

Briefing Paper 4

A DYNAMIC PERSPECTIVE OF YOUNG FATHERS' WELL-BEING

Predictive and protective factors across their mental health pathways

June 2023

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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.

Funded by the UKRI Future Leaders Fellowship scheme, 'Following Young Fathers Further' (FYFF) is a four-year qualitative longitudinal study at the University of Lincoln, exploring the parenting trajectories and support needs of young fathers (age 25 and under).



A collaboration between

KEY FINDINGS

- The mental health of fathers has only recently been recognised as a public health priority. In this context, the mental health and associated support needs of young fathers (aged 25 and under) are often overlooked.
- Young fathers describe dynamic mental health pathways in their transition to fatherhood. They navigate a well-being spectrum over time as they adapt to their new identities and responsibilities. Young fatherhood can be a positive source of well-being, establishing a new identity and focus. However, the demands and responsibilities of fatherhood at a young age, compounded by limited access to the key resources needed to parent effectively, may tip young men into periods of distress and mental ill health.
- Young fathers describe numerous factors that may be simultaneously protective or predictive of their mental health. Mental health and well-being may be better protected with access to strong relational networks, employment security and other environmental factors. The absence of one or more of these is often predictive of mental ill health.
- Awareness of the structural contexts and processes shaping the mental health pathways of young fathers is essential for a more holistic understanding of their mental health pathways and for developing more effective means of support.
- In the UK, access to formal support service pathways that address mental health are limited. For young fathers, fear of disclosing the need for support for mental health is also heightened and compounded by stigma and young age, especially in families where there is involvement with surveillance agencies like social services.

INTRODUCTION

The mental health of fathers during the transition into parenthood has become a priority for public health in recent years. Yet, little is known about how young fathers (aged 25 and under) fare both during and beyond their simultaneous transitions into parenthood and adulthood.

Mental health is integral to individual well-being, with implications for families and the relations that comprise them. Where fathers play important protective functions in families, mental health also has broader implications for managing and navigating all aspects of life including education, employment and fulfilling aspirations. As the Institute for Health Visiting (2022) notes: *'Fathers are important and good mental health is important for fathers, their partners, and their children'*.

Yet becoming a father, especially for the first time, is a major life transition and one that carries new responsibilities, shifts in circumstances and identities, and new emotional pressures. The potential for men to experience mental *ill-health* during what can be an emotionally destabilising transition to fatherhood has been acknowledged as an important public health issue (Baldwin et al. 2018). Indeed, questions around how mental ill health experienced by fathers might be better addressed, are reflected in recent public health strategies. NHS England, for example, has published a report and new guidelines stipulating that new fathers should be screened for their mental health (Darwin et al. 2021). Yet fathers more generally are under served by existing support systems (Scourfield et al. 2015).

While it is recommended that young fathers are supported as early in the pregnancy period as possible (Cundy, 2015), this does not always occur. Where suggestions for new policies represent an encouraging shift in recognition of fathers' mental health and support needs, gaps remain in how fathers are identified and supported in public health contexts.

Drawing on qualitative longitudinal data from the Following Young Fathers Further (FYFF) study, we explore the dynamics of young fathers' mental health across their parenting journeys. We conceptualise these as mental health pathways and apply a temporal approach to capture the ebbs and flows of the mental health journeys and trajectories of young fathers, developing a dynamic view of their well-being as fathers across a well-being spectrum. In tracing these pathways alongside other key life course trajectories, we consider how, why and when they may be especially vulnerable to mental health difficulties, including when interventions from support services may be sorely needed but are not always accessible or available.





PATHWAYS INTO YOUNG FATHERHOOD AND MENTAL HEALTH

Becoming a father at any age is a major life transition and a period of heightened risk for paternal perinatal mental health concerns (Schuppan et al. 2018). For young fathers, whose transitions may be unanticipated, stigmatised and/or occur before other normative lifecourse transitions such as securing employment or housing, the responsibilities of becoming a father for the first time often loom larger. The negotiation of their identities, both as adolescents becoming adults and as new fathers can also take a toll on their mental health and well-being.

Reflecting the adjustments many fathers make as they transition to fatherhood, young fathers report that they relish the opportunity to become a father even if the pregnancy was unplanned. For some however it can be a fraught process requiring a significant period of adaptation. Ben, for example, describes the 'rollercoaster of feelings' that becoming a father for the first time created for him, especially when this occurred unexpectedly at age 18 while he was attending university:

“ The sheer toll on mental health that becoming a parent took was really bad and, like, I was dealing with that for a long time, and it wasn't until I got onto medication and private counselling that I managed to kind of deal with a lot of it... I don't know if I would blame it on entirely on becoming a parent, but certainly becoming a parent really kind of triggered a very big depressive period... it can seem very scary and it can seem overwhelming, but it does get better, and particularly as children get older, you grow into your role as a parent.

Ben, age 29, wave 3

Adjusting to fatherhood for the first time is a process of becoming, mired by fluctuations in mental health. While becoming a father can be redemptive for some young men (Ladlow and Neale, 2016), these transitions can also be emotionally fraught and place a strain on mental health. Where for many young men the impacts of the transition to fatherhood were fairly fleeting and short-lived, for others, periods of mental ill-health were reoccurring and required intervention. Longer term challenges in sustaining a fathering role may lead to more prolonged periods of mental ill-health, which intersect with the challenging structural conditions and socio-cultural expectations that characterise the contexts through which young fathers navigate their new fathering identities and responsibilities.



PROTECTIVE OR PREDICTIVE FACTORS INFLUENCING MENTAL HEALTH

Across a diverse sample of young fathers from varying socio-economic backgrounds, mental ill-health was not only experienced by disadvantaged or low-income fathers. It was nevertheless more prevalent among those young men whose socio-economic and relational resources were limited or in greater flux. Several of the young men who reported downward spirals into mental ill-health described challenges in meeting normative societal expectations for men associated with *the package deal* (Townsend, 2002), comprising marriage (or a stable relationship), employment and home ownership. Across our sample, young men's abilities to fulfil their aspirations as fathers observably intersected with other key trajectories, that were either protective of their mental health and well-being or predictive of mental ill-health and decline. Protective factors included supportive relationships with family members and the mothers of the children, security in their education, employment and/or training trajectories, and access to adequate and secure housing. Where any of these were missing or were an absence, risks of mental ill-health were higher.

Where a complex blend of factors across the trajectories of young fathers' parenting journeys may intersect to influence the equilibrium of their mental health, the escalation of mental health problems was most strongly associated with employment instability. This impacted on their developing identities as young men and fathers and led to wider concerns about their finances and housing. Several reported impacts on their relationships with their partners and co-parents where finances were constrained. Sharing commonalities with others interviewed, Adam, who also explained that he was fired from one job because of his depression and mental ill-health, reflected on how the lack of employment and a perceived failure to meet expectations that men provide financially, led to a downward spiral in his mental health:

“ As a guy you are kind of raised to have that feeling that you have to provide, and that kind of got ingrained to me personally, so right now, I don't feel really great I sit at home, clean up and I know I'm being productive and helping, but like, I don't feel like I'm helping, I don't feel like I'm useful. It's, like I say, it's not a nice feeling. But I mean, there's a lot of people that would think it's fine 'cause I'm doing to the best of my ability what I can to get involved; keeping the house tidy and, you know, just getting involved with washing clothes and just keeping the house running, functional, but I don't know, it just doesn't, as a guy, as a father, I feel like I should be bringing home the money. You know what I mean? Financially supporting them, which I'm not at the moment. So it doesn't feel too great in that aspect, but I don't know, I'm doing me best.

Adam, age 26, wave 2.1

Young fathers' parenting pathways constitute multiple interconnected trajectories, whereby (un)employment, associated financial and relationship difficulties, intersect with fluctuating periods of mental ill-health. Taking a holistic view in this way, offers an important explanatory framework for professionals with remits to offer support for young fathers.

MENTAL HEALTH SUPPORT PATHWAYS

Most of the young men identified a lack of support for their mental health, including during the perinatal period when they were transitioning into fatherhood. In contexts where emotional literacy among young men is discouraged as part of their socialisation, opportunities to disclose concerns about their emotional health was considered to subvert gendered norms and expectations:

“ To some extent, men aren’t allowed to kind of feel certain things, especially not at a young age, so boys as well, like I think, a little girl falls over, you run over and pick them up, but when a little boy falls over, you go, ‘Ah, get up, come on, you’ll be fine.’

Jake, age 28, wave 2.1

Young fathers were unlikely to present concerns about their mental health, especially to formal services where they feel excluded and overlooked or fear being subject to surveillance. Informal support from friends, co-parents and family were identified as protective factors and important sources of well-being across their parenting pathways, sustaining their ability to invest in their identities as fathers and to address social isolation and loneliness.

Where these socio emotional resources were unavailable or young fathers’ mental health tipped into decline, GPs were their first point of call. According to the Mental Health Foundation (2018), 39.2% of young fathers express a need for support for their mental health. However, access to support for mental health via this pathway is often challenging. It is well documented that NHS mental health services are under strain, with long waiting lists, especially for young adults (Punton et al. 2022). In the absence of free or affordable therapeutic forms of mental health support, young fathers are often forced to rely on medical intervention or to manage their symptoms alone.

Young fathers may also be reluctant to reveal their mental health problems to formal services, for fear that this may lead to punitive interventions including social services involvement:

“ I used to go to doctors and try and get the help and it just doesn’t get any help. Say like now, with me being depressed and that, they try and get social services involved because you’re not an adequate parent, and it’s like, what? And they just make the situation, they can make the situation 10/15 times worse... Reaching out and asking for help is the most riskiest thing you can do as a parent. As bad as that sounds, that is how it is, that is what it is, it’s just how the system is, you can’t do owt about it.

Adam, age 26, wave 2.1

In the absence of informal support in their personal lives and without prescribed formal pathways for mental health support for fathers, engagements with locality based services providing a combination of peer and tailored intervention, were identified as an important source of emotional support for young fathers. These were key to identifying, addressing and sustaining young men’s mental health and intervening with strengths based support when most needed. For those with positive relationships with their families, support services and engagements with trusted professionals, were an additional cushion mitigating against much longer term, more challenging mental health concerns:

“ and [young dads’ support worker] as well, I can’t leave him out. I don’t get to see him all the time though, that’s the only issue. With my nanna, I live with her, with my friends, I can just call them up, but obviously [young dads’ support worker] doesn’t just see me, he sees other people who are in similar positions to me or who aren’t, and he’s there to support everyone as a collective unit.

Nathan, age 19, wave 2.1

For Liam, who was experiencing a significant set of difficulties, including homelessness and a loss of contact with his child, it was compassionate and authentic support from a specialist young fathers’ support service that helped him back onto a more positive trajectory:

“ [Project Worker] pulled me out the gutter really ‘cause at that moment in time when I was homeless and I lost the bairn and all that sorta stuff, I’m not gonna lie I like, I did think obviously suicidal thoughts at that point. So I was down at rock bottom and [Project Worker] got us contact. He got all the stuff wi’ court sorted, everything, so I owe [Project Worker] a lot.

Liam, age 21, wave 1

While for these young fathers, access to specialist support for young fathers played a vital role in supporting them with their mental health and wider associated issues, these remain a postcode lottery in the UK (Tarrant and Neale, 2017). However, where available, they play a vital role in establishing alternative trajectories for young fathers, where their well-being is enhanced through supportive relationships and investments in their citizenship.

POLICY AND PRACTICE IMPLICATIONS

- Raising awareness among professionals about the mental health pathways of young fathers is vital to the refinement of support approaches and increasing understanding of the importance of their well-being as caregivers.
- The mental health trajectories of young fathers are dynamic and characterised by fluctuations over time. These ebbs and flows both shape, and are shaped by, the interplay of the conditions of their individual circumstances and wider structural determinants and adversities. Awareness of these intersections and the predictive and protective factors that influence their well-being are key to a holistic understanding of young fathers' well-being and how these may be better addressed and supported.
- Young men need support for their mental health that is delivered within a framework of care and compassion. This involves challenging stigma associated with young parenthood and recognising young fathers' capacity to care for their children. Provided as part of a holistic offer, support for fathers' mental health from the peri-natal period onwards, has potential to improve outcomes for them, for their wider children, their partners and wider family.
- The transition to parenthood is 'the golden moment' to engage fathers (Fatherhood Institute, 2021). Formal professional services such as healthcare and social services should strive to 'think dad' and consider how much father-inclusive support and outreach might be achieved for young fathers. This might include establishing partnerships with specialist support services for fathers that provide tailored and social forms of support to enable onwards referrals.

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- You can access our Think Dads toolkit that was co-created for professionals with the North East Young Dads and Lads here for suggestions about how to be father-inclusive in practice: https://www.digidad.uk/wp-content/uploads/2023/09/NEYDL_toolkit_v13.pdf

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