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& Social Policy**

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# ENGAGED YOUNG FATHERS?:

**Gender,  
Parenthood and  
the Dynamics  
of Young  
Relationships**

**Bren Neale &  
Ruth Patrick**

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**Following Young Fathers  
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# Engaged Young Fathers?

## Gender, Parenthood and the Dynamics of Relationships

Bren Neale and Ruth Patrick<sup>1</sup>

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### Abstract

Drawing on an extended longitudinal study of the lived experiences and support needs of young fathers, this working paper follows the fortunes of 31 young men through the process of becoming a parent. The paper begins with some reflections on the nature of existing evidence on young fathers. In 2010, at the outset of our study, we discovered a paradox in researching this topic. On the one hand, young fathers had been neglected in social scientific research and marginalised in policy discourses and in professional practice (see Neale 2016, Neale and Davies 2015 and for parallel developments in a US context, Parikh 2005). On the other hand, they loomed large in popular media and political discourses, where they are commonly represented in negative terms as ‘troubled’ youth and feckless parents (Duncan 2007).

In order to address this gap in the evidence base, we sought to understand how young fatherhood is experienced and practiced, and what factors influence the capacity of young men to establish and sustain a paternal role. Our particular focus in this working paper is the shifting nature and quality of young fathers’ relationships with the mothers of their children, and how this in turn impacts on their paternal engagement. We also explore the gendered ideologies and values that underpin these processes. These emerged as pivotal issues for the young men in this study. We conclude with a brief reflection on the policy implications of the findings<sup>2</sup>.

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<sup>2</sup> For a more detailed discussion of policy issues see Neale 2016. Our companion publications explore a wider array of intersecting factors that shape the parenting journeys of young fathers, including sexual



## Introduction.

The entry of young people into early parenthood is a longstanding issue for both social policy and 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 2015). The majority of these pregnancies are unplanned, with about half resulting in the birth of a child (ONS 2015). However, the extent to which this should be regarded as a social problem is a contested issue (Duncan 2007, Arai 2009, Duncan *et al* 2010, Neale 2016). It is also commonly agreed that the majority of young fathers, defined as those who enter parenthood below the age of 25, live in disadvantaged circumstances. They have few material or financial resources to contribute to parenting, and face a combination of relational, socio-economic and environmental (housing) constraints and challenges that can severely hamper their parenting efforts (Pirog-Good 1995; Kiernan 1995; Johnson 2001; Swann *et al* 2003; Bunting and McAuley 2004, Parikh 2005; Tyrer *et al* 2005; Reeves 2006; Trivedi *et al* 2009; Neale and Davies 2015a; 2016; Ladlow and Neale 2016). Of particular relevance for this paper, their childhoods are commonly reported to be marked by family insecurity, rejection, loss, stress and mental health problems. These issues need to be addressed and overcome if they are to establish and sustain trusting and supportive relationships in adulthood (see, for example, Caldwell and Antonucci 1997, Wiggins *et al* 2005).

There is another feature of the existing evidence base that is worth highlighting here. While there is a growing body of research on young motherhood, commentators frequently point to the limited and partial evidence on young fatherhood, both in the UK and internationally. Indeed, reviews of the literature are almost as numerous as the studies themselves. For example, in their overview of evaluations of pregnancy prevention and parenting support for young men, from 1996 to 2008, Trivedi and colleagues (2009) found 3 quantitative and 15 qualitative studies, of which 9 were UK based (see also reviews in Swann *et al* 2003; Bunting and McAuley 2004; Parikh 2005, Trivedi *et al* 2007; Tuffin *et al*

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health and agency, and the familial, socio-economic, environmental (housing) and youth justice dimensions of these processes (Neale, Patrick and Lau Clayton 2017; Neale and Lau Clayton 2014; Neale and Davies 2016; Neale and Ladlow 2015; Ladlow and Neale 2016; see also the following young fathers briefing paper series, [www.followingfathers.leeds.ac.uk](http://www.followingfathers.leeds.ac.uk) .

2010; Lau Clayton 2016). Moreover, a good many of these studies focus on young mothers, and include a subsample of young fathers by virtue of their status as the mothers' partners (e.g. Quinton et al 2002; Gibbin 2003; Higginbottom et al 2005). Relatively few studies have recruited young fathers directly or focused exclusively on their needs and experiences. Indeed much teenage parenthood research might be more accurately identified as young motherhood research (Parikh 2005) with only a handful of contemporary young fathers included in the samples (see, for example, Formby et al 2010 and Alexander et al 2010). The over-reliance on recruiting partnered young fathers, either via the mothers or through health or social services, has created an imbalance in the evidence base. It has meant a neglect of the substantial proportions of young men who are single, and who may therefore face different, and arguably greater challenges in establishing and sustaining a paternal role and identity (Wiggins et al 2005, Trivedi et al 2009, Lohan et al 2010). The overall effect has been the creation of a small-scale, scattered and somewhat skewed evidence base, making it difficult to build an accurate picture of young fatherhood.

This vacuum in the research evidence has contributed to an impression that young fathers are either invisible or absent (Coleman 1998: 311). Combined with the knowledge that most young fathers are socially deprived, there has been a tendency among some researchers to perpetuate negative stereotypes of them as uncaring or indifferent (critiqued in particular by Parikh 2005 and Tuffin et al 2010). To give one example, in her analysis of data from the US National Longitudinal Survey of Labor Market Experiences, Maureen Pirog-Good suggests that the poverty and lack of agency that marks the lives of young fathers goes hand in hand with 'irresponsible behaviour concerning one's children.' (Pirog-Good (1995: 373; see also Miller 1997, and for an excellent overview of such studies, Tuffin et al 2010). Based on an uncritical acceptance of the notion of inter-generational cycles of disadvantage, vulnerability is, in itself, seen as a risk factor, leading to concerns about safeguarding issues for the mothers and their children (Neale and Davies 2015; Webb 2008). A further related assumption is that young men's aspirations to engage positively with their children are no more than idealised and romantic perceptions of fatherhood, born of their vulnerability (reported in Trivedi et al 2009).

These negative perceptions of the capacity of young men to be responsible and trustworthy, to sustain positive adult relationships, or to take a direct caring role for a child

are commonly perpetuated; indeed, they have become part of the orthodoxy of professional and public understandings of young fathers. Perhaps the most pernicious public perception of these young men is that they are 'feckless' i.e. that they impregnate young women 'here, there and everywhere' while running away from the responsibilities of parenthood (for recent critiques see Neale 2016, Neale and Davies 2015a; Neale et al 2017). Young men themselves are keen to distance themselves from such stereotypical views (Johnson 2015; Neale et al 2017 forthcoming), but they can impact upon their reputations and relationships, particularly with the young mothers and the maternal family<sup>3</sup>. And they can affect the way young fathers respond to or seek to engage with professional support (Parikh 2005; Neale and Davies 2015a and b; Neale 2016). The commonly held practitioner view that young fathers are 'hard to reach' and therefore too challenging to support, is one manifestation of this stigma. In a broader policy context too, there is a widespread view that early parenthood is a social ill that needs to be prevented or, at the least, its worst effects ameliorated (see critiques in Duncan 2007, Arai 2009, Duncan *et al* 2010; Neale 2016). As a result, policies have been either punitive or neglectful (Parikh 2005: 20). 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 their children, the mothers, and the young men themselves.

There are some important exceptions to this rather woeful picture. Running alongside these developments, there has been a small strand of qualitative research, dating from the 1980s in the UK, the US and elsewhere, that has highlighted the capacity of young men to care deeply for their children, to aspire to 'be there' as loving and committed parents, and to respond positively when focused support is offered (see, for example, Hendriks and Montgomery 1983; Marsiglio, 1993; Rhein et al 1997, Speak et al 1997, Johnson 2001, Quinton et al 2002, Morduant 2005; Tyrer et al 2005, Wiggins et al 2005, Reeves 2006, Ayoola et al 2010; Tuffin et al 2010)<sup>4</sup>. Studies such as these have gained momentum over the past decade and begun to offer a more substantial challenge to the

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<sup>3</sup> Young mothers also face negative stereotypes, see Wenham 2016.

<sup>4</sup> A recent large scale comparative study (Grundy and Foverskov 2016) compared health related outcomes across Western and Eastern European countries for earlier generations of men and women (born between 1923 and 1961), who had had children early in their lives. The researchers found that outcomes were generally better for the latter countries, where acceptance of early parenthood and the provision of support services were notably greater. This indicates that outcomes are not inevitable, for they may be influenced by public understanding and the provision of professional support.

dominant narratives. Young fathers commonly adopt a discourse of emerging adult responsibility towards their children that replaces their youthful risky behaviour, and from which they derive a new meaning and purpose in life. There is, too, a desire to do things differently from their own fathers (what Tuffin and colleagues (2010) call a discourse of inter-generational repair; see also Reeves 2006, and for reviews of more recent studies in this vein, see Trivedi et al 2009, Tuffin et al 2010 and Lau Clayton 2016).

Our own study follows in the tradition of this 'alternative' strand of research. We conducted a qualitative longitudinal study which traced the journeys of 31 young men through the process of becoming a parent. We sought to understand how young fatherhood is experienced and practiced, in particular, why young men become parents at an early age, what values they may hold about parenthood and family life, what support they need, and what influences their capacity to establish and sustain a role as a parent. Across the study as a whole we explored a complex array of intersecting factors that shaped the young men's parenting journeys.

Here we focus on the nature and quality of the young men's relationships with the mothers of their children as a key driver of these processes. This emerged as a central theme in our research, as it has done in other studies (Rhein et al 1997, Speak et al 1997, Quinton et al 2002 Bunting and McAuley 2004). In this working paper we attempt to unpick the gendered ideologies and values around parenting that underpin these processes. Before turning to our empirical evidence, we present an overview of the wider literature on gendered ideologies of parenthood, and we outline details of our methodology and the characteristics of our sample that are pertinent to the themes explored here.

### ***Shifting ideologies of parenthood***

Gendered ideologies of parenthood are continually shifting over time, creating tensions between potentially competing sets of values. Despite this fluid picture, there is a strongly ingrained and widely held assumption that mothers are the primary carers of their children, placing fathers in a more peripheral role in terms of direct care, and with their primary responsibility linked to their provider role (Neale and Davies 2016). Recent estimates suggest that around 97% of primary caring parents are mothers (ONS 2013). While the circumstances of young fathers are varied, they are more likely than older fathers

to have been in casual or short-term relationships with the mothers and, therefore, to enter parenthood as single, non-resident fathers (Poole et al 2013). As such, their experiences are similar to those of divorced or separated fathers. Based on a nationally representative sample of fathers interviewed for the Understanding Society Study, Poole and colleagues (2013) found that 34% of young fathers aged 16-24 are non-resident, compared with 14% of fathers aged 45 and over. Moreover, this is a growing trend. The proportion of single parent households in the UK has tripled over the past 30 years, indicating a growing number of fathers who don't live with their children (ONS 2013; DWP 2010; Poole et al 2013).

For much of the twentieth century, it was common for non-resident fathers in the UK to lose contact with their children over time. Estimates suggest that between 40% and 74% lost contact, the higher incidence occurring among fathers living in disadvantaged socio-economic circumstances (Simpson et al 1995; Bradshaw et al 1999; chapter 6). In the context of separation or divorce, and driven by the idea of a 'clean break,' mothers and their children would seek a new family unit with a surrogate father, while the fathers would commonly start a new family, or join a pre-existing unit of single mother and her children (Bradshaw et al 1999). These practices, in turn, were underpinned by the prevailing ethos for gendered patterns of parenthood: a presumed essentialist and indissoluble tie between mothers and their children (the mother/child dyad), to which fathers or father substitutes could be serially and conditionally attached (McDermott and Graham 2005). In an American context, a similar idea underpins the notion of a *package deal* for fathers, which has become strongly institutionalised in American society (Furstenberg and Cherlin 1991; Townsend 2002, Tach et al 2010). According to this model, fatherhood is not independent of, but largely flows through and is contingent upon the relationship between the mother and child. This pattern has been found to be particularly common among low-income families (Edin and Nelson 2013).

Since the relationship between father and child is commonly mediated through the mother, this can create particular fragility in these relationships after a separation or divorce (Furstenberg and Cherlin 1991, Tach et al 2010). Moreover, this fragility increases where either parent re-partners, for this may 'crowd out' the fathers' obligations to their original children (Tach et al 2010). Indeed, some researchers speculate that it is easier for fathers to use their scarce resources to fulfil the demands of a new family, than to retain

their commitment to their original children (Tach et al 2010). It has also been suggested that it is the change in the mother's circumstances (rather than the father's) that provides most of the momentum for a change in paternal contact arrangements. Fathers tend to be pushed out, rather than drop out (Corlyan and McGuire 1997: 85). Or, as Tach and colleagues put it, it is mothers wishing to swap fathers (rather than fathers choosing to swap children) that drives these changes (Tach et al 2010).

By the same logic, this fragility in contact arrangements is all the more apparent where parents are in fleeting relationships and/or are loosely attached to each other at the time of conception, a scenario that is particularly common among young parents (Kiernan 2005). In these circumstances, it is not so much that the ties between the parents have been broken, but that they were never strongly forged in the first place. As Gilligan and colleagues (2012) note, young mothers alone are seen to have a legitimate claim to their children, and the right to determine the nature and extent of a young father's involvement. These patterns became more pronounced in late 20<sup>th</sup> century Britain through the rise in cohabitation and non-marital parenthood, and the gradual reduction in marriage as the institutional backbone of family life (Clark 1991). Whatever the precise routes into single or non-residential fatherhood, changing patterns of family life in post-war Britain helped to expose the relatively high numbers of non-partnered, non-resident fathers who had limited or no contact with their children. Wider evidence (from the US Fragile Families and Child Wellbeing study<sup>5</sup>) has also highlighted the significance of these relational factors, and indicates that they are just as salient in determining father/child contact as a father's socio-economic status and resources (Tach et al 2010).

However, alongside these changes, and accompanied by the rise in working motherhood and ideals of gender equality, late 20<sup>th</sup> century Britain also saw the emergence of a new ethos of engaged fatherhood and shared parenting. This was founded on the desire of men to take a more active role in the direct care of their children beyond their traditional provider role. The importance of men 'being there' both emotionally and practically for their children has been sharpened in recent years by evidence (drawn

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<sup>5</sup> This is a large-scale longitudinal study of nearly 5,000 children, living in large US cities, who were born between 1998 and 2000, in most cases to unmarried parents. Five waves of data have been gathered and extensively analysed. A 15 year follow up wave was recently conducted ([www.fragilefamilies.princeton.edu](http://www.fragilefamilies.princeton.edu)).



primarily from large-scale studies) of a correlation between engaged fathering and positive outcomes for children. This correlation has been demonstrated along a range of measures, including children's mental health, anti-social behaviour and academic motivation (Flouri 2005; Duncan 2007, Paranjothy et al 2009). This recent ideology has been described in increasingly nuanced language as the emergence of 'new' men, shared or co-parenting, or engaged, involved or intimate fathering (Clark 1991, Dermott 2008; Featherstone 2009; Miller 2010). In the UK it has been reflected in and reinforced through legislative change, notably the Children Act 1989, and the Child Support Act 1991. Subsequent legislation (e.g. The Children and Families Act 2014), has also sought to strengthen fathers' responsibilities for their children, regardless of their marital or residential status, through such provisions as paternal leave<sup>6</sup>.

The extent to which this newer ideology of engaged fatherhood has replaced the ethos of the mother/child dyad, and how far it is reflected in family practices, has been the subject of sustained academic interest and debate (see, for example, Clark 1991 and for a recent review, Dermott and Miller 2015). Thus far, there appears to be little empirical evidence to suggest a wholesale transformation in family practices, founded on a re-ordering of gendered relationships, a relational shift between the parents, durable forms of engaged, paternal subjectivities, and structural reconfigurations of caring and work practises (Dermott and Miller 2015: 184-5). Gender remains 'lurking in the background ... across different situations and never more so than in relation to parenting' (Dermott and Miller 2015: 188). Pre-existing gendered patterns of parenting remain deeply embedded; it would require more than a few short decades for any wholesale change to occur. Whatever factors may lead to refinements in parental roles and responsibilities over time, fathers are more likely to start from an imperative to earn, while mothers start from an imperative to care (Neale and Smart 2002).

Even so, there is evidence to suggest that mothers are well aware of the new ethos of engaged fatherhood, and may adopt it where relationships between the parents are positive and where fathers have demonstrated a strong commitment to their children and a willingness to support the mothers as the primary carers (Carlson et al 2008). Whatever

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<sup>6</sup> At the same time, however, recent reforms in legal aid provision are making it harder for fathers to pursue contact through the family courts.

their gatekeeping role, mothers can also be gate ‘openers’ in facilitating the relationships between a father and his child (Parke 2002, Reeves et al 2009). Recent surveys also reflect this trend; they report a rise in the incidence of sustained contact between non-resident fathers and their children, with only 10% losing all contact over time (although the cessation of contact remains a more pronounced pattern among those living in impoverished socio-economic circumstances (Poole et al 2013)). Overall, then, the evidence suggests that while wholesale changes in parenting practices have yet to materialise, there are small pockets of change occurring, both historically and biographically. These reflect both the heterogeneity of fathers’ circumstances and characteristics, and the fluidity of individual life journeys. Such scattered patterns represent the seeds of change, the incremental steps through which wider transformations may eventually occur. Whatever the wider picture, there is undoubted value in exploring the nature and extent of reconfigured parenting practices in different contexts of change, however minute they may be (Dermott and Miller 2015).

To what extent these shifts in gendered parenting values and practices apply to young fathers, who may lack the resources to ‘provide’ in any material sense, and are more likely to be single and non-resident, is an under-researched topic. Existing evidence is limited and somewhat mixed,<sup>7</sup> but suggests overall that, in both the UK and US, there is a relatively high incidence of relationship breakdown between young parents, particularly in the first year of the child’s life (Tabberer et al 2000). This, in turn, is linked to decreasing paternal contact with children (Bunting and McAuley 2004). Young parents tend to give conflicting reasons for this, with young women lamenting the father’s lack of interest, while

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<sup>7</sup> The main evidence drawn upon here is international in scope and reviewed in some detail by Bunting and McAuley (2004). Toledo-Dreves et al (1995), for example, reported a relatively high incidence of stable relationships in their sample of 89 African-American young mothers, with 66% maintaining their family relationships at the two year follow up. However, longitudinal research conducted over more extensive periods of time indicate that such relationships deteriorate over time. Larson et al (1996) for example, report that, among their sample of 241 teenage mothers, 60% of fathers were involved with their children in the immediate aftermath of the birth, but only 25% were still involved at the follow up, some three and a half years later. Moreover, the engagement was intermittent. Similar findings are reported by Furstenberg et al (1987), who conducted a 17 year follow up of a sample of 400 African American teenage mothers. They found that, while nearly half the fathers had resided with their children for some time after the birth only 17% were co-resident parents at the long term follow up, while a further 16% had weekly contact with their children. Similar findings are reported in a UK context (Bunting and McAuley 2004). For example, most of the 13 fathers recruited by Wiggins et al 2005 were in a relationship with the mothers at the time of the pregnancy but none of these relationships were sustained over time. These young men maintained some contact with their children, although the quality and extent of this contact was highly variable. It is worth noting that many of these studies rely predominantly on mothers’ reports, and, all are reporting on the longer term experiences of earlier generational cohorts. In other words, such studies are less likely to reflect the recent rise in the ideology of engaged fatherhood.

young men lament the mother's resistance to their involvement (Rhein et al 1997). In either case, it would seem that there is a widespread acceptance of the ethos of father engagement, with neither parent willing to take the blame when this is curtailed.

One of the aims of this study was to explore whether young fathers (whether partnered or single, co-resident or non-resident, richly or poorly resourced) saw themselves as part of the growing trend towards greater father engagement, and how far the notion of a mother/child dyad remained as a central driving force in the way they negotiated with the mothers of their children. For this age group, the picture is also complicated by the significant role played by grandparents in these processes. We have suggested elsewhere that decision-making tends to reside in the maternal household, running vertically down the generations, rather than being shared laterally between the parents themselves (Neale and Lau Clayton 2014; see also Hudson and Ineichen 1991, Rhein et al 1997, Speak et al 1997, Gavin et al 2002; Bunting and McAuley 2004, Wenham 2016). Here we touch upon this evidence in exploring the place of young fathers in what, at least initially, may take the form of a triad between mothers, children and the maternal grandmothers.

### **The Following Young Fathers Study.**

The findings reported here are drawn from a qualitative longitudinal (QL) study of young fatherhood, conducted in a Northern city in the UK from 2010-15 (findings are available at [www.followingfathers.leeds.ac.uk](http://www.followingfathers.leeds.ac.uk)). The QL methodology is described in detail elsewhere (Neale et al 2015) but some salient points are drawn out here. Taking a qualitative approach to longitudinal enquiry enables a richer, more in-depth understanding of the factors that shape unfolding lives, the mechanisms that lead to upward or downward trajectories over time, and how lived experiences intersect over time with policy and practice processes (Neale 2017). Hardly any of the limited research on young fatherhood in UK settings has taken a dynamic view, or sought to understand the processes by which the lives of young fathers unfold (although in the US and Canada this methodology has generated important insights into young fatherhood, see, for example, Glikman 2004; Negura and Deslauriers 2010; Deslauriers et al 2012). A handful of UK-based longitudinal studies are available but these are primarily quantitative in nature, and report on cohorts from earlier generations, born in the 1970s and 80s (see, for example, Kiernan 1997;

Quinton *et al* 2002; Berrington *et al* 2009; an exception is the work of Shirani (2015), albeit based on very limited case study evidence ).

We were able to generate dynamic evidence on the experiences of two contemporary cohorts of young fathers, who were recruited directly into the study using a variety of routes. Data were gathered over a two to four year period<sup>8</sup>. The baseline cohort consisted of 12 low-income fathers, who were initially tracked over three waves of interviews (2010-2012). This was an opportunity sample, with all but one young man recruited and followed up via a specialist educational support service for young fathers. Further funding enabled us to extend the tracking of the baseline sample, giving a total of five waves of interviews for this cohort (2010-14). We also recruited a second cohort of 19 young fathers into the study. As well as increasing the overall size of the sample, our aim here was to bring greater variation into the sample, both in terms of socio-economic background and engagement (or otherwise) with professional support agencies. This gave a total of 31 young men in the composite sample. Sample attrition was greater among this second group, but we were able to track most of them over two waves of fieldwork (2013-14).

Across the sample as a whole, 12 young men were from middle-income families, and 19 from low-income families. Among the latter group, 14 were low-skilled and living in relatively precarious financial and material circumstances. Ten of this group also disclosed various family hardships and challenges as part of their childhoods, and in their own lives since (and these may have been under-reported among the remainder). Problems affecting their parents, and/or the young men themselves, included drug or alcohol-related problems; physical abuse and issues of domestic violence; custodial sentences; mental health and anger management problems; frequent changes of abode; periods in social care; and tenuous or volatile relationships within and outside their families. Although the nature, extent and severity of these problems varied across the sample, the widely reported correlations between young parenthood and social deprivation were clearly evident for many of these low-skilled, low-income young men (cf. Quinton *et al* 2002, Swann *et al* 2003; Lemay *et al* 2010).

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<sup>8</sup> The fieldwork with fathers was conducted by Carmen Lau Clayton.

At the time of first conception, the young fathers ranged in age from 13 to 24. Over half of the sample (18 young men), were school-age fathers, having conceived their first child between the ages of 13 and 16, with most (15) clustered in the age range 15 to 16. The remaining 13 young men conceived their first child between the ages of 17 and 24, with a fairly even spread across this age range. The relative weighting in our sample towards school age and younger fathers reflects our initial recruitment strategy, but sample boosting with our second cohort achieved a more balanced age range. At the time of their initial interview, 11 young men were of school age, 9 were in their mid to late teens, and the remaining 11 were in their early to mid-twenties.

The relational challenges facing the young men were considerable. At the start of fieldwork, 17 young men were in a relationship with the mother (albeit many of these were tenuous and not based on shared residence), while 14 young men were single, having entered parenthood and 'lone' parenthood simultaneously. By the close of fieldwork, a further five relationships had come to an end, leaving 12 young men who were partnered and 19 (over two-thirds of the sample) as non-resident parents, attempting to establish a parental role outside a couple relationship with the mother.

The intention had been to recruit and interview the young men as near as possible to the point at which a first pregnancy was confirmed (the baseline for the study), but in practice this was difficult to achieve. At this initial research encounter, 5 of the young men were expectant fathers, while 22 had recently entered fatherhood for the first time (in 17 cases the babies were under a year old, while the remainder were 2 to 3 years old). The remaining 4 fathers had had children earlier in their lives, and had primary school-age children at the time of first interview. In most cases, experiences of the transition to fatherhood were relatively recent at first interview, enabling us to capture the young men's reflections at an early stage in the process and to discern changes in their circumstances as they occurred. In five cases we were able to follow the young men prospectively through the transition itself. For those who were further along the path of parenthood, there was a greater focus on their retrospective accounts of the journey into parenthood, alongside reflections on any changes in their practices and values over the early years. Overall, it is worth noting that the prospective longitudinal window provided here into the unfolding lives of these young men is a relatively modest one, covering, in most cases, between two



and four years. The fledgling parental trajectories described here are clearly very much ‘in the making’. Nevertheless, it is possible to discern some distinctive patterns in these trajectories, as the discussion below shows.

## **Journeys into young fatherhood.**

### ***Planned conceptions?***

Twenty nine of the 31 one young fathers in this study conceived their children without advanced planning, and most often in casual, fleeting or fledgling relationships with the child’s mother. In the three cases where the pregnancies were planned, the young men were in longer term relationships with the mothers and had some material resources to contribute to parenthood. In two cases this was a marital relationship (although one marriage broke down during the study). In the vast majority of cases, however, the accounts of the young men reflect the tempo of young lives lived ‘in the moment’, with a discernible lack of agency and planning for the future. While an ethos of shared responsibility was held in principle, there was an assumption that, in practice, the main responsibility for fertility decisions and contraceptive planning resided with the mothers (for a full account see Neale et al 2017). Initial reactions to the news of the pregnancy varied, but the overriding response was shock, disbelief and emotional turmoil, particularly where fleeting relationships had already come to an end. Such negative feelings and responses have been reported in other qualitative studies of the transition to young fatherhood (see, for example, Tyrer et al 2005, Higginbottom et al 2005, Trivedi et al 2009, Lohan et al 2010).

With the benefit of hindsight, a substantial majority of the young men felt that they were not ready for parenthood and, given the choice, they would have delayed this transition (Neale and Davies 2016). This same sense of powerlessness and lack of paternal agency was also evident among the small number of fathers who had subsequent children with the same or a different mother (Neale et al 2017). These cases of multiple partners and children reflect lives that are loosely or serially partnered. The rather fixed categories of single and partnered fathers that are commonly used by researchers do not readily capture these fluid patterns of partnering and parenting operating across households.

The young men also reported a lack of agency over decisions to proceed with the pregnancy. The possibility of terminating the pregnancy was discussed in only seven of these cases and the idea was quickly abandoned (Neale et al 2017 forthcoming). As we show elsewhere (Neale and Lau Clayton 2014), such decisions tend to run ‘vertically’ down the generations within the maternal family, rather than ‘laterally’ between the young parents themselves, a pattern that was then continued into the early years of a child’s life:

Her mother is ... Catholic. She managed to persuade my ex to not have an abortion. ... It was down to her dad and mum saying, ‘we’re having him.’ And obviously I just felt this isn’t your right ... It’s down to ... me and [her]. ... I’ve let it go now, whatever’s happened has happened ... I said, you know, ‘whatever you want, it’s your body’. (Dominic, aged 18, middle income, single)<sup>9</sup>

Overall, the relative powerlessness of the young men over fertility choices reflects the gendered nature of these decision making processes, and the continuing dominance of the mother/child dyad in determining parenting patterns and processes.

### ***Adjusting to and Engaging with the Pregnancy.***

The young men’s accounts illustrate how they attempted to put into practice an ethos of father engagement and responsibility, but how this could be at odds with the assumptions of the mother and the maternal grandparents concerning the primacy of the mother/child bond. In all but one case in this sample, the young men tried to come to terms with their impending fatherhood and take an active role in the pregnancy. This involved being supportive of the primary caring mothers (for it was taken for granted by all concerned that the mothers would take the primary caring role), saving up and providing material resources, and tackling a range of practical, emotional and relational challenges as they navigated the ‘fast track’ to adulthood. Simon was the only father not able to engage in these ways, because he was estranged from the mother and her family and did not find out about the pregnancy until two weeks before the child’s birth. Dominic, aged 16 at the time of his entry into parenthood, also struggled with finding a role at this stage, because he and the mother, who were in a relationship at the time of conception, were separated by the

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<sup>9</sup> After each quotation we have recorded the pseudonyms of the young men, their age at the time of interview, their general income levels, and their relationship status at the close of fieldwork. Some of the quotations are composites, drawn from varied waves of fieldwork.

grandparents. Contact between them was forbidden, resulting in clandestine contact for some months during the pregnancy.

The process of adjustment for the young men commonly involved a sense of loss. They regretted the impending end of their youthful, carefree lives as they strove to curtail smoking, drinking, soft drugs, nights out, and physically dangerous pastimes. As Reeves (2006) and Tuffin et al (2010) found, the young men commonly adopted narratives of emerging adult responsibility to capture the changes in their lives:

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)

I was upset ... nervous, shaking ... because I just thought within myself I felt a bit young, and still a bit, well not wild [laughs] ... I felt that would be the end of my fun basically. (Orlando, aged 24, low income, single)

My mum, she was disappointed in me. It's not the fact that I did it, but that I am so young. ...but if I take responsibility for what I've done then that'll be ok. (Trevor, aged 15, middle-income, single)

I only started getting some common sense when our lass fell on ... I needed to stop acting like an idiot. ... Most blokes, as soon as they find their girl friend's pregnant, they are gone, but I didn't see it that way. ... I just saw it as a better start ... a better way to change in my life. (Darren, aged 23, low-income, partnered)

I just thought, if this is going to come about, this is something 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 28 of these cases, the young men were engaged to varying degrees with the development of the pregnancy, including attending hospital scans and ante-natal 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' appointment that she's had. ... I didn't want her to feel like, just cos we're single, like, I can't come and help her. (Orlando 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 31 young men, was experienced as an emotionally charged turning point, a key moment when they were confronted with the enormity of bringing a new and fragile life into the world. Many of the young men flagged up the instantaneous love and attachment they felt towards their child:

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* anymore. (Callum, aged 19, low-income, single)

I were crying and I've never cried like that before. The first time he cried, the first time he took a bath, had a bottle, I was there to witness all that, which is important for being a father ... not just for the kids, but for his mum. I was there for her as well. (Kevin aged 24, low income, single)

Well if I'm honest, before he was born I was a bit negative ... I didn't want to be a dad, cos for starters I'm unemployed. ... And living in a council flat in a block of smack head flats ... wasn't ideal. ... So I can't give him the best possible life. ... I thought because I didn't like his mother that I wouldn't like him. ... 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)

These accounts reflect the rise of a new emotional literacy that goes hand in hand with the ideology of engaged fatherhood (Dermott and Miller 2015). The accumulation of such experiences during the pregnancy and birth were critical trigger points in generating new paternal identities for a substantial majority of these young men (a finding also reported in Kiernan 2005, in relation to non-residential fathers more generally). These processes can be regarded as incremental steps that cumulate to create a significant life course transition. Whatever the circumstance at the point of conception, by the time of the birth, these children were far from unwanted. The maturity and emotional fluency with which so many of these young men recounted their developing sense of responsibility and attachment to their children is a pertinent counter to the narratives that stereotype and stigmatise young fathers.

## **Developing a Relationship with a Child.**

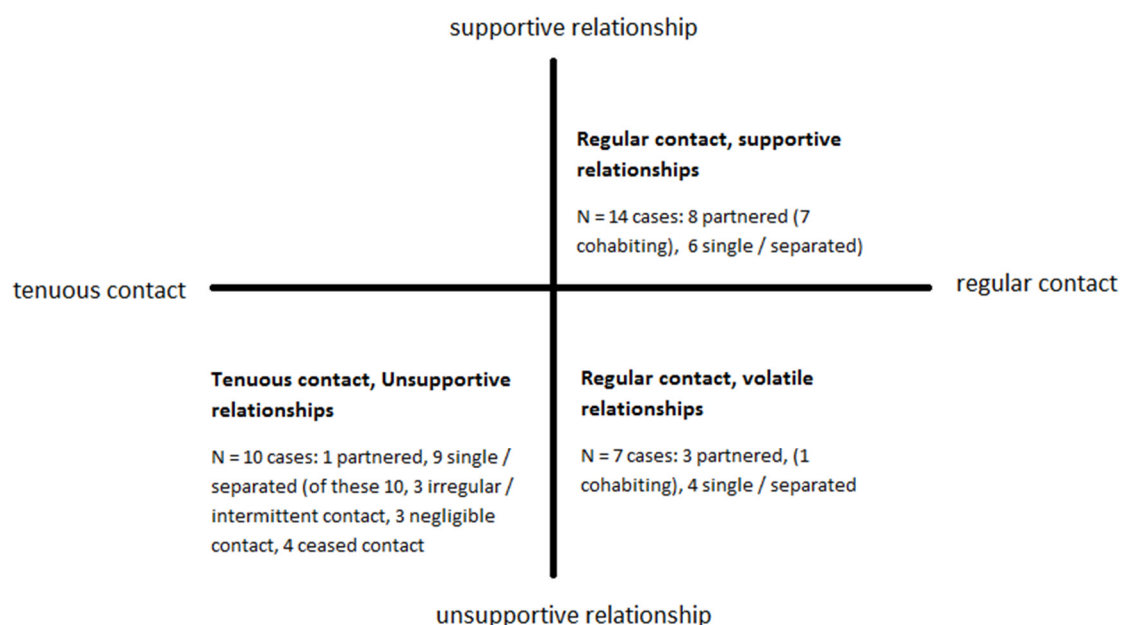
The vast majority of the young men in this study desired to 'be there', as emotionally engaged carers of their children, motivated, in some cases, by the wish to be more 'hands-on' than their own fathers had been (Bunting and McAuley 2004, Tuffin et al 2010). This adherence to the ethos of engaged fatherhood has been reported widely in recent qualitative studies of young fathers (see, for example, Bunting and McAuley 2004, Lemay et al 2010, Tuffin et al 2010, Kiselica 2011). In this study, this commitment was evident regardless of the partnership or co-resident status with the mother. However, the extent to which the young men were able to fulfil this aspiration varied across the sample. A spectrum of contact arrangements was in place, ranging from young fathers living with their children and sharing their lives on a daily basis, to non-resident young fathers with no contact at all. These patterns were complicated further for they were not static but constantly shifting over the course of the study.

Even for the most engaged and highly committed young men in this study, the journey into parenthood was far from straightforward. The challenges took a variety of forms. Some were of a material and practical nature – a lack of financial resources and/or stable living environments, which could affect the social standing and reputations of the young men and their ability to take on a provider role for their children (Bunting and McAuley 2004; Neale and Ladlow 2015, Neale and Davies 2016). Even for relatively skilled and potentially employable young men this could be a problem. Having a child could lead to modifications in their educational and employment aspirations and trajectories, and lead them to face a triple burden of earning, learning and caring (Neale and Davies 2016). But the most immediate challenges were of a relational nature, those bound up with the nature and quality of relationships between the young men and the mothers, and, by extension, with both sets of grandparents (Neale and Lau Clayton 2014; a finding also reported more widely, see Gavin et al 2002, Bunting and McAuley 2004). For both partnered and single young men in this study, there were notable examples of stable working relationships between the parents, which developed as a solid foundation for a joint parenting project, often across two households. But, at the other end of the spectrum, there were examples of relational problems that led to tenuous contact or its cessation over time (Lau Clayton 2015).

However the relationship between the parents was defined, across our varied sample we found a close link between the quality of these relationships and the nature,



extent and regularity of contact with their children. This is a widely reported finding for fathers in general, whether they are partnered and sharing residence with their children, or single and non-resident (Bronte-Tickew and Horowitz 2010, Poole et al 2014). The nature of this link, however, is complex; there is no simple or direct correlation between the partnered status of parents and child contact. Looking across the sample, it was possible to develop a typology that captured whether fathers were in regular or tenuous contact with their children, and how this mapped on to the quality of their relationships with the mothers. The young men fell into three groups at any one time. The first group enjoyed regular contact with their child in circumstances where they had developed or sustained supportive and ongoing relationships with the child's mother. A further seven also had regular contact, but with much more volatile relationships with the mother. A third group had tenuous or no contact with their child, in circumstances where the relationship with the mother was unsupportive. We say more about this typology below, but it is worth noting here that our categories are not static: relatively few of the young men stayed in one category throughout the period of fieldwork. Our reporting here relates primarily to the circumstances of the young men at the conclusion of the empirical study.



Looking, first of all, at the spectrum of contact across the horizontal plane, it was striking that 21 of the 31 young men in the study were located in the right hand quadrants of the plane. By the end of the study period these young men were seeing their children at regular and usually frequent intervals. Those who were co-resident (8 cases by the close of fieldwork) were sharing their daily lives with their children. The remaining 10 young men were located on the left hand side of the plane (all in the lower quadrant). In three of these cases contact was inconsistent over the study period, while in a further seven cases it had dwindled significantly or ceased by the end of fieldwork. Overall, what was particularly marked in this study was the relatively small number of fathers (4 cases) who did not manage to sustain any contact with their children over the course of the fieldwork. We acknowledge that some of those who had good contact were still in the very early stages of parenthood; their relationships with their children were still under development and were likely to change over time. Even so, this finding is a challenge to the dominant narrative of absent young fathers who show no interest in their children, particularly given the sometimes extensive barriers and challenges that these young men face. It also accords with wider evidence that indicates the articulation of a steadily increasing commitment among non-resident fathers (regardless of age) to their children (Poole et al 2013).

However, looking at the spectrum of relationships running down the vertical plane of our grid, it is also striking to note that, by the end of the study period, most of the young men (17 of the total sample of 31 young men) were located in the bottom half of the plane. In other words, they were experiencing difficult, fluctuating relationships with the mothers, and/or their children and the maternal families. In some cases, these relationships were described as highly volatile or non-existent.

As we have seen, where young fathers were no longer, or had never been in a relationship with the mother, and/or were living separately, it was taken for granted that the relationship between the young men and their children would be mediated through the mothers, as the primary carers. In these circumstances, the parental status of the single young men was conditional, necessitating proof of their commitment to their children, the quality of their care, their capacity to offer material support, and their willingness to be supportive of the mothers as the primary carers. Doing so required co-operation, tact, the ability to negotiate, emotional maturity and a focus on the needs of the child. Yet such

relational skills have to be learned. The young men in this study varied in the extent to which they had had opportunities to acquire, test out or hone such skills, and this in itself became a key challenge for them. Below we examine the experiences of the three groups of young fathers located on our grid above.

**Regular Contact, Supportive Relationships.** The young men located in the top right-hand quadrant of the grid were enjoying relatively frequent and sustained contact with their children at the close of the study, founded on the development of supportive working relationships with the mothers. They were doing so in varied and fluid circumstances. Among the 8 partnered young men, one was married, while a further 4 saw this as a viable goal for the future (Lau Clayton 2015), indicating relative stability and commitment between the parents:

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, middle income, partnered)

The five single young men located here had also developed supportive relationships with the mothers and the maternal family over time. This, in turn, facilitated on-going, stable contact with their children by the end of the study. These relationships were often described in terms of close friendships rather than partnerships.

As long as you've got that strong friendship, or strong bond together, and that togetherness, you don't need to be in a relationship. (Senwe, aged 17, middle income, single)

Even so, with shaky foundations for their parenting, these single young men had had to work harder than the partnered fathers to establish a working relationship with the mothers of their children. This particular group of young single men managed this very well although they may have faced some initial hostility. Ben, for example, was heavily supervised by the mother during the first year of his daughter's life, and only saw his child when he visited the maternal home:

Having, you know, had quite a hostile relationship with [the mother], there was quite a hostile relationship with her family as well, though they were much better at hiding it [laughs]. But it was, so I would always have to spend time at her house with [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 was something I'd never done before and I'd never had practice doing. I could just feel eyes on the back of my neck [laughs]. ... I was being reviewed on my performance ... and I felt like I couldn't do what, what felt would be natural to do. It just kind of ... it almost felt like it was someone else's baby ... yeah, like someone else's child. (Ben, aged 20, middle-income, single)

Through perseverance and a great deal of tact during the first year, Ben was eventually able to take his child out on his own, and care for her at the home of his parents. A key factor in this change was the improved relationship with his child's mother: 'We get on really well. ... She is one of my closest friends, actually, and we can talk about pretty much anything (Ben, aged 21). Ben was able to co-operate flexibly, share discussions about the child's needs, and generally work towards a relationship of trust and respect for the mother, all of which helped enormously. The fact that he was studying for a degree, with good socio-economic credentials and prospects, and enjoyed supportive and stable relationships with his own parents, may also have helped.

Over time, the young fathers in this group managed to develop an element of shared care with the primary caring mothers across two households, with their child regularly visiting or staying with them overnight during the week or at weekends. For example, Jock, had moved into his parents' house with the mother and child after the birth, but tensions in the household led the young couple to separate and for the mother to take the child back to her own family. By the close of fieldwork, Jock was seeing his child every night at the maternal grandparents' home, and his child came to stay with him for one night per week. He described the relationship with the mother as:

[O]n and off. ... Very casual at the moment, yeah, getting along absolutely fine but as she wants to make another go of it. I'm, like, 'no, we need to take our time', ... just wait 'til I finish uni, get a decent job, everything settled down, ... so I says, 'look, you know, I can't see us being together at the moment, but I really want us to, you know, get along, I still want us to, at the very least, be friends. I don't want my son growing up with a mum and dad

that hate each other.’ I just want to make it as amicable and friendly as we can, even if we aren’t together. (Jock, aged 22, middle income, single)

The potential to re-kindle this relationship was a consideration in Jock’s account, and undoubtedly helped his efforts to sustain good relationships with the mother and consolidate his relationship with his child.

Our final example in this group illustrates the fluid and difficult journeys that some young men experience in establishing their credentials as a parent, and how perseverance, often over considerable periods of time, is needed to consolidate their role and engagement. Dominic, who was 16 when he conceived a child, experienced an enforced separation from the mother during the pregnancy, engineered by both sets of grandparents. He resumed a relationship with the mother around the time of the birth, after which his child regularly came to stay at the paternal grandparents’ home. But when Dominic ended the relationship with the mother, a year or so after the birth, contact with his son was curtailed. At the age of 18 he sought help from the family courts to re-instate contact, resulting in a mediated agreement over contact. He was helped in this in no small measure by his stable home environment (with his parents), his full time office employment, which gave him credentials as a provider, his evident love for and commitment to his child, and his perseverance in attempting to negotiate with the mother. Dominic’s narratives, gathered over time, reflect the gradual improvement in his relationship with the mother over the years. This went hand in hand with his growing responsibility for liaising with his son’s school, and the greater willingness of the mother to listen to and defer to him over issues concerning routines such as bedtime, and consistency of care across the two households:

I found out, ultimately, that I wasn’t going to be happy in that relationship, [but] it became quite hard to maintain a separate parent relationship. ... She’s tried to make life as hard as possible for me with our son. (Dominic, aged 18, middle-income, single, wave 1)

We’re civil now. We can have conversations. I think she’s grown up and we’ve become more of a team. I think she sees me more as a form of support as opposed to being someone against her. (Dominic, aged 21, middle-income, single, wave 4)

I think we’re working in [the] right direction. ... It’s a working relationship. ... Things aren’t perfect or ideal but it’s working to a degree. ... I think there’s a lot of negative influences in [the mother’s] family. I’ve got to sort of accept that. ... I have a routine, she doesn’t. ... She’s acutely aware that she’s the decision maker, but ... she depends on me to sort out serious, adult stuff. ... I need to play the game ... compromise and



just that sort of way of communicating. ... I'm probably the dominating character within, well, for all three of us together. (Dominic, aged 22, middle-income, single, wave 5)

In his final interview, Dominic reflected that, in an ideal world he would have liked to have secured 'custody' (i.e. a residence order) for his son. This was in a context where the two young parents were from different socio-economic backgrounds, and where Dominic had often expressed concern and frustration that they were at odds over their values, lifestyle and their views on relationships and child rearing. Unlike Ben, there was little sense in Dominic's account that he could ever forge a friendship with the mother, and it seemed likely that he would have to continue to work hard to find some common ground with her. Even so, he had demonstrated the capacity to negotiate and sustain a working relationship with the mother. As his earlier reflections (see above) show, at the start of fieldwork, he had been on the periphery of the mother/child dyad, with decisions taken within the maternal household. But over the five years of his son's life, the sustained nature of his commitment and his strong bond with this son earned him the right to assume an integral role in what had become a triad of mother, father and child.

The young men who achieved sustained relationships with their children felt that their lives had been enhanced. 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):

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

My attitude to life's a lot better. Yeah, I've become a lot calmer. ... A couple of years ago the slightest thing could really, really get me angry. ... now it just flies straight over my head. It's cos you've got the responsibility of looking after another human being. (Joe, aged 18, low income, partnered)

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 cos 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)

**Regular Contact, Volatile Relationships.** The circumstances of the 7 young men in the bottom right-hand quadrant of the grid were also varied, with significant differences

among the three who were partnered, and the four who were single. Although they enjoyed frequent or regular contact with their children by the close of the study, relationships with the mother, and/or the child and the maternal family had been noticeably volatile during the course of the study. Among the partnered young men, only one (Darren) had managed to establish a joint household with his partner. However, in this case, social care teams were involved on two occasions over allegations of the father's physical abuse of his child and both parents had been referred for compulsory parenting classes. In the two other partnered cases (Adam and Andrew), relationships with the mothers were volatile throughout the study period, with the fathers moving in and out of the mothers' homes. In both cases social services intervention involved child protection plans, placements on parenting and domestic violence programmes and periods of supervised contact for the fathers:

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, low income, partnered)

These young men had experienced poor family relationships during their childhoods that had left them with anger management problems and few resources to fashion supportive, trusting adult relationships. However, despite the poor quality of their intimate relationships, these young men were able to maintain a relationship with their children by virtue of their partnered status. They expressed a great deal of love for their children and pride in their parenting commitments.

The circumstances of the four single young men in this group were rather different, for they faced highly volatile or estranged relationships with their ex partners. One father (Bekele) had become the primary carer of his two children, in a context where the mother was incapacitated through substance abuse, and had not seen her children for some months. In the remaining cases, the young men were struggling to find a foothold as a parent. Iman had had a strong friendship with the mother during the pregnancy, describing her as 'bonded' to him and his family. However, relationships quickly deteriorated after the birth of their twins, necessitating the mediation of Iman's mother to ensure contact continued:

I'm going into someone else's territory and I didn't feel like I could be myself around my kids. ... There isn't a relationship [with the mum]. I don't think about her, I don't speak to her. ... [ She] was causing me a lot of stress. ... All the arrangements are through my mother. She's my saviour. (Iman, aged 17, middle-income, single)

Iman's experiences bore some similarity to Ben's (see above) but he was unable to contain his frustration at the circumstances in which he was forced to develop his parental role. Iman felt he had developed a close bond with his children, albeit, by the close of fieldwork, he was only seeing them on a monthly basis.

Even established and relatively stable relationships could unravel over time, as Tommy discovered. During the course of the study, his marriage came to an end in bitter circumstances. Although by the close of fieldwork he was completely estranged from the mother, he was maintaining regular weekly contact with his child through the mediating efforts of the maternal grandmother. The circumstances for these young single men were far from ideal, and there was a strong sense that these were makeshift arrangements, often held together by the grandparent generation, which would inevitably have to be resolved with the mothers themselves over the longer term.

**Tenuous contact, Unsupportive relationships.** Located in the left hand plane of our grid (bottom quadrant) were 10 young men (nine of whom were single) who had tenuous contact with their children, alongside unsupportive relationships with the mothers. These cases were also varied in their nature and marked by particularly high levels of fluidity over time. By the close of the research, 3 of these young men had intermittent contact with their children, a further 3 had negligible contact, while in the remaining 4 cases, contact had ceased. Whatever the challenges faced by the fathers who managed to sustain contact, these were magnified for this group. Practical and material barriers were extensive and more severe in their effects. Seven of the fathers in this group were leading impoverished lives, marked by varied forms of social deprivation, including periods in care, and a lack of a stable home base (Neale and Ladlow 2015). The young men had struggled to contribute to the cost of basics such as nappies or milk, or to find the bus fare to visit their children (Neale and Davies 2016). These socio-economic, environmental and familial problems had a significant impact on their parenting efforts. In two of these cases the young men had received custodial sentences which disrupted their contact with their children, (Ladlow and Neale 2016), while another young father (the only partnered young man in this group) had had his contact with his child revoked under the terms of his probation.

But, again, perhaps the most acute and immediate challenges facing these young men were of a relational nature. Their relationships with the mothers and/or the maternal family were highly volatile and of poor quality. They commonly reported feeling side-lined or excluded by the mother or maternal family (and by practitioners, who would commonly take their lead from the mothers, Neale and Davies 2015b). These young men expressed a sense of powerlessness in finding a connection to their child, or being simply recognised as a parent. This was particularly evident for the young men who disclosed anger management problems or domestic violence in their relationships, where they were dependent on drugs or alcohol or had experienced periods in care during their adolescence (cf. Caldwell and Antonucci 1997). As we have seen above, such problems do not necessarily result in curtailed contact; it depends on whether the young men are in a couple relationship with the mother. But in 8 of these cases, the mothers were reported to have blocked or severely curtailed contact between the young men and their children. Such gatekeeping practices have been reported elsewhere in these circumstances (Reeves et al 2009). In five of these cases, safeguarding issues had been identified by practitioners, with the young men and/or the mothers regarded as a potential risk to their children. Contact for these young men was supervised by child protection teams and in one of these cases the child was eventually taken into care.

The safeguarding issues in these cases are of paramount importance, and they may provide a strong rationale for the more vigilant gatekeeping practices of the mothers. Controlling or blocking contact may be a vital defence strategy for the mothers and their children (Smart and Neale 1999)<sup>10</sup>. Even so, the young men's accounts indicated that the blocking of contact was not founded on safeguarding issues alone.<sup>11</sup> It was also triggered

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<sup>10</sup> In this regard, the adherence of the family law courts to the principle of awarding contact to fathers, regardless of the quality of relationships and the presence of domestic violence, is a worrying trend that places a commitment to the ideology of engaged fatherhood and shared parenting above the principle of safeguarding children and their parents (Neale et al 2003). After more than a decade of increasingly rigid adherence to the principle of engaged fatherhood, there are signs that the pendulum may be starting to swing the other way. A recent report (Women's Aid 2016) has challenged this evangelical stance in family law and highlighted the very real dangers of such ideological enforcements, when they fail to take into account the nature and quality of family relationships.

<sup>11</sup> As we saw above, where young men were partnered, contact was not necessarily curtailed, despite the possible presence of safeguarding and domestic violence issues. Our evidence, drawing solely on the young men's narratives, does not provide a full account of, or explanation for this, but it is possible that other factors may have been at play in these relationships that enabled contact to continue, for example, linked to the mothers' lack of agency or emotional/physical subjugation with these relationships. For a comprehensive review of safeguarding issues, and the need to apply these to vulnerable young men as well as their children, see Webb 2008.

when relationships between the parents came to an end, or when the mothers were seeking or had found new partners. In these circumstances, the young men felt that their commitment to their children – the ideal of engaged fatherhood - was not recognised by the mothers or by professionals as a strong enough rationale to facilitate ongoing contact.

Like Dominic, several of these young men had sought or were considering seeking legal redress through the family courts. Following periods in care during his adolescence, Jason had drinking and anger management problems that had resulted in pub brawls and two custodial sentences. Yet, his accounts show a staunch adherence to the ethos of engaged fatherhood:

I'm sick of her changing the times ... [During a telephone argument over contact] I heard her mum in the background saying, 'tell him he's immature and he needs to grow up'. So I said to her, 'tell your mum, immature is not wanting to see your son, and not caring. Mature is wanting to see your son, and asking why the times have been changed'. (Jason, aged 22, low-income, single)

In his first-wave interview Jason reflected on how he would have to 'bite his tongue' in order to keep the peace, and described some of his 'silly arguments and fall outs' with the mother. In his second-wave interview, some two months later, he reported that, following his first interview with the research team, he had gone back to the mother to try to negotiate a better relationship for the sake of their son:

I went home after I spoke to you, and I just thought about how I'd spoken and how it must have looked. ... It sounded crazy. So I just said [to her], how we've been acting childish, and all that ... and that we just need to get along for [son's] sake. ... I said, 'we've got a son and it's all about him'. And we weren't arguing ... and now she's just like a different girl. We go and meet each other, drop [son] off. Yesterday, we went for a walk round park, we make arrangements and stick to them. It seems a lot better, and we wouldn't have been able to do that before. ... I knew what were happening were wrong. It's like we're mates now, good mates. (Jason, aged 22, low-income, single).

Jason's account reveals the efforts he made to be supportive of the mother of his child, and to work collectively with her in his child's interests. However, his aspiration for a relationship based on friendship, trust and joint parenting had not been sustainable. He reported that the mother blocked contact when they were arguing, and when she learned of Jason's other relationships. By the end of the study (by which time Jason had fathered another child with the mother), contact was blocked once again. This triggered a loss of

temper and threatening and erratic behaviour from Jason that led to an escalation of their problems. Jason's anguish at this turn of events was evident in our last interview with him, when he seemed to be at breaking point:

She uses our son as a weapon when we don't get on. It's the only way she can hurt me. ... I don't even know where the kids are, she's got so much power and she knows that ... She's got every say, I've got no power whatsoever. I don't have a leg to stand on. I ... kept on her case, 'I want to see [child] ... I really don't want to take you to court.' ... It were like I were constantly begging, 'please let me see them.' ... And then it'd be, like, 'I've got £50, can I come and see them?' Those were the times when she were letting me. ... Once I rang her and I were crying. I said, 'you don't know what you are doing to me. It's breaking me'. ... I don't want them growing up, seeing tension between us. That's the last thing I want. ... I've just felt like giving up, and just not trying. But then I think I owe it to my son ... just for him to know that I care. ... I've contacted solicitors. ... I know I'm not the best dad in the world, and I don't even work, But I'd still always care about them and I'd never let them down. ... I'm going through double the heartache. ... Sometimes I just think about, like, going to nursery and taking my son ... but I know it'd cause more problems than its worth. (Jason, aged 24, low-income, single)

Jason's efforts to establish a parental role as a single father had been ineffective, and led him to reflect that the only way that he could see his children was to rekindle a relationship with the mother:

I'd love to be able to get on with her. ... Obviously she's my kids' mum. ... I still respect and care about her, but I kind of hate her as well. ... I were only trying to make it work because it made it easier to see my kids ... I still think I would love to be a family, love to wake up with them in the morning, and if that meant being with her, I would, I'd do that now, but only because I miss them so much (Jason, aged 24, low-income, single)

At the same time he recognised that this might not work as the basis for a relationship:

I would have wanted to make it work, but for all the wrong reasons. ... I would never have had kids when I did, never. It's a ridiculous idea. It weren't with the right woman, it weren't at the right time in me life. I were 20 years old, unemployed, getting a girl pregnant that I weren't even in a full time relationship with. .... If you aren't [suited] then you can't just make it work for the kids. ... But we tried to make it work, probably for the kids, and it's just made it worse. (Jason, aged 24, low-income, single)

Like Jason, the other young men in this group expressed anguish that contact had foundered when their relationships came to an end, or when the mothers re-partnered:

I feel like I've been replaced. ... It's hard. I used to see [daughter] every day. And then I've gone from seeing her on the weekend, to not seeing her at all. She [the mother] has bullied me out really. (Richard aged 18, low income, single)

She were just ... well, making me last as long as I can without seeing [the twins]. She'd do owt to stop me. And, well, it's about, going on three years I've been to court now. I get to see them once a week now, on a Saturday. ... I feel, fair enough, she wants a new boyfriend ... and live a life with him. I aren't really bothered about that. But I'm bothered about her not wanting me to see the kids. It should be fair to let me have 'em, well, not when I want, but at least part of the day, and then things would be fine. (Callum, aged 21, low-income, single)

Jimmy was one of the four young fathers in this study who lost all contact with his child over time. These circumstances were not of his choosing, but reflected the multiple barriers that he faced as a parent, including anger management problems, safeguarding issues, lack of a stable home, blocked contact, a court application, and side-lining by practitioners (Neale and Davies 2015b).

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. ... I've got nowhere to go, nowhere to live. And I'm like sponging off people's mums and that. And then obviously I can't go and see [my child's mum], she can't bring [my son] down to see me. So ... it's just harder on me. (Jimmy, aged 16, low-income, single)

By the end of the study Jimmy had not seen his son for the past 18 months, although he hoped to rekindle contact in future. Asked about his relationship with his son, he reflected:

I haven't got one. 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, cos 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. ... It would be good to see him, just for ten minutes. Mind you, I probably wouldn't want to see him for ten minutes. Rather just not see him. I'd rather wait till I know it's gonna be consistent, instead of seeing him for ten minutes and then not seeing him again for months. .... [just] ... get through each day and just wait till I see him eventually. (Jimmy, aged 19, low-income, single)

Contact had also ceased for Simon, who, following a violent falling out, was estranged from his former partner's family and had not been told of his impending paternity



during the pregnancy. After the birth, he was offered and made a supervised visit to his son at the paternal great grandmother's house. His mother also visited the baby on several occasions. But Simon found it too difficult emotionally to resume contact with the mother's family, which left him without a foundation for building a meaningful relationship with his son. Like Jimmy, he reflected that his parental status felt unreal:

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. ... He might want to see me when he's a bit older. But if they [the maternal family] have got anything to do with it, then I don't think he will. ...[We] just seemed to drift away. ... I think my mum, obviously, stopped going and ... nothing being spoke about, ... obviously calmed me down and I weren't as stressed out. And I aren't thinking about it as much. And I think my mum's just thought, 'let's just get on with our lives.' And that's what I've done. (Simon, aged 18, low-income, single)

By the end of the study what marked these two young men out from the rest of the sample was their emotional disengagement from their children, and their matter of fact acceptance that, in the present circumstances, they had no role in their children's lives. These changes in perception and emotional distancing were, in themselves, critical transitions in their fatherhood journeys.

The tendency for non-resident fathers to lose contact with their children after a separation or divorce has been well documented, although the pattern appears to be diminishing over time (Simpson et al 1995; Bradshaw et al 1999; Pool et al 2014). It is also clear that there are heavy emotional, physical and financial costs involved in pursuing contact, which have to be weighed against the benefits of abandoning the struggle and simply letting go (Bradshaw et al 1999). The lack of continuity of contact and the powerlessness associated with this circumstance can create a heavy emotional burden (Bradshaw et al 1999: 121), that, for vulnerable young fathers, may become too much to bear (cf. Quinton et al 2002; Mazza 2002). At the same time, for vulnerable young fathers, the loss of a potentially fulfilling role as a parent may compound their sense of failure and marginalisation, with longer term implications for their mental health and well-being (Caldwell and Antonucci 1997, Lowenthal and Lowenthal 1997, Mazza 2002, Parikh 2005).

## ***Concluding Discussion***

The rich evidence presented across the sample of young men suggests that their relationships with the mothers of their children were critical factors in determining the nature and extent of their engagement with their children. It is worth re-iterating at this point that the typology presented above offers a snap-shot view of their circumstances at the close of fieldwork. Yet our discussion also illustrates the considerable fluidity in contact arrangements and in the nature of the young men's relationships with the mothers over time, with many of these young men moving between quadrants during the study. Ben, for example, was in the lower right hand quadrant at the start of fieldwork and moved into the upper quadrant as things settled down with the mother. Iman, in contrast, moved in the opposite direction as his relationship deteriorated, while Dominic, who was followed over a longer period (four years), moved back and forth between these quadrants as his relationship with the mother fluctuated. Similarly, a number of young men (Callum and Jason, for example), started out in the upper right hand quadrant, moved into the lower right hand quadrant as relationships deteriorated and eventually moved to the lower left hand quadrant as contact was curtailed. Some of these young men (Joe and Iman, for example) were still in the formative stages of parenthood. We were documenting tentative arrangements that were far from established and were therefore very likely to undergo change in future. Overall, the picture we have presented here is clearly not a static one, but subject to continual flux over time.

The broader evidence from this study suggests that there are significant variations in the way young men manage the transition into fatherhood, shaped by a complex blend of sexual, relational, familial, socio-economic and health related opportunities and constraints. It also appears that personal and structural factors do not operate in isolation from each other, but intersect in complex ways to determine the capacity of young men to manage their fertility and to take up the roles and responsibilities of fatherhood (Holmes and Kiernan 2010, La Placa and Corylon 2016). In this paper we have highlighted the significance of relational factors in shaping these young men's journeys into parenthood; indeed for many of these young men these were pivotal issues. Here we briefly consider the implications of our findings for theoretical understandings of shifting ideologies

and patterns of parenthood, and we touch too on the implications for policy and for professional practice.

**The Developing Ethos of Engaged Fatherhood.** The uniform and steadfast adherence of the young men in this study to the ethos of engaged fatherhood is a significant finding. These young fathers strongly aspired to ‘be there’ in a loving personal relationship with their children, in many cases reinforced by a wish to do things differently from their own fathers. This was so regardless of their age, relationship status or socio-economic circumstances. Whatever the circumstance at the start of a pregnancy, by the time of the birth, an unplanned child was by no means an unwanted child. Moreover, young men without the capacity to fulfil a breadwinner role may place an enhanced value on engaged, intimate fatherhood as the source of their commitment to their children and their sense of paternal identity (Tyrer et al 2005). These changing perceptions and values represent critical incremental steps in the process of building more widespread changes in parenting practices and values. Given the significant constraints faced by young fathers, it is striking how many of the young men in this study were able to maintain their commitment to their children; the longitudinal design of this study enabled us to discern that these changes were not operating simply at an ideological level, but feeding into and unsettling young parenting practices and negotiating processes. The pioneering young men in this study, particularly those located in the upper right hand plane of our grid, were finding (or striving to find) ways to develop sustainable and supportive relationships with their children. Their priority was to work productively with the mothers, even where these relationships presented ongoing challenges. On the whole, the evidence shows that 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). Where young fathers are positively engaged in these ways, this can be beneficial to them, their children, the mothers, and the wider families (Duncan et al 2010). Such evidence provides a strong corrective to the stereotypical view that young fathers are feckless, i.e. that they are commonly absent, and fail to show any interest in, or concern about their children. Even for those young men who lost all contact, the ethos of engaged fatherhood was evident, albeit they were not able to translate this effectively into practice.

**The Enduring nature of the mother/child dyad.** But this finding does not represent the whole picture. Wider evidence suggest that, to date, there has been little sign of a wholesale transformation in parenting practices from an ethos built around the mother/child dyad, to one of engaged fatherhood based on a joint parenting project (a mother/father dyad) (cf. Esping Anderson 2009). Instead, these models of parenthood co-exist in uneasy tension with each other (Dermott and Miller 2015). For young fathers, this would seem to be all the more the case. The ethos of engaged fatherhood is predicated on the idea that relationships between the parents (whether partnered, formerly partnered, single, co-resident or across households) are relatively positive and supportive; that both parents have material and emotional resources that they can contribute and pool in a joint parenting project; and that the fathers can demonstrate adequate standards of care, emotional maturity, support and commitment for their children and for the mothers of their children. Yet young fathers are much less likely to have the resources to fulfil these conditions, at least initially.

As we have seen, it is the young mothers who are, by default, the primary carers, in control of their pregnancy and subsequent decisions about a child, and able to exercise some influence and control over the young men's paternity. The young men, in contrast, are more likely to enter parenthood as single, non-resident parents. A substantial majority face the challenge of developing a joint parenting project without the spring board of any prior commitment to or choice about having a child, or the foundation of a strong partnership or shared living space with the child upon which to build a paternal role. Moreover, they may have few relational resources to contribute, and little opportunity to develop such resources. This is particularly the case for those who are single and impoverished, and where safeguarding and/or domestic violence issues arise. Clearly, the ideology of engaged fatherhood as an unmitigated good or an inherent right, regardless of the circumstances and the *quality* of parent-child and parent-parent relationships, does not hold for the majority of young fathers. In these circumstances, young fatherhood becomes a contingent state. It is perhaps not surprising, then, that many of the young single men in this study experienced distrustful, tenuous and volatile relationships with the gatekeeping mothers and their families. Our evidence reveals, too, the anguish felt by the young men who held dear to the ideals of engaged fatherhood, yet lacked the capacity to turn these ideals into practice. Given these

ideological challenges and tensions, it is perhaps all the more striking that so many of the young men did manage to keep in contact with their children.

Overall, our evidence suggests that the conflicting ideologies surrounding engaged fatherhood and the mother/child bond are polarised for this age group, and that it is the dominance of the mother-child dyad (and, by extension, the triad with maternal grandparents) that remains the key driving force for the negotiation of paternal engagement. This is a view born out in a systematic review of research on young motherhood (McDermott and Graham 2005; cf. Smart and Neale 1999: 34-5). The evidence also illustrates the power of the older generation to mediate between the young parents and to either block or broker contact for the young men at critical junctions in their parenting journeys.

### **Policy and Practice Implications.**

These findings have policy and practice implications, particularly for young men living in deprived circumstances that may impact on their efforts to manage the transition into parenthood. Reviews of the UK policy landscape have been provided elsewhere (Neale 2016, and for parallel developments in the US see Parikh 2005), but some salient points are drawn out here. Since 2010, following the end of the ten year Teenage Pregnancy Strategy, provision for engaging with young prospective parents has been fragmented across a range of statutory and specialist service providers. This fragmentation is more than an organisational issue. It runs counter to the benefits of 'joined up' provision, and may fail to recognise, let alone respond effectively to the complex constellation of factors that influence the transition into young fatherhood. Relational factors are clearly recognised in practice directives, of course, not least in the provision of Sex and Relationship Education (SRE) for young people. But as we have seen elsewhere (Neale et al 2017), the focus tends to be on the mechanics of sexual practices rather than on the nuances of relational skills and literacy. Preparing young people for the responsibilities and challenges of parenthood tends to give way to a preoccupation with how to avoid becoming a parent in the first place. This suggests an overriding need to get a better balance between the 'sex' and 'relationship' elements of provision and to build in a more nuanced understanding of how relational

factors shape sexual well-being, fertility decisions, adult relationships and parenting practices.

More generally, a greater awareness among practitioners and policy makers of the gendered dynamics of early parenthood, and the competing ideologies at play would help to inform policy responses and provide a platform for more effective interventions. Greater provision of parenthood classes and relationship counselling within early intervention strategies, tailored to the needs of young fathers, and exploring the relational and emotional terrain of parenting, would also help to facilitate more supportive relationships between young men and the mothers of their children, as well as the children themselves. Assumptions among practitioners that young fathers are 'hard to reach' and that only young men who are partnered are likely to want, or indeed have the credentials, to care for their children, are likely to be unhelpful. Moreover, side-lining young fathers through lack of trust or on the grounds of safeguarding issues for their children may be a less than helpful strategy; it is better to be fully appraised of the risks in individual cases than to simply ignore them (Ladlow and Neale 2016; Neale and Davies 2015b). Indeed, it may be more helpful to consider the safeguarding support that young fathers themselves may need, to enable them to manage the effects of impoverished childhoods and to care for their own mental and physical wellbeing, alongside caring for others (Webb 2008). International comparative evidence (Grundy and Foverskov 2016) reminds us that public acceptance and state support can make a significant difference to longer term outcomes for young parents. it would seem that there is nothing inevitable about inter-generational cycles of neglect, abuse or disadvantage, particularly where young fathers themselves are aware of and keen to break these cycles.

Overall, a greater engagement with the gendered dimensions of parenthood and the complex array of relational, sexual and socio-economic factors that shape pregnancy and parenting ideals, decisions and practices, could go some way to encourage, facilitate and mediate young men's parenting aspirations and practices. However, as a crucial first step, the key challenge for policy and practice 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 fledgling efforts to embrace the ethos of engaged fatherhood and to become good parents.

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