

1 Introduction

2 Young Fatherhood: Lived experiences and policy challenges

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7 The entry of young people into early parenthood has long been regarded as an issue
8 for social policy and for professional practice in the UK and internationally. Despite a
9 steadily falling trend, most notably since 1998, the UK still has one of the highest rates
10 of teenage pregnancy in Europe, concentrated in the most socially disadvantaged areas
11 of the country (Office for National Statistics, 2015). The majority of these pregnancies
12 are unplanned, with about half resulting in the birth of a child, although the extent to
13 which this should be a cause for concern is a contested issue (Duncan *et al.*, 2010).
14 Considerable research evidence exists on the experiences of young mothers, with a range
15 of interventions designed to meet their needs. However, young fathers (defined as those
16 under the age of 25, a quarter of whom are estimated to be in their teens) have, until
17 recently, been neglected in both research and policy. Over the past decade, small pockets
18 of research evidence on the circumstances, practices and values of young fathers have
19 begun to coalesce into a fledgling evidence base. However, the notion of ‘feckless’ young
20 men, who are assumed to be absent, or disinterested in ‘being there’, or, worse, regarded
21 as a potential risk to their children, continues to hold sway, particularly in popular media
22 and some political discourses (Neale and Davies, 2015).

23 **Young parents: ‘new’ adults?**

24 Before turning to the policy context for this themed section, it is worth considering why
25 the idea of young fatherhood (and young parenthood more generally) evokes such moral
26 panic and condemnation in the popular imagination. Of the many challenges facing young
27 parents, perhaps the foundational issue relates to their youthful and dependent status.
28 Transitions into adulthood in contemporary Britain are acknowledged to be increasingly
29 fluid, varied and difficult to navigate (Furlong and Cartmel, 2007). Youth as a life course
30 category is said to be expanding in a way that blurs the boundaries between youth and
31 independent adult life. In the 1950s, as post-war employment opportunities flourished,
32 the key life course trajectories relating to age, employment, family and household were
33 bound together for young people as part of a new, normatively prescribed pathway into
34 adulthood. The orderly progression involved leaving school or college, finding work,
35 entering a stable relationship, setting up an independent marital home and starting a new
36 family. Time spans for these transitions were also prescribed, with progress expected to
37 occur over a decade or so, starting at the point of leaving full time education.

38 However, for many contemporary young people these pathways have been disrupted
39 (McDowell, 2014). In 1975, over 60 per cent of young people moved straight from school

40 to work at the age of sixteen, but by the mid 1990s the percentage had dropped to less
41 than 20 per cent (Coles, 2000). The collapse of the youth labour market in the 1980s
42 led to a steep rise in youth unemployment, an expansion of youth training schemes and,
43 by the 1990s, an expansion in post-sixteen education and routes into further and higher
44 education. By the year 2000, nearly 80 per cent of young people were extending their
45 education beyond the traditional school leaving age (Coles, 2000), a trend that has been
46 reflected and reinforced through successive legislation (the latest change, in 2015, requires
47 young people born after September 1997 to stay in education or training until they are
48 eighteen). Disadvantaged young people are more likely than others to experience insecure
49 working lives, with 'transitions characterised by flux and rapid movement around different
50 economic statuses ('unemployed', 'in training', 'in education', 'employed') (MacDonald,
51 2013: 2).

52 These changing routes from education and training into employment have been
53 accompanied by rising housing costs and widespread transformations in normative family
54 practices, a substantial loosening of marital ties, and a slow but discernible uncoupling of
55 partnering, cohabitation and parenting as the basis for family life. Of key importance here
56 is the gradual rise of the ideology of 'new fatherhood': an appreciation of fathering that
57 is grounded in the quality of parent-child relationships, rather than the extent of contact,
58 or the co-resident or partnership status of the parents (Smart and Neale, 1999).

59 These far reaching changes in life course trajectories have substantially unravelled the
60 post war, normatively prescribed transition to adulthood. The extended trajectory from
61 compulsory education into employment for most young people brings parallel delays
62 and variations in the transition from dependent to independent living, with a growing
63 pattern of nomadic young people living in temporary forms of accommodation in early
64 adulthood. The key trajectories relating to age, family, employment and home, then,
65 are no longer necessarily synchronised, or intertwined; they may or may not unfold in
66 chronological order, in a linear direction, or at a uniform pace, indeed some elements
67 of the transition may be extended while others have accelerated (Bynner, 2007; Neale, 2015):
68 '[F]ar more common are complex and contradictory patterns in which the achievement of
69 independence in one sphere of life may well involve compromises in others' (Allen and
70 Crow, 2001: 36). As Bynner observes, there is a need to 'move from blanket categorisations
71 of individuals in terms of stages bound by chronological age towards a broader conception
72 based on a range of trajectories' (2007: 378).

73 Young parents occupy a unique place in these processes. In 1981, around 50 per
74 cent of teenage conceptions occurred within marriage, but the delayed trajectories and
75 changing mores of family formation mean that only a small minority of conceptions now
76 take place as part of a planned entry into parenthood within a stable relationship. It
77 is also the case that values surrounding transitions into parenthood vary across social
78 groups; a close layering of the generations, for example, is a more commonly occurring
79 and acceptable pattern within disadvantaged communities (Emmel and Hughes, 2014).
80 Viewed historically, it is not so much that young people are having children at an earlier
81 age, it is more the case that other elements of the transition to 'full' adult status are
82 occurring later in the life course. Indeed, young parents could be said to be pioneers
83 of a 'new' adulthood (Wyn, 2014), one that does not rely on the idea of a prescribed
84 and wholesale transition to a 'finished' and fully independent adult state at the point
85 where all the pieces of the jigsaw fall neatly into place. Indeed, in the current climate of
86 austerity and wholesale changes in labour markets, a secure transition into such a state

87 may be beyond the reach of many disadvantaged young people. In this shifting historical
88 picture, young people in their teenage years, who enter parenthood without skills,
89 employment, resources, stable relationships or stable independent homes represent the
90 ultimate confounding of the post-war normative path to adulthood. It is this confounding of
91 normative ideas, coupled with evidence for a strong correlation between early conception
92 and indices of social deprivation, that has had a profound influence on public and policy
93 perceptions of young parents and, in some government and media circles, created such
94 opprobrium towards them (Swann *et al.*, 2003; Ingham, 2005; Arai, 2009).

95 **The policy context**

96 The shifting normative picture outlined above has given rise to a range of policy concerns
97 about young parenthood. In the last decade of the twentieth century, Conservative
98 policy was framed by a moralistic concern to reduce teenage pregnancy rates. This was
99 operationalised as a policy target within the five year Health of the Nation initiative
100 (1992–7), although it proved to be largely ineffective (Department of Health, 1998; Arai,
101 2009). Under New Labour's ten-year Teenage Pregnancy Strategy (TPS, 2000–10) (Social
102 Exclusion Unit, 1999), the concern about young parenthood was reframed in the less
103 moralistic language of social exclusion: a perceived correlation between early parenthood
104 and a range of social ills, including poverty, poor education and skills, unemployment,
105 crime and 'troubled' family backgrounds. Evidence on the backgrounds of young fathers
106 tends to support this view (Quinton *et al.*, 2002; Swann *et al.*, 2003).

107 The then prime minister, Tony Blair, castigated the Tories for attacking teenage mothers
108 while ignoring, 'the damage [pregnancy] does to the education, employment and life
109 chances of young women and girls' (cited in Arai, 2009: 59). The TPS, which was rolled
110 out nationally via a team of regional teenage pregnancy coordinators, responded to this
111 perceived hazard by setting targets to substantially reduce conception rates among young
112 women, and to increase (to 60 per cent) the number of young parents in education,
113 employment and training (EET). However, the priority of the strategy was to tackle
114 the ignorance that was perceived to be driving early conception, rather than the low
115 expectations that were presumed to underpin the social disadvantages associated with
116 young parenthood (Duncan *et al.*, 2010). In the event, only a 30 per cent increase was
117 achieved in EET rates over the ten-year period. It is worth putting this statistic in context. To
118 expect very young mothers, driven by an imperative to care, to be in employment from the
119 time of their child's birth was perhaps unrealistic, when survey data for the 1990s shows
120 that, at that time, nearly 60 per cent of all first time mothers were not in employment
121 during the first five years of their children's lives (Duncan *et al.*, 2010: 42). The strategy,
122 then, presumed a life path that was not necessarily suited to the needs of young mothers
123 (Harris *et al.*, 2005). Nevertheless, while the Teenage Pregnancy Strategy missed its targets
124 by a considerable margin, some progress was made, and a useful framework was provided
125 around which wider policy and practice responses could cohere.

126 There are two important observations to be made about these policy developments.
127 Firstly, as the above discussion reveals (and as commentators frequently observe),
128 parenthood in the TPS really meant motherhood: young fathers are largely invisible in
129 the equation. Where they are referred to, it is their responsibility as financial providers or
130 their indirect support for mothers that is stressed, rather than any direct caring role:

131 Young men are half of the problem and the solution ... Young men ... need to be targeted
132 with information about the consequences of sex and fatherhood, including their financial
133 responsibility to support their children. Fathers of children borne to teenage mothers will
134 therefore be pursued vigorously by the Child Support Agency to reinforce the message that,
135 for this group, regardless of age, they are financially responsible for their children. (Social
136 Exclusion Unit, 1999: 97)

137 There is a deep-rooted assumption that fathers who live apart from their children and
138 are not in a relationship with the mother (who is usually the primary carer) are necessarily
139 'absent' and 'feckless', i.e. that they are uninterested in their children and do not wish to
140 provide financially for them. For young fathers, whose children are presumed to be the
141 product of irresponsible and casual intimacy, these assumptions are even more deeply
142 ingrained. These young men, then, are stigmatised on two counts – as 'absent' fathers
143 and irresponsible youths – with few material resources to bring to parenting. No account
144 is taken here of the potential of young fathers to contribute to the direct care of their
145 children, and no consideration is given to their own aspirations and life chances and their
146 needs for support in their own right (Quinton *et al.*, 2002). In these important dimensions
147 of their lives, young fathers are notably absent from the policy script.

148 Secondly, while the precise relationship between early parenthood and the conditions
149 associated with social exclusion is not clearly spelt out, in New Labour rhetoric it is early
150 parenthood itself that is seen as a social problem. It is presented as a uniformly negative
151 experience for young parents, their children and for society as a whole, a calamity or
152 hazard that leads to a range of social ills. Moreover, the problem is perceived to be rooted
153 in young people's ignorance and low expectations; it is an individual problem that requires
154 remedying through changes to their attitudes and behaviour. Despite acknowledging the
155 links between early conception and poverty and unemployment, the wider structural
156 issues and measures needed to tackle these were ignored in New Labour's strategy for
157 teenage pregnancy (Kidger, 2004; Arai, 2009; Duncan *et al.*, 2010).

158 In 2010, at the end of New Labour's term of office, plans emerged to integrate
159 work on the prevention of early conception and support for young parents into a variety
160 of pre-existing policies and programmes. The TPS was to be rolled out via a range of
161 universal and targeted services: maternity and SRE (Sex and Relationship Education)
162 provision, structured family intervention programmes (the Family Nurse Partnership for
163 vulnerable young mothers); Children's Centres, Education and Housing support services,
164 and the Connexions (employment) service for young people (Department for Children,
165 Schools and Families/Department of Health, DCFS/DH, 2010). The new approach was
166 subsequently implemented by the incoming Coalition government (Hadley, 2014). The
167 focus continued to be on reducing the under-eighteen conception rate, with targets
168 set within a range of new policy documents issued between 2011 and 2014 by the
169 Departments of Health and Education (Hadley, 2014). While young fathers' needs were
170 more readily identified and acknowledged in the DCFS/DH strategy document, there was
171 little attempt to follow this through into subsequent policy directives. The Department for
172 Education guidance for Children's Centres, for example, makes provision for supporting
173 parents and addressing issues of poverty and inequality through the coordination of skills
174 training and referrals to job centres, but on the needs of young parents the guidance is
175 strangely silent, while fathers are barely mentioned (Department for Education, 2013).
176 Starting with the disbanding of the teenage pregnancy coordinators in 2010, the new

177 strategy for teenage pregnancy was fractured and diluted across diverse agencies, resulting
178 in patchy and un-coordinated service provision, and an over-reliance on isolated 'local
179 champions' operating outside of, or on the fringes of statutory provision. A recent
180 parliamentary enquiry into parenting and social mobility observes that:

181 The present parenting support offer across the UK is fragmented, with little leadership from
182 national government. With family policy spread across a number of departments, a lack of
183 joined up government is a key barrier to any successful parenting support . . . Any parenting
184 support scheme must not be overly prescriptive, and cannot be seen by parents as a punishment
185 if it is to be successful . . . Fathers are an important resource in early years child development
186 . . . but are under used and often side lined when family services are developed. (All Party
187 Parliamentary Group, 2015: 5)

188 The issue raised by the parliamentary enquiry concerning the nature and style
189 of delivery of parenting support schemes is highly pertinent here, given the ongoing
190 stigmatising of young fathers and their families. Traditional moralistic responses to young
191 parenthood had continued to find voice during New Labour's terms of office through
192 speeches and media reports from Conservative opposition MPs. These sought to place
193 young parents in an assumed 'underclass', from large, poor, 'broken' and troubled
194 families, who live on welfare at the expense of hard working tax payers, and engage
195 in anti-social behaviour, crime and drug addiction. Indeed, Duncan Smith went on to
196 link teenage parenting with moral and cultural breakdown, placing the children, parents
197 and extended families beyond the pale of 'civilised society'. He also criticised 'ineffective
198 remedial policies, whether they take the form of more prisons, drug rehabilitation or
199 supporting longer and more costly lifetimes on benefits' (*The Sunday Times*, 15 February
200 2009, cited in Duncan *et al.*, 2010: 2–3).

201 Since the time of the Coalition government, an increasingly moralising and divisive
202 narrative has sought to distinguish responsible, deserving citizens from those who are
203 irresponsible and un-deserving. Conservative rhetoric that decries the broken society and
204 family breakdown and equates the rise of single parent families with a descent into poverty
205 and 'welfare' dependency has intensified (Patrick, 2015). For fathers in general, and young
206 fathers in particular, this is reflected in the distinctions drawn between 'good' hard-
207 working fathers and 'feckless', absent fathers, and between 'vulnerable' single mothers
208 and the 'runaway' fathers who abandon them. While legislation such as the 2014 Children
209 and Families Act, valorises the 'good' father through provisions for paternal leave and
210 flexible working practices, in public discourses 'bad' fathers are increasingly vilified: 'its
211 high time "runaway" dads were stigmatised and the full force of shame was heaped upon
212 them' (David Cameron, quoted in Hennessy, 2011). Policy discourses may paint young
213 fathers in a variety of ways, but they are invariably cast as a social problem and the root
214 of the problem is presumed to lie with them.

215 To go back to our starting point, this state of affairs arises in part because policy
216 responses are not adequately grounded in a robust evidence base that takes into account
217 the realities of young fathers' unfolding lives. In the context of 'whole family' policies,
218 Morris and Featherstone (2010: 563) observe that:

219 [T]he last decade represents a lost opportunity to construct family policies which engage with
220 the complexity and diversity of the lived experiences of families and contemporary family

221 practices. Policies have not been rooted in dialogue with vulnerable and marginalised families
222 about their needs and the challenges they experience.

223 The same could equally be said for policies that impact on young fathers. In the current
224 climate, the potential for young fathers to make a positive contribution to their children's
225 lives, and to improve their own life chances, is only slowly being realised.

226 **Young fatherhood: lived experiences and policy challenges**

227 Based on a symposium on young fatherhood, held at the Social Policy Association Annual
228 Conference in July 2014, the contributions gathered here afford an opportunity to enhance
229 the evidence base on young fatherhood and to give a fresh appraisal of their support needs
230 and experiences. The articles take as a starting point the insight that young fathers are
231 generally committed to their children and that their involvement can be beneficial for
232 all: an unplanned child is by no means an unwanted child. However, young fathers are
233 likely to face a raft of challenges in securing and sustaining an active role as a parent, and
234 many will need professional help and support in doing so. The first three articles present
235 new empirical evidence on the varied circumstances of young fathers' lives. In the first,
236 Neale and Davies explore young fathers' aspirations as 'breadwinners', documenting
237 their desire to provide for their families and charting their varied, circuitous and tenuous
238 routes through education and training into employment or on to benefits. The article
239 reveals the sheer, sustained hard work of young fathers in managing the triple burden of
240 earning, learning and caring, dispelling any vestige of the idea that they are to be written
241 off, en masse, as feckless (cf. also Johnson, 2015). Engaging with the 'social problems'
242 perspective on early parenthood, the authors refute the view that early parenthood 'causes'
243 social deprivation. They show that the fortunes of young fathers are shaped in the main
244 by their pre-existing socio-economic circumstances, indicating the need for more robust
245 support that begins much earlier in their EET journeys, and for greater recognition of the
246 structural factors that shape their life chances. In the second article, Ferguson explores
247 the varied ways in which young fathers engage with a flagship early intervention scheme:
248 the Family–Nurse Partnership. His evidence demonstrates the importance of moving
249 beyond blanket categorisations of fathers, or the professionals that support them, as 'good'
250 or 'bad'. Painting a more nuanced picture, he shows how a constellation of dynamic
251 factors operate to create distinctive interactions between fathers and practitioners. He
252 also explores the reasons for the disengagement of highly marginalised young men, those
253 whose deep experiences of social suffering indicate the need for sustained, therapeutic
254 support from specialist practitioners. In the third article, Ladlow and Neale take up this
255 theme, exploring the provision offered to highly marginalised, young offender fathers in
256 and beyond the custodial estate. Drawing on narratives from the young men and the
257 practitioners who work with them, the article examines and invites us to rethink the
258 dominant framing of these young men as either a 'risk to', or 'resource for' their children,
259 bringing ideas of redemption, agency and emergent identities over time more centrally
260 into the picture. In her review article, Lau Clayton places the evidence from the empirical
261 articles in a broader context, drawing on key studies to build a more definitive picture
262 of the relationships, circumstances and support needs of young fathers, in the process
263 revealing the heterogeneous nature of their lives. The evidence presented on the extent to
264 which young fathers seek to engage with their children, and maintain a commitment to

265 working constructively with the mothers, is a significant corrective to popular perceptions
266 of these young men. The final article is practitioner-led, based on a review of service
267 provision carried out by Cundy on behalf of a consortium of voluntary sector organisations
268 (the Family Strategic Partnership). She provides an overview of the joint role of statutory
269 and voluntary sector organisations in supporting young fathers, mapping out a number
270 of good practice pathways, through maternity services, children's centres, schooling,
271 housing and custodial settings, that enable young fathers to meet the challenges of early
272 parenthood.

273 A key theme underpinning these articles, and representing a departure from much
274 of the existing literature in this field, concerns the importance of thinking dynamically in
275 understanding the lives of young fathers, and, indeed, the value of building a life course
276 perspective into policy and practice responses and processes. The emerging picture here
277 is complex. The evidence shows that tailored support, that is timely, provided at an early
278 stage in the journey into parenthood, and sustained over time, can foster new parental
279 identities and a renewed sense of purpose in life for young fathers, to the benefit of
280 all. There is clearly scope for adopting a redemptionist ethos in working with highly
281 marginalised young fathers, those whose biographies are marked by persistent levels of
282 poverty and emotional hardships. Side-lining young men who may be deemed 'risky'
283 does not address the issues they are facing, and, at the least, may do little to address
284 safeguarding issues for their children or the mothers. In these challenging circumstances,
285 the emphasis on specialist, sustained professional support that is tailored specifically to
286 the needs of these young men would seem to be vital.

287 In the current climate, there is clearly a case for rethinking the notion that young
288 fathers are 'hard to reach'. It is worth recalling that this is stigmatising terminology,
289 which places responsibility for a perceived lack of engagement with 'hard to reach'
290 people themselves (Freimuth and Mettger, 1990). Perhaps it is time to turn this idea on
291 its head, to consider how services respond and how they may be 'hard to access' for
292 this client group (Hadley, 2014). The potential to meet young fathers half way, to find
293 creative ways to enter into their world rather than assuming an engagement solely on
294 professional terms, may be part and parcel of an effective strategy to build sustained,
295 trusting and supportive professional relationships. Yet while the nature and quality of
296 interactions between clients and practitioners is important, ultimately it is not simply
297 about the responses of individual service providers (Osborn, 2015). It is also vital to
298 address the infrastructure and service ethos within which practitioners operate, the policy
299 directives that guide their engagement, the funding and resources available to facilitate
300 their work and, not least, government measures to tackle the structural inequalities that
301 create persistent hardship. These are the crucial prerequisites in supporting some of the
302 most marginalised young men and their families in our society.

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