

Following Young Fathers: Shared Parenting and the 'Package Deal'

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ESRC Following Young Fathers Study

- **Aims:** To explore the lived experiences and support needs of young fathers
- **Rationale:** High rates of teen parenthood in the UK; gaps in evidence/provision, with policy focus on young mothers; lack of dynamic research that can discern life course processes
- **Background:** Baseline study (2010-12) and subsequent follow up (2012-15)
- **Design:** Qualitative Longitudinal Research and Co-production of knowledge
- **Sample:** 31 young fathers (under 25), diverse backgrounds, experiences and trajectories
- **Team:** Carmen Lau Clayton, Bren Neale and Laura Davies



Our Sample

- Conception ages of the fathers ranged from 13- 23 years
- All were first time fathers (with the exception of one)
- Wave 1: Fifteen were in a relationship and Sixteen were separated
- By the end of the project- twelve couples remained intact and nineteen young men were separated from the mothers
- Reasons for separation varied



Background

- Quality of the young fathers' relationship with the baby's mother has a direct bearing on his paternal identity and fatherhood involvement
- But intimacy and continuation/separation of young fathers' relationships with the mother is lacking in research
- Focus is on maternal gatekeeping behaviours- 'package deal'
- Better understanding needed
- Can help foster fatherhood engagement levels and reduce instability in young parental relationships

Findings

The young parents' relationship statuses varied

4 relationship themes emerged:

1. **Partnered and supportive** (regular child contact)
2. **Separated and co-operative** (regular child contact)
3. **Co-Parenting in flux – partnered and separated young fathers** (regular child contact)
4. **Separated and challenging** (irregular or no child contact)

1) Partnered and Supportive

- High quality relationships reported
- Pregnancy, birth and entry into parenthood – key turning points
- Intensification of relationship commitment and reciprocity
- Shared domestic tasks and child care
- Equal partner in parenting dyad

“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, age 18, wave 2)

2) Separated and Co-operative

- Cordial relationships
- Acknowledged the importance of the young mother and her role in the co-parenting relationship
- Respectful and caring attitudes
- Strategies implemented to initiate and maintain co-parenting behaviours – not always easy
- Created opportunities to spend time with child away from the mother's gaze and satisfactory parental input

“Part of the idea of the arrangement is that my time is my time with our daughter. . . So in that respect she doesn't interfere or anything”

(Ben, age 21, wave 2)

3) Co-parenting in Flux

- Joint parenting could still be demanding for partnered and separated young fathers with amicable relationships
- For some, such difficulties lessened over time and with maturity
- Co-operative parenting was work in progress
- In 2 cases, professional support was beneficial

“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, age 16, wave 5)

Co-parenting in Flux: case study example

- **Dominic** (age 18, part time employed and HE student, one child)
- Wave 1: *“It became quite hard to maintain a separate parent relationship and the conflicting emotional feelings felt [after separating], she tried to make life as hard as possible for me with our son”*
- Wave 4: *“Yeah we’re civil now. We’ve become more of a team. I think she sees me more as a form of support as opposed to being someone against. That’s something I always wanted to be, but she always tried to make it more difficult”*
- Wave 5: *“I think we’re working in right direction. Things aren’t perfect or ideal but, you know it’s working to a degree”*

4) Separated and Challenging

- Challenging relationships and frequent discrepancies
- Avoidance of the baby's mother by some
- Threat of maternal gatekeeping behaviours- "*biting your tongue*"
- Erratic or no child contact- but young fathers still reported close bonds
- Some wanted to be amicable with the mother
- Others preferred the route of family law courts but lacked financial means

Separated and Challenging: case example

- **Jason** (age 21, unemployed, two children)
- Wave 1: ***“Me and his mum are not together, she uses him as a weapon all the time. . . I don’t understand how you could try and deprive your son of seeing his dad”***
- Wave 4: ***“She uses our son as a weapon when we don’t get on. It’s the only way she can hurt me”***
- Wave 5: ***“It’s just got so bad since I last seen you. . .It’s just horrible. It hurts now even just talking about it. My kids are somewhere and I don’t even know where they are or what they’re doing and I can’t even see them. . . I am powerless, very powerless . . . She never had any power and now she’s got our kids, well my kids, she’s got so much power. And she knows that”***

Policy and Practice Implications

- Not a simple binary of 'gatekeeping' versus 'gate-opening' maternal behaviours in the 'package deal'
- Encouragement and refinement of co-parenting behaviours advantageous
- Collective parenting can reduce the risk of parental relationship instabilities and benefits children's outcomes
- Professional support for co-parenting skills beneficial for intact and separated young fathers

Suggestions

- Policy makers and practitioners need to more actively recognise and support a constructive and cooperative relationship between young parents, as part of their routine care
- Incorporate into CANparent initiative and related relationship and parenting classes (piloted 2012-14)- roll out status of universal provision currently unknown
- Alternatively- SRE/sex and relationship education provision
- Given the unknown future of the CANparent initiative and variable quality of SRE in schools, the role of practitioners further underlined in their role to support young fathers

Conclusion

- Relationship with the young mother and the subsequent 'package deal' is complex and changes over time
- The 'deal' between young parents, like any contract, is open to change, can be overwritten, and either party can terminate the contract at any point= potential risk and fragility of such relationships
- Parenting support for coupled and non-partnered young fathers beneficial, given the positive implications of successful joint parenting in terms of child outcomes and ongoing co-parenting

Selected Outputs

- Davies, L. and Neale, B. (2015 – forthcoming) ‘The promise, potential and perils of statutory service provision in a Northern Local Authority’ in *Families, Relationships and Societies: Open Space*
- Ladlow, L. and Neale, B. (2015 – forthcoming) ‘Risk? Resource? Redemption? Conceptualising and responding to young offender fathers’ in *Social Policy and Society: themed section on young fatherhood*
- Lau Clayton (forthcoming). Supporting Young Fathers: Lived Experiences and Policy Challenges. *Journal of Social Policy and Society*.
- Neale, B. and Lau-Clayton, C. (2014) ‘Following Fathers; Young Fatherhood and Cross Generational Relationships’ in Holland, J. and Edwards, R. (Eds). *Understanding Families over Time: Research and Policy* Palgrave Macmillan
- Neale, B. and Lau-Clayton, C. (2015- forthcoming) Themed Issue: Supporting Young Fathers: Lived Experiences and Policy Challenges. *Social Policy and Society*.
- Neale, B. and Lau-Clayton, C. (2011). *Following Fathers: The Lived Experience of Teenage Parenting over Time*. Timescapes Policy Briefing Paper Series. University of Leeds.
- Neale, B. and Davies, L. (2015 – forthcoming) ‘Becoming a young breadwinner? The education, employment and training trajectories of young fathers’ in *Social Policy and Society: themed section on young fatherhood*

