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SUPPORTING YOUNG FATHERS IN WELFARE SETTINGS:

An Evidence Review of What Matters and What Helps

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Responding to Young Fathers in a Different Way

Leeds Social Sciences Institute

Family and Childcare Trust

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OVERVIEW

This report has been produced for an impact project called 'Responding to Young Fathers in a Different Way'. The project has been funded by the University of Leeds, under the Leeds Social Sciences Institute (LSSI) Responsive Mode impact-funding stream. Based on existing evidence generated by the Following Young Fathers study, the main aim of this follow on study is to develop effective policy and practice for young fathers, that is attentive to life course dynamics and diversity in their experiences. Difficulty in finding evidence to support practice and the development of funding grants for work with young fathers, has been highlighted as a key concern for practitioners.

Based upon a synthesis of recent research evidence, this report outlines key findings and points for practice in relation to what works when working with young fathers in welfare and support settings. Unlike previous reviews (e.g. Trivedi et al, 2007), we do not focus on interventions or policies that aim to reduce teenage pregnancies. Instead we focus on interventions and programs that are proving to be effective in improving outcomes for young fathers and vulnerable groups in relation to key dimensions of their lives, such as education, health, relationships and employment. This body of evidence from a number of varied studies highlights the issues that are specific to vulnerable young fathers and what practitioners need to consider when working with them.

'Responding to Young Fathers in a Different Way' is a collaboration between the University of Leeds, Leeds City Council, the Family and ChildCare Trust and Oakhill Secure Training Centre. The project consists of three interrelated work packages that broadly seek to extend and improve policy and practice with young fathers nationally; to increase recognition of the multiple challenges faced by young fathers; and to provide them with increasing opportunities to engage in advocacy and collective support.

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NOTES

When we mention young fathers we are referring to young men aged 25 and under.

Throughout this report, where possible, we reference literature that is accessible to practitioners for additional follow up.

1. KEY POINTS

What we know: It is well established and remains undisputed that fathers matter to children, whether they are absent or present, or considered as risk or resource. Where positive relationships between fathers and their children can be nurtured, this can result in better outcomes for children, women and fathers as well. Yet the assumption that mothers are primary care givers remains pervasive and this impacts on how public services engage with men at the local level. Fathers still remain on the periphery of service delivery because services do not always routinely engage with them. Despite the establishment of an All Party Parliamentary Group on Fatherhood in 2010, there is currently no coherent national policy strategy to combat this. Existing research indicates that all services should endeavor to develop more *father-inclusive practices*, in order to engender a systems change that recognises, values and encourages more positive forms of involvement by young fathers in children's lives.

While more focused service interventions for young men and fathers are only a relatively recent occurrence, a distinct research literature is beginning to emerge that explores what can work in practice. This work indicates that much more research is needed, but it also highlights ways of working effectively with young fathers, particularly when they are vulnerable or multiply disadvantaged.

Based on this literature it is possible to draw together and develop recommendations for good practice that can be adapted, and built into existing service provision or considered in the development of new services. As Sheriff (2007) argues, innovative and effective practice with young men and fathers does not necessarily require a large financial investment.

Most of the literature available about working effectively with young men and fathers focuses on the importance of providing safe spaces for men, including the use of *group work*, opportunities to facilitate *male socialization* and *skills development*. Young men also value particular attributes in the people who work

with them. This includes respect, trust, consistency, care and commitment. For vulnerable young men in particular, *recognition* and *respect* of the individual challenges they face is a key attribute.

1.1. What Works? What matters? What helps?

It is increasingly recognized in research circles that identifying 'what works' can be difficult, particularly where it implies blanket solutions to diverse problems. There is a greater appreciation that we need to consider what works for whom, in what circumstances and over what periods of time (Pawson, 2006). It is also worth considering *what matters* to people (as a necessary precursor to understanding what works) and to focus rather more on what might help people, rather than being overly prescriptive about what works for them (Neale, 2017).

Understanding diversity, dynamics and vulnerability in young men's lives: Young fathers are not a unified group. Multiple factors influence their experiences. They may face a number of distinct challenges and issues across generations and over time, relating to their socio-economic status, experiences of deprivation and both relational (i.e. relationships with mothers and children) and intergenerational (relationships with parents and grandparents) factors. They may also have different support needs at different points in time, depending on their status and role within family relationships.

Busting myths; challenging stigma: Assumptions that men are 'hard to reach' serve to reinforce stigma and men's exclusion from services. Services should focus instead on the ways in which they might be 'difficult to access'. Pragmatic support can play an important role in engaging men in groups.

Safe social spaces/group interventions: Men value spaces that are safe and support opportunities to enjoy social time with other men. The positive changes this engenders can have positive outcomes for women as well as men because men are more likely to engage in healthier relationships with their partners. Improvements in

fathers' skills, capacities and confidence have a cyclical affect, influencing the health and behaviour of children as well.

Employing an ethic of care: Young men value a sense of care and commitment in workers, built on trust, respect, consistency and reciprocity. When they feel cared about when they engage with services, this can produce marked improvements in how they care for others such as partners and children.

Mentors and guides: Young men particularly value workers who act as mentors or guides, with whom they can construct new identities and futures.

Working with men rather than delivering to them: Research confirms that young men want services that are adapted to their needs. Services like dads groups work better when they work alongside men, using an ethos of encouragement and support, rather than delivering to them in an instrumental fashion. It is important that communities feel a sense of ownership for these groups by supporting fathers to actively contribute to the group direction and its strategic vision.

Gaps in research: Research has not fully engaged with diversity in the lives of young men and fathers. Gaps in existing research include:

- Custody and post-custody experiences of young fathers,
- Young minority ethic fathers,
- Young fathers in the care system,
- Young fathers and mental health,
- Young fathers and domestic violence.

2. METHODOLOGY

A Rapid Evidence Assessment (REA) has been employed on the available academic and policy literature about support for young fathers, in order to develop a critical but accessible overview of key findings and gaps in evidence. The search of academic and policy literature has focused on two broad areas:

1) Young fatherhood (experiences and contexts of)

2) Services designed to support young fathers.

Figure 1 provides an overview of the inclusion/exclusion criteria. Given the relatively recent nature of support work for young fathers and the need for the most up-to date evidence, the search was limited to a ten-year period, starting in 2006. Studies included have either been peer-reviewed or publicly funded to ensure their quality and are predominantly UK based. As well as conducting searches in various institutional libraries and Google Scholar, relevant policy think tanks and research bodies like The Fatherhood Institute, the Joseph Rowntree Foundation and Working With Men were also searched for reports relevant to work with young fathers.

Included	**Excluded**
Studies between Jan 2006 and Oct 2016	Studies prior to 2006
Young men aged 14-25 who are fathers	Fathers older than 25
English language publications, UK based	
Qualitative methods	Quantitative survey data
Publically available academic research (interdisciplinary), evaluations, government funded research, reports, reviews.	Policy documents, media or other reports of specific cases, non-academic opinion pieces
Main focus on the contexts and experiences of young fathers who come into contact with a range of services	General studies about young men or fathers over age of 25
Literature available in full text from various institutional libraries	

A combination of search terms was used to identify appropriate evidence.

Keywords included: young fathers; young dads; young men; welfare settings; working with; parenting; parenting support; parenting programmes; family support.

The findings have been synthesized and organised thematically to provide an overview of key findings.

3. KEY THEMES

3.1. What matters to young fathers?

Key challenges

- Young fathers remain some of the most excluded and vulnerable young people in society,
- They face numerous pressures when they become parents including navigating complex relationships, new responsibilities and changing identities,
- Young fathers are also more likely to leave education early, hold NEET (not in education, employment or training) status, become homeless, experience financial hardship, lose or be denied access to their children, and/or be held in custody.

They benefit from being involved

Research overwhelmingly finds that the majority of young fathers, including those that are most disadvantaged, are keen to be involved with their children and to stay connected to them (see Lau Clayton, 2016 for a review of relevant studies). Involved fatherhood, which reflects the current cultural model of fatherhood in the UK, involves being there for children, providing for their physical needs and providing them with psychological support and moral guidance. Within this model, the question of involvement is not about who is more important, mothers or fathers, but about recognizing that when fathers are considered a resource to their children this can be of benefit to the while family unit (Neale and Patrick, 2017). However, while this ideal of fatherhood would suggest that the role of the father as the sole economic provider is diminishing, in favour of more caring forms of masculinity, a dichotomy between provider vs carer models of fatherhood still persists and remains problematic for some men, including young fathers.

Young fathers, particularly from disadvantaged backgrounds, also have to contend with stigmatizing labels like feckless, uncaring or absent, which remain widespread. The research literature, which largely justifies the positive outcomes of father involvement, demonstrates that such labels are stereotypical, pejorative and relatively unfounded. For many young men, fatherhood can actually be a source of pride, responsibility and accomplishment irrespective of any initial ambivalence it may cause. For some young men it can also be an opportunity to form new attachments and to create family (Tyrer et al. 2005).

The stigma underlying these labels is particularly powerful because it represents an additional challenge for young men who are vulnerable and multiply disadvantaged. One manifestation of this stigma that is commonly held by practitioners for example is that young men are 'hard-to-reach' (Neale, 2016; Neale and Davies, 2015). Such perceptions serve to reinforce these assumptions, representing an additional barrier in young men's engagements with support services.

Diversity, dynamics and complexity

When young men become fathers they deal with a complex set of issues and changes. A report by Barnado's (2012) and developed by Cundy (2016, 142) argued that young fathers are likely to be:

- Coping with complex identity changes,
- Experiencing significant financial hardship,
- In need of legal advice in order to maintain contact with their child(ren),
- In need of relationship support with the mother (and possibly grandparents),
- In need of parenting advice that it tailored to young men in all their complexities.

Existing research further indicates that policy and practice should take account of young men's diverse and complex family relationships and the impact of local

cultures and social inequalities that have shaped, and continue to shape their lives when they come into contact with support services.

Lamb and Lewis (2007) have argued that academics and professionals have a tendency to resort to stereotypes about fathers and fail to acknowledge complexity in the lives of young fathers and the lived realities that create barriers for young men in their pursuit of living up to the contemporary ideals of fatherhood. One way of challenging the stigmatised stereotypes identified above is by developing an understanding of the vulnerabilities and challenges that young fathers face and how these unfold over time.

Pioneering research projects that have adopted a dynamic view (e.g. Deslauriers et al. 2012; Neale et al. 2015) through life story (Barnado's, 2012) and longitudinal (meaning longer-term) approaches, have begun to provide important insights into the lives of young fathers, highlighting what matters to them and what helps and/or hinders them in their parenting journeys. This approach has produced evidence of the ways the lives of young fathers unfold and the points at which they are likely to come into contact with a range of varied services, be those specialist, generic or voluntary, across their parenting journeys.

Social deprivation, exclusion and associated challenges

Most young fathers live in disadvantaged circumstances so those that come into contact with services are likely to be affected by a range of vulnerabilities, associated with social exclusion and deprivation. These disadvantages may correlate with other related health and social issues. Factors to consider include a combination of:

- poor finances and reliance on welfare,
- issues with schooling and training,
- drug or alcohol-related problems,
- physical abuse and issues of domestic violence (experienced and perpetrated),
- custodial sentences,
- mental health and anger management problems,

- insecure housing,
- periods in social care,
- family poverty;
- tenuous or volatile relationships both within and outside their families.

Young fathers are also more likely than young mothers to have engaged in offending behaviours (Tryer et al. 2005) and both young fathers and their children may also be subject to child protection plans. Any combination of these issues, which can lead to stress, under-confidence and anger that is both embodied and sometimes enacted, can undermine positive interactions with children and people in their support network. The nature, extent and severity of these problems inevitably vary between young fathers (Neale and Patrick, 2017; Lau Clayton, 2016) but are important considerations with regards to providing the best package of support.

Relationships

Negative perceptions about young fathers also impact on their relationships, which can either help or hinder them in their parenting journeys. The research literature highlights that familial relationships matter to young fathers and therefore that services need to recognise;

1) men's support needs in relation to developing good relationships with their children,
2) the significance of positive relationships within the broader family network, including with the mother of their children and with grandparents.

Awareness of the character of these relationships in young men's lives can be an important resource for practitioners in seeking to support young fathers effectively.

a) *Relationships with children*

As indicated above, many young fathers desire involvement with their children and when they are engaged effectively, this can result in positive social and

developmental outcomes for their children. However they may be encountering specific difficulties in maintaining relationships with their children and require support in several areas. This includes with their parenting skills, in understanding what their children need and how they can communicate effectively with their children. They may feel 'positively ambivalent' about their role as father for example, particularly in the early stages of their parenthood journey, so need support in being emotionally available to their children (Lau Clayton, 2016).

It cannot be assumed that the involvement of young fathers will always be beneficial, particularly if they are experiencing social exclusion or are subject to disadvantage. Without appropriate support, these vulnerabilities can affect the relationships young men have with their children.

b) Relationships with mothers

The mother-father relationship is perhaps the main influencing factor in determining the involvement of young fathers with their children (Panades-Blas, 2008; The Fatherhood Institute, 2011). Regardless of relationship or accommodation status, better quality relationships between mothers and fathers are more likely to lead to greater father involvement with children. National patterns of co-residence among young parents provide a mixed picture (The Fatherhood Institute, 2013), although this is not an indicator of relationship quality. Research does indicate that children born to young parents may be conceived without advanced planning or within fleeting or fledging relationships (Neale and Patrick, 2017).

A commonly reported finding is that the quality of the mother-father relationship links closely to the extent and regularity of contact that young fathers have with their children (Poole et al. 2014; Neale and Patrick, 2017). When relationships between parents are more stable and cohesive, father involvement is likely to be higher (Poole et al. 2014) making it possible to develop a more stable foundation for effective joint or co-parenting (Neale and Patrick, 2017). For men living in a different household to their child this can mean parenting across two households, but still requires the support of mothers as primary carers. Young mothers have also

reported that they value the involvement of their babies' fathers with positive impacts on their parenting skills (The Fatherhood Institute, 2011).

Lau Clayton (2016) highlights that for some separated young fathers however, hostile relationships with the mother of their children can result in irregular or no contact with their child(ren). This is because mothers continue to be seen as the main carer and may be unwilling to allow access. These young men, in particular, require support in their relationships with the mother, if only to re-establish contact with the child. The mother may also require support to recognise the benefits of the young father's positive involvement.

c) Relationships with grandparents

Relationships with grandparents are also key determinants in young fathers' involvement with their children. Turedi et al's (2007) systematic review of research about teenage pregnancies in the UK highlights that many young parents rely heavily on family members throughout their parenting journeys. Neale and Lau Clayton (2015) also confirm that grandparent's are a vital resource both for young fathers and for the mother-father-child unit. In their study, grandparents, on both the maternal and paternal side, fulfilled a variety of important support needs in relation to housing, practical, and emotional support and childcare, although the nature and extent of this involvement varies between families and over time (Neale and Lau Clayton, 2015). Maternal grandparents were more likely to be engaged in decisions around the child, from early conception all the way through to decisions about how a child is raised. Depending on the parenting context, for some this involvement is welcome but for others, and at different stages of the parenting journey, this involvement may complicate and blur the lines of responsibility. When grandparental care is burdensome to young fathers it can have detrimental effects and inadvertently marginalise them further.

Recognition of the role of grandparents and the wider support network also has important implications for policy and practice. As Neale and Clayton (2015) suggest, it would be useful to tailor support to families where generations are closely spaced,

and to consider ways in which grandparents can be included within family centred services to the benefit of young fathers and families across generations.

3.2. What we know about effective service provision for young dads?

Essential for supporting young fathers

As highlighted in the previous section, existing research, including the Following Young Fathers study, has highlighted the value of adopting a life course approach in order to understand what matters to young fathers. This approach has emphasized that young fathers are on a journey and that support should be a process, not just a one off intervention. Support therefore needs to be *timely*; needs to reach them *early* enough; and should to be *sustained* where needed, to encourage young men throughout their journeys. This research, combined with a burgeoning literature focusing on existing service provision for young fathers (mainly in the UK) is contributing to a currently fragmented, yet important, evidence base. This evidence base provides examples of good practice in relation to how young fathers might be supported effectively, as well as insight into the key barriers and challenges that are experienced by both young fathers and service providers themselves. Consensus about good practice discussed within the literature is shared here.

The following recommendations briefly summarise essential elements of effective support as supported by evidence:

- Young fathers should be engaged in service provision early in their parenting journey, including in ante-natal and post natal care,
- Sustained support and the development of strong practitioner/service user relationships across the fathering journey,
- Practice that increases the visibility of young fathers within services (through father-inclusive practice, culture change, listening to young fathers and exploring the potential of self help),
- Additional funding to support services to market their services effectively and increase their visibility,

- Holistic service provision and the use of mentoring by relevant practitioners,
- Support with housing needs,
- Support for young men through custody and resettlement.

Overview of the literature

The previous section highlights what matters to young fathers, including the ways in which their vulnerabilities might restrict them in their capacity to be involved in the lives of their children. It is clear from the evidence that when the appropriate support and policies are in place, when effort is made to include men, and when fathers are recognised as an asset rather than a risk, young men are keen to engage in services that benefit them and their children (Davies, 2017) and services can play a significant role in improving outcomes. This is achieved by supporting young fathers to be involved with their children and to develop their own identities, resilience and resourcefulness in contexts of material and social disadvantage. Effective services are those that support young men to develop a greater sense of positive identity and belonging, to improve relationships with their partners and children, increase their engagement in community settings (in volunteering, employment and education) and improve confidence (e.g. Robertson et al. 2015).

The evidence suggests that young fathers may engage with a number of services as they transition to fatherhood and through their parenting journeys. This ranges from maternity services; children's centres; school support; housing support; leaving custody: and father's groups. Key points of intervention include the period immediately following conception, or while young fathers are still engaged in education (Cundy, 2016). Good practice for individual fathers therefore requires a joined up and integrated approach including consistent ways of working by professionals and services. In an address in 2010 at a parliamentary enquiry into parenting and social mobility David Lammy MP acknowledged that:

> *The present parenting support offer across the UK is fragmented, with little leadership from national government. With family policy spread across a number of departments, a lack of joined up government is a key barrier to any successful parenting support . . . Any parenting support scheme must not be overly prescriptive, and cannot be seen by parents as a punishment if it is to be successful . . . Fathers are an important resource in early years child development . . . but are under used and often side lined when family services are developed.* (All Party Parliamentary Group, 2015: 5)

Yet the lack of focus on young fathers as a distinct policy area continues to be an on-going issue (Cundy, 2016). Responding to the concerns highlighted in the previous section, there is an on-going need to promote the idea that men, regardless of their age, gender or socioeconomic position, are an important resource to their children. As Scourfield et al. (2016, p. 266) argue, "if men are genuinely to be supported to play an important and valuable role as fathers in the lives of their children, then all agencies need to subscribe to this aim and to recognise and support the particular needs of vulnerable fathers.'

The research literature about what works in practice for young fathers is currently fragmented but when synthesized, represents a powerful resource for considering what services need to deliver in order to engage young fathers effectively and to support them to achieve positive outcomes across their parenting journeys. Small, but significant changes in practice, at the local level have the power and potential to engender a broader attitudinal shift in relation to the ways in which young fathers are perceived and their support needs are met.

The following themes highlight what is proving to be effective practice for young fathers who engage with services and how these might be implemented.

<u>Increasing engagement</u>

A key theme in relation to engaging young fathers effectively in services is that work does not need to be really innovative or even reliant on large amounts of money and

resources (Sheriff, 2007). What is important, is dedication, commitment and careful consideration about how to meet the diverse needs of young fathers.

Research that reports the effectiveness of services from the perspectives of young men themselves, is particularly critical of services that are inflexible and bureaucratic, championing services instead that are flexible, that reach out to young fathers and that have an attractive offer. Services need to be accessible to all fathers and this can be achieved through the provision of flexible opening hours, including weekdays, evenings and weekends. Services are most effective when they reach out directly to young fathers (Maxwell et al. 2009). Persistence, home visits and consultations with fathers are all examples of making services 'easier to access' (Neale and Davies, 2015) for young men, challenging broader stigmaitizing notions that young fathers themselves are 'hard-to-reach' or 'difficult-to-engage'.

While simple innovation within services may not require a large amount of resource, Davies' (2017) research with support workers in services for young fathers, highlights that it can be very difficult to market services in ways that are accessible to young fathers. Her findings demonstrate that while young fathers engage well with services when they are aware of them, finding out about what is on offer is more challenging. Disadvantaged young fathers in particular for example, may lack access to the Internet, making it more difficult for them to search for services effectively. One support worker cited in this article highlights the need for additional funding for marketing (Davies, 2017) in order to improve the visibility of services via alternative means.

Early intervention in young men's parenthood journeys is also recommended, both to encourage longer-term engagement (Maxwell et al. 2009) and to support young fathers to provide care and support to the mother of their children throughout pregnancy and early parenthood (Ferguson and Gates, 2013).

Father-inclusive support within maternal and ante-natal services is just one way in which fathers might be engaged with early on (Family and ChildCare Trust, 2016). In

a study of the Family Nurse partnership (FNP) for example, many young fathers placed high value on the therapeutic and relationship-based approach adopted. This supported the young fathers in a holistic way with positive implications for their capabilities to identify work and education opportunities, to support their partners and to build their self-esteem and identities (Ferguson and Gates, 2013). The recognition of parenting journey's further highlights that support needs to be sustained over time (Barnado's 2012; Neale and Davies, 2015).

Good Practice example:

Working with Men's Expectant Father's Programme has been cited as a good practice example of early intervention. Designed with young fathers' involvement, young fathers are given the opportunity to speak to experienced midwives and to engage more effectively in pregnancy (Cundy, 2016). This programme aims to build young men's self-confidence to support the development of key parenting skills.

http://www.efprogramme.co.uk

Creativity and simple innovation in support

Recent evaluations of current provision for men also highlight a number of additional strategies that have proven to be effective at increasing the engagement of young fathers (Maxwell et al. 2009; Family and ChildCare Trust, 2016; Hanna, 2016). These include;

- Employing male staff (and if this is not possible it is important to recognise that support for fathers should look different to support offered to young mums),
- Advertising services in a range of locations including sports centres, libraries or workplaces,
- Provision of pragmatic support (such as costs for transport, refreshments and childcare),
- Displaying positive images of fatherhood,

- Providing a 'hook' – like the offer of employment and parenting skills, support for mental health or substance abuse and other general health aspects.

Many of these key components can be identified within the Mellow Dads Parenting Programme, an intensive parenting programme, which was recently evaluated by Scourfield et al. (2016) (Figure 1). Underpinned by attachment theory, this group work programme provides practical support and employs a number of methods to keep men engaged over time including "homework" and persistence by staff in encouraging non-attenders.

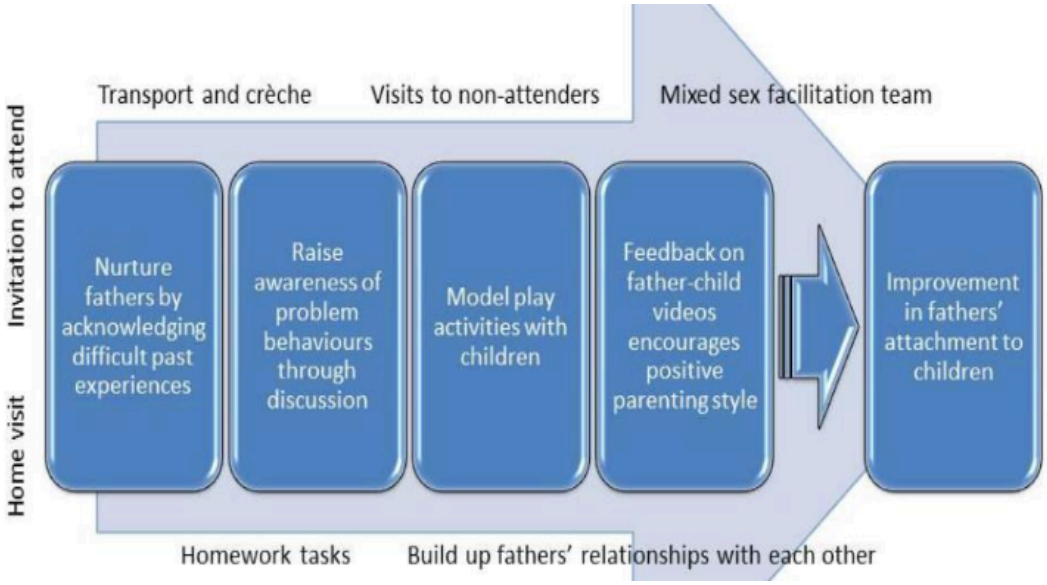

Figure 1: Model of engagement underpinning Mellow Dads, From Scourfield et al (2016)

Support workers as mentors

A consistent finding across research studies is that positive professional attitudes also contribute to men's increased engagement (Maxwell et al. 2009). Young men value personalised support and identify with particular qualities in the people they work with. This includes respect, trust, consistency, reliability and a sense of care and commitment (Ward et al. 2015). In a study of young fathers who have experience of the care system, it is reported that some found it particularly difficult to trust support workers, often as a result of having had a lack of attachment figure

in the past (Tyrer et al. 2005). In this study, the young fathers valued someone who supported them on a number of levels over a long period of time and who acted as a mentor or 'friend' by providing an engaged, informed but personal approach. Good working relationships can be fostered when professionals invest in the aspirations that young fathers have, which are comparable to the aspirations of other young people. The nurturing of aspiration encourages their transitions to a 'safe' adult identity (Ward et al. 2015).

Effective communication that is premised on these qualities and involves simple information exchanges between professionals and young fathers (Family and ChildCare Trust, 2016) is also significant. Young fathers respond more positively when they are being *listened to* rather than being told what they need (as has been found in some existing services that have been described as overly bureaucratic and inflexible).

Strengths based support

Linked to the above, it is also important that services adopt a strengths based approach that recognises men's positive status as a father and seeks to address the barriers that might be impeding their ability to be involved with their children. An awareness of the contexts of young men's lives (like the factors identified earlier; 'chaotic' lifestyles, engagement with the Criminal Justice System, experiences of exclusion and deprivation and inadequate economic resources) is a key factor in setting up projects that are attentive to diversity in the lives of young fathers and sensitive in their approach (Hanna, 2016). When professionals try to understand, and are alert to these challenges they are also more likely to respond to young fathers in a non-judgmental way. Cundy (2016) for example argues that gender and age together reinforce exclusion and can act as key social barriers for young fathers who try to gain access to services, particularly in health services like maternity services. Such an approach represents a deficit model in which young fathers are viewed negatively, rather than in a way that is attentive to their strengths and the significance of their contribution.

According to a Barnado's report in 2012, the voluntary sector is already good at providing strengths based support. This includes helping fathers to stay on track with education, employment and training; addressing the multiple factors that underlie young men's disengagement; and offering informal support to enable young parents to maintain contact for the sake of their children.

A report on a parenting programme aimed at drug using parents found that the service considered it important to include fathers and to employ a strengths based approach rather than one that focused on parental deficit, relating to their drug-use (Chandler and Whittock, 2014).

Community embedded projects

A small number of notable evaluations of support groups for dads have started to emerge, suggesting that community embedded approaches can be particularly effective for disadvantaged young fathers, their children (Deslauriers et al. 2012; Hanna, 2016; Robertson et al. 2015) and the mothers of their children (Hanna et al. forthcoming). Community embedded groups typically based on a 'social' rather than a 'medical' model of support, offer a unique response to the disadvantage faced by many young fathers because they can offer flexible and holistic support that is not offered by other services.

Community embedded groups may be organised in different ways but share several approaches in common. In an evaluation of two comparable groups in West Yorkshire and Edinburgh for example, the success of these groups was predicated on several shared factors (Hanna, 2016). This includes bringing young fathers together (improving their well-being through male socialisation, peer support and skills development – parenting and employment based), providing pragmatic support in the form of transport costs, refreshments and childcare, the use of appropriate (and cost neutral) activities, and confidence and empathy from key workers (Hanna, 2016).

These evaluations also highlight that women benefit from fathers' involvement in these groups (Robertson et al. 2015; Hanna, 2016; Hanna et al. forthcoming). The

projects not only provided a shared space for men and children, but also gave the mothers time without their children and aided in shifting traditional gendered attitudes around childcare.

Good Practice example:

Salford Dadz is a community well-being project in Little Hulton, Salford. It has been evaluated twice and has been described as 'exemplary' in its approach to engaging and involving young fathers (Robertson et al. 2015). While many of the fathers involved in the project experience disadvantage, key to its success is its focus on the needs and strengths of local fathers; its role in building community resilience and capacity; and its unique, broad range support that is not already being provided in the locality. The project is now seeking to extend its connections and alliances beyond the community by linking with both local partners and national agencies. This is essential for programmes that aim to address underlying social and health inequalities.

http://eprints.leedsbeckett.ac.uk/1728/1/Salford%20Dadz%20Yr%202%20Eval_FINAL.pdf

A key issue at present is that community embedded groups for young fathers are not offered in every region of the UK. Where they do exist they are being positively evaluated. There is a need for a coherent national strategy and investment of funding to offer community embedded projects such as Salford Dads and Dad's Rock, in the most marginalised regions of the UK.

3.3. Gaps in research

It is evident from the extant research literature that fathers are a diverse group with varied backgrounds. They experience a complex set of issues and as a non-unified group, represent a challenge to professionals who seek to work with them. While the existing research acknowledges this diversity, research is still limited in key areas and some vulnerable groups of young fathers remain invisible.

Gaps in the existing research include;

- **Custody and post-custody experiences of young fathers** (Meek, 2007; Neale and Ladlow, 2015; Redman, 2016),

Young offender fathers are a particularly vulnerable group of young men. According to a Barnado's (2009) report, 160,000 children in the UK have a parent in prison, most of whom are fathers. However, it still remains unclear what support is available to fathers when in custody and when they leave the secure estate (Redman, 2016). As Meek (2007) argues however there is a real, on-going need for further research that investigates the impacts of parenting education and general support provision that is provided in prison settings, particularly including in the long-term when former prisoners have returned to their families.

- **Young minority ethic fathers** (Lau Clayton, 2016),

While incidences of teenage pregnancy are known to be higher among certain BME or ethnic minority groups, very little research explores their experiences of young fatherhood and how services currently respond to and engage with them. Relating to the point above, young black fathers are also an over-represented population in prisons. Meek (2007) identifies that there is a need for more culturally sensitive materials to support them in prison settings.

- **Young fathers in the care system** (Tyrer et al, 2005),

Fathers from low-income families are more likely to have had experience of living in care. It Is known that when young people enter the care system this can affect their ability to both build and maintain relationships, meaning that young men who leave the care system are less likely to have family support mechanisms available (Reeves, 2008). There is need for a more dynamic understanding of young men's journeys in and through the care system and the impact of this experience on their relationships with children.

- **Young fathers and mental health**,

Community embedded groups can provide positive support for the well-being of fathers and their children. But parenting stress and poor mental health (including depression and anxiety) remain prevalent and are known to have detrimental effects on the father-child relationship (Panades-Blas, 2008). More evidence is needed to understand the contexts and impacts of a father's mental health and the ways in which services can support young men with their mental health in a more effective way.

- **Young fathers and domestic violence** (see Morrison, 2016).

While it is important to be critical of the stigma associated with young fatherhood, negative perceptions of young fathers are influenced by genuine concerns about issues such as domestic violence and child abuse. Few researchers have explored domestic violence both perpetrated and/or experienced by young fathers. The Caring Dads programme is a training course for fathers who bully or abuse. Evaluations suggest that it results in positive improvements in fathers' behaviours and feelings of safety within men's families. However, there is a need to understand the contexts and conditions leading to violent behaviours and how young men might be better supported either to report violence and abuse or to reduce their own abusive behaviours.

There is also an ongoing need to ensure that researchers and practitioners link up to share good practice and work to challenge systemic gender and age based biases.

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