

Becoming a Young Father

Transitions into parenthood and unfolding
relationships with children

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ESRC Following young Fathers Study 2010-15.

- **Aims:** to explore the lived experiences and support needs of young fathers (under the age of 25)
- **Rationale:** High rates of teen parenthood in the UK; Gaps in evidence/provision, with policy focus on young mothers; Lack of dynamic evidence on unfolding lives;
- **Design:** Qualitative Longitudinal Research using the life course as central organising framework.
- **Sample :** 31 fathers followed: 12 over 4 years/19 over 2 years.
 - aged 16-22
 - From Northern Industrial city in the UK
 - Varied socio-economic backgrounds
 - Explored pathways through relationships, education, employment, housing, custody.

Key questions

- Were conceptions planned?
- Terminations: Did young men have any choice or involvement in decision making?
- To what extent did they adjust and engage during the pregnancy and the transition of the birth?
- How did they perceive their fatherhood, and how committed were they to their children in the aftermath?

Planned conceptions?

- 29 unplanned.
- **Unplanned:** I think she were on the injection but I weren't sure. I didn't ask her, we didn't use condoms (Adam aged 16)
- **Planned:** we were both in a position where we wanted that, we felt like it was right... Financially sound, we had a lot of opportunities for, ahead for us. You know, we both wanted to go down that route, so yeah. (Tommy aged 22, middle income).
- Ideally, they would have delayed parenthood:
- The problem is I am still growing up, I am discovering who I am and what I want to do. If I was 25, 26, I'd know who I am a bit, and would have a more established life (Ben, aged 18, middle income).
- I wouldn't change Sylvie [daughter] for the world, but I wish I could have waited till I had a job and a little bit more money,.. But things happen, don't they (Andrew aged 17 .

Initial reactions

- I found out that she was pregnant and ... I just kind of freaked out for a bit ... cut myself off from the world.. I was terrified to be honest (Ben aged 20 middle income)
- Accidents happen. ... we didn't have us own place, no job, no income or anything. Really rock bottom (Peter aged 17).
- My mum, she was disappointed in me. It's not the fact that I did it ... But that I am so young. (Trevor aged 15 middle income).

Terminations? Exercising choice?

- I said, you know, 'whatever you want, it's your body.' (Dominic aged 18).
- Its up to the girl, obviously, they're bringing it [up]. But, be good to have opinion [from] lads as well cos at sixteen, you've still got all your life to live aint you... If I'd have known straight away, I'd be – definitely told her to have an abortion. ... (Simon aged x found out two weeks before birth).
- Abortions – I don't believe in all that. So end of day you have to cope. We managed to keep it a secret for five months... and by then it were too late to get rid of it [Darren 22]
- I were a bit annoyed cause, obviously I didn't want a kid then. Cause obviously I'm still only young. ... she just texted me and said, 'I'm keeping it' ... Her mum started saying 'oh you need to think about it because if you get rid of it, it's just like killing somebody'. So she just decided to keep it. (Jimmy, aged 16)
- 7 considered or discussed abortion with the mums.

Adjusting

- Its just that challenge of growing up, manning up, knowing you've got a child on the way (Senwe aged 16)
- My mum, she was disappointed in me... But if I take responsibility for what I've done then that'll be ok. (Trevor aged 15 middle income)
- I just thought, if this is going to come about, this is some thing 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)
- Sense of reconciling carefree time of youth with responsibilities as they negotiate the fast lane to adulthood.

And Engaging....

- 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 .. She's carrying my kids ...so she's bonded to me and my family (Iman aged 16 ,middle income)
- 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 cause we're single, like I can't come and help her (Orlando aged 24 ,middle income)
- They involved both of us.. There was a lot of laughing and joking.. The staff and the scans... they was all fantastic... they explained what the pregnancy's going to be like and giving birth .. It was really good (Kevin aged 24 – reflecting back to age 18)
- 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).
- 28 young men attended hospital appointments, scans or ante natal classes.

The birth

- It were just like the biggest joy I've ever had in my life (Callum aged 19)
- It was just mind blowing to be honest (Orlando aged 24 middle income)
- Well if I'm honest, before he was born I was a bit negative ...I didn't want to be a dad 'cause for starters I'm unemployed. ... And living in a council flat in a block of smack head flats in [a deprived area of the city] wasn't ideal. ... So I can't give him the best possible life. But its 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 their 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,)
- 26 young men attended the birth

Becoming a Young Father

- I didn't realise the responsibility of having a kid is far greater than anything you've ever dealt with before. So it, it hits you like a ton of bricks when, when they're born and you realise that it's not about you any more. (Callum)
- '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, its the happiest emotion cause 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).
- People say it ruins your life, but it doesn't. It makes you a better person.

Breadwinning? Being there?

- I was only 18, so it was ... a shock, like I said, it forced me to grow up, to take responsibility. ... to go and look for work ... [A good dad is] one that listens, always there, no matter what. And teach you things. ... bed time stories and just spending time, that important time. It's not just about buying them clothes, buying them this and that. It's – it runs a lot deeper than that. It's having that bond. ... My son wants to be like me ...get my hairstyle, support the same football team. ... It's wonderful to see 'cause I never had that ... I grew up with [my dad] in and out of my life. (Kevin age 24).

Sustaining fatherhood over time?

- At the end of our study 21 young men had established stable and ongoing relationships with their children (over 2-4 years)
- 10 had unstable contact because it was blocked intermittently by the mothers; there was social services involvement - a child taken into care, or supervised contact ; or CJS involvement - restraining orders were in place.
- 5 of these considered going to court to seek contact: 4 had done so.
- Two young men that had not established a relationship with their child had been the least engaged during the pregnancy . All but one young father was anguished about the lack of contact.

Looking back...

- My advice (to other young dads) ... is .. just keep positive. Having kids is going to be the most exciting and terrifying moment of your life. ... and just be honest with yourself. I think being in a family unit is important. Like I said, my situation is now how I planned it out to be. But if its not working, don't be living under false pretences. But yeah, enjoy every minute of it. There's a lot that's going to happen in ... watching your kids grow. They' re always gonna be your babies and just, just love them. Enjoy it, its great

Key findings

- V few young fathers choose to have a child at a young age. They may be conceived ‘ in the moment’ and have little choice over decisions to terminate
- However, an unplanned child is far from an unwanted child
- Our evidence shows the significant commitment that young fathers make to their children, regardless of their age, relationship with the mother, and socio-economic background
- However they also face significant challenges in fulfilling a role as a father, born of their youth, lack of skills and resources, and fragile and volatile relationships with the mothers and the maternal families.

Policy and Practice context

- Policy driven by view of young fathers as feckless or risky; overriding concern with breadwinner role at expense of direct engagement with child, being there.
- Support? Surveillance? Sidelining?
- An ethos of support evident in some services but just as likely to find ethos of surveillance (young men seen as risky) or 'sidelining' (young men seen as feckless – not interested)
- young fathers said to be hard to reach... but perhaps services are hard to access.

Professional Support?

- During the pregnancy, services are provided to the woman and so it can sometimes feel to men as though they are an add-on (Family Nurse)
- Often it's the girl that goes along to the family planning clinic or the youth clinic.. And if the guy does go along, not all clinics are as friendly as they could be... so many boys now have had [a lack] of quality SRE (Director, SRE provider).
- Its right from midwifery, at the first appointment, if there's a young man there... making him feel he's part of the process ... by telling him, 'you are really important to this pregnancy. I would like to see you at the next appointment cause... you will want to know what's going on.' And that's just communication. Likewise with health visiting, [saying] 'your role is key in this, because of the outcomes for your child ... (Specialist learning mentor, Education Services).
- You see some individual hospitals or individual midwifery teams who've really taken the needs of young fathers on board, but, you know, If we're to look nationally, then they're few and far between (Connexions, young parent specialist).