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UNIVERSITY OF LEEDS

LEARNING TO SUPPORT YOUNG DADS

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**Responding to Young
Fathers in a Different Way**
Leeds Social Sciences Institute

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Learning to Support Young Fathers

Bren Neale and Anna Tarrant

Introduction

In this briefing paper we describe a professional development initiative that was designed to pilot new ways to work with young fathers (defined here as those under the age of 25), and to enable practitioners who come into contact with young fathers to develop more informed and effective working practices. The initiative ran over a year from May 2016 to April 2017. It was a collaborative effort between leading practitioners from Leeds City Council, the Family and Childcare Trust, and Oakhill Training Centre, working in partnership with academics from the University of Leeds.

The professional development initiative

As leading practitioners in their respective fields, the project partners were keen to explore how good models of practice could be further developed and then rolled out to others via a national training program. To that end, the initiative involved three interrelated strands of work. These are summarized very briefly below and described in more detail in later section of this report.

1. Developing sustained support for vulnerable young fathers

This strand of work was led by Kate Bulman, health education lead nurse at Oakhill Secure Training Centre, a residential unit for school-age offenders. The project explored how support for marginalized young fathers could be more effectively delivered and sustained over the longer term, and what issues might arise for practitioners in meeting this objective. Tracing the pathways of young offender fathers on release from Oakhill provided an ideal test case for this strand of work.

2. Developing the Young Dads Collective

This strand of work involved collaboration between the Young Dads Collective in London, and the Teenage Pregnancy and Parenthood Team (TPPT), located within the Health and Wellbeing Service at Leeds City Council. It was designed to develop a Young Dads Collective in the north of England, drawing on the expertise of the London group to facilitate this process, and exploring how this might operate in a statutory council setting offering generic family support. In the process both collectives were able to develop their practices and move into new and exciting arenas of engagement.

3. New Forms of Training

This strand of work was a collaborative effort across the whole group, and the culmination of the professional development work over the course of the year. It

was designed to test out new ways to deliver practitioner training, based on the direct involvement of young fathers themselves, and to consider the feasibility of rolling this out across the regions of the UK. The aim was to put into practice a key principle: that young fathers should not only be heard but should be given an audience. The training was piloted through a one-day practitioner event, held in Leeds towards the end of the initiative. We will be gauging the outcomes of this strand of work as the project closes, and posting the results on the project web pages ([www.followingfathers.leeds.ac.uk/supporting young dads](http://www.followingfathers.leeds.ac.uk/supporting_young_dads)).

Background

The *Learning to Support Young Fathers* project was funded by the Leeds Social Sciences Institute (LSSI) at the University of Leeds. This funding was made possible because Anna and Bren, the academic partners, were engaged in collaborative research on young fatherhood, and secured funding to ensure that the insights from the research would make a difference to young fathers themselves and the practitioners who seek to support them.

The practitioner initiative builds directly on the findings from the *Following Young Fathers Study (FYF)*, (2010-15) which was set up under Bren's direction with funding from the Economic and Social Research Council. Details of the project, the research team and its publications can be found at www.followingfathers.leeds.ac.uk. It is worth noting here that the project tracked a group of 31 young fathers over time, tracing their journeys through the early years of parenthood. Emerging findings from a Leverhulme funded project, *Men, Poverty and Lifetimes of Care* (2014-17) also fed into this initiative. Led by Anna, this project was affiliated to the FYF research and involved a focused re-analysis of selected data from the FYF dataset, as well as the gathering of new data on the caring practices of young fathers living in disadvantaged circumstances. Details of this project can be found at <http://menandcare.blogs.lincoln.ac.uk>.

Lessons from Research

The projects have yielded rich insights and filled gaps in our knowledge on the nature of young fathers' lives, the values and aspirations that they hold, the challenges they face across a range of domains (relationships, employment, housing finances and so on); and the support that they need in establishing and sustaining a relationship with their children. Overall, the FYF study identified areas of positive support for young fathers, alongside a range of challenges for professionals:

- While pockets of good practice exist, there is no coherent or unifying policy or professional approach to recognising young fathers and understanding and responding to their needs (Neale, 2016; Neale and Patrick, 2016).
- Young fathers are often marginalised via practices of surveillance or sidelining in professional settings. In particular, sustained support for the most marginalized young men is sorely needed but usually lacking (Neale and Davies, 2015b; Neale and Ladlow, 2015; Ladlow and Neale, 2016).
- There is a pressing need to challenge - and change - the way that young fathers are represented and understood in society, in particular to challenge the idea that young fathers are necessarily 'hard to reach' or, even worse, that they are not interested in their children or may pose a risk to them. It is only by overcoming these barriers that more effective support can begin to develop (Neale, 2016; Neale and Davies, 2015b, Neale and Ladlow, 2015).
- There are broader issues relating to the problem of simply recognising young fathers: identifying them, counting them and responding positively to them. This suggests the need to 'see' young fathers in a different way. Training selected young fathers to take on advocacy and peer mentoring roles is a tangible way to increase their visibility and give them a voice (Neale and Davies, 2015a and b; Colfer, Turner-Uaandja and Johnson, 2015).

It is important to note at this point, that these insights emerged through a *collaborative model of research* with practitioners and with young fathers themselves. Knowledge and findings were co-produced, giving the lead practitioners with whom we worked a strong sense of ownership of these findings and a wish to use them as a springboard to further develop their practice. It was out of these earlier collaborations that the Learning to Support Young Fathers Initiative took shape. In their reports on their strands of work, set out below, the practitioners describe the ways in which they have built on the findings of the research to develop and refine their practice. Their work has led to the creation of a new evidence base for the further development of policy and practice in relation to young fathers.

Developing sustained support for vulnerable young fathers: Journeys with young offenders

Kate Bulman and Bren Neale¹

Introduction

The broad aim of this strand of work was to explore how support for marginalized young fathers with the greatest needs could be more effectively delivered and sustained over the longer term, and what issues might arise for practitioners in this process. The work involved following a small group of young offender fathers through the process of re-settlement, in the year following their release from a Secure Training Centre. This provided an ideal test case for understanding the particular issues facing some of the most marginalized and vulnerable young men in the UK, and piloting new and more robust forms of support for them.

The research evidence

While young fathers are far from a homogeneous group, a substantial proportion of these young men are from disadvantaged backgrounds. It is commonly reported in the research literature that they have few material or financial resources to contribute to parenting, and face a combination of relational, socio-economic and housing constraints that can severely hamper their parenting efforts (see Evidence review by Tarrant and Neale, 2017). Of particular relevance here, a proportion of these disadvantaged young fathers have and continue to experience childhoods or young adulthoods marked by a significant levels of deprivation. They have experienced higher than average numbers of adverse childhood experiences (ACE's). These may include verbal, physical or sexual abuse, and living in households where there has been parental separation, domestic violence, mental illness, drug and alcohol misuse. The National survey on the impact of childhood experiences and their resilience to health harming behaviours in England (Bellis et al. 2014) found that having four or more of these adverse childhood experiences lead to a person having more chance of health harming behaviours in adulthood, which include higher levels of drug and alcohol misuse, being involved in violence, incarceration and having a poor diet and being a smoker. Compared to people with no ACE's those who have had four or more such adverse experiences are six times more likely to become a teenage parent. Having a high number of ACE's is closely related to being taken into the care system; rates of parenthood are high for young people in the

¹ The pilot program described here was devised and carried out by Kate Bulman, who also produced the insights and findings. Bren supported Kate in the writing up of the findings.

care system. Statistics are not available for young men but a quarter of young women leaving care at aged 18 are pregnant and almost half are pregnant within 18 to 24 months.

The specific challenges associated with young fatherhood are greatly magnified in these circumstances. The gendered construction of parenthood is polarized for young parents; the primary caring role of young mothers means that they, with the support of any family they have and professionals working with them, have the discretion to operate as gatekeepers to their children, as well as gate openers. For young offender fathers, the challenges of proving their worth and establishing their credentials as parents with a right to be part of a child's life are all the greater (Neale and Patrick, 2016). The range of complex issues that vulnerable young fathers face need to be addressed and overcome if they are to establish and sustain trusting and supportive relationships in adulthood, including the potential to have a healthy relationship with a partner or co-parent and to become a good father.

Findings on the support needs of young fathers show that specialist services that can work with an ethos of support (rather than primarily through surveillance or 'sidelining') are likely to be most effective in making a positive difference to these young men, their children and the mothers of their children. This provides the foundation for building a virtuous circle of trust, respect and growing confidence, which can lead to new aspirations and goals in life for the young men (Neale and Davies, 2015). For vulnerable young fathers, including young offenders, such support is vital. Professional interventions based on an ethos of support and redemption (rather than an overriding focus on surveillance and risk) can play a significant role in nurturing a new parental identity for young offender fathers, as an alternative pathway for them to follow (Neale and Ladlow, 2015; Ladlow and Neale, 2016)).

The Oakhill Secure Training Centre Fatherhood Programme

The award winning Fatherhood programme developed in 2010 at Oakhill Secure Training Centre is a prime example of such a professional intervention. The course was designed and delivered by Kate and is described in more detail elsewhere (Neale and Davies, 2015; Ladlow and Neale, 2016)) but some salient points are drawn out here. It is based on the ethos that being a good parent relies on the capacity of young men to develop their own lives in positive ways. In a climate where mothers are the primary carers and able to exercise choices about their children's lives, young men need to care for themselves and work in a spirit of trust, respect and commitment with the young mothers, if they are to sustain a role in their children's lives (Neale and Davies, 2015; Neale and Patrick, 2016).

Feedback on the Oakhill fatherhood training programme is uniformly positive. Young fathers commonly reflect that the course has given them a new sense of purpose

and identity in life, an understanding of the importance of having a non-abusive, supportive and respectful relationship with their child's mother, and the confidence to develop their skills as a parent (Neale and Davies, 2015; Ladlow and Neale, 2016). However the effects of such interventions may be short lived: there is no quick fix to turning round the lives of highly vulnerable young fathers or surmounting the considerable barriers that they may face. Specialist support that can be sustained over time is needed to address their complex needs:

Professional support for young offender fathers is likely to be most effective where it is tailored to the needs of fathers, or prospective fathers, delivered as early as possible in their offending and parenthood journeys, and sustained over time through custody and into re-settlement (Neale and Ladlow, 2015).

The Pilot Initiative

The Oakhill fatherhood training programme played a central role in informing the findings of the Following Young Fathers study. In turn these findings have now been taken up to inform the next phase of professional developmental work in this setting. Five young fathers who had engaged very positively with the Oakhill fatherhood programme were followed up on a regular basis as they underwent the journey from custody to re-settlement in the community. This work took place over a 10-month period, and involved adopting a part-time fatherhood support role in relation to the young men. The role was a flexible one, including some counselling, advocating on their behalf in their negotiations with family members and the mothers of their children, and acting as a broker in relation to varied professional agencies that the young men came into contact with (including housing and benefits offices, child protection teams, social services agencies, and young offending teams). In a productive cross over between the different strands of this initiative, some mentoring was put in place for the young men via the Young Dads Collective in London (described in the next section).

The five young men ranged in age from 15 to 17 at the point of their release. They varied greatly in their circumstances but each had extensive needs borne of their disadvantaged backgrounds. The safeguarding issues that arose in these cases were complex; risks were not only bound up with their potential risk to others, but risks to the young men themselves. Their own life chances were slim, and yet they lacked sustained support to address their personal health and development needs. Four of the young men had maintained a relationship with the mothers of their children while in custody, giving them a springboard upon which to build a fatherhood identity. However, one young man had broken up with his child's mother and had an acrimonious relationship with her that placed him in a precarious position as a parent (Neale and Patrick, 2016).

Three of the young men were in care, and two had been subject to child protection plans. Prior to going into custody none of the five had been living with biological parents but were either in care placements or living with extended family, and most had been of no fixed abode and missing for periods of time. On release from custody only one of the five returned to live with a biological parent and this relationship fell apart soon afterwards. Another who was a care leaver went to live with his biological father who he had not lived with since he was a baby. While this provided him with short-term stability it became increasingly difficult for his father to cope with his mental health and behavioural issues. As a recent cross government strategy report makes clear, care leavers are a vulnerable group and though measures have been put in place to support them over the past decade, these are not sufficient:

Care leavers will have faced many challenges in their lives and are likely to need much more support than other young people as they make their transition to adulthood. Yet in most cases, care leavers are not only making that transition at a much younger age than their peers, but they also typically get far less support from their corporate parent than other young people get from their birth parents (Keep on Caring 'Supporting Young People from care to Independence: A cross government strategy to transform support for young people leaving care, HM Government, DFE-00165-2016, July 2016)

Lacking support from either their families or the state as corporate parents, these young men find themselves struggling to meet their own basic physical, psychological and social needs as they make the transition to adulthood. The basic underpinning requirements of adulthood, e.g. having ID and a bank account (needed for receiving payment for work or benefits), are difficult for these young men to acquire or preserve without parental support. Interlocking factors such as the loss of a birth certificate; lack of knowledge and confidence to fill in forms or negotiate support in person or on the phone; and poor financial resources, make it difficult for these young men to meet their own needs, never mind fulfill their role as a parent. If they are in a relationship with their baby's mother they may rely on support from her and her family. However this creates tensions as the mother and her family are unlikely to have the physical and emotional resources to provide for the young father's needs, and may, indeed perceive him as someone who should provide support rather than receive it.

Findings and recommendations

Sharing the journeys undertaken by the young men enabled a clearer insight into their complex needs and revealed some significant gaps in the provision of effective support for them. Three interlinked areas for development are set out below.

1. Fragile identities, complex needs

Having a positive role and identity as a young dad is greatly valued by young offender fathers and a foil to their identities as young offenders. All were keen to rise to this challenge following the six-week course at Oakhill. However the limited relational skills and practical resources available to the young men when they returned to their communities were significant barriers that require more than a quick fix. This is particularly the case for care leavers who lack any familial support.

The highly gendered nature of young parenthood requires the young men to work with this dynamic and support the mothers in order to secure a role in their children's lives. In the absence of familial and social support, vulnerable young fathers may invest heavily in their fledgling family identities. But this may tip over from mutual support to high levels of dependency on the mother. This can put a strain on her, drain her energy and undermine the relationship with both mother and child. This is made more difficult if the mother herself is a care leaver or has a lack of support from her family.

Linked to this, the young men may have to work even harder to prove their credentials as a parent, given the stigma they face as young offenders. Given their life course so far, young fathers are unlikely to be 'work ready' and are likely to require significant employability support before they can realistically get and hold down a job. This, along with their criminal records, compounds the problems of finding work and demonstrating a provider role. Their time in custody also sharpens the view of them as a risk to, rather than a resource for their children. Indeed, regardless of the circumstances of the young parents, by virtue of their gender the young fathers will usually be regarded as an inherent risk to their children in the way that mothers are not.

Overall, while fatherhood may be a protective factor for the young men, giving them a new sense of identity, it may also be a risk factor for them. In each of these cases, a significant gap was evident between the caring aspirations of the young men and their capacities to fulfil a caring role. Where young fathers have a reduced capacity to care for a child, or face rejection by the mother, this can compound their sense of failure and inadequacy and have serious consequences for their mental health. Instances of self-harm, suicide attempts, depression, substance and alcohol misuse and a return to offending are all commonly reported among those struggling during resettlement. They were risk factors for all of the young men in this pilot.

Implications for professional practice

Support needs to be offered to young fathers regardless of their contact with a child. This requires practitioners to walk a tightrope. They need to acknowledge, nurture and support the aspirations of young fathers to be engaged with their children, and broker this where possible, but at the same time, be aware of safeguarding constraints, or the wishes of the mother and her family, that may not make this possible for the young man.

Care is therefore needed to ensure that young men's expectations are not raised inappropriately or too high, or that they are set up to fail. They will need to be supported through what may be difficult parenting journeys, which may or may not result in a regular role in their child's life. If a mother does not want contact then the young men need support to manage this process. It may, for example, be possible for them to maintain an indirect engagement of some kind, in other words, to keep the gate open for the future, when things may change.

It may also help to focus support on the young men's longer-term aspirations, and how they may manage their relationships and the entry into parenthood differently in their future lives. This is a more sustained project, involving a longer-term investment in their future lives and relationships. It requires a focus on how they can care for themselves, build their self-esteem, challenge the assumption of risk, and develop positive 'safe' masculine identities.

2. Multiple needs and complex systems

The young men in the pilot faced a range of severe problems upon their release from custody, including relocation to areas distant from their children, disjointed services and problematic family relationships. Their socio-economic problems included eviction and homelessness, severe financial problems (without money for bus fares to travel or make visits), reliance on food banks, and no prospects of training or finding employment. Again these problems were compounded where the young men had no support from their families or few contacts in their local communities.

Given their complex needs, they often faced a bewildering variety of agencies whose provision was un-coordinated and whose advice could sometimes be conflicting. There were competing demands on these complex systems and chains of support that were difficult to navigate. Their status as parents or their precarious relationships and needs for emotional support were not always recognized by the agencies that they came into contact with, and certainly never fully met. Housing provision varied. One young person who was initially provided with accommodation close to his child by his local authority (a different authority to that where his child lived) was evicted on two occasions without sufficient grounds. These evictions were

overturned through Kate's intervention, working with an advocate and solicitors. It was clear however this young person's local authority did not understand the need for this young man to live close to his child. Their priority had been to provide cheaper housing in their own local area.

Ongoing professional support that recognized the young men's status as fathers and provided skills training to care for a child and the mother, were noticeably lacking for these young men. Statutory provision provided through Children's Centres is patchy and not necessarily designed for or open to young fathers, while more specialist support, provided through small pockets of the voluntary sector², has very limited coverage. Young fathers tend to fall through the gaps of generic local provision; the problem of sidelining identified in the research evidence was likely to apply even more to these highly vulnerable young men, fueling a vicious circle of non-engagement and distrust on their part. Their potential to be a good resource for their children, the mothers and others involved in a child's primary care is not recognized or nurtured.

The young men found it hard to build supportive, positive or trusting relationship with the generic professionals whom they came into contact with. Their experience was most often one where busy practitioners with limited time failed to show an interest in, listen to or reach an understanding of their needs. High workloads meant the practitioners had to be task focused rather than giving an individualized, tailored service.

The disjointed nature of provision was particularly evident for the young care leavers in this pilot. The lack of support for these young men was bound up with the view that they should now be treated as adults, responsible for their own lives, and were therefore to blame if they do not manage basic tasks well. Their fatherhood status tended to compound this view. Yet they are no less likely to need basic help with tasks such as signing on for benefits or securing a college placement.

When young care leavers are in custody their care is transferred to Young Offender Teams (YOTs) who support them for a short while into resettlement. This is a time when their needs are most likely to be met. Social services support is withdrawn at this time, but when they once again resume responsibility the support provided can become woefully inadequate. The passing on of this responsibility, in effect, having these complex and challenging young men 'taken off their hands', is perhaps welcomed, while the resumption of this responsibility then becomes something of a burden. In the process, the corporate parenting of the state is transformed into a statutory exercise, rather than a meaningful and personalized process of guiding a

² For example, the Dads House charity in London provides child friendly shared houses for men, as an alternative to single hostel accommodation.

young person into adulthood. It is ironic that the state is charged with the critical surveillance of parental capacities in these young men, while commonly failing to discharge its own parental duties.

The agencies commonly reinforce rather than challenge the gendered nature of young parenthood. They assume that young mothers will be there for their children and need support in the process. They also often assume that young fathers will not be there and that their parental status can, therefore, be safely ignored. In recent years there have been greater efforts made to assess both parents for their needs and capabilities. But nevertheless, this gender stereotyping continues to shape professional practice. Whatever the dynamic between the parents themselves, children have the right to a relationship with both their parents. This needs to be recognized and addressed in the way services respond to young mothers and young fathers.

Overall, the system itself seems to set these vulnerable young fathers up to fail, increasing the risk that they will retreat back into a life of offending. Changes are needed to overcome these limitations in the current system of generic provision, based on the cultivation of a new way to see, understand and respond to vulnerable young fathers.

3. Specialist Support

In order to help bring about this systemic change to the practice landscape, to meet the extensive needs of vulnerable young fathers, and to help them in the process of navigating a complex bureaucracy of state agencies, one-to-one specialist provision is needed that can support young offender fathers through the process of resettlement. Key elements of such provision include:

- Emotional support and counselling and the management of negative feelings and problems (using monitoring tools to gauge these states where possible),
- Relationship support, including referral to perpetrator programmes for young men who show signs of controlling or abusive behavior in relationships,
- Mediating relationships of trust between the young men, the mothers and wider family members,
- Practical child care skills,
- Bringing young fathers together for peer support and the building of new social networks,
- Advocacy on behalf of young fathers,
- Brokering generic services, including accompanying young fathers to appointments with housing, educational, employment and benefits workers,

- Coordinating referrals to other agencies and arranging extra support where needed³.

The key worker, then, works holistically as an ally, listener, critical friend, advisor, ambassador, diplomat, mediator, broker and fixer. The continuity of such support via the same key worker is of vital importance, as is the sustaining of this support over time, at least through the resettlement process. Ideally it would run for a two-year period and mirror the intensive support provided for vulnerable young mothers through the Family Nurse Partnership scheme.

These activities should preferably form an integral part of the remit of a dedicated resettlement worker, akin to the role that Kate took on for this pilot. Under this new model of practice, the role would be effectively integrated into existing networks of provision and the worker would be armed with the local knowledge and contacts needed to broker support effectively for the young fathers. The process requires inter-agency co-operation and working, in a context where much professional thinking is currently driven by a risk/surveillance mind set. In the process, this dedicated role would act as a catalyst for reshaping the culture of generic provision.

At the moment, such dedicated support is rarely provided for young men who face re-settlement. Where such provision does exist, it is usually at the discretion of committed individuals, rather than being built into the remit of a support worker's role.

One of the strongest rationales for an investment in dedicated and sustained support is that it provides an alternative and effective form of surveillance, based on an open and honest relationship between professional and young father, and the disclosure of problems as they occur. Surveillance in the context of support is positive for the young men, part of a structure of sustained and responsive interaction and guidance that enables them to disclose and own their problems and jointly manage and find solutions to them. The likelihood of risky behavior is reduced as a result. Surveillance in this scenario is recast as a redemptive and developmental process that is there as much for the benefit of the young man as for others. It is therefore likely to be significantly more effective.

While the development of this specialist practitioner role would require resources and staff training, the investment would be more than offset by the significant benefits that this role would bring, ensuring that we no longer fail these marginalized young men but can work collectively to safeguard their futures and the futures of their families.

³ An example of this is the mentoring and befriending service that Kate organized through the Young Dads Collective.

Developing the Young Dads Collective North

John May, Hannah Turner-Uaandja, Holly Dawson and Ruben Vemba⁴

Introduction

This strand of work involved collaboration between the Young Dads Collective in London (led by Hannah Turner-Uaandja), and The Leeds Teenage Pregnancy and Parenthood (TPPT) team, part of the Health and Wellbeing Service at Leeds City Council (led by John May). It was designed to develop a branch of the Young Dads Collective (YDC) in the north of England, drawing on the expertise of the London group to facilitate this process and exploring how a new group might operate in a statutory council setting offering generic family support. In the process both collectives were able to develop their practices and move into new and exciting arenas of engagement. The potential for the Young Dads Collective to develop a role in facilitating a national roll out of such provision was enhanced through this pilot.

Background and research evidence

Evidence from the Following Young fathers Study showed that young fathers need to be seen and understood in new ways (Neale and Davies, 2015a). One of the key barriers to their participation is the pervasive view of them as 'hard to reach', which effectively silences them and increases their marginalization (Neale and Davies 2015a, 2015b; Neale et al. 2015). The capacity of young fathers to be recognized as 'experts by experience', i.e. to speak for themselves, to provide peer support, to be involved in the delivery of professional training and to generally act as ambassadors for young fathers everywhere, was seen as a vital means to create this changing culture. The process is not just about empowering and giving voice to a marginalized group, but also giving them an audience and effecting a change in professional cultures. This in turn requires sustained professional support and training for the young fathers who are involved.

The work of the YDC in London fed directly into the findings of the research, and formed part of the outputs from the study (Neale and Davies, 2015a; Colfer et al. 2015; Neale et al. 2015). In turn the opportunity to roll out and develop the work of the YDC in new regions of the UK was seen as a crucial strand of this practitioner initiative. One of the fundamental issues identified in the FYF study was the problem of simply recognizing young fathers, identifying them and responding positively to

⁴ Thanks to Anna Tarrant and Bren Neale for their support in the writing of this report.

them. This collaboration directly addresses this finding by giving effective voices to a wider constituency of young fathers.

The Young Dads Collective

The Young Dads Collective began its life in 2010 as Young Dads TV, a project designed to give young fathers an authentic voice and provide peer support and advocacy on behalf of young fathers everywhere (Colfer et al. 2015). The TV project led to the establishment of the Young Dads Council, which by 2015 had become the Young Dads Collective, a group that operates as part of a leading family charity, the Family and Childcare Trust in London.

The YDC works with young dads aged under-26 to effect change and raise awareness of the specific challenges young men face during their transition from young person to young parent. One of the more effective ways to do this is to empower selected young fathers and recognise them as 'experts by experience'. To this end the YDC employ a small team of young fathers, training, mentoring and enabling them to share their knowledge and experiences with practitioners, service providers and policy makers and to influence change in policy and practice. The programme aims to create a space in which our team can advocate for other young fathers while also offering personal support to team members who, in many cases, would otherwise not be heard. By co-designing and running practitioner training and consultation they can share their knowledge and experiences with practitioners, service providers and policy makers, and develop the capacity to influence change in policy and practice.

The YDC does important work to reduce the effects of poverty and isolation that many young fathers experience, giving them life skills that can also help with their employability. It co-produces and delivers a range of distinctive and flexible interventions, including consultation, staff training, workshops, action research, outreach, advocacy and mentoring. With this work, YDC seeks to increase the quality and range of services offered to young dads, and to improve the way professionals engage, communicate with and support them. The Young Dads Collective's contribution to this work was funded by the Esmée Fairburn foundation.

The pilot initiative: Developing the work of the Young Dads Collective

Laying the Groundwork: The aim of the pilot initiative was to create a new YDC hub for the North of England, hosted through Leeds City Council. In a collaborative enterprise, YDC north was modelled on the work of YDC London, with practitioners and young fathers involved from both settings. The collaboration was originally made possible through the work of the Following Young Fathers study, which had set

up a professional forum to bring together leading experts in the field. Through this forum, practitioners were able to share insights and identify productive ways to roll out good practice.

The existing research evidence makes clear that service provision is a postcode lottery for many young fathers, i.e. that both the experience of being a young dad and the ability to access appropriate support varies by locality. The YDC model works effectively in the London area, supporting young fathers at a local level and attending to the specific needs of young dads in their communities. The task now was to roll out this provision to new regions of the UK, and also test out how it could be embedded within a different model of service provision, provided through a statutory authority rather than a voluntary sector organisation.

The TPPT team in Leeds was an ideal partner for this pilot initiative. The team already had a strong track record of specialist and pioneering support for young fathers, a willingness to explore and implement new models of professional development, and a commitment to bringing young fathers together to help shape practice. This provided the necessary foundation for the development of a new YDC. The new model was designed to develop three broad areas of work: peer support, an engagement with local practitioners, and an engagement with policy makers at regional and national level.

The YDC North Pilot

The pilot initiative was progressed through regular consultation meetings between YDC and the fledgling team assembled in Leeds (see Figure 1). Over the course of the year a structured programme of work took shape, with the following components:

- The recruitment of four capable young fathers in Leeds to become ‘experts by experience’;
- Basic professional training and support for the young men;
- Engagement with local practitioners in a variety of settings;
- Meetings with local decision makers;
- Street level consultations with young dads;



Figure 1: John, Ruben, Holly and the newly established YDC North

- Surveys and action research to inform the development of each of the Young Dads Collectives;
- The creation of a media campaign led by the young fathers, specifically designed for the Leeds city area.

Recruitment and Training

The TPPT recruited four young fathers to form the core of the YDC. The young men were already known to the TPPT, since they had received ongoing support from the service in the past. As clients of the service, the young men had been in their mid-teens, aged between 14 and 16. At the time of recruitment to the pilot they ranged in age from 21 to 25. Perhaps indicating the success of their past engagement, the young men had established relatively stable family lives, in one case having married his partner. All had regular contact with their children. Two of the young men were expecting second children at the time of recruitment, in both cases as a planned part of their family lives. In terms of employment, two of the young men had relatively stable jobs at the time of recruitment to the pilot, one was unemployed, while the fourth was employed intermittently.

Bringing the young men together as a group was a complicated process because of their diverse work and care commitments. The only available time for all of the young men to meet was on Saturday mornings. Given that the young fathers also lived in different areas of the city, meetings needed to be held in an accessible central location. The Civic Hall was chosen for this venue, since it is a space with existing links to the Council.

At the outset of the project, the YDC London team (Hannah Turner-Uaandja and Ruben Vemba) visited Leeds to support the set-up of the collective and deliver some introductory training. The young men received skills training in professional standards of practice and representation, communication skills, personal and professional boundaries and a detailed introduction to the antenatal and early years' sector of the Council. The training established good working relationships between the members of the two collectives. Thereafter, YDC London provided remote support and ad hoc advice as needed.

Further training was 'on the job', involving careful preparation for each planned activity. Instead of working within a deficit model of fatherhood, the programme focused on the development of the team's soft skills. The young fathers were tasked, and trusted with, a variety of activities that require good communication and critical thinking skills. These include problem solving, decision-making, gathering and evaluating information and planning and organising. In Leeds, as in London the young men quickly gained confidence in these skills and, as a result, increased their

employability. By the end of the year, the two young men who were not in permanent employment had secured paid work and training opportunities.

Engagement with local practitioners

The young men received training in how to engage effectively with local practitioners working in a variety of professional settings. They were able to test out and hone their skills by making presentations and speaking of their experiences through a variety of engagements over the course of the year (see table below). The TPPT in Leeds is recognised for its work with teen parents within the Local Authority, including its work with young fathers. The fledgling YDC North team was able to build on the reputation of the TPPT and tap into the established networks of the TPPT to develop these engagement opportunities. This saved a great deal of time and made the work less challenging to arrange. Through these events, the young men engaged with over 300 professionals from varied health and social care agencies, across the statutory and voluntary sectors.

Event	Date	Venue	Activity
Baby week	16 Sept 2016	Civic Hall, Leeds	Discussion of personal experiences, what worked and did not work in the transition to parenthood; If I had a Magic Wand activity.
Midwife referrers events	13 Oct and 25 Oct 2016	Reginald centre Chapeltown/ St. Georges Middleton, Leeds.	Sharing experiences of engaging with antenatal services
Teenage Pregnancy and Parenthood Forum	9 Nov 2016	Tech North, Leeds.	Information session: What is the YDC?
Training event for early years degree students. 'Difficulties families face'	17 Nov 2106	Trinity and All Saints College, Leeds	Powerpoint presentation on working with young fathers – personal experiences, what works well, less well; If I had a magic wand activity.
Public Health Bite size sessions	31 Jan 2017	Public Health resource Centre, Leeds.	Presentations on Why support Young dads

The young men who were supported to engage in these ways were able to build their confidence over the course of the year:

I was really nervous before I had to present, because of it being a big crowd. It helped with me courage. I felt valued by the people in the room, people who came over and talked to me and said well done, which really give me a boost. Made me feel confident to do it again. (YDC North member)

Buzzing, love being listened to. It's not just the work with the professionals it's about meeting up with other dads when we do the planning. We all want other dads to have a better experience. (YDC North member)

Not all of these encounters were this positive, of course. There were occasional teething problems, with some audiences much less receptive than others. One young man, for example, was sufficiently uncomfortable with the poor reception that he opted out of his presentation and handed over to his support worker.

'that's why I shut up, What's the point if no one's listening?'

He was taken aback, in part, because his previous experience with a much larger and less specialist audience had been a great success. However, the young man was well supported by his team through this experience, which became a valuable learning curve in gauging different audiences and tailoring an engagement to hold their attention. It is also a salutary lesson that, currently at least, not all groups of professionals 'see' young fathers as a valuable source of insight or learning, nor are they able to fully accord them recognition, respect and participation, the basic rights of citizenship that they so clearly deserve.

Meetings with local decision makers

The young men were also trained to deliver sessions to senior service providers in the local authority and in the health sector. At one such event, a member of the collective discussed his experiences with a local MP. On another occasion, a young father from the collective participated in an event that considered how the city could improve its support for teenage parents. A draft action plan was developed from this event, which was considered at a subsequent board meeting of the TPPT. The young father was invited to attend the board meeting and offer his views on the action plan. His feedback was well received and he was subsequently invited to join the board as a user representative.

Social media campaign: developing a mentoring role

The young men were keen to complete a social media campaign to support young fathers, and decided to focus on Christmas and emotional well-being. The collective shared messages with other young fathers about the support services available to them in the Leeds area, at what can be an emotionally challenging time of year. They focused on a number of key themes:

- The times services are available in the Leeds area,
- Money issues,
- The experiences of those who are not able to share Christmas with their children;
- Relationship support – including support for those who may be violent,
- Cheap, fun play ideas,
- Emotional well-being at this time of year.

The messages were promoted through the @YDCNorth Twitter account (see Figure 2). The young men hoped that professionals would pick up the information and share it with other young fathers whom they may have been working with.

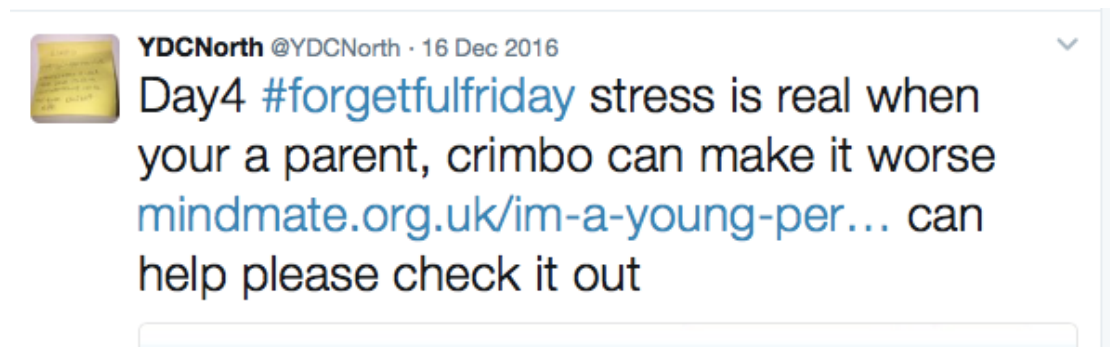


Figure 2: The YDC North Christmas campaign

Impact of the pilot for the national development of the YDC

The work of the pilot was very successful in establishing a new platform for developing the work of the YDC across a new region of the UK, and training a new cohort of young fathers with different needs and experiences. The new collective is embedded within a different professional infrastructure, one that creates opportunities for taking the messages of the YDC into a wider constituency of professional agencies. The city council infrastructure has been particularly successful in this regard, enabling the group to build on an existing body of expertise in supporting young fathers and using well established networks of practitioners to test out and develop the new work.

Policy Engagement

The pilot in turn has had a significant impact on YDC in London, taking the group into new arenas of engagement in a national context and expanding its repertoire of training and mentoring activities (including working with vulnerable young fathers in collaboration with Kate Bulman). This has brought home to all concerned the very patchy nature of existing provision, the lack of recognition for young fathers and a greater awareness of the universal challenges that young fathers face. This has sharpened the need for a national review and reform of current parental policies to ensure that future developments take young fathers more centrally into account.

Young dads influencing policy and practice: YDC members attending a meeting at the House of Lords.

Building on its established experiences, YDC is poised to play a greater role in and actively influence national policy developments. This is a very welcome and exciting development that the work of the pilot initiative has helped to enhance.

The location of London YDC gives is easy access to policy makers in Westminster, where the group has developed excellent links over the past years. The YDC recently gave a presentation at the House of Lords about the expanded work of the collective, and the urgent need to build young fathers into a national framework for parenting. The team was able to share these experiences with the young fathers in Leeds. Similarly fathers from the YDC North will take part in a future presentation to the All Party Parliamentary Group on Fatherhood. The pilot initiative has opened up the opportunity for a wider cohort of young fathers to directly influence policy, service design and delivery. Through this project, established members of the collective have had the opportunity to attend All Party Parliamentary Groups, and Parliamentary Inquiries and to talk to decision makers at local and national government levels (see Figure 3).



Figure 3: Ruben, Kevin, James and Hannah in Westminster Abbey

Developing the YDC model

The project has also opened up the possibility for YDC to roll out its expertise to other regions of the UK and to take the lead in the development of a national network of YDCs. In moving in this direction, YDC has begun to develop a toolkit with which organisations may be able to adapt the model in their own professional contexts. Collaborative learning from other professionals and young fathers has really enhanced the existing work done by YDC.

However, one size does not fit all. It is worth reflecting that the success of the expansion of YDC to the North of England was made possible because it built upon a very strong local infrastructure, with existing expertise in place. The specialist provision for young fathers through Leeds City Council was originally established in 2004, and was the culmination of 13 years of developmental work. However, this was not the only prerequisite; the work needed a vision and the drive to create local opportunities. Many of the workshop activities, for example, reached fruition through effective efforts to promote the work of the collective. If conditions are not already in place, localities interested in adapting the model for their area will need time to develop the model with local young fathers, and a dedicated and experienced worker in place to create the right kind of environment for success.

It is worth bearing in mind, too, that young fathers need sustained professional support to move into advocacy and training roles (Colfer et al. 2015), and the resources needed for such work, including appropriate remuneration for the young men themselves⁵, are therefore considerable. But the payoff is also likely to be considerable, making this a worthwhile investment. It is a robust mechanism for creating a significant shift in the culture of professional practice. It has a transformative effect, enabling young fathers to be seen and understood in a new light and, at the same time, enabling young fathers to see and understand themselves in a new light.

⁵ All the young men involved in the collective have received contracts and remuneration for their work.

New Forms of Training

Anna Tarrant and Bren Neale



At the Parent Champions conference, Family and Childcare Trust (2017) ©

Introduction

This strand of work was a collaborative effort across the whole group, and the culmination of the professional development work over the course of the year. It was designed to test out new ways to deliver practitioner training, based on the direct involvement of young fathers themselves, and to consider the feasibility of rolling this out across the regions of the UK. The aim was to put into practice a key principle: that young fathers should not only be heard but should be given an audience. This new training was designed to enable practitioners to talk *with* young fathers rather than simply talk *about* them. In other words, the principle of listening to young fathers and treating them with respect was conveyed in the very way that the training was delivered.

Background and Development

The power of this way of working was forcefully brought home to members of this pilot initiative during the final practitioner conference for the Following Young Fathers study, held in Leeds in September 2015. This is described in detail elsewhere (Neale et al. 2015: 36-40; Tarrant, 2015), but some salient points are drawn out here. The FYF research was built on the principle of participation and the co-

production of knowledge with both practitioners and the young fathers themselves. Selected young men became not only co-creators of knowledge, but co-disseminators of this knowledge, shedding their anonymity to speak openly about their experiences. One young man wrote an autobiographical account of his experiences of entering parenthood (Johnson, 2015) while another contributed to an article about the Young Dads Council (as it then was) in London (Colfer et al. 2015).

Several of these young men also took part in our final conference, where, with the support of their key workers, they were able to contribute to workshops, speak about their own experiences and reflect on the nature of young fatherhood. To a spell bound audience of 80 delegates, they formed a panel at the end of the day where they fielded a range of questions from delegates. The importance of seeing young fathers differently and according them respect were key messages of this event. But these messages were not only conveyed and discussed by professionals; they were powerfully embodied in the contributions of the young men themselves (Neale et al. 2015; Tarrant, 2015).





Developing new forms of training

It was this experience that provided the impetus for the development of a new form of training that could be delivered jointly by professionals and by young fathers themselves. The availability of a ready-made pool of young fathers, with training and support through the YDCs in London and Leeds, provided the springboard for planning this event. It was developed through a series of conference calls and a one-day meeting between the pilot practitioners and academics and a group of six young fathers from both YDC Leeds, London and Kate's mentoring work (see Figure 4). Structured around a number of activities and guided by the project team, the planning event was designed to find out what matters to young fathers, giving them the opportunity to provide direct input. The practitioner event is built upon the key messages that young fathers want professionals to understand.

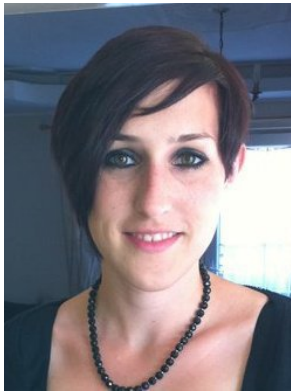


Figure 4: Members of the project team and young fathers who collaborated to design the practitioner training event



The training was piloted through a one-day practitioner event, called Young Dads Talk, which was held in Leeds towards the end of March 2017. Interest in the event was high, with over 80 delegates registered at the point that the booking was closed, and with a healthy waiting list for spare places. We will be gauging the outcomes of this strand of work as the project closes and posting the results on the project web pages ([www.followingfathers.leeds.ac.uk/supporting young dads](http://www.followingfathers.leeds.ac.uk/supporting_young_dads)). We are hopeful that, in the absence of existing training programmes for practitioners in different professional and regional settings, there is huge potential to refine and further develop this model of training and deliver it further afield. This is perhaps the best means of increasing understanding of the needs and experiences of young fathers and heralding a new culture of support for them.

The contributors



Anna Tarrant is a Lecturer in Sociology at the University of Lincoln. She previously worked at the University of Leeds where she began her Leverhulme Trust funded study of the care responsibilities of men living on a low-income. This current project is based on a secondary analysis of the findings from Following Young Fathers, which has led to consideration of developing more effective support for young fathers.

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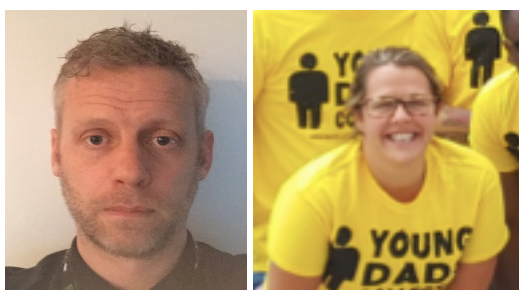


Bren Neale is Emeritus Professor of Life course and Family Research (University of Leeds, School of Sociology and Social Policy, UK) and a fellow of the Academy of Social Sciences (elected in 2010). She is an international expert in Qualitative Longitudinal Research and spends much of her time supporting projects that use this methodology. Bren specialises in research on the dynamics of family life and inter-generational relationships, and has published widely in this field. She is a founding member of the journal *Families, Relationships and Societies*, and chair of the journal's Editorial Management Board.

Her recent publications present findings from the Economic and Social Research Council-funded *Following Young Fathers* study (www.followingfathers.leeds.ac.uk). In 2016, she worked with Anna to secure funding for a one-year impact initiative, designed to translate the findings of the Following Young Fathers study into practice, building on the collaborative style of working that was central to the Following Young Fathers study.



Kate Bulman has worked as a nurse at Oakhill STC for the past 11 years, where she has developed and run an award winning intervention for young fathers, and she has also been involved in following up on and supporting young fathers as they resettle into the community. Kate has an undergraduate degree in Social Anthropology and a MA in Health Education and Health Promotion. As well as working at Oakhill STC, Kate is employed as an associate lecturer at Northampton University, and has recently started work as a facilitator for the MK Act Domestic Violence Intervention Service Fresh Start Programme working to enable those who have used domestic violence and abuse in relationships to engage in changing their behaviour.



John May is the manager of the Teenage Pregnancy and Parenthood team, in the Health and Wellbeing Service, Leeds City Council. His previous role was as a Young Dads Worker within the same team. John has had 13 years' experience of working with young dads. He currently manages **Holly Dawson** who is a Specialist Learning Mentor and has lead on the development of YDCNorth.



Hannah Turner-Uaandja is the Project Manager of the Young Dads Collective at the Family and Childcare Trust. She has worked with young parents since graduating in 2012 and previously worked for the Lullaby Trust on their young parent social networking site, Little Lullaby. She is particularly interested in co-designed social change initiatives and works supporting the youth voice.



Ruben Vemba is a father to his three year old son and has experienced first-hand the barriers that young men face when becoming fathers. Now the YDC Project Assistant, Ruben first became a YDC member and advocate for young dads after finding himself with minimal support and having to learn the skills and coping mechanisms necessary to be a great father on his own. Ruben is keen to represent the interests of his peers through this project and give a voice to those young dads who remain left out.

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