, like explain it to me in a way I understand. ... But they didn’t. ... Looking back, I’d tell [other young fathers] to ... stick their noses in. Like make sure they get involved and ask, definitely. Like, don’t just get left sat there” (Jimmy, Midwives, Health Visiting).  
“It is quite unusual [for young fathers

to access services directly] ... For some reason ... young men are ... not standoffish, but frightened of services” (Young Parent specialist, Connexions service).

“[It’s] benign neglect. But it also tips into exclusion and rudeness” (Head of Commissioning, Local Authority children’s services).

Side-lining practices and experiences in relation to young fathers have been widely reported (Osborn 2015), raising the possibility that the vicious circle has become embedded in institutional cultures, fuelled by broader cultural perceptions of ‘feckless’ young fathers (Neale 2015). It is a practice that fails to accord recognition and respect to young men as parents, and may undermine their efforts to secure a parental role and identity.

### SUPPORT

An ethos of support for young fathers is also evident within professional practice. Taking as a starting point the potential contribution that young men can make to their children’s lives, and the value that parenthood can have for the young men, the aim is to nurture this potential - to build the confidence, skills, identities and responsibilities of

young fathers.

Perhaps inevitably, a supportive ethos finds its clearest expression in specialist, targeted services that are tailored to the needs of young fathers. In this study this included a specialist mentoring service for young fathers, attended by 17 of the young men in our study and funded through the local education authority (Davies and Neale 2015).

The high value placed on this service by the young men in our study was striking:

“[It was] the best support you can have really. ... I didn’t have a clue what I was doing, like, I was skiving school ... but he got me referred onto college, and that got me back into education, right. ... And like he’d take us out places ... So we’d get to bond with us kids instead of the mother being there ... And socialising with other young fathers, you know, in the same shoes as us. ... Well, I’d have been lost [without him]” (Darren, Local Authority learning mentor scheme).

“The support I got from college was to help me financially ... But he’s helped me a lot emotionally. ... ’cause I didn’t sort of have emotional boundaries, that - I couldn’t care less about anything. So to get things off my chest with him ... like someone I could talk to as a friend, but wasn’t a friend cos he was a professional. ... It helped me sort of stabilise myself” (Adam, Local Authority, learning mentor scheme).

“He’s got his, like, professional voice and that. But when he’s talking to you he’s, he’s just like a mate. You can just tell him owt and talk to him properly. And he’s just totally down to earth. ... I did a fathers group that he ran ... like how to bath a baby. And one time [laughs] they brought in these pretend pregnancy things – in the belly it had loads of weights - so you’d know how it felt to be pregnant. ... [then] I was doing peer mentoring ... like you’d help other teenage fathers and stuff. ... It felt like I’m needed to do summat, like I’m wanted, if you know what I mean. ... I don’t know where I’d be now if it weren’t for him. ... He does teach you. And he makes you think about things ... in the right way. And makes you see sense. And that’s helped me a lot in life ’cause I’ve been in a lot of dark places. ... If you can see yourself going down hill, you want to stop it. And he makes you see that” (Callum, Local Authority, learning mentor scheme).

The service combined emotional support and counselling; practical help and co-ordinated referrals to other agencies; and an educational, peer mentoring and social programme exclusively for young fathers. This created a unique blend of holistic support. Crucially, it was triggered at an early stage in the young men’s transitions into parenthood, and sustained over time. But perhaps the key factor in its effectiveness was the mode of delivery: flexible, impartial, genial and approachable.

This practitioner was able to engender the vital elements of trust and mutual respect in the young men, through which the vicious circle was broken and replaced by a virtuous circle of engagement and support. He was also able to advocate on behalf of his clients, attending referrals with them and promoting an ethos of engagement and support across mainstream provision.

### DEVELOPING AN ETHOS OF ENGAGEMENT AND SUPPORT

It is difficult to gauge how far a supportive approach has been adopted across health, social care



and other mainstream agencies. The young men in our study reported supportive encounters with a range of mainstream services, including health visiting, probation, the CAF/CASS family law service, and the Connexions service. But professional perceptions indicate this occurs in pockets of provision rather than being widespread:

“You see some individual hospitals or individual midwifery teams who’ve really taken the needs of young fathers on board, but, you know, if we’re to look nationally, then they’re few and far between” (Young parent specialist, Connexions service).

Currently, the approach seems to be driven by ‘local champions’ for young fathers, practitioners residing on the margins of statutory provision or in the voluntary sector, who are pioneering new ways to develop their services for young fathers, and are prepared to ‘go the extra mile’, to meet their needs.

The task of creating a virtuous circle of engagement and support may mean more than bringing young fathers into the fold. It suggests the need to meet them halfway, through creative initiatives that rely on an

appreciation and acceptance of their lived experiences (Deslauriers et al 2012; Hogg 2014).

A voluntary sector practitioner, for example, recounted his strategy for encouraging attendance at his parenting group:

“Well, you know, you have to think outside the box. ... When you put out good food the dads will come. ... I’ve started calling it Fry Up Thursdays. ... These dads are getting ... a good hearty breakfast. And it brings them in” (Young fathers’ worker, Voluntary Sector Organisation).

Where young fathers themselves have the capacity and confidence to engage, this can also help to change the culture of professional practice:

“I’ll observe, listen and then, you know, the midwife, I’ll ask a question and then the midwife will answer. And then she’ll be like, ‘oh yeah, yeah. Just to remind you, I’m not just here for the mother to be. Any questions you want to ask, I’ll answer” (Iman, middle income, Ante natal services).

But there can be challenges for young men without a vocabulary or etiquette for professional engagement.

Self help and peer support schemes are valuable here, for they can help young fathers to find a collective voice. This increases their capacity to exercise their agency, to gain confidence as 'experts by experience', and to speak out about their identities, values and needs. Johnson, for example, describes his experiences of developing a role as a spokesperson for young fathers through the Young Dads Council (Colfer et al 2015, on the work of Young Dads TV and the Young Dads Council):

"I know now that it's OK for men to have a little gossip about things they're going through, you don't have to be afraid of what people think" (Johnson, in Colfer et al 2015: 343).

### COMPLEMENTARY STRATEGIES

The professional approaches outlined above are not mutually exclusive but

are found operating along side each other. A young fatherhood programme developed by a staff nurse in a Secure Training Centre (briefing paper no. 5) shares many of the features of the mentoring service outlined above. The provision is non-judgemental, flexible, comprehensive, tailored specifically to the needs of young fathers, delivered by people who care, and highly valued by the young men. In this case the service operates within the criminal justice system, providing a supportive ethos to temper the dominant culture of surveillance and risk.

In similar vein, for young parents with complex needs, the intensive, home based support provided by the Family Nurse Partnership (FNP) can balance the protectionist concerns of social services and reduce the stigma felt by young parents. The scheme is supportive in its ethos, avoiding a culture of blame and offering positive and transformative experiences for the participants. While the focus is on mothers and babies, nurses use their discretion to engage young fathers who are present during a visit (Ferguson 2015). This was the case

for Adam, who valued the service and found it a foil to social services surveillance.

In his study of the Family Nurse Partnership scheme, Ferguson (2011) shows how the nurses may choose from a repertoire of surveillance, side-lining or support strategies in their dealing with the young men.

This allows them to respond flexibly to different circumstances and draw on their interactions with and knowledge of the young men. While some young men are fully engaged with the family nurses, Ferguson shows how difficult it is for the nurses to engage with the most marginalised young men, those whose deep experiences of social suffering required sustained therapeutic support from specialist agencies. Ferguson's findings reinforce the need for complementary provision across generic and specialist services and effective referrals between the two.

## POLICY AND PRACTICE IMPLICATIONS

Our evidence suggests the need to re-think the idea that young fathers are 'hard to reach' and to develop alternative understandings of these young men that recognise the complex interactions that shape their engagements with services. It is worth recalling that the 'hard to reach' label is stigmatising, placing the responsibility for a perceived lack of engagement on 'hard to reach' people themselves (Osborn 2015; Davies 2016).

Refocusing attention on how services respond to young fathers reveals that support is often 'hard to access' (Hadley, 2014). As a first step in tackling this issue, there is a need to address the side-lining practices of health and social care organisations and the underlying assumptions that drive these practices - the notion that young fathers are 'feckless' or 'risky' and thereby 'hard to reach'.

These assumptions create a vicious circle of disengagement and mistrust. Changing a side-lining culture, however, will take time. While breaking the circle is clearly possible, it relies on creative thinking and responses on the part of professional practice. Specialist input to take this work forward is invaluable. As we have seen, these 'local champions' of young fathers can not only generate virtuous circles of engagement and support but can lead the way in brokering this ethos in mainstream settings.

While effective engagement relies on the quality of client-practitioner relationships, the responses of individual service providers represents only one dimension of the process. The structure and organisation of service provision, and the balance between generic and specialist support are also fundamentally important (Reeves et al 2009; Osborn 2015; Davies 2016).

As we have seen, an ethos of support and engagement is part of the repertoire of practitioner responses in a variety of health, social care and other professional settings. But it is more likely to be 'tacked on' to mainstream services, or to be the product of practitioner discretion, than to be robustly embedded in the culture and organisation of mainstream provision (Osborn 2015). There is a danger, too, that the 'hard to reach' label may be used to justify 'hiving off' provision to specialist services alone (Osborn 2015).

Perhaps the first step in making young fathers 'count' in mainstream settings is the simple expedient of counting them. New auditing tools, developed by the Fatherhood Institute for local authority use, are showing that the process of identifying and thereby recognising young fathers can be highly effective in fostering a new culture of engagement (Osborn 2014).

Effective engagement also requires professional training and the provision of well co-ordinated support and continuity of care between agencies, and across the mix of generic and specialist services (Reeves et al 2009).

Finally, the timing and sustainability of support for young fathers is critical. Early support is vital; it is when young fathers are undergoing the transition to parenthood that their fledgling identities as parents need to be nurtured. It is at this time too, when they are likely to be most willing to acquire new skills without the stigma of seeming vulnerable or 'in need'. However, the focus on early engagement should not detract from the value of sustained support that can be mobilised flexibly as and when needed to provide a safety net over time.

These organisational dimensions, in turn, require a number of structural building blocks, not least, clear policy directives and sufficient resources of staff and funding that can be secured and sustained over time (Davies 2016).

These are the vital pre-requisites in changing the culture of professional practice so that young fathers are no longer discounted as 'hard to reach', 'disinterested' or 'risky', but sought out and welcomed as clients with a valuable contribution to make to their children's lives.

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## NOTES

- 1 The Findings in this briefing paper are reported in full in Neale, B. and Davies, L. (2016) Hard to Reach? Re-thinking professional support for young fathers, *Youth and Policy*, 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](http://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](mailto:b.neale@leeds.ac.uk)
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