

Seeing Young Fathers in a Different Way: Lived Experiences, Policy Challenges, Practice Developments

Following Young Fathers conference report

Wednesday 30th September 2015

University of Leeds

#FYFconf

Introduction

The ESRC funded Following Young Fathers (2012-15) study was a unique opportunity to investigate the varied experiences and support needs of young fathers (those under the age of 25) in the UK. Important findings have emerged from the study about what works, or doesn't currently work for them, in particular support contexts and circumstances. The study has therefore generated an evidence base that supports the work of statutory and voluntary sector services and that has implications for policy and practice.

The main findings from the study were presented at the 'Seeing Young Fathers in a Different Way' conference, which took place on Wednesday 30th September 2015, at the University of Leeds. The event was over subscribed and attended by over 80 delegates. This was a predominantly practitioner audience from local and national voluntary sector organisations, the public health sector and local authorities. Through a series of presentations and workshops, lead by professionals and local champions for young fathers, and with input from young fathers themselves, the event aimed to facilitate the exploration of insights from practice, as well as more effective ways for professionals to work with young men.

Presentations

Owen Thomas, from the organisation Working For Men, chaired the event and emphasized the importance of research for generating the data that is required to support the work of the third sector. In his introduction he conveyed to the conference the good wishes of David Lammy MP, chair of the All Party Parliamentary Group on Fatherhood, who has lent his support to this project over the years, and been actively

involved in a joint writing project with the research team. Own was followed by Angela Hadley, from the Teenage Pregnancy Knowledge Exchange at the University of Bedfordshire, who gave a keynote presentation that outlined key challenges for policy and practice. She provided an overview of existing knowledge and research about teenage pregnancy in the UK and highlighted what existing research suggests are the key barriers young men face in support contexts. While the involvement of fathers is associated with positive outcomes for the child, the roles of young fathers continue to be marginalised and they find it difficult to access services. This may be because of the negative effects of young men's existing vulnerabilities, the anticipation of judgmental attitudes from support workers and/or concerns around surveillance and side-lining by professionals. It was suggested that JSNA's should include the needs of young fathers and that more positive images of young fathers should be used across universal settings (including maternity, Children's Centres and GP services).

Professor Bren Neale and Dr Carmen Lau Clayton then presented some of the key findings from the study. A basic insight is that young fathers do matter and in the vast majority of cases, want to 'be there' for their children, in a loving, personal relationship. This is an important finding in a context where young men are represented as 'feckless' or a potential risk to their children in popular, media and policy discourse. The presentation included analysis from the study and quotes from the young men themselves. A number of important themes were highlighted, including how the young fathers negotiate the complex balance of learning, caring and earning; the importance of grandparents (particularly maternal) in supporting or creating conflict; their relationship status with the mothers of their children; their sometimes insecure housing trajectories; and barriers faced in accessing services.

Some 'must-do's for practice

The presentations provided context to the event, as well as examples from the research that have implications for policy and practice. The break-out sessions that followed allowed delegates to share their own insights and examples of good practice and to compile some 'top tips', later rebranded as 'must do's', for professional practice. The sessions covered a wide range of potential areas of engagement with young men, including:

- the involvement of men in ante-natal and post-natal care;
- supporting young men through custody and resettlement;
- increasing the visibility of young men (through culture change, listening to young fathers and exploring the potential of self-help);
- mentoring needs and holistic service provision and,
- housing needs and support.

These ‘must-do’s were presented back to all of the delegates in a final session where commonalities were identified, as well as suggestions for good practice specific to each practice environment. The following ten tips or ‘must do’s’ highlight some of the shared opportunities for practice identified across the groups:

1. It is important to work *with* young fathers rather than impose on them. They should be consulted at every stage of service design and involved in educating professionals,
2. *Persistence* was highlighted as a key issue. It is assumed that young men are hard to engage and they are unlikely to self-refer. However, they will engage with some persistence and creativity on the behalf of professionals,
3. There is a need to create *safe spaces* for young men where they feel valued and able to share their experiences with other men,
4. If possible (within funding and organisational culture constraints), consideration should be given to more *creative* ways of engaging young men, perhaps in a separate place from the office. This might include urban walking, socialising events or activity based sessions like cooking or DIY,
5. Support is required around *mental health issues* and *emotional well-being*. This was highlighted as a key gap in service provision and could support young men in their relationships with others, including their children and the mother of their child or children,
6. There is a need to *collect data* or details from dads, as well as mums, at first contact and to ask them the question; are you a dad? Statutory gender equality where paperwork requires fatherhood data to be logged and passed onto to relevant agencies is key,

7. All services need to be *fathering inclusive* across early-start teams and training provided across services,
8. *Early education* and interventions in SRE through schools is required,
9. It is important to think about *where* services are provided in order to meet the needs of young men with varied circumstances,
10. Services need to be *the right 'fit'* for young men and should be approachable.

Across the themes there were also more specific suggestions:

Housing

- There is a need to raise awareness with housing agencies about fathers' accommodation needs, as well as the benefits to housing agencies of working with the voluntary sector,
- Fathers should be included in housing assessments and young couples should be supported to be together if that is what they want,
- Safeguarding issues are also a key consideration, particularly if young fathers are expected to live in shared accommodation with other under 35s,
- There is a need for housing that supports young fathers as parents,
- Young fathers should be encouraged to become more politically engaged (if they are not already), especially given the recent government cuts to young people's benefits (see the UK government's Summer Budget 2015),

Young offenders

- Family Group Conferences could be held in custody, including fathers' needs, alongside the needs of the mother and child(ren),
- Links and relationships should be built with the whole support network (family/friends) from within custody,

The Visibility of Young Men

- The gender-neutral language of 'parents' might be replaced with 'mum' and 'dad' when communicating and encouraging engagement with services,
- It is important for professionals to understand young men's biographies so that they are not all treated in the same way.

Key messages

The event was a wonderful celebration of the positive roles that young men can play in the lives of their children and it certainly challenged the delegates to see them in a different way. Together, the presentations and discussions from the academic team, professionals and young men themselves, provided a compelling argument for the need to put young men on the map and to recognise how their support needs might be met across a number of key areas, from early education and experiences of ante-natal and post-natal support, through to housing support and transitions to and from prison. It was a timely reminder that despite wanting to be involved in their children's lives, young fathers do have support needs of their own and must be engaged with in a way that is respectful of their experiences and attentive to their diverse needs. Lots of examples of 'good' practice were shared at the meeting, as well as broader issues in policy and practice that need to be challenged and developed.



Resources

A number of resources were made available at the event, appropriate for a range of practitioners who wish to discuss the support needs of fathers or develop their practice. The full series is also available on the Following Young Fathers project website: www.followingfathers.leeds.ac.uk.