

Policy Briefing 1

# **KEY PRINCIPLES OF FATHER-INCLUSIVE PRACTICE**

2021

## ABOUT

**Following Young Fathers Further** (2020–2027) is a seven-year qualitative longitudinal research study, funded via the prestigious UK Research & Innovation Future Leaders Fellowship scheme (grant number: MR/S031723/1). A major aim of the research is to generate an extended evidence base about the lived experiences and support needs of young men who become fathers or experience a pregnancy aged 25 and under. In productive partnership with young fathers and the professionals who support them, the study is also implementing innovative methodologies to produce both practice-informed research and research-based practice (Neale, 2021) through the generation of in-depth, longitudinal, and international evidence about young fatherhood. Facilitated by co-creation methodology, a form of participatory action research, that directly involves young fathers and national multi-agency support services in creating and promoting new service approaches, the study is also driving social transformation through the implementation of a support and policy environment in the UK that is both compassionate and participatory.



A collaboration between

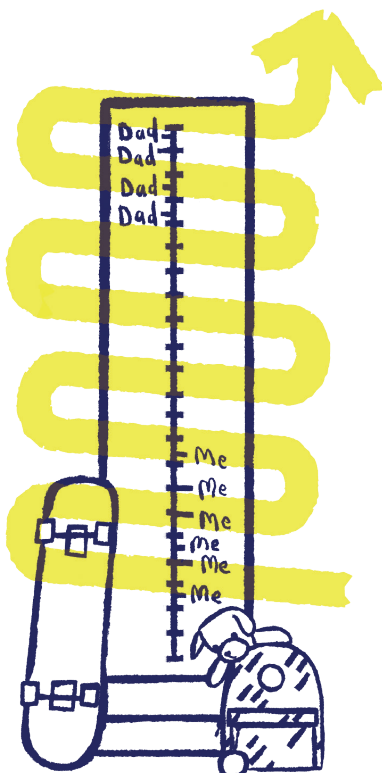
## KEY FINDINGS

- Father-inclusive practice in the support of parents and families is key to addressing inequalities through social and gendered transformations. It has an important role to play in enabling men to fulfil their ambitions as active partners and parents.
- Embedding these approaches in policy and practice is especially important for fathers who are typically excluded from services, including young fathers and those from minoritised communities.
- Developing and implementing father-inclusive approaches at the level of professional practice and support is often considered an extra or an 'in addition' in practice settings. However, evidence generated with professionals makes a compelling case that small changes on behalf of professionals can make a big difference and that they can be integrated into existing practice as an effective way of meeting existing and forthcoming professional obligations.
- Moving forward, expectations are that professionals can demonstrate that the support they offer is both trauma informed and restorative. The fundamental principles of father-inclusive approaches, namely being inclusive and building relationships, align with these expectations. For example, it is not possible to be inclusive if one or both parents are excluded from the support offer.

## WHY FATHER-INCLUSIVE APPROACHES MATTER

International research with fathers illustrates a shared intention, among all father groups and populations, to 'be there' for their children and to engage in their care and support (Neale and Davies, 2015; Andreasson, Tarrant et al. forthcoming) regardless of relationship or socio-economic circumstances. Father-inclusive interventions and approaches support men to fulfil their roles as caregivers and to participate in family life (Bateson et al. 2017).

Effective engagement with men who are fathers and support for father-child relationships should be the responsibility of all adult and children's services. Father-inclusive services are those that adopt both a strategic and integrated approach to engaging with fathers and support for their relationships with their children (Moore et al. n.d.). In practice, this is not always being achieved and is linked to a combination of systemic barriers and associated professional apathy.



### WHAT IS FATHER-INCLUSIVE PRACTICE?

Evidence suggests that engaging fathers early in their parenting journeys has benefits both for child development and family well-being (Diniz et al. 2021), including:

- Promoting the fathers' well-being.
- Building on the fathers' capacity to support mothers' psychological well-being.
- Improving maternal health behaviours.
- Promoting children's mental health and development (Bateson et al. 2017).

The ethos underpinning a father-inclusive practice model combines several elements:

- Recognising the diverse circumstances, strengths and interests of fathers.
- Taking a positive approach to the diversity of men, their needs and expectations.
- Encouraging men and service providers to openly acknowledge and value fathering.

Commonwealth of Australia (2009)



## BARRIERS TO FATHER-INCLUSIVE PRACTICE

**Systematic issues:** Both nationally and internationally, there continues to be a significant lack of father inclusion in parenting services (Panter-Brick et al. 2014; Cooke et al. 2019; Tarrant and Neale, 2017). In the UK context, there are pockets of excellent practice in evidence, promoted by 'local champions' (Davies and Neale, 2015) that are establishing the groundwork for an evidence base that is practice-informed and research verified (see for example the Young Dads Collective and the North East Young Dads and Lads, and Policy briefs two and three).

Research demonstrates that a combination of **structural, organisational, cultural, and societal influences**, reinforce the marginalisation of fathers from services and hamper their engagements with professionals (Tarrant and Neale, 2017). Fathers themselves may also be experiencing a complex set of *personal* challenges and have a diverse set of needs that act as a barrier both to their participation in the lives of their children and with services.

**Understanding what works is knowing what matters to people**

**Services remain mother-centric:** Even though gendered ideas around fatherhood are changing; meaning that men are increasingly expected to, and want to, engage in the care and support of their children, the historically rooted ideas that mothers are primary caregivers remains pervasive. This impacts how public services engage with men at the local level and, as reported by young fathers, can lead to problematic practices of surveillance or sidelining among professionals (Neale et al. 2015). Fathers therefore remain on the periphery of service delivery because services do not always routinely engage with them (see also Tarrant, 2021).

**Vicious circles of disengagement, distrust and lack of respect:** Existing research with young fathers and professionals demonstrates how practices of surveillance and/or distrust by professionals feed into *vicious circles of disengagement, distrust and lack of respect*. This is heightened if such practices damage self-esteem or undermine mens' confidence in themselves or their identities as fathers. Young men (as well as fathers who are experiencing disadvantage) are more likely to disengage when they feel the stigma of their early entry into parenthood and are aware of the ambivalence of professionals towards them (Deslauriers et al. 2012). Sidelining or surveillance experiences in one setting can colour perceptions and fuel distrust in others (Neale and Ladlow, 2016).



## WHAT WORKS, WHAT MATTERS, WHAT HELPS?

Identifying 'what works' in practice can be difficult, particularly when blanket solutions are considered for diverse problems. What we need to consider is what works for whom, in what circumstances and over what periods of time (Pawson, 2006). A necessary precursor to understanding what works is knowing what matters to people. This is where productive relationships between research, the professional workforce, and those with lived experience are of paramount importance for implementing approaches that are effective.

The combined knowledge of researchers, fathers and the professional workforce is essential to the promotion and embedding of a father-inclusive environment and for implementing strategies for fathers that have realistic targets and goals. Research with young fathers, which has wider application to professional support for fathers more generally, suggests that professionals who deliver effective practice should be able to:

- Consider how a service may be 'hard-to-access' for all fathers (rather than 'hard-to-reach').
- Understand diversity, dynamics and vulnerability in the lives of fathers.
- Challenge myths and stereotypes and address stigma by promoting positive messages about fathering and masculinities.
- Create safe social spaces/group interventions that offer both tailored individual and holistic support to address complex needs.
- Employ an ethic of care, compassion and authentic engagement.
- Work with fathers to understand their experiences and develop knowledge about their support needs rather than deliver to them.
- Act as mentors and guides rather than as disciplinarians.

(Tarrant and Neale, 2017)

## PRACTICE AND POLICY IMPLICATIONS

**Holistic provision:** Holistic and creative forms of provision are more likely to foster a culture of authentic engagement with fathers that both meet them halfway and go the extra mile. A service level fatherhood strategy with realistic targets and goals may include the provision of any combination of:

- Emotional support and counselling.
- Development of parenting skills.
- Practical help, referrals, advocacy and brokering support with other agencies.
- Peer mentoring.
- Social programmes that bring fathers together (Tarrant and Neale, 2017).

**Creating a virtuous circle of engagement, trust, and mutual respect:** Vicious circles of disengagement, trust and lack of respect can be turned around through the implementation of a supportive and compassionate ethos, particularly where this approach focuses on the capabilities and resourcefulness of fathers and facilitates the building of self-confidence to develop an identity as a parent. In criminal justice settings this approach should also incorporate an ethos of redemption, whereby investments in fathering are central to supporting men to transition back into the community (Meek, 2007; Ladlow and Neale, 2016).

**Fostering productive and collaborative research-practice partnerships:** Effective knowledge exchange between fathers, researchers and professionals has proven to be effective at addressing the gap between what is known (i.e. that there is a wider societal benefit in promoting positive father involvement), what supports fathers and their families (e.g. promoting, embedding, and implementing father-inclusive practice), and what happens in practice. The Young Dads Collective model and its latest iterations in Leeds and Grimsby are effective case studies in illustrating what happens when young fathers are empowered to shape professional practice as a method for instigating wider systems change (see Policy briefing 3).

**Co-creating knowledge and services:** The co-creation of services that engage fathers as 'experts by experience' (both as advocates and mentors, see also Policy brief 3 on the Young Dads Collective model) and harness the knowledge of professionals and research evidence are likely to be the most productive in developing, implementing and refining a father-inclusive offer and support environment that acknowledges both the needs and challenges experienced by fathers and the professional workforce.





## POLICY BRIEFINGS IN THIS SERIES

→ **Policy briefing 2:** Models of good practice for work with fathers: co-creating knowledge about inclusive and intersectional approaches in the 'Diverse Dads' project

→ **Policy briefing 3:** Models of good practice in work with young fathers: the Grimsby Dads Collective case study

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## STUDY DIRECTOR:

Professor Anna Tarrant  
atarrant@lincoln.ac.uk

## RESEARCH FELLOWS:

Dr Linzi Ladlow  
lladlow@lincoln.ac.uk

Dr Laura Way  
lway@lincoln.ac.uk



@FollowingYFF

<https://followingyoungfathersfurther.org/>