

Report No. 4

DOING FATHER-INCLUSIVE RESEARCH OVER TIME:

**THE VALUE OF SUSTAINED AND PURPOSEFUL
ENGAGEMENT BY YOUNG FATHERS IN QUALITATIVE
LONGITUDINAL RESEARCH**

HOW TO CITE THIS PAPER

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KEY POINTS

- A core strand of [Following Young Fathers Further \(FYFF\)](#) was the 're-access' of a sub-sample of young fathers from the original [Following Young Fathers](#) baseline study. In total, a cohort of eleven young fathers have experienced sustained research participation in the wider programme of research, some across a twelve-year period.
- An exploration of their motivations to remain engaged, suggests that there are numerous social and emotion dimensions that underpin their engagement and participation.
- On the premise of sharing values and identities as young fathers, these young men demonstrated an unwavering and passionate commitment to affecting positive change for others, as their own parenting journeys have unfolded.
- These young men described the interview encounters as forms of father-inclusive intervention. Having a safe and recurrent space to recount the joys and challenges of young fatherhood is rare but highly valued.
- There is relevance of these findings for research and professional practice. Young fathers value having dedicated time and space to be listened to and to work through their experiences of fatherhood. These spaces help them to see that their private *troubles* are also shaped by wider social and political processes. This recognition among young fathers can reduce feelings of isolation and motivate them to advocate for other young fathers.

INTRODUCTION

This paper draws on insights generated with a cohort of young fathers, who became a parent when aged 25 and under, who have participated in the FYFF programme of research, some consistently, some sporadically, across a twelve-year period. Analysis of their motivations for being and remaining involved in the study for such an extensive period, reveal the programme of research itself to be a form of father-inclusive intervention for these young men and a feature of their biographies and evolving trajectories as fathers.

The qualitative longitudinal design of the FYFF programme of research, and the studies that comprise it, has supported the refinement of numerous methodological strategies. This includes the use of a constellation of traditional and creative methods, including recurrent interviews, the co-creation of father-inclusive interventions, zines and photovoice. During the COVID-19 pandemic, we also shifted our research online to enable continued, yet remote engagement with young fathers at a distance (Tarrant et al. 2022). These approaches have supported the sustained engagement and inclusion of young fathers in the research programme over time, while simultaneously building substantive and empirical insights about their lives as an evidence-base from which to influence societal discourse and debate, and to affect change.

In this paper, we describe one of the core methodological strategies employed in the FYFF study, which has supported the extensive engagement of a cohort of 11 young fathers. We begin by providing an overview of the 're-access' strategy employed to sustain this sample of young fathers through consecutive, cumulative studies about young fatherhood (see also Tarrant, 2023). Whilst from the outset we have used the language of re-access, the continued engagement of the young fathers reflects their deep commitment to the overall ethos of the study as a father-inclusive programme of research that is committed to social change.

Through our analysis of their interview data, we highlight the *social* and *emotional* benefits these young fathers describe in relation to their participation in the FYFF research programme for extensive periods. A common thread for these young men was that they construct the interview encounters as a uniquely therapeutic space, in which they can re-order their experiences, articulate more nuanced accounts of young fatherhood, and seek to improve the experiences of other young fathers. The findings further indicate that the research has become an intervention, in and of itself, for these young men.

RE-ACCESSING YOUNG FATHERS FOR RESEARCH OVER TIME: STRATEGY AND PROCESS FOR SUSTAINING ‘RELATIONAL THREADS’

A key aim of the re-access and follow-up process in the FYFF study was to generate extended insights about the longer-term dynamics of young fathers’ parenting journeys and support experiences. This has required us to sustain the ‘relational threads’ established with our participants and practice partners that have weaved our variously funded studies together. The cumulative and contiguous nature of the four funded studies comprising the FYFF programme of research (see Report 1), has facilitated the longer-term participation of a total sub-sample of eleven young fathers. Table 4.1 provides an overview of the participants we followed up with and their participation journeys through the various studies. From the outset, this strand of work was designed to extend the longitudinal reach of a selected sample of young fathers from the baseline study ‘Following Young Fathers (FYF) (Neale and Lau-Clayton, 2012–2015). It has been possible to re-access ten participants from the baseline study, and one who participated in Ladlow’s (2021) study, *Housing Young Parents* (see also Report 1). All were ethically recruited into the study by utilising established relationships with the participants, the original FYF research team and with the support of a practitioner gatekeeper. These mechanisms have also been key to sustaining the ‘relational threads’ that have been so carefully nurtured between studies.

FIGURE 4.1: THE FYFF PROGRAMME PARTICIPATION AND ENGAGEMENT PATHWAYS OF THE RE-ACCESS COHORT OF YOUNG FATHERS

Participant	FYF (2011–15)					Responding to Young Dads (2016–17)	Housing Young Parents (2015–2021)	FYFF (2020–24)				
	W1	W2	W3	W4	W5			W1	W2	W2.1*	W3	W4**
Adam	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓		✓	✓	✓	✓	
Ben				✓	✓				✓		✓	
Christopher				✓	✓				✓		✓	✓
Craig							✓	✓	✓		✓	
Dominic	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓			✓	✓		✓	✓
Jayden					✓		✓	✓	✓		✓	
Jock				✓	✓		✓	✓	✓		✓	✓
Manuel	✓			✓			✓					
Raymond					✓			✓	✓		✓	
Tarrell	✓		✓		✓				✓		✓	
Trevor				✓	✓			✓	✓		✓	✓

*A sub-sample focused on mental health.

** Photovoice interviews

We note here that not all those we contacted decided to take part in the follow up study and there was some attrition. However, those who did were highly motivated to participate for multiple reasons, which we categorise as emotional and/or social. For this cohort of young men their sustained participation and engagement in the FYFF research programme has become part of their biographies and enabled them to make contributions to a unique global evidence base about young fatherhood.



THE VALUE OF QUALITATIVE LONGITUDINAL (QL) METHODOLOGY

Much research about young fatherhood historically has captured a snapshot view of young fatherhood, typically around the time of their early entry into fatherhood, often an intensive moment of disruption and rupture. The extensive time frames of the qualitative longitudinal methodology are therefore novel in that it has extended the capture of the dynamics of young fatherhood over time and beyond the moment of 'becoming' (Bergson, 1946 [1903] cited in Neale 2021). Furthermore, these have been captured against a backdrop of rapid socio-historic, economic and policy change and the profound impacts of consecutive crises on family lives, gendered dynamics of parenting, and employment opportunities (e.g., Tarrant et al. 020ab; Twamley et al. 2024).

To capture both intensive and more extensive horizons of time, as well as change and continuity in the parenting trajectories and support needs of these young men, we asked temporally orientated questions to ascertain:

- where they are now,
- whether they have maintained a role in their children's lives, and,
- what factors have shaped the experiences and practices of those who have and have not sustained a parental role.

We also followed up on core thematic areas that were pertinent in the FYF baseline study to extend our case-based data that had captured change and continuity across the key domains of their lives, including their employment and housing trajectories, changing support needs and experiences of engaging with services. Participating in qualitative interviews for over a decade has provided a broad sweeping insight into the lives of young fathers, from their entry into fatherhood to their experiences of parenting older children. Following the lives of these young men over time, reveals how becoming a father at a young age influences their life course decisions and opportunities, and has demonstrated the commitment these participants have to their children. Some participants have remained in stable relationships with the mothers of their children, while others have separated. However, all 11 have remain actively engaged fathers.

The interviews also provided an opportunity to capture what impacts their participation in the research have had over time and why they have felt so motivated to remain connected to the study over such an extended period. Their responses to these methodological questions confirmed that the research process itself, as a form of 'impact-in-process' (Marzi and Pain, 2022), has had social and emotional effects on the lives of these young men and has provided a unique space for their political participation, as we evidence next.

THE FYFF RESEARCH AS FATHER-INCLUSIVE SPACE

Initially, the research team were concerned with considering the ethical and practical aspects of the methodology of re-accessing participants. Where ethics committees and approvals processes may initially orient researchers to think about the risks of research burden on participants, framing participants as being potentially reluctant in their engagement. Countering these assumptions, our participants described their sustained participation in the research programme as a form of 'purposeful engagement' (Hughes et al. 2020); they have remained highly motivated to participate at regular intervals for reasons that were important to them. Perhaps unsurprisingly, given their sustained commitment to the research programme over time, these young fathers talked fondly about their engagement. They were strongly connected to the study and described the value for them individually of engaging in a space that is not otherwise available to them in their everyday lives or in a society where spaces for men to speak emotionally and about being a father are largely absent. Each described a range of social and emotional benefits that had accrued for them as they participated over time:

“ I love it, you know. You know what, I kind of feel better right now, because I didn't know I was bottling up so many things and I've just heard my whole life on a plate [laughs], and I've never done that. Sometimes, you see what I'm saying, you need to be heard. I feel so much better now, I didn't know I was sitting on so much things. The amount of things that came out of my mouth in this whole conversation, I didn't even know I was sitting on so much things, like damn. Man, you're a soldier, and I'm still carrying on. I feel much better right now. Every time I speak to you, I feel like I've aired out my head, cause I'm the kind of person, I've got no-one to talk to. Do you know what I mean? Out of choice, because I've always been an enclosed person, but doing this research, it just makes me feel like you know what, Raymond, actually congratulate yourself. Like, what you're doing is a big thing already and talking about it as well, I just feel really airy. feel so good now [laughs]

(Raymond, wave 2, age 26)

When the young fathers were asked to reflect on why they continued to participate and why it was worth their engagement, in some cases for over a decade, they described both individual and collective benefits. On an individual level they enjoyed participating because the interview encounter was experienced as a therapeutic space (an experience participants often report about research, Hughes et al. 2020). It is well established that young fathers are particularly susceptible to isolation and loneliness and that they rarely have opportunities to engage with others in dialogue about their fathering identities (Lau Clayton, 2016). The research programme has created a safe and sustainable space, based on the premise of trust and reciprocity with the research team, through which they have felt able to provide both prospective and retrospective accounts of their parenting journeys in increasingly revealing ways.

“ I've absolutely loved taking part in all of it. I mean coming up with new ideas and just trying to help people, it's gratifying. It's been lovely. It's been brilliant. Like these little sessions are like offloading really. I get to talk to someone that I've known for a while. I get to go reminisce on things that have happened and yeah, it's nice, it's definitely nice. And hopefully you get funded for longer because like I say it's helped me out a hell of a lot and that's why I do it, to try and give something back

(Adam wave 3, age 26).



FROM PERSONAL VALUE TO RAISING AWARENESS

Where the young fathers benefitted personally from engagement in the research, they were also driven to do so to support others and to challenge deficit narratives about young fathers. Adam reported that his engagement was beneficial to his mental health, not only because it created a space to talk about being a dad but also because it was helping others. Ben also explained how the interviews supported him to theorise and construct his experience via an alternative framing and to order his own thoughts about his experiences of parenting and its challenges. He considered this important in efforts to challenge cultural and societal stigma and to advocate for greater acceptance of young parenthood as a decision, based on improved understanding:

“ I just, I like to be able to kind of talk about this stuff and sometimes it helps me to kind of...what's the word? Not process things, but sort of express them, I guess. Like, I'm a big believer in the idea that being able to put things into words makes them feel differently. You know, when, like, you're feeling really overwhelmed by something and then you, like, or, like, you feel like you're really busy and then you put a to do list together and you realise, oh actually, I'm not that busy. It's kind of like that mentally, that sometimes things can feel really big and over-facing and overwhelming, and actually you spell them out and you say them and it's not as bad as all that. So yeah, the opportunity to kind of express things that I may not necessarily have expressed properly or ever before has kind of been really beneficial, I think.

I think I said this last time, but kind of a, culturally, kind of a broader acceptance of people's choices to become parents, and while people obviously do know that being a parent is difficult, I think being more tolerant and not only accepting and tolerant, but kind of supportive of that decision, particularly for young parents I think is important. So yeah like, I don't know what the scope of publication is like, but it would be, yeah, it would be, in my view, it would be good to kind of try to overcome a little bit of cultural prejudice towards young parents.

(Ben, wave 2, age 29)



Jock also felt that the interviews provided the opportunity to see young fatherhood and its associated challenges not just as a private and individually experienced *trouble* but as an experience that may also be shared by others. This is reminiscent of the private-public distinction made by one of the founding fathers of sociology, C. Wright Mills (1959). In this example, young fathers are better able to see that the challenges that they experience are shared to some extent, as well as contingent on social and political contexts. In recasting young fatherhood as a public issue in this way, Jock felt that his participation was valuable both for raising awareness and for influencing change and transformation such that it would support young fathers after him to have a better experience. This was a sentiment shared by many of the participants, but expressed eloquently by Jock:

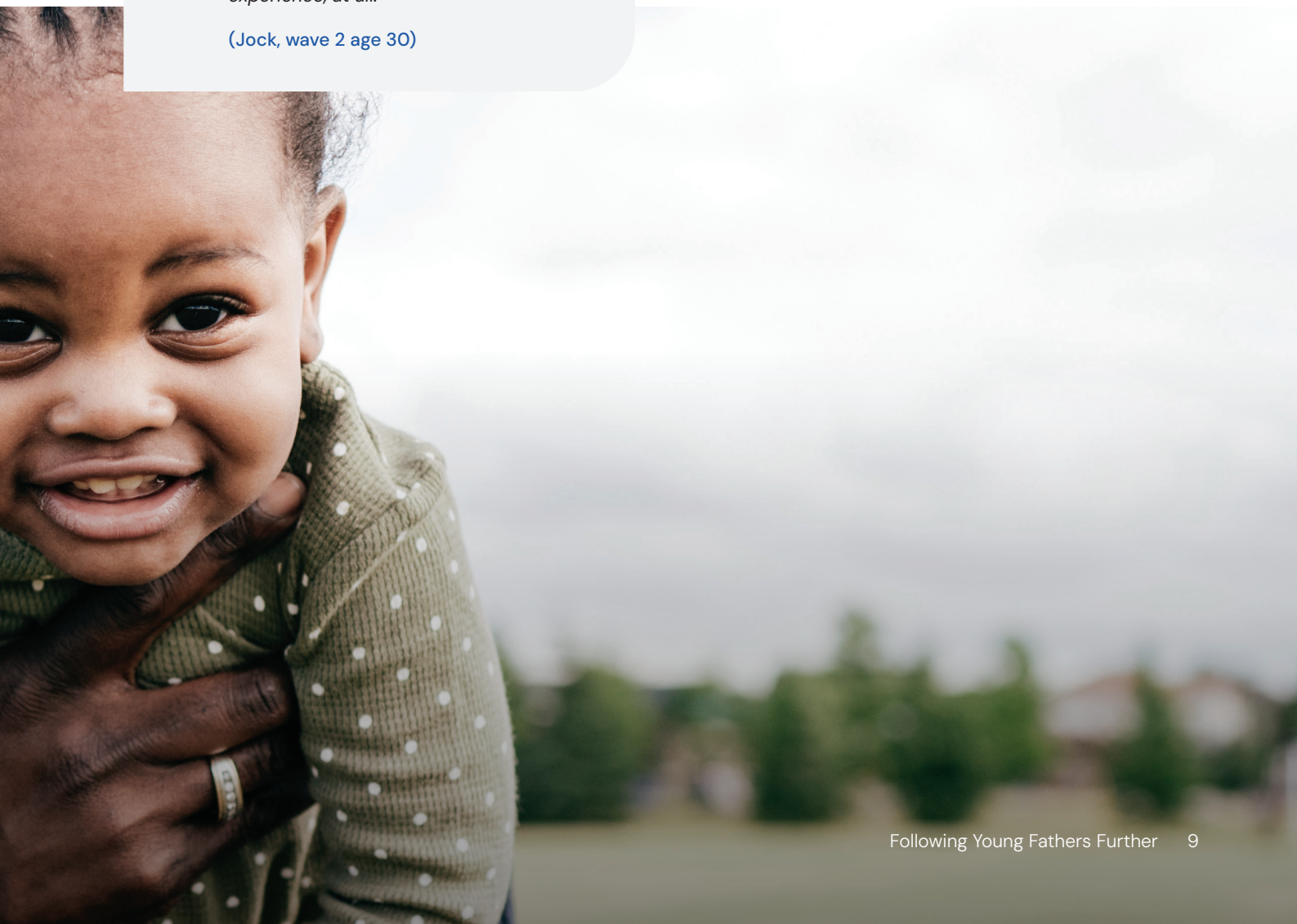
“Support for young dads, cause talking about it, like, I mean, it's been, like, a long time since my son were a baby, and you reflect back on what the challenges were and what little actually happened support wise, be nice to know that something actually happened in that regard, cause you don't really, I don't think about it now that I'm older, but when you reflect on it, you think actually, some other people actually go through what I went through. Just the awareness of what, of what young dads go through, because as I said before, there's a lot of things about young mothers and the support that goes for them, but what about the young fathers, there isn't that much out there, in my experience, at all.

(Jock, wave 2 age 30)

For many of these young fathers, their participation was politically as well as personally motivated and engaged them in, what we call elsewhere, a persuasive politics (Neale and Tarrant, 2024), through which they sought to change the narrative for young fathers who follow behind.

These ostensibly methodologically focused insights from the young fathers were revealing of the importance of the FYFF research programme and the extensive opportunities to participate as a unique father-inclusive space and intervention in a context where young fathers are constructed in deficit terms and assumed to be irresponsible, feckless, and uncaring. The interviews created the space and time for these young men to take a step back, to re-construct their narratives in new ways and acknowledge both the challenges and joys of young fatherhood. Their engagement has been both purposeful and politically motivated, validating their experiences and enabling them to influence a narrative of change in the support of others.

Indeed, by walking alongside this cohort of young fathers over time, we have been able to observe and capture the trials and tribulations of young fatherhood, to establish a more nuanced perspective on their social engagement, and explore the longer-term outcomes for these young men, thus casting them as prospective cases for young men who become fathers today.





CONCLUSION

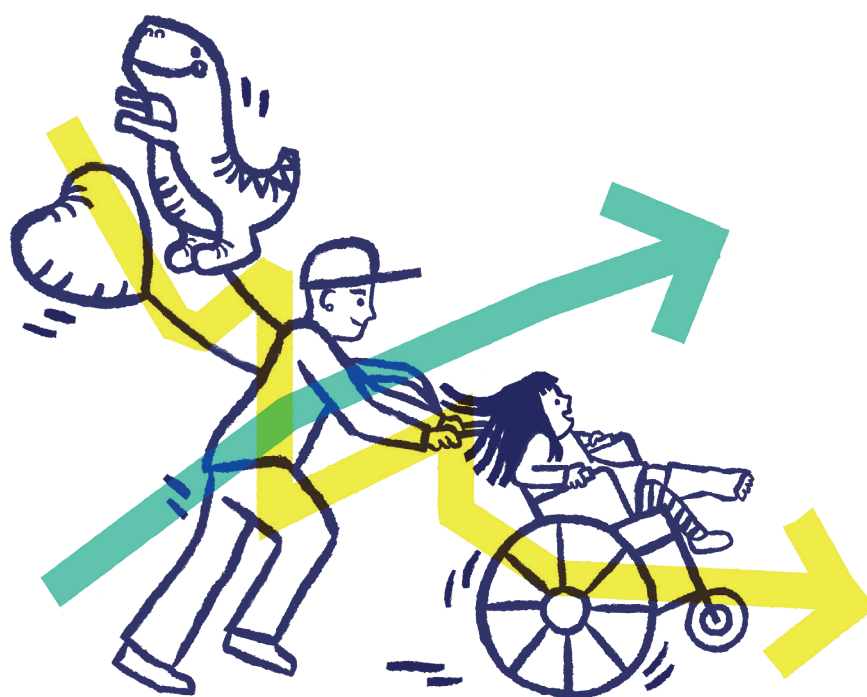
The re-access process enabled us to consider the motivations for the extended research participation of this cohort of young fathers, demonstrating the social and emotional value they derived from being engaged in the research, in some cases for over a decade. While no longer 'young' in policy terms, young fatherhood remains an important identity to these young men and one that they continue to identify with as their parenting journeys have evolved and progressed.

These young fathers described numerous tangible benefits associated with their sustained engagement in the research. FYFF has overtly sought to refine father-inclusive methodological strategies, driven by a clear commitment to engaging sociologically with orthodox deficit views about young fathers by seeking to capture their voices, and learn about the dynamics and diversity of their experiences. Indeed, the participatory ethos threaded throughout the FYFF programme of research has enabled the participants to become ambassadors for other young fathers and to become active in changing the narrative about young fatherhood (see Reports 5 and 6). Their continued commitment to sharing their lived experiences and making contributions to challenge the wider narrative about young fatherhood have more recently underpinned a theoretical shift from a social problems framework to one of social engagement (Report 2, 2023; Neale and Tarrant, in press 2024). We also argue that this is better explained by a social participation framework (see Report 8) in which the capacity of young fathers to engage as advocates, mentors and peer researchers in their own right is being demonstrated and supported.

FYFF participants are seeing that their otherwise private and individual experiences do not need to be framed as internalised issues but instead as part of a broader social context and set of public concerns in which young fathers are stigmatised. Jock, for example, is motivated because he did not receive support but wants other to benefit from it. Their participation is therefore driven by a commitment to a father-inclusive society because they are politically motivated to share their stories for the social good and the good of the young fathers who follow behind them. These findings should provide impetus for future researchers to consider and advance methodologies that promote father-inclusion in the production and dissemination of new knowledge that is based on lived experience.

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