

Report No. 8

CONCLUSION:

**LEARNING FROM CO-CREATING FATHER-INCLUSIVE
PRACTICE AND RESEARCH WITH YOUNG FATHERS
AND MULTI-AGENCY PROFESSIONALS**

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KEY POINTS: OUR RECOMMENDATIONS FOR PRACTICE AND POLICY

- **Think Dad!** Authentic, strengths-based relationships with all father's matter; not just for fathers but also for their children and co-parents.
- **Challenge deficit!** Social problem and deficit-based views of young fathers do not match the realities of their lives. Recognising the capabilities of young fathers for engagement and participation are key to developing father-inclusive thinking and for shaping practice and policy approaches that better serve all fathers.
- **Think Father-inclusion!** Include and listen to dads to more effectively respond to their needs and experiences and to factor these into the design of social interventions and services.
- **Co-create!** Existing services can be readily developed to create a dynamic and locally adapted offer. There is strength in working collaboratively and in partnership both within services and with experts beyond services e.g. young fathers, father-inclusive champions and researchers.
- **Advocate!** Challenge deficit views about dads and campaign for resourcing and investment in both universal and specialist services that support all fathers and their families to thrive.

INTRODUCTION

Underscored by the compelling evidence generated across the wider [Following Young Fathers Further](#) programme of research and wider scholarship, our starting point for our transformative agenda from January 2020 was that the realities of the lives of young fathers and their families are misunderstood and professionals are poorly supported and resourced when it comes to promoting and embedding father-inclusion within their organisations. As a research and innovation Fellowship, a key goal of the Following Young Fathers Further (FYFF) study was to build coalitions of researchers, professionals and policy makers who work collectively to promote and embed father-inclusive practice in their interactions with all fathers and in their organisations, as part of a process of instigating a father-inclusive practice ecosystem.

A key argument that we make based on the strategies and vision advanced through the Following Young Fathers Further study, is that opportunities for the comprehensive social participation of young fathers can only be created if their lives, experiences, and capabilities are properly evidenced, understood, and invested in. This requires the extended building and promotion of a dynamic, longitudinal evidence base in real time, with and for those who benefit from and are positioned to instigate change.

A major advance from the FYFF study is the understanding that crucial to any vision or manifesto for resisting and replacing social problem and deficit framework views of young fathers is understanding what (young) fathers value about fatherhood, what challenges they need to overcome, and 'what works' in facilitating their engagements both in their personal and family contexts and across the key domains of their everyday lives.

As the study has progressed, our aim has been to better understand father-inclusion as a manifesto, an ethos, and a route to the comprehensive social participation of young fathers by providing them with the opportunities, resources and support they need to actively engage with other communities of fathers and professionals, across the various spheres of society. In partnership with young fathers and professionals, we have:

- developed new extended and international knowledge and understanding of the lives and support needs of young fathers;
- established new relationships with and between professionals pioneering father-inclusion to develop a practice-informed evidence base;
- co-created father-inclusive interventions; and
- developed and sustained new relational ecologies and dialogues between researchers, practitioners and young fathers to collectively address father-inclusion as a timely area of societal interest and concern.

Each of these contributions mean that the FYFF study has become a father-inclusive intervention in and of itself (see Report 4). The study has created new opportunities for young fathers to participate in their familial lives. As advocates, volunteers and employees (see Reports 5 and 6) who make important social contributions, they have also been supported to invest in their own development and citizenship in ways that the traditional social structures that shape individual life course trajectories and pathways for young fathers don't currently enable or allow.



TOWARDS A ‘SOCIAL PARTICIPATION’ FRAMEWORK OF YOUNG FATHERHOOD

In Report 2, a case is made for two theoretical frameworks for understanding the evidence around young fathers; a *social problems/deficit* framework and a *social engagement* framework (developed in Neale and Tarrant, 2024). Where the social problems framework builds on evidence about the risk factors associated with early pregnancy and parenthood and the challenges that young men may have in sustaining their roles as parents, the social engagement framework develops a more nuanced picture built on the perspectives of young fathers themselves that captures their intention to be there for their children alongside the challenges they navigate.

Underscored by our findings and co-creation work in the past four years, we propose a third framework; the *social participation framework*. Where the social problem and engagement frameworks seek to explain young fathers’ experiences in relation to their familial lives, the social participation framework captures their familial

engagement, as well as the more comprehensive social participation of young fathers beyond the family. This involves capturing their wider societal and community contributions as young fathers, as well as the mechanisms through which they are supported to participate as advocates, mentors, volunteers, and researchers (see Report 6).

Table 8.1 provides an overview of each of the frameworks, which have their overlaps, demonstrating how a social participation approach differs in its attention to the proactive creation and provision of spaces for young fathers. These support them to develop their skills, their confidence and to engage in a persuasive politics (Neale and Tarrant, 2024) of change that facilitates their involvement in challenging deficit narratives.

FIGURE 8.1: KEY THEORETICAL FRAMEWORKS IN YOUNG FATHERHOOD RESEARCH

SOCIAL PROBLEMS/DEFICIT	SOCIAL ENGAGEMENT	SOCIAL PARTICIPATION
<div>→ Predominantly associated with the ‘problem’ focus, which frames responses and interpretations of teenage and young pregnancy and parenthood.</div> <div>→ Underscores a risk profile comprising the antecedent and longer-term factors that increase the likelihood of early parenthood and continued disadvantage.</div> <div>→ Contributes to and reinforces the stigmatisation of young fatherhood; sustains and sustained by stereotypes of feckless, absent, and uncaring fathers.</div>	<div>→ Recognises the challenges young fathers face as shaped and influenced by prevailing socio-economic and structural conditions.</div> <div>→ Develops a more nuanced perspective of young fatherhood associated with alternative theories including masculinities theories and shifts towards engaged and involved fatherhood.</div> <div>→ Challenges orthodox and deficit views of young fatherhood through a focus on their capabilities and contributions to their family life.</div>	<div>→ Recognises the challenges young fathers face, as shaped and influenced by prevailing socio-economic and structural conditions but seeks to support young fathers to identify and overcome them.</div> <div>→ Involves the provision of opportunities for young fathers outside of traditional institutional structures where their life course pathways may have been otherwise disrupted.</div> <div>→ Young fathers participate in dialogues of change, as peer mentors, volunteers, researchers and advocates for father-inclusion.</div> <div>→ Built on qualitative longitudinal impact methodology and co-creation, which are designed to affect change and transformation in real time.</div>

It may not be straightforward for all services to engage young fathers through a social participation framework, especially mainstream and universal services. However there is clear value in engaging with fathers to inform service design and understand what matters to them. Specialist organisations like the North East Young Dads and Lads (NEYDL) and interventions like the Grimsby Dads Collective (GDC), demonstrate that young fathers are highly capable actors in influencing change and advocating for father-inclusion across the family, health, and social support landscape. Organisations and interventions tailored to engaging young fathers as advocates, volunteers and mentors, also demonstrate that investments in specialist services like these are high yield, simultaneously supporting them as beneficiaries, while also creating new pathways to independence that are predicated on the view that they are 'experts by experience' and highly capable of developing their skills and confidence given the right support, time and investment. The work of the Young Dads Collective North, for example, one of the legacy models for the Grimsby Dads Collective (see Report 5), offered unique routes for young men's wider social and economic participation, by upskilling and investing in young men and tackling social isolation through peer support (Tarrant and Neale, 2017; Tarrant et al. 2023).

It is worth noting that some young fathers may not wish to engage in these ways or may disengage with these kinds of opportunities over time. This has certainly been the case throughout the process of implementing the NEYDL and GDC support offers. Where young fathers do disengage, an open-door policy has been adopted to ensure that all young fathers feel empowered to return at any time should they want to, or perhaps more importantly, should they *need* to. Carefully managing sustained relationships with those who disengage is essential for maintaining these often-fragile relationships of trust, as is being aware that processes of intervention may inadvertently reinforce the very exclusion and disempowerment that they seek to address.

THE COMBINED VALUE OF QUALITATIVE LONGITUDINAL AND CO-CREATION RESEARCH AS MECHANISMS FOR CHANGE

As well as extending sustained qualitative longitudinal research with young fathers over a period of a decade, the most recently funded phase, the Following Young Fathers Further study, has laid the groundwork for proactively instigating the societal changes needed to realise ambitions for promoting father-inclusion and improving the welfare of young fathers and their families. Addressing such a complex challenge requires a holistic understanding of fatherhood and of fathers as a diverse, heterogenous population and the use of a multidisciplinary, participatory approach. While the changes have been relatively modest and place specific, they demonstrate the potential seeds of change that are possible when communities, professionals and policy makers work towards a common goal.

The methodologies that have been refined across the Following Young Fathers Further programme involve a synergy of parallel and complementary methodological developments in qualitative longitudinal impact research (Neale, 2021a; Neale and Tarrant, 2024), and the participatory method of co-creation (Tarrant, 2023, see Figure 8.2 for definitions). Utilised in combination, the Following Young Fathers Further study has operated as an enhanced programme of applied fatherhood research that has had enhanced impact. These impacts are premised on innovations in the capture, mobilisation, and translation of evidence-informed practice in the context of support for young fathers.

FIGURE 8.2: BRIEF DEFINITION OF QUALITATIVE LONGITUDINAL RESEARCH AND CO-CREATION

QUALITATIVE LONGITUDINAL RESEARCH:

Bren Neale (2021a) states that while varied and diverse in form and design, qualitative longitudinal studies share a common purpose: following the lives and fortunes of individuals and groups prospectively in 'real time' to explore how their lives unfold. With a dual identity as both longitudinal and qualitative, qualitative longitudinal studies are typically in-depth and intensive and involve walking alongside participants to capture 'change in the making' (Bergson 1946 [1903]; Mills 1959).

CO-CREATION is premised on an inclusive and democratic approach to research, practice development, and policy making. Simply defined, it is a methodology and 'a form of collaborative creativity that is initiated to enable innovation *with* rather than *for* the involved stakeholders.' (ACCOMPLISH, 2018). The methodology has been gained credentials in public health, where co-creation has successfully been used to align research and service development (Greenhalgh et al. 2016). Core to a co-creative approach is a systems perspective, creative approaches to research to ensure improvements in human experience, and consideration of governance and process (ibid, 2016). Our work involves a form of partnership research with the communities involved to produce *practice-informed research* and *research-based practice* (Neale, 2021b) to co-create new social interventions.

Where the qualitative longitudinal methodology of the Following Young Fathers Further study has enabled us to capture and analyse the parenting journeys and support needs of international cohorts of young fathers concurrently for the purposes of comparison (see Report 7), the extended timeframes of the study have also supported the development of the Grimsby Dads Collective as a new iteration of the Young Dads Collective model, grounded in the principles of participation and partnership working. The extended qualitative longitudinal design of the initiative has facilitated various activities; partnership working between local fathers, local and national partner organisations and the research team; the documentation of the implementation process to inform decision-making and shape adaptations in real time; and an examination of the impacts of this work during times of change.

These methodologies have also facilitated more democratic, collaborative ways of working that, in turn, have underpinned the collective ability to navigate and adapt to a practice landscape that remains largely 'risk/problem centred and

'mother-centric'. In sum, and in reference to Report 5, the methodologies employed illustrate the combined value of qualitative longitudinal and participatory modes of impact research (Neale, 2021b) and their credentials in addressing both the complex needs of marginalised communities and populations and more general, yet complex practice and policy challenges like the exclusion of fathers.

In crafting and advocating for a collective mindset, we demonstrate that we are better equipped to explore the practical strategies and methodological approaches that are best placed to promote father-inclusion and the social participation of young fathers in a more comprehensive way. The Following Young Fathers Further study also provides some of the necessary frameworks, tools, and methodologies needed to instigate this change and evidence it as it unfolds as part of a sustained empirically driven process.



TOWARDS A FATHER INCLUSIVE ECOSYSTEM

Before concluding, it is pertinent to think forward to next steps. This eight-part series of reports has been developed and designed to share evidence about the need for, and value of, father-inclusion and what kind of societal conditions this might create if embedded as an ethos and set of principles system wide. Our findings offer compelling evidence of the continued need for advocacy in the promotion of father-inclusive practice among professionals and within service contexts, as the first step towards creating a father-inclusive ecosystem and a national policy strategy designed to support fathers in the round.

Relatively under-theorised in the wider academic literature, (see Report 3) it is not always clear to professionals with a remit to support families, what it means to be father-inclusive or how to do it. Our view is that father-inclusive practice refers to an approach or set of strategies that actively recognise, value, and engage fathers in various contexts, such as family support services, healthcare, education, and social welfare. Such an approach and its associated practices promote the positive engagement, well-being, and active participation of fathers in the lives of their children and families. Father-inclusive practices acknowledge the important role that fathers play in child development, parenting, and family dynamics. They are underpinned by recognition that fathers have unique strengths, perspectives, and contributions that are valuable to the overall well-being of children and the family unit.

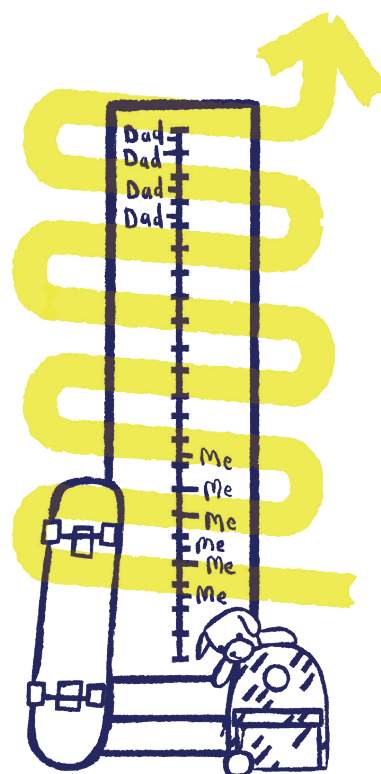
In an organisation that is committed to father-inclusive practice, professionals and service providers are encouraged to adopt strategies that:

- **1. Pro-actively engage and involve fathers:** This entails effective outreach to fathers, the creation of welcoming environments (e.g. using visuals of fathers and using the language of father in outreach and support materials) and providing opportunities for their meaningful involvement. The [Think Dad! toolkit](#) that we co-created with the North East Young Dads and Lads provides some useful advice and insights about how this can be achieved.
- **2. Provide education and support:** This involves disseminating resources, information, and support, tailored to the needs and experiences of fathers. Examples may include parenting education, workshops, counselling, and guidance (e.g. toolkits) that acknowledge and address the unique challenges, concerns, and strengths of fathers. Please consider recommending the [DigiDAD](#) website to young fathers and other professionals in your networks. This unique e-learning platform has been co-created with and for young fathers and now has an international audience!
- **3. Fostering positive relationships:** Father-inclusive practices prioritise building positive and respectful relationships with fathers. This includes effective communication, active listening, and involving fathers in decision-making processes related to their children's well-being and development, and to service design.

→ **4. Challenging stereotypes and biases:** Father-inclusive practices challenge societal stereotypes and biases that may marginalise or underestimate the role of fathers. This is especially important for young fathers as some of the most misrepresented and marginalised of fathers as a population. Father-inclusion advocates a shift in attitudes and perceptions, recognising the diversity of fatherhood experiences and the importance of fathers' participation both in their family life and other key life course domains that intersect across their parenting trajectories.

→ **5. Appropriate collaboration with mothers and co-parents:** Father-inclusive practices emphasise the value of collaboration and partnership between fathers and mothers or co-parents. They recognise the benefits of shared parenting responsibilities, effective co-parenting, and effective communication between parents for the well-being of children.

While individual relationships between fathers and professionals are pertinent, the benefits and value of these kinds of positive and compassionate engagements are only really feasible in a context where environments and systems are equipped to actively engage and support fathers and recognise their significance in child development and positive family outcomes. By valuing and involving fathers, father-inclusion has the potential to reinforce and embed more equitable and nurturing family and social environments. The ecosystemic framework, originally developed by Bronfenbrenner (1979; 1986), might be usefully applied in this regard, illustrating how numerous familial, social and economic factors and policy systems interact to influence father involvement and engagement (Donald et al. 2020; Kiselica and Deslauriers, 2022). We move on next to make the case for the need to embed mechanisms that underscore recognition of fathers and their involvement across key sectors of society.



THE CORE COMPONENTS OF A FATHER-INCLUSIVE ECOSYSTEM: OUR RECOMMENDATIONS FOR TURNING A VISION INTO A REALITY

Driven by an ethos of participation, much of the work in the FYFF programme of research has been about driving change and transformation from the bottom-up; working with young fathers and multi-agency professionals to share their perspectives about what father exclusion/inclusion looks like and responding to that evidence to promote systems change. In the FYFF study, we have done so by co-creating new innovations, creating opportunities for dialogue about how the inclusion of fathers can be more effectively achieved, and developing evidence about these processes to demonstrate how a vision for father-inclusion can be realised. Via the study innovations, we have shown how a commitment to father-inclusion can be translated into tangible approaches for addressing the exclusion fathers tell us they experience, often to the detriment of their own mental health and well-being and to the welfare of their families.

In terms of next steps, our evidence suggests a clear need for change in this direction at multiple scales. Key elements of a father-inclusive ecosystem may include:

- **1. A father-inclusive ethos and mindset:** There is a need to shift mindsets to challenge the orthodox social deficit/problem perspective, to those that are underscored by *social engagement and participation* frameworks. Young fathers do not feel listened to, or trusted by health care practitioners because they are young, even though they are willing and able to support their new family (Ayton and Hanson 2016). This means recognising the wider significance of fathers' participation to the family unit and wider society and making efforts in practice to support fathers to be there for their children (Davies and Neale, 2015; Rollins, 2020). Male-friendly attitudes, outreach and rapport-building are key to this enterprise among professionals (Kiselica and Kiselica, 2014).
- **2. Policies and legislation:** Mirroring similar Western countries like the US (Kiselica and Kiselica, 2014), UK public policy places little emphasis on fathers. In Report 7 we cite David Lammy MP who said in 2015 that: '*the present parenting support offer across the UK is fragmented, with little leadership from national government*'. The development and implementation of policies that support fatherhood and promote co-parenting may include parental leave policies, flexible work arrangements, and legal frameworks that encourage fathers' involvement in the lives of their children. Housing, youth, and social security policies are also key to enabling young fathers and their families to establish their independence.
- **3. Services and programmes:** In Report 3, we quote Scourfield et al. (2016) who argue that all agencies need to subscribe to the aim of supporting the valuable role of fathers in their children's lives, and this includes recognising and supporting the diverse needs of vulnerable fathers. Evidence suggests that a lack of dedicated father support services can exacerbate the feelings of loneliness that young fathers experience in the perinatal period (Ayton and Hansen 2016) and disconnect them from their identities as fathers. To combat these challenges a father-inclusive ecosystem should comprise accessible and tailored services and programmes that address the specific needs and concerns of fathers from the outset of their parenting journeys (see also Cundy, 2016). This can include any combination of specialist support, father-focused parenting classes, peer groups, mental health services, and other resources that promote positive father-child relationships. As we note elsewhere (Tarrant and Neale, 2017), good practice for individual fathers also requires a joined up and integrated approach including consistent ways of working by professionals and services. The growth of online apps and parenting programmes like DigiDAD, also suggest there is a growing appetite for supporting fathers online, as well as face-to-face.
- **4. Awareness and education:** Key to the success of the Young Dads Collective model (Tarrant and Neale, 2017; Report 5) is that it provides an innovative mechanism for educating professionals through the creation of spaces where young fathers and professionals can share their experiences and work together to consider solutions. Raising awareness about young fatherhood, dispelling stereotypes and biases, and educating the public about the importance of father involvement are also key to this process (Parra-Cardona et al. 2006 Mvune and Bhana, 2022). Campaigns, educational initiatives, and community outreach efforts that promote the value of engaged fatherhood have a valuable role to play in this space, as does academic research. Challenging the under-representation of fathers in research, including attention to how research can become more father-inclusive (see Report 4), also has value.
- **5. Working in coalition/collaboration to identify and address barriers to father-inclusion:** Like others, we consider research and investments in pioneering practice to be essential in setting the benchmarks for effective father-inclusive approaches and practices. Working collaboratively, including with fathers, is a powerful mechanism for driving impact and change from within support systems that are otherwise 'mother-centric', and risk focused (Tarrant, 2023; Neale and Tarrant, 2024). A father-inclusive ecosystem must be built on collaborations among stakeholders, including government agencies, community organisations, employers, healthcare providers, educational institutions, and the criminal justice system and so on. Productive collaboration will facilitate the exchange of knowledge, resources, and best practices to create a comprehensive and integrated support system for fathers (Miniszak et al. 2019).
- **6. Recognition that individual behavioural changes can lead to systemic change:** Changes in behaviours are occurring in the family and at practice level (Tarrant, 2023; Neale and Tarrant, 2024). These incremental shifts may seem insignificant and may be easily taken for granted but they are also fundamental evidence of the need for longer-term systemic and policy change. Replicating these shifts in personal and familial arenas requires everyone to address and resist stereotypes, to promote positive representations of fathers in media and popular culture, and to foster an inclusive society that supports and celebrates the participation of fathers in their familial and social lives.

SOME FINAL REFLECTIONS

Across this series of short reports, we have outlined a rationale for fostering the comprehensive social participation of young fathers, building on and advancing existing conceptual framings in academic scholarship that provide a more dynamic view of the combined joys and challenges associated with young fatherhood. We have also made an evidence-informed case about the potential value of a system wide shift towards father inclusion. This should be driven by a manifesto and common vision towards greater equality for women and men in their work and familial lives, as well as an associated set of strategies that can be employed and embedded across the social support, employment, and family support ecosystem to create the conditions that more effectively support the welfare of fathers, their partners, and their children to flourish.

In encouraging a collective response to the promotion and advocacy of father-inclusion nationally, we are heartened by more visible forms of national advocacy. The Fatherhood Institute has long been a significant and respected voice in this space and there has been a rising commitment to father-inclusion among social commentators like Mark Williams and Elliott Rae, and advocacy and campaigning organisations like Fatherhood Network Scotland. FutureMen¹ have also established a new advocacy space called Agenda:DAD (2023), which aims to raise the bar for all fathers at a universal policy level. This is built around three core thematic strands deemed to be most pertinent to contemporary fathers and families. These are:

- Increasing mental health screenings for fathers and improving access to treatments,
- Increased and improved paternity leave offers for fathers (including a joint campaign to extend the current 2 week offer to 6 weeks at 90%),
- Increasing birth registrations and ensuring that all fathers can register births, and
- Developing a policy landscape that works for all fathers.

We look forward to seeing where this collective movement might lead in the future and anticipate that the new Centre for Innovation in Fatherhood and Family Research at the University of Lincoln will become an important space for generating new evidence about fatherhood and a force for transformation and change. As these developments evolve, please do [join our network](#), keep up to date with the next phase of the research up to 2027 and consider membership of the Centre for latest news and research.

¹ | A London based organisation that acts as the secretariat for the All Party Parliamentary Group on Fatherhood



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