

The changing landscape of policy and practice for young fathers: lived experiences of support, surveillance and exclusion

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Policy background

- Teenage Pregnancy Strategy (SEU, 1999)
- Increasing father involvement a core purpose for children's centres
- Reduction of pregnancy rates for under 18s a key part of the sexual health improvement framework (DoH 2013)
- Children and Families Act 2014

Practice background

- a range of support is available, but it is fragmented across a numerous services from the statutory and voluntary sectors
- fathers tend to perceive that support services are targeted towards mothers, and interpret the work 'parent' on advertising literature as meaning 'mother' (Bayley et al., 2009)
- focus on fathers through lens of risk they may represent to their children rather than as a resource (Maxwell et al., 2012)

Context of the study

- QL research with sample of 35 young men aged between 15-25 from varied walks of life
- These young men are from a range of backgrounds, with about 15 highly disadvantaged
- Additional strands of work engage with policy and practice contexts

Professional support

For young dads, specialist support is crucial

“I don’t know where I would be without him. Yeah and he taught me a lot as well.” (*Callum*)

However, support for young dads is often lacking

“It’s all mums and babies.” (*Jack*)

“It’s more of support with welfare issues [that is needed]. Having someone to, if you run into problems, you know, saying ‘I need help’” (*Dominic*)

“[Connexions] Kind of put my faith back in the world cause I had just kind of given up. Cause I’d tried for that long. Yeah. It’s just made me show I can do it. I’ll just prove I can do it.” (*James*)

“But yeah, I would say it’s brilliant, it’s brilliant. The staff at the hospital, like I say, the scans, they were all fantastic. It was all fantastic. Again they explained what the pregnancy’s going to be like, giving birth. It was good yeah. It was really good. . . . I would say it was pretty open and honest.” (*Karl*)

“We were both involved in everything they [midwives] did and everything what they was going to do and everything they said, we was both involved. Yeah it was not left out in any way.” (*Senwe*)

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

Mentoring: the importance of communication

“He used to talk sense to me. He talked to me how I’d like talk to someone. If he talks to me right I’ll talk to him right. And that’s how I learnt how to keep calm and that lot, cause he taught me. The world doesn’t always evolve round you. And you’ve got to learn from your mistakes and pick up from there. And that’s how I am today. . . Basically he knew he’s done his job right cause I behaved.” (*Jackson*)

Mentoring: accessibility and responsiveness

- “If you ever needed anything he was only a phone call away.” (*Richard*)
- “he put himself out there if he knew that you needed emotional support, support with practical things, things like that. So you know, that’s perhaps not in his job role, but that’s what he did.” (*Dominic*)

Practice perspectives on inclusion

“What we have found is that we weren’t collecting that data on fathers. So now we make sure that we collect that data and hopefully at some point a young person would come in and they would bring the point up that they were a young father and it would be a question that the personal advisor would ask them as the standard practice.” (*Connexions PA, Young Parent Specialist*)

Building relationships

“the mum was saying that you know really he doesn’t really, he doesn’t really speak to girls was one thing she said. And he doesn’t really engage with professionals but actually he really likes the family nurse and he’s found her visits really useful. And he was able to tell me a little bit about that as well.” (*Family Nurse Partnership nurse*)

What do mean by exclusion?

- Exclusion occurs when fathers are “ignored, avoided or actively kept out of child and family work by professionals and how men absent themselves , or are kept out by other family members” (Ferguson and Hogan, 2004: 4)
- “there’s benign neglect. But it also tips into exclusion and rudeness.” (*Head of Commissioning, Children’s Services*)

Feeling excluded

“I said [to the midwife], ‘how come you never ever address me? When you’ve got anything to say about my son you never tell me, it’s always my girlfriend. And I’m left in dark, you are speaking in riddles’. And she just said it’s easier and she’s mum after all and all this. So fair enough the mum does need to be told, but just I were never addressed, never told about anything. And I said, ‘why is this?’ And I never got an answer.” *(Jason)*

“Like a couple of my recent social workers have just not really seemed to care or bother.” (*Joe*)

“I just get this, this feeling that because you’re young parents that you don’t tend to get the respect.” (*Tommy*)

but also...

“it is quite unusual [for young fathers to access services directly] It’s not something that they all do. For some reason men are very, or young, young boys, men are...not standoffish but frightened of, of services. A lot, a lot of the girls will, are a lot more open minded about where they can get support, what they can get in support and how that would look in terms of for the future for them.” (*Connexions PA, Young Parent Specialist*)

Feeling under surveillance

“I feel like I’ve got to do what they say and if I don’t then summat bad is gonna happen. ..So I’ve got to just listen and keep it in. . . I don’t want to make a wrong move. I’m scared to make a wrong move.” (*Adam*)

“I’m sure he’s supposed to support not pressurise and like really at the time, he was stressing me, stressing me out even more. I just thought I didn’t want to really work with him. Told my mum to tell him cause I didn’t want to feel rude in front of him.” (*Jackson*)

“Normally we used to worry about bills coming through doors. But now it ain’t. It’s about when you get a knock on door. Whether it’s gonna be social services or whatever if you know what I mean. . With social care and that lot, they just beat me down to be honest. They are not actually helping me if you know what I mean. They are just making things worse.” (*Darren*)

Issues for practice

“when there are sort of serious relationship difficulties between the couple, where there’s a lot of control issues and actually you’re trying to ensure that the mum and the baby are safe, it can be quite a tricky road to walk actually. The mum and baby need to become the priority and the focus.”

“we have had it the other way round where actually she can be the risk to the child. And actually he’s the protective factor. And so then we will make every effort to work with him. And we have had occasion where we’ve, he’s become the main focus of the program delivery.”

(Family Nurse Partnership supervisor)

Understanding engagement

“some of them [young fathers] are listening but they are not perhaps confident enough to engage in the discussion with a professional but are in the background.” (*Family Nurse Partnership nurse*)

“[health visitor] was talking to a, a young mum, in the, in the living room in this flat. And the young dad kind of appeared in his dressing gown eating a pot noodle. And he came in and he sat down between them on the sofa and turned the telly on. And he sat there in his dressing gown eating his pot noodle. And it’s kind of fascinating because she coped with that. She coped with that really well and managed to interpret what was going on, that he was putting himself right in the middle of it. He was actually getting in and being involved. He didn’t know how to come up and say, ‘oh I want to find out this? What do you do?’ Sitting there, turned the telly on. Even him, he was doing his bit and she kind of interpreted that. And for most health visitors they would have been outraged and disgusted.” (*Programme Manager, fatherhood think tank*)

Why do young fathers feel excluded?

- Lack of male workers
- Inaccessibility of language
- Invisibility of fathers in promotional materials/leaflets/photographs
- Perception that children's services are for mums and children
- Some of the services accessed early in pregnancy/parenthood (eg midwifery, health visiting) *are* more targeted at mothers and children

What are the key features of effective support services for young fathers?

- Inclusiveness – both of fathers, and of their youth
- Responsiveness to individual needs/circumstances
- Flexible and personalized support
- Accessibility – geographically, phone/email as well as in terms of language used
- Good relationship with a key practitioner – feeling welcome when accessing services
- Ability to signpost to other services when needed
- Consistency – fathers prefer to tell their story once, and frequent staff changes can be a problem
- Being welcoming and non-judgemental

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