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Part II

Parenting and Family Life

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Young Parenthood and Cross-Generational Relationships: The Perspectives of Young Fathers

Bren Neale and Carmen Lau Clayton

Introduction

The entry of young people into parenthood has long been regarded as an issue for UK social policy and professional practice. The UK has one of the highest rates of teenage pregnancy in Europe, concentrated in the most socially disadvantaged areas of the country (DCSF/DoH 2010). Most of these pregnancies are unplanned and about half end in abortion, although whether this should be a cause for concern is a contested issue (Duncan et al. 2010). Most existing research and policy tends to focus on young mothers; we currently know little about the practices, values or support needs of young fathers, or what barriers and enablers exist to improve their life chances (Alexander et al. 2010). Research that takes a dynamic approach, exploring the varied pathways through which young men enter and attempt to sustain parenthood is especially sparse. A small-scale baseline study, conducted under the Timescapes programme is addressing these gaps in knowledge, utilizing qualitative longitudinal (QL) methods of enquiry. We have been prospectively tracking a sample of young men to explore how their journeys through varied public landscapes (education, health, housing, employment and financial security) intersect with their interpersonal journeys – the changing landscapes of family life, partnering and parenting.

An important theme emerging from this research concerns the nature of intergenerational relationships in families where there is an early entry into parenthood. The transition to early parenthood has significance not only for the young people but for their parents, who face an

unanticipated entry into grandparenthood. Our baseline study revealed that young fathers may have a strong commitment to developing a fathering identity, and that unplanned children are not necessarily unwanted; the arrival of a new generation may give young fathers a new sense of purpose and responsibility. However, young fathers also face a raft of challenges in developing a parenting role, often requiring considerable support over time from their families and in some cases from health and social care professionals (Neale and Lau Clayton 2011). Family support that flows down the generations from grandparents to parents and their young children is often taken for granted in this context (Grandparents Plus 2010). But the nature of such grandparental support, and the extent to which it is sustainable and can therefore be relied upon over time, is much less clear cut – with implications for the provision of professional support for young parents. Currently our knowledge of this support comes largely from the accounts of grandparents; there is very little evidence on how it is perceived and experienced by young parents themselves, especially young fathers (Tan et al. 2010).

The QL design of this research enabled us to explore how intergenerational support is worked out in the aftermath of youthful entry into parenthood. By ‘walking alongside’ our participants as their lives unfolded (Neale and Flowerdew 2003) we were able to explore the micro-processes through which intergenerational support is worked out over time and to document how grandparental support – maternal and paternal – is perceived and experienced by young fathers in the context of a major and often unanticipated life-course transition. We explored the opportunities, tension and constraints that may arise across the generations in these circumstances; and the impact of grandparental involvement on the ability of young men to establish and sustain an identity and role as a parent. Before turning to the empirical study and our findings, we briefly set out the theoretical and policy contexts for this research.

Parenting, intergenerational support and social change

In the UK, there are approximately 14 million grandparents (Broad 2007). The average age of becoming a grandparent is cited as anything between 47 and 54, with significant age differences by socio-economic group; for example, working-class women are more likely to be young grandmothers (under 50) than middle-class women (22% compared with 5%; Grandparents Plus 2009). The proportion of the population who are grandparents has been increasing (to an estimated 28.4% in

2007) and approximately 25% of families with a child under 14 are now using grandparent care (Speight et al. 2009). Demographic changes, from a high-mortality/ high-fertility to a low-mortality/ low-fertility society, have impacted upon these processes, leading to a rise in 'longer' and 'thinner' 'beanpole' families with fewer family members per generation. Increased life expectancy and falling fertility rates mean that grandparents may live longer and healthier lives, with increased options to take on an active and sustained caring role. While this may be incongruous with other options that may open up in mid to later life, for example, through changing work patterns, retirement or relocation planning (Carter and McGoldrick 2005), there is widespread evidence that grandparents play an increasingly significant role in supporting their children and grandchildren. This runs counter to the idea of older people as a burden, a drain on their families and on the public purse (Phillipson 1998).

Research on intergenerational support suggests the need to rethink the nature of grandparenting. The rather sedate and voluntary 'leisure and pleasure' model of grandparental care now sits alongside a more active and engaged 'rescue and repair' model, particularly in the context of managing family crises or disruption, such as divorce, separation or unemployment; or where chronic disadvantage or vulnerability among the parent generation requires grandparents to act as facilitators of family life and hold families together (Griggs 2010, Hughes and Emmel 2011, and Chapter 9 this volume). Grandparent care has been described as part of the 'moral economy': a significant social resource and a form of social capital (Arthur et al. 2003). The provision of kin care by grandparents may be particularly important for young parents; those living in disadvantaged circumstances may have few resources to bring to parenthood and need ongoing care themselves (Swann et al. 2003). Such support tends to flow down the maternal line. Indeed, in some communities, women may provide kin care (as the main carers or substitute parents) to successive cohorts of young children for many decades (Townsend 2011). There is also evidence to suggest a vital role for paternal grandparents in providing practical help and housing for young fathers, and supporting and enabling ongoing contact between the young men and their children (Speak et al. 1997, Shepherd et al. 2011).

Research that evaluates such care and the value that it holds reveals a mixed picture. Grandmother care may have positive outcomes for young mothers and grandchildren, for example on mothers' mental health and educational attainment (Griggs 2010, Shepherd et al. 2011).

But studies also report negative effects and the undermining of care between parent and child (SmithBattle 1996, Culp et al. 2006, Glaser et al. 2010) – fuelling notions of a parenting deficit that is passed down the generations.

Whatever the effects on the parent generation and their children, there are likely to be mixed consequences for the grandparents themselves. Reliance on the older generation can result in a ‘missing generation in the middle’ with a double care burden for the grandparents, particularly where they step in to keep families together and avoid their grandchildren being fostered (Kropf and Burnette 2003, Chapter 9 this volume). This, in turn, can impact negatively on the grandparents’ health, income and future lives. Concerns have been raised about the stress on younger grandparents who need to balance work and family commitments – this clearly becomes a multigenerational family matter rather than a challenge for younger parents alone (Hank and Buber 2008). It is clear that with the arrival of a new generation, the whole configuration of interpersonal relationships are disrupted and forced to change to accommodate the need for new roles and additional resources (Kehily and Thomson 2011). Ambivalence between the generations can occur, as family members experience and negotiate familial and social change on the one hand, and continuity on the other (Thomson 2008, Thomson et al. 2011). Overall, there appears to be no simple correlation between involvement of grandparents and positive outcomes for their children and grandchildren and for their own well-being – the picture is complex and requires a more nuanced understanding of the constellation of factors at play across the generations and over time.

The policy context: Grandparental care

The broad aim of policy since 1999 has been to ensure that young parents engage with education and employment opportunities and develop the skills needed to parent effectively, reflected, for example, in the ten-year Teenage Pregnancy Strategy, and early interventions such as Sure Start and the Nurse Family Partnership schemes. The place of grandparents in this process is rather nebulous. Despite some recognition of their role (DfES 2003), in the main, they are marginalized in legislation and social policy (Grandparents Plus 2010). For example, grandparents are ineligible for childcare tax credit or childcare vouchers (Grandparents Plus 2010) and their role is not defined or assumed in family law, although they can apply for leave to make an application for contact or residence for a grandchild (DfES 2006). Currently, it would seem that

practitioners, service providers and policy-makers are often unaware of the contribution that grandparents make to families, or may lack professional mechanisms to translate this knowledge into practice (Hughes and Emmel 2011, and Chapter 9 this volume). Some of the ambivalence about grandparents in policy and practice circles may have been fuelled by notions of an intergenerational cycle of disadvantage, whereby cultures of deprivation and a parenting deficit are presumed to pass down the generations, requiring early interventions to break the cycle (Allen 2011). This idea has become embedded in policy and practice thinking, despite longstanding evidence that such cycles are not inevitable, and that parenting cultures are only one part of the complex web of factors – structural, economic, relational and environmental – that influence the fortunes of families (Shildrick et al. 2012).

Notions of an intergenerational cycle of disadvantage may have the unintended consequence of reinforcing a negative image of the legacy that grandparents hand down to their children and grandchildren. Moreover, the overriding policy focus on early intervention may detract from the value of sustained support over time, while the short-term targets and measures used to evaluate provision (such as those used for the Sure Start programme) may be out of step with longer-term needs and the tenor of real lives (Neale et al. 2013).

This brief overview reveals some mixed evidence on the nature and extent of grandparental care for young parents. In what follows we explore how intergenerational support unfolds over time from the perspective of young fathers, and we consider what this means for their ability to establish and sustain a parenting role.

The ‘Following young fathers’ study

The research for ‘Following young fathers’ was carried out as part of the ‘Young lives and times’ project (part of the Timescapes programme). In 2010, in consultation with a team of teenage pregnancy co-ordinators, we set up a small study on young fatherhood – designed to support practitioners who were struggling to identify, let alone meet the needs of, young fathers. The consultation led to a partnership with a local authority educational service, located in a northern metropolitan city, with high levels of youth unemployment (22.5%). We combined a QL design with a participatory ‘knowledge to action’ approach, working closely with the practitioner in the conduct of the research (Neale and Morton 2012). Through this route we recruited 11 young fathers, and could engage with a marginalized group that would be otherwise

'hard to reach' using indirect methods of recruitment or survey techniques. Our twelfth participant was recruited through snowballing and was without any professional support.

We tracked the young men over an 18-month period, using focus groups and three waves of qualitative interviews in which we gathered life history data about their past lives, and utilized timelines and relationship maps to reveal changes in life-course trajectories and relationships. The interviews took place at four to six month intervals between December 2010 and May 2012. The importance of grandparents emerged through the early waves of interviews, and became a particular focus of our third wave of interviews.

Sample characteristics and circumstances

At the time of the first interview, the 12 young men were aged between 16 and 22. One young man was expecting a child, seven had children under the age of one, two had children under the age of three, while the remaining two fathers had children under the age of seven. In ten cases the fathers had been under the age of 16 when their child was conceived. Ten of the young men were of European descent and two of African Caribbean descent. While there was a great deal of variation in life circumstances across the sample, in ten cases the young men had experienced disadvantaged and often chaotic backgrounds. They commonly described their lives in terms of family 'troubles' during their upbringing, including incidents of parental drug addiction, prison sentences, mental health problems, physical abuse, frequent changes of abode, periods in social care and volatile relationships within and outside their families. The young men themselves were often 'troubled' during their childhoods, describing volatile behaviour, anger management problems, dangerous activities, involvement with the police and disengagement from school. In seven cases, they had been, or were the subject of intervention or support from statutory agencies such as social services and youth offending teams.

The young fathers had different levels of contact with their children and varied relationships with the child's mother and maternal grandparents. Five of the young men were in a relationship with the mother at the time of the birth. In one case these relationships were described as positive and settled; in the remainder varied levels of difficulty and volatility were reported over time. The majority (ten young men) had more positive relationships with their own parents (the paternal grandparents), although these too could be volatile over time. The fluid living

arrangements of the young men reflected the nature of these relationships. All the young parents initially resided with their respective parents, with the mothers and babies living with the maternal grandmother (although subsequently, three young couples managed to set up home together in privately rented accommodation). Five young men had changed abode since the arrival of their child; in three cases, they changed residence during the course of the study.

According to the accounts of the young men, the paternal and maternal grandparents were under the average age of grandparenthood, in their 30s or early 40s, as opposed to their 50s. There were marked similarities between the maternal and paternal grandparents in terms of residence, employment status and relationships. Most sets of grandparents lived in the local area and were reported to be in receipt of social welfare benefits. Those in full-time employment worked in manual to semi-skilled professions. Most had separated and re-partnered with new children. Where paternal grandparents had separated, the young men often had limited contact with their fathers as a result (although in one case, a young man had resided with his father after his parents' divorce).

The intensive tracking revealed fluid and sometimes volatile lives for 11 of the 12 young men, marked by frequent changes of residence and the making and breaking of relationships over relatively short periods of time. In ten of these families, the generations were closely layered together, with entry into early parenthood a feature of the lives of the grandparent as well as the parent generation and also evident among the siblings of the young parents. Such close layering of the generations is a relatively common feature of family life in disadvantaged communities. It appears to generate distinctive patterns of parenting in circumstances where young parents are grappling with a dual identity as both young person and parent, while mid-life grandparents have both children and grandchildren to support.

Tracing the journeys of the young men into parenthood, we draw below on their current and retrospective accounts of how they disclosed the pregnancy to the older generation, what kinds of support – practical, financial and emotional – they received prior to and following the birth, how intergenerational support evolved over time, and what impact this had on the young men. These were strong and reoccurring themes within our data set that enabled us to gain an insight into the nature of intergenerational support from the young men's perspective over a relatively short period of time. We are currently extending the longitudinal reach and value of this study over a further three-year period, with follow-up funding from the Economic and Social Research Council; this

will enable us to extend and deepen the 'long view' of grandparental support as the study progresses.

Disclosing the pregnancy: Reactions and adjustments

Paternal grandparents in this study had mixed reactions to the news of the pregnancy. Only one grandmother was said to be happy with the news; the others expressed shock and concern for their child: 'My step dad was just like "yeah, you screwed your life up"' (Darren, aged 21, wave 3). This would seem to be a common reaction from grandparents (Shepherd et al. 2011). Such feelings were considered to be a natural reaction:

Because of the age factor and the circumstances . . . [It was a] shock for them. Cause at my age, at my point in life, circumstance wise, education wise, that wasn't the right time for, for me to come with the news that, like a baby was on the way. But I think that's a natural reaction if they care about someone . . . They were purely looking out for my best interest.

(Dominic, aged 18, wave 3)

One grandmother in the sample offered to become the primary caregiver once the grandchild was born (cf. Maposa and SmithBattle 2008):

Oh my mum . . . she was like 'if you can't look after him, I'll take him on as my own but he'll still be calling you mum and dad' and all this.

(Darren, aged 21, wave 3)

The maternal grandparents can play a significant role in the continuation (or otherwise) of a pregnancy. Four of these young men (ranging in age from 16 to 20 at time of first interview) had originally planned with their partners for the pregnancy to be terminated. However, the maternal grandparents' were highly influential in reversing this decision. Dominic (aged 18) and Callum (aged 19), were both partnered at the time of their child's birth, but subsequently separated. In these cases, the maternal grandparents' religious and personal beliefs were a factor in keeping the child:

Her mum didn't want her to [have an abortion]. My ex girlfriend probably thought, 'my mum knows best'. You're going to listen to your mum, aren't you?

(Callum, aged 19, wave 3)

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Her mother is very religious and Catholic; she managed to persuade my ex-girlfriend to not have an abortion . . . My ex hadn't spoken to me at all. It was down to her dad and mum saying 'we're having him'. And obviously I just felt 'this isn't your right, this isn't your right as a person to decide whether or not me and [my ex] should have this child'. And it's something that I've let it go now, you know, whatever's happened has happened But at the time I was like you know, 'what is your right to decide this?' It's down to me, me and [her].

(Dominic, aged 18, wave 3)

As Dominic shows, when decisions were made in this fashion without any further discussion, the young men expressed upset and anger that they had been excluded.

Once the decision to go ahead with the pregnancy had been made, Dominic, Tarrell and Callum adjusted to the idea and were supportive, despite perceiving difficulties ahead. However, Jimmy, one of the youngest fathers in the sample, felt differently. He described early parenthood as very difficult, with negative effects on his intimate relationship with his partner, his energy levels and his social networks. Over time he expressed growing unhappiness with the interference of the maternal grandmother and great-grandmother:

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. And now her mum and her nana have a go, saying 'oh you shouldn't have had him if you can't look after him'. But they were the ones that said all that to her. And they seem to forget that.

(Jimmy, aged 16, wave 3)

Other fathers were also aware of the potential influence of the maternal grandparents, but their concern was that the young mothers-to-be (their partners) would be persuaded to have an abortion. To avoid this, the young couples did not reveal the news of the pregnancy to the maternal side of the family until after the first trimester (although, interestingly, paternal grandparents were informed much earlier in the process):

We managed to keep it a secret for five months. And obviously by then it were too late to get rid of it.

(Darren, aged 21, wave 1)

After the initial shock, grandparents in this study 'came around' once the grandchild was born. Our findings mirror those of Sadler and

Clemmens (2004) who found that grandparents often formed a deep attachment to the grandchild after resolving their initial shock and disappointment regarding the pregnancy and their ambivalence about becoming a young grandparent.

I don't think my mum was that happy at first but she grew to be alright with it.

(Jimmy, aged 16, wave 3)

Yeah they absolutely love and adore (being a grandparent). And they really enjoy the time.

(Dominic, aged 18, wave 3)

Strong bond. Yeah like when my son grows up he's going to absolutely love his nana.

(Adam, aged 16, wave 3)

The reactions to the pregnancy by the grandparents indicate the momentous change that entry into young parenthood entails for both generations. While the mother is seen as the primary decision-maker in relation to the pregnancy, by extension it is the maternal grandparents – particularly grandmothers – who exercise agency in these decisions, creating a marked contrast with the agency of the young men and their families. This reflects a broader pattern of decision-making and responsibility that resides in the 'vertical' cross-generational maternal household, rather than residing in the lateral relationship between the young people themselves. As we show below, this pattern is likely to continue into the early years of parenthood.

Grandparental support

In line with existing evidence, the grandparents in this study were the main providers of practical, emotional and financial support for their children and new grandchildren. The provision of a home (board and lodging) for the young parents was perhaps the most tangible dimension of the support provided; in each case mother and baby initially resided with the maternal grandparents while the fathers continued to live with their parents. Direct care of the baby was more usually provided by the maternal grandmothers than grandfathers, reflecting traditional gendered roles and responsibilities. Such support was valued by the fathers, who could not always be present at the maternal home in the early days of the child's life.

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In the six cases where the young parents were in a relationship, the couple and child would visit and stay over at the paternal household, enabling the paternal grandparents to provide some support and forge a grandparental role. Where the young parents were not together, the fathers would negotiate times to visit the baby, or to take the baby to the paternal grandparents' house – although this process could generate some tensions.

Most fathers reported that their own parents also played a significant role as second or co-parents to their children, involved actively in feeding, bathing, changing nappies, playing, minding and taking grandchildren out on day trips and visits. This was particularly so for the youngest of the parents in the sample (cf. Griggs 2010):

She'll [paternal grandmother] just do everything we would really. Change her bum. She'll have cuddles with her, have a little play with her and she likes to bath her now and again as well.

(Callum, aged 19, wave 3)

She'll just do everything that a parent does basically, but she's grandma . . . I don't think a grandma would do that much. She does the absolute maximum that she could do.

(Adam, aged 16, wave 3)

Dominic regularly brought his child to stay over at his parent's home and appreciated the support he received as a single parent:

I think I've lost a bit of support from not having a partner . . . So yeah they'll help out . . . If they see I just need a hand or if, you know, they could see I've got a lot to do . . . I think they're spot on in terms of how they deal with my son, they're really good grandparents.

(Dominic, aged 18, wave 3)

In terms of financial support, this too tended to flow down the generations from grandmothers and grandfathers, rather than operating as an exchange between the young parents. Depending on the relationship between the young parents, young fathers could benefit indirectly from the support provided for the young mothers:

See my dad, he helps me out with money.

(Darren, aged 21, wave 3)

She [ex-partner's mother] always took us places we needed to go and stuff like that. She did do quite a lot for us money-wise as well.

(Callum, aged 19, wave 3)

Only one father (Dominic) was in full-time employment during the study. Of the remainder, four were at college and seven fell into the local authority category of NEETs (not in education, employment or training). Four young men were not eligible for social welfare benefits and were entirely dependent upon their parents for financial and material support. The young fathers in the study often spoke of the difficulties of being young, uneducated or unqualified in a context where they perceived a fathers' role to be that of a traditional 'provider' for their children, and for their partners if the relationship was still intact.

I'm the one who's meant to support the baby. Obviously without my mother's financial support or anything, I don't know where I would have got the money from. I'd have been really been stuck.

(Senwe, aged 16, wave 2)

Even minimal help was greatly appreciated. However, some frustration was felt at having to rely on the grandparents, especially when their resources were also limited. This was the case for Karl, who, following a social services pre-birth assessment order, did not have funds to attend assessment meetings to see his child:

It's £4.30 every time The social workers expect my dad to, like, give me the bus fare and all that. But he can't afford it.

(Karl, aged 16, wave 1).

Emotional support was also of vital importance to the young men. While this could come from a number of sources, including the young mothers and their families, the most consistent support in terms of talking things through and being listened to was from the paternal grandparents, particularly the grandmothers (cf. Tan et al. 2010, and Shepherd et al. 2011, who report similar findings for the maternal household). Simon, for example, learned of the pregnancy shortly before his child was born and valued his mother's support:

If she weren't always there then I reckon I could have got in a mess and trouble and stuff.

(Simon, aged 16, wave 3)

Grandparents were perceived as better confidantes than friends, in a context where few of the young men's peers would understand the issues they were facing: for single parents like Dominic, grandparents were doubly important, providing both childcare and emotional support that may have otherwise been provided by the mother (Tan et al. 2010).

I feel that I can go to them with – and vent and discuss how I feel about certain things regarding my son and ex-partner... I don't tend to have that same outlook with my friends.

(Dominic, aged 18, wave 3)

Overall, the material, financial, childcare and emotional support provided by grandparents for the young parents and their babies was substantial, especially in the early days of parenthood. This reinforced a pattern of parenting that operates down the generational line within each household. In these early days, the young fathers in this sample did not assume a central role as part of a parental dyad; they were more likely to find themselves somewhat peripheral as front-line carers. The engagement of the grandparents was not simply a useful supplement to the care provided by the young parents; it was in many cases a crucial foundation for the care of the new generation. Grandparental support was generally welcomed by the young men in this study and could help in their assumption of a parental identity. However, as we show below, the nature and level of support provided was subject to change over time.

Gift or curse? Changing grandparental support over time

The parenting journeys of the young men revealed the tensions that can arise across the generations over the boundaries around parental and grandparental care, and the difficulties entailed in sustaining inter-generational support over time. As we noted earlier, SmithBattle (1996) suggests that grandparent involvement can be seen as a gift or a curse. Tensions may arise, firstly, over involvement of the grandparents in ways that may marginalize the young men. Getting the right balance between support and interference is a difficult matter that affected most of the young men, even where relationships were generally very good. Dominic, for example, brought his child to live in the paternal home for three days per week:

I'm parenting my son as a father. They're spending time with my son as grandparents. If my son's being naughty, if he's being silly

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or if he's doing something or if he's done something dangerous, me telling him off and saying, you know, 'it's quiet time for five minutes cause you've been bad', and my parents are pulling faces. Just kind of undermining me as a father . . . They just want to enjoy him. Sometimes it does get heated and quite hard to live under one roof and to co-exist happily.

(Dominic, aged 18, wave 1)

By wave 3 (a year after the first interview), Dominic's ex-partner had reduced the amount of contact that he had with his son. Contact times were precious and he found it difficult to always share his son with his parents:

If I'm at home with my son, I know that my parents are gonna be there. And obviously there may be activities I want to [do] and spend [time] alone [with him], but just due to obviously living arrangements, it's not going to be like that.

Where mother and child resided with the maternal grandparents, similar concerns were raised. Often maternal grandparents appeared to 'know best' and would take over in a way that was described as 'annoying' and 'upsetting' for the young fathers. However, voicing their concerns might lead to conflicts and withdrawal of support:

I'd just like her to sit back and be a grandmother instead of a mother. Normally I would argue with people if they've tried to be so controlling and horrible, but it's not in my son's best interest, I just had to bite my tongue.

(Jason, aged 22, wave 1)

If over-involvement was a curse, so too was its opposite – a withdrawal of grandparental support. In both cases the source of the conflict was a blurring of the boundaries of parental and grandparental care, with both generations perceiving a lack of responsibility in the other. Tensions simmered but might then erupt into family arguments over household chores, infant care and the differing priorities of the generations (Sadler and Clemmens 2004), which could in turn trigger changes in arrangements. During the first two waves of interviews (three months apart), Jimmy reported that his mother had been very supportive, but by the third wave (three months after wave 2), she had withdrawn all her

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support due to a large family disagreement, leading to a change of abode for Jimmy, who moved to live with his friend.

She used to do everything for [the baby]. Like watch him all the time whenever we needed her to and that. But now she's started this big argument. She's not a good mum or grandma.

(Jimmy, aged 16)

The maternal grandmother had also withdrawn her support at wave 3 due to the development of a new romantic relationship with another man:

Her mum could watch my son a bit more and pay a little bit more attention to him. Because then my girlfriend would get it easier. Like she'd be able to go to sleep on a night if her mum'd watch him, and [be able to] get up for school and go. But no, her mum's just awkward like that.

(Jimmy, aged 16, wave 3)

In this context, grandparenting took the form of temporary 'helping out' while the parents adjusted to parenthood, rather than a longer-term commitment. Darren's mother, for example, had initially provided substantial grandparental care, but within a few months of the baby's birth she was seeking a new life without parenting responsibilities:

She wanted to move... and start afresh, which I can understand, but obviously still see your grandkids. But she doesn't want it like that. She wants to go up there, never come back... She goes 'oh my life don't involve children now'. So I'm like, 'well that's nice'. So if it doesn't involve children it doesn't involve my son. And if it doesn't involve my son, it doesn't involve me... You could ring her and she's like, 'well, I'm busy now, you'll have to ring back tomorrow'. I'm like, 'well I don't need you tomorrow, I need you now'.

(Darren, aged 21, wave 2)

The relationship between Darren and his mother grew increasingly distant over the course of the study. As a result, he became closer to his partner's parents and relied more heavily upon the maternal grandparents' support by wave 3. Adam (aged 16) also experienced dramatic changes in his relationship with the maternal grandparents over the course of the study. Prior to his son's birth at wave 1, Adam

had a tenuous relationship with the mother-to-be, and experienced hostility from her parents. However, the arrival of his son at wave 2 (three months later) mended relationships with the maternal household. At this point, Adam moved in with his partner and was receiving substantial help and support. By the third wave (nine months later), relationships had once more become fragile and grandparental support was withdrawn:

It's hard just the two of us.

(Adam, aged 16, wave 3)

Sometimes the problems between the generations were severe, with grandparental care perceived to be poor in quality, or tipping over into exploitation or policing of the young parents. Research more usually stresses grandparents' dissatisfaction with the younger generation, but these judgements may be reversed where young parents enter parenthood themselves. Five young fathers reported that grandparents were leading lifestyles that were non-conducive to 'good' grandparenthood or were misusing their role as custodians of their grandchildren's welfare benefits:

When you're on drugs, you're not interested about anybody but yourself and the drugs.

(Andrew, aged 16, wave 3)

Like my son's child benefits and all that, she [maternal grandmother] claims them because my girlfriend's too young. And when my girlfriend asks...she won't give her it, she spends it on herself. So we can never...go buy him anything.

(Jimmy, aged 16, wave 3)

As a final example, maternal grandparents could control, restrict or even block contact between a young father and their daughter and the new baby. This was the case for seven of the young men in this sample. Sometimes this was in the context of concerns over child protection issues, with social services involvement already in place, but nevertheless, the actions led to stressful situations, with the young men having to seek contact through the family law courts:

Her mum won't let me go up to her house no more....And, like, I want to see [my son]....It'd have to go through courts wouldn't

it?. [But] I don't wanna do that cause then it'll just cause bigger arguments.

(Jimmy, aged 16, wave 1)

Overall, grandparenting could tip over into control of the pregnancy and child, policing of the young parents' behaviour or interference in their relationship. This reflects the potentially conflicting status of the young parents – responsible for their children, yet still the responsibility of the older generation. The young fathers' high expectations and mixed satisfaction levels with the older generation was an important theme running through the young men's accounts, revealing a distinctive dynamic about relationships and practices of care across the generations.

Conclusion

The findings presented here reflect the complex constellation of family relationships at play when young people enter parenthood. Intergenerational or 'vertical' care relationships are highly significant where the generations are closely layered, and they may take precedence over and interfere with the development of 'lateral' parenting relationships between the young parents themselves. Grandparental involvement clearly has an impact on the ability of young men to manage the transition to parenthood and to establish a parenting role and identity. But the evidence here shows that such support can be highly variable, may have mixed effects on their parenting identities, and may be unsustainable over time, particularly in families with complex needs such as those who make up most of this sample.

If state support for families is to be effective, it is important that the realities of grandparental care, including in some cases its detrimental effect over the long term, is taken into account. Even where such care is of good quality and highly valued, finding the right balance between support, interference and neglect is notoriously difficult to achieve, and may result in blurred lines of responsibility that become a burden for both the young parents and the older generations. A broader approach to policy and professional practice may be needed, that takes into account cross-generational relationships and support, as well as the dynamic relationship between the young parents themselves. There would be scope, for example, to extend the partnership approach for working with parents (DfES 2006) to include grandparents too, and to

offer bespoke support that would operate flexibly and in line with the shifting dynamics of kin care in families. Tailoring support for families where the generations are closely layered could lead to a better balance of care across the generations, and between the young parents themselves, enabling young men to play a more effective role in their children's lives.

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