

New Pathways for Young Fathers

Policy Briefing Paper

Dr Carmen Clayton (Leeds Trinity University),
Han-Son Lee (DaddiLife) and
John May (Leeds City Council)

March 2021



'New Pathways for Young Fathers' was funded by Research England and a collaboration between Leeds Trinity University and DaddiLife to address an important and under researched topic - young fathers' future aspirations and what barriers and enablers exist regarding the improvement of their life chances, and potentially, the life chances of their children (Public Health England 2019). By working in partnership with Leeds City Council, national partners, and key stakeholders, including North East Young Dads and Lads (NEYDL), this study aimed to address the current gaps in knowledge. In collaboration with young fathers (defined in this research as under the age of 25 at the time of the first birth or pregnancy), this briefing paper presents selected key findings and policy and practice recommendations to help better support young fathers and their families.

Young fatherhood ideals

Fathers exhibited strong breadwinner ideals. Whilst they saw the modern role of a father as being different to the historical stereotype of 'father as provider', they still expressed a desire to want to be able to act as a provider.

Beyond the breadwinner model, young fathers all felt that it was important to 'be there' for their children. They understood the value of their role and they wanted to help with all aspects of their child's life, ranging from the day-to-day care, providing learning experiences for the children, through to keeping them safe and looking out for their long-term interests.

The fathers described close relationships with their children and felt that their children benefited from their involvement and input.

Most fathers were influenced by their own upbringing in terms of how they approached the fatherhood role. Some wanted to do things differently compared to their own fathers, whilst others wanted to be present in a way that their fathers were not for them.

Many fathers expressed that they had made positive changes to their way of life as a result of becoming a father. This included thinking about the future and how to be a good role model for their own children.

Several fathers wanted to encourage the development of a strong moral compass within their children.

The fathers spoke about enjoying their role as a father. Despite some of the challenges present, the overall experience is one of joy.

For young fathers who had separated from the child's mother, there were often difficulties with child contact arrangements. These fathers were actively seeking to address such issues.

Some of the fathers spoke about having a poor understanding of what their rights were as fathers. They often perceived that they had very few rights and that there was little help available to them either as young people or as fathers.



"I think it's just a matter a' being there. Not everything revolves round money and stuff. Just making sure that your child knows that you're going to be there, that they're healthy and happy."

Johnny (aged 25)

Employment Pathways

Some fathers felt pressured to act as breadwinners, sometimes by others including the child's mother, but sometimes by the pressure they placed upon themselves or by society generally.

Most fathers who were in employment, enjoyed working and were largely satisfied with their jobs.

Young fathers spoke about experiencing difficulties in finding work. Job centres were regarded as unhelpful and unreliable for different reasons.

Many young fathers found their current occupations through informal networks which included contacts made via their family and friends and roles were often unplanned.

Some described themselves as 'falling into jobs' rather than gaining jobs they aspired to gain.

Several fathers expressed the view that they were not in a position to be selective about their occupations and careers.

Some young fathers expressed the viewpoint that the ability to earn was more important than the job itself. 'A job is a job' and 'I do what I have to do to get by' were common remarks made.

Agencies were often utilised by young fathers in order to gain short term contracts quickly. However, these roles did not provide long-term security and agency work was problematic in terms of employee rights/entitlements for those on temporary contracts.

Some employers were supportive to the young fathers and had family-friendly approaches, including allowing parents to work flexibly.

Other employers were deemed as not supportive and had the same expectations of workers with children as they did of workers without children.

Flexible working is beneficial to young fathers so that they can be engaged with their children's needs. This could take the form of compressed hours, having autonomy over working patterns, or working from home for example. The ability to leave work to attend to family matters and undertake school runs were considered important and necessary.

Some fathers found it difficult to balance their work and family life, particularly if they were expected to work long hours or were asked to work nights. Some of these 'less-desirable' jobs, were not acquired by choice, but were the only jobs that the young fathers were able to secure.

Young fathers in inflexible jobs sometimes changed their careers in order to become more available and to have more contact time with their children, whilst meeting the needs of the family.

"Any employment that I could get my hands on, I was going for it. Not just to benefit myself, but to help me along the way of, like, growing up and being a young single dad."

Tarrell (aged 30)

Education Pathways

Young fathers reported mixed viewpoints and experiences within compulsory education which affected later decisions around employment, training, and further education pathways.

For many young fathers, negative educational experiences meant that education post-16 was not considered.

Compulsory education was deemed as being too academically focused. For most young fathers, they felt that there should be a focus on life skills such as budgeting, parenting awareness, and personal relationships as part of the national curriculum.

Career advice during statutory education was varied in terms of helpfulness and the advice given.

"Yeah, university has definitely been life-changing. It has definitely opened doors."

Max (aged 32)

Once becoming a parent, a small number of young fathers expressed a more positive view of post-compulsory education, in terms of career advancement and increasing earning potential.

For those who had returned to higher education as a mature student, they felt that education allowed self-development opportunities and life-long learning which was not fully appreciated when younger.

Young fathers described a delicate juggling act when it came to studying and caring for children, especially if part-time employment was undertaken by young men too.

Despite the interest in returning to education for some, young fathers did not know how to go about this or cited financial difficulties as a real or potential barrier (either in terms of course fees, and/or loss of earnings if currently working).

Often young fathers' decisions about returning to education required a deep consideration of the immediate impact versus the long-term benefits for the whole family.



Health and Wellbeing

Young fathers described varied experiences when interacting with professionals from different services.

For a small number of young fathers, they received valuable professional support which they commended and, in some cases, saw as 'life changing'.

However, for most young fathers, they felt that some professionals did not acknowledge or value their role as a father.

Several fathers felt ignored by certain professionals and that services were too mother-centric, often at the expense of the father.

Reaching out for support was difficult for some young men. Often embarrassment, fear of the unknown, or perceived loss of pride were cited as the main reasons for not talking to professionals or accessing help.

Mental health issues were commonly cited by young fathers. Often young fathers' well-being was impacted by education, employment, and training pathways on the one hand and personal relationships with significant others (such as the child's mother) on the other.

Some young fathers had no informal support networks to rely on, or they were hesitant to speak to friends and family.

Several young fathers spoke of personal coping strategies which they had to implement as a result of little support being available.

"Every single decision I make is based on my family. It's not based on myself. If it was based on myself, I'd have a lot less pressure on my shoulders. My mentality would probably be a lot better. But I'm not like that. My family come first all the time, so every decision I make is based on my family's outcomes."

Adam (aged 26)

Policy Recommendations

There is a need to identify and include young fathers when working with young parents, so that they are not ignored or forgotten about.

Acknowledging the role of young fathers better and recognising the ways in which they can positively contribute to family life needs to be reflected in the language of policy and practice documents and other relevant debates.

We also need to recognise the diversity that exists amongst young fathers and their circumstances.

Counter to the 'feckless father' notion, which is often attributed to younger fathers, the young men we spoke to were aspirational and wanted to do their best for the children and 'be there'. It is therefore important to challenge and change the negative perceptions of young fathers if we are to reach out to them effectively and provide adequate support.

Many young fathers were unsure of their parenting rights and what this meant in practice. Young fathers would welcome clearer advice here especially if there are problematic relationships with the mother of the child or maternal family.

Regardless of the relationship status and the differences seen, young fathers wanted to work together with the child's mother when parenting.

Many young fathers did not know who they could turn to in times of need in relation to professional advice or if they were eligible for support. Increasing awareness of what support is available at a national and local level would benefit many young fathers.

Despite a number of policy measures being in place for health support services and education and employment pathways, these were not well understood by fathers or well utilised as a result.

Young fatherhood is often defined as under the age of 25 and dedicated support for young fathers is restricted by age as a result. Many young fathers would benefit from professional support at different stages of their lives and past their mid-twenties.

Professional support can make a significant difference to the lives of young fathers. However, in many areas, generic and specialised provision that is targeted towards young parents or young fathers specifically has been reduced or stopped.

Young fathers wanted support with the development of core and soft skill sets (e.g., EET pathways, budgeting, personal relationships, health, and well-being).

The opportunity for young fathers to come together to connect and support each other, was said to be extremely helpful and beneficial.

"I think for anyone who's a young father, whether they've come out of education now, looking for work, or whether they're looking into further education, I think that support is needed. There's a lot of career support needed and the financial element. There's definitely that kind of team needed. There should be something there."

Tommy (aged 31)

Practice Recommendations

Consider offering young fathers their own opportunities to gain consultation, advice, and support, independently from the mothers.

Ask young fathers if they are aware of their rights as a father whilst at work/education. Signpost them to support organisations.

Establish with young fathers, what role they would like to play as a father. Discuss with them how they will achieve that and if there any difficulties here, and what help is available.

Fathers may have different expectations of what their role should be and there may be cultural differences. Be prepared for this and share with them best practice recommendations without judgement.

Signpost young fathers towards support which will help to encourage and maintain positive relationship with the child's mother regardless of the young parents' relationship status.

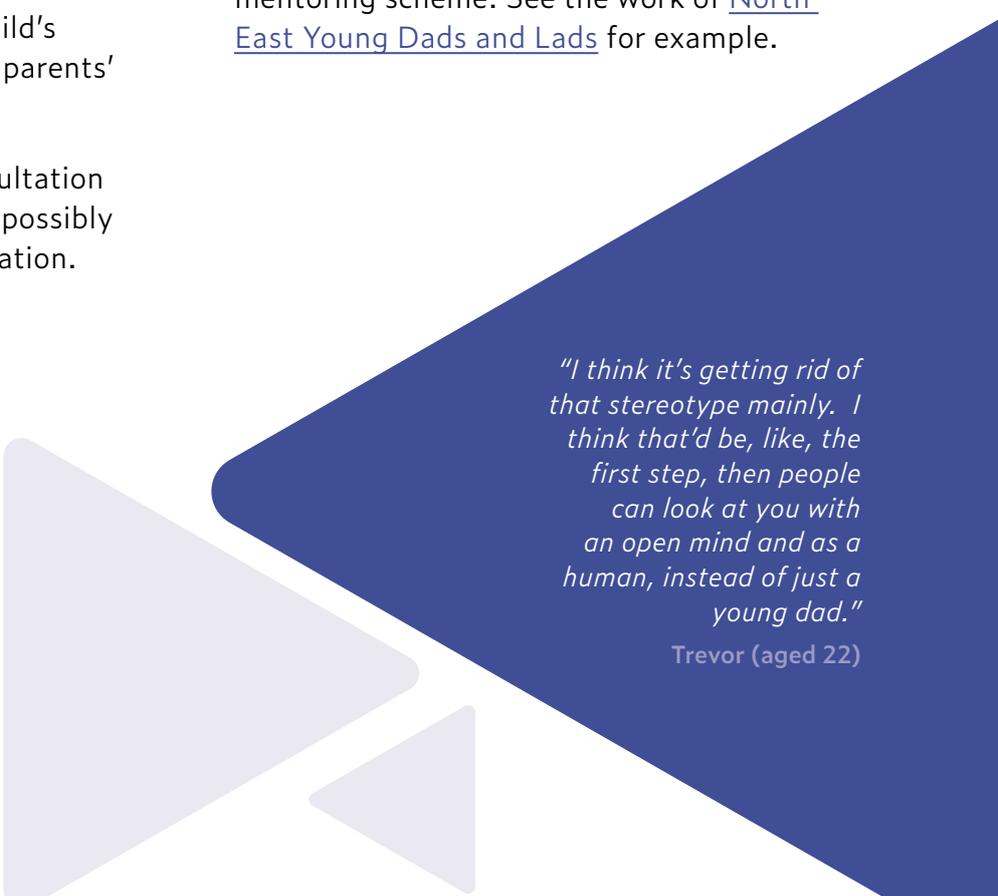
Allow young parents more consultation time in order to clarify new and possibly confusing or challenging information.

Some young fathers may have limited or no contact with their children for varied reasons. Sensitivity of such issues are therefore required. See the work of [Futures](#) for example.

Utilise existing training aids to encourage young fathers to ask questions and provide support (such as 'Following Young Fathers' Practitioner Training Workbooks (books [1](#), [2](#), [3](#)) (2015).

Distribute best practice material with all front-line workers who may come in contact with young fathers. The top ten tips provided are particularly useful.

Support groups specifically focused on young fathers can be very useful. Young fathers can be excellent peer mentors to other young fathers. Consider inviting young men to join a peer-to-peer mentoring scheme. See the work of [North East Young Dads and Lads](#) for example.



"I think it's getting rid of that stereotype mainly. I think that'd be, like, the first step, then people can look at you with an open mind and as a human, instead of just a young dad."

Trevor (aged 22)

Top 10 Tips for Supporting Young Fathers

1

Young fathers are a particularly vulnerable and invisible group. Sometimes it is not immediately obvious if the young man has child-caring responsibilities. Simply asking the question can help kick start a conversation.

2

Young fathers are all different, and these differences should be respected.

3

Negative stereotypes around young fatherhood can affect how young fathers engage with professionals. Be non-judgemental and listen in a genuine manner.

4

Young fathers may feel reluctant to ask for help or how to ask for this help. Give them extra time to ask questions and be observant and sensitive.

5

Rather than being disengaged, data shows that young fathers want to be fully active in their role as a father. This can be capitalised upon when working with and supporting young fathers.

6

Young fathers can often provide great support for the young mothers regardless of the relationship status and they should be encouraged to be involved throughout the parenting journey where possible.

7

Young fathers may have a desire to act as a breadwinner, but they may not have the ability to do so. Help them to understand non-financial ways of supporting the baby or child, which is just as meaningful and important.

8

Young fathers may struggle to attend meetings and sessions especially if expenses are incurred. Offer young fathers' flexible ways of participating which does not put them out of pocket (e.g., online meetings).

9

Young fathers are often under multiple strain and pressures which may become more susceptible to mental health problems.

10

Do not ignore fathers by focusing solely on the mother's interests. Use inclusive language to both fathers and mothers during consultations and documentations sent (e.g., letters). Try to signpost young fathers to support that is available and do not assume that young fathers are aware of such provision even if it may seem obvious.

"I try to be a good father. It's hard when you're new to it, and you don't know if you're doing things right."

Steve (aged 24)

The full report 'New Pathways for Young Fathers' is available [here](#). For information on the 'New Pathways' videos which were made in collaboration with young fathers themselves, please contact Dr Carmen Clayton C.clayton@leedstrinity.ac.uk

We would like to sincerely thank all of the young fathers who took part in the interviews and focus groups, for sharing their lives and experiences with us in such an open manner. We would also like to extend our gratitude to the expert stakeholders involved in the project, whose insights have been enormously helpful and supportive throughout. A special mention for the North East Young Dads and Lads Project and CATCH for their valuable assistance too.