

Statement to the Conference on

Seeing Young Fathers in a Different Way

Lived Experiences, Policy Challenges, Practice Developments

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By

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Please accept my apologies that I am unable to attend the University of Leeds conference on young fathers. I thank the directors for this opportunity to provide my perspective as a Member of Parliament who, since 2000, has fought to bring fatherhood to the forefront as a pressing social issue.

Offering support to young fathers has never made for particularly compelling political rhetoric. Almost immediately, the debate descends into decrying “feckless fathers” and proposing plans for more support for mothers. I write as someone whose own father walked out when I was twelve, never to be seen again, and whose mother often worked multiple jobs and relied on that sort of governmental support to raise my siblings and me. I know as well as anyone the importance of our public services supporting mothers.

Too often, however, these public services neglect to offer similar support to fathers. Our system works from the outdated assumption that women are the exclusive carers of children. Fathers are treated as risks to be managed, rather than resources to be developed. Young fathers feel this acutely, as both their age and their gender can bar them from access to the services they need to play a supportive role in their child’s life.

The title of this conference, “Seeing Young Fathers in a Different Way,” represents a goal that can only be achieved through a broad cultural change, of which government policy plays a limited but crucial role. Small changes can have major impacts. Making it standard practice to register the names of fathers on birth certificates would be a good place to start. Each year, 45,000 children do not have their father’s name on the register. For unmarried women, the father’s name is not sought, and only allowed with the mother’s consent.

Not only does this policy contravene Article 7 of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, which requires countries to ensure “as far as possible” that a child’s parentage is recorded, but it establishes a cultural norm where fathers are disengaged from the very start of the child’s life. The better norm to establish is one where both a mother’s and father’s name must be recorded wherever practicable, as a symbol of the equal expectations we should have for both them in the life of their child.

A host of other policies ought to follow. An improved paternity leave system, at least one paid ante-natal visit, and improved access to training programmes for soon-to-be fathers, to name a few. With increased support must come increased expectation placed on fathers. Except in those cases where

a father is rightly removed, we as a society must have a zero tolerance approach fatherlessness, built around core, universal responsibilities.

Why does supporting young fathers matter? We have all read the studies that show young people brought up without a father are less likely to attend higher education, more likely to be involved in heavy drinking and drug abuse, and that they go on to be poorer parents themselves. Even without these studies, the evidence comes before us all the time. It came before all of Britain for three nights in 2011, when riots, largely consisting of young men, engulfed my constituency of Tottenham in chaos. Many of these men, perhaps a majority, came from households without a father figure. Without a healthy male role model, these boys took their cues on masculinity from a consumer culture that glamorizes greed and a gang culture that dictates power through fear.

Children need fathers. Those on the left who think all single mothers need is financial assistance make just as damaging a mistake as those on the right who demonise them. Just as it cannot replace a mother, the state cannot replace the father, and I commend this conference for seeking practical methods for supporting and nurturing young fathers to become part of the bedrock of British society.

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