

Are young fathers ‘hard to reach’? Understanding the importance of relationship building and service sustainability

Introduction

This article explores service provision for young fathers through analysis of data from the three year ESRC funded project Following Young Fathers.¹ It draws on data collected in interviews and focus groups with practitioners, service managers and those working to develop and deliver family support services in the UK. The focus of the article is an exploration of the idea that young fathers are a ‘hard to reach’ group and it begins with a discussion of literature and research evidence on this theme. Our research findings, and those of others discussed in the article, challenge the idea that young fathers are ‘hard to reach’, suggesting that we should, conversely, consider that many services are actually *hard to access*. Thus, increasing young fathers’ engagement requires better understanding of their often complex needs and a reshaping of service design and delivery to account for them. The article highlights how the configuration, funding and delivery of services can inhibit young fathers’ use of them, and identifies ways in which they could be made more accessible.

Key words: young fathers; family support; hard to reach; practitioner/service use relationships; funding; UK

Young fathers and engagement with support services

Research conducted with young fathers themselves has shown that their support needs are complex and interconnected. These findings, which have been reported more fully elsewhere (Davies and Neale, 2015; Neale and Davies, 2015), indicate that needs range from requiring assistance to access training, educational and employment opportunities to support with managing finances, relationships and developing childcare skills. Some of these needs are common to all new parents, but they present particular challenges for those who become parents at an early age and have not yet developed an independent adult lifestyle. A range of responses is therefore needed from specialist and more generic services, with the development of father inclusive practice an important element of delivering services that can respond effectively to the range of needs that young fathers may present with. Ideals of contemporary fatherhood are increasingly based around emotional engagement, sensitivity, intimacy and hands on parenting activity, with the breadwinner role less dominant (Dermott and Miller, 2015). For those entering parenthood early and unable to act as the family breadwinner, providing hands on care can be extremely important, but many young men see breadwinning and caring as interlinked, with the ability to provide financial support enabling them to ‘be there’ for their children (see Neale and Davies, 2016).

Fathers, and young fathers particularly, are often regarded as a ‘hard to reach’ group. This paper suggests that this is problematic both because it accepts low rates of engagement from fathers, and also because it places the responsibility for engagement with services with fathers themselves without proper consideration of the dynamics of the service provider/service user relationship. Regarding men as ‘hard to reach’ has roots in the way men have been conceptualised both in practitioner training and in service design and delivery. Language used in the social work literature tends to present men as either absent or dangerous (Clapton, 2009) with young fathers often presented as a risk rather than a resource (Maxwell et al, 2012), or in line with gendered assumptions about parenting roles, as being ‘of no use’ (Daniel and Taylor, 2001). This is problematic as services then tend to begin from a deficit

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model, rather than seeing young fathers as capable of making a positive contribution to the family. Perceiving men as either all ‘good’ or all ‘bad’ presents significant challenges in practice settings, as well as impacting negatively on individual men (Maxwell et al., 2012): men are seen as difficult to work with, and services become less able to engage effectively with them. Conceptualising fathers as a risk to their children provides an inappropriate starting point for making policy and formulating public services and can hinder young men’s efforts to be responsible and active parents (Lammy, 2013).

Research shows that mainstream service provision does not effectively engage with fathers and fathers themselves do not see that those services that are available are relevant to them: the perception that family support services are designed for and delivered by women is powerful (Katz et al., 2007). Whilst there has been a shift towards broad policy developments aimed at supporting improvements in fathering ‘quality’ (Collier, 2011), the available evidence suggests that for young men, levels of engagement with services remain low. Whilst a range of generic and specialist family support services for young parents have been developed, such as Sure Start, a government initiative offering childcare, health and family support, and the Family Nurse Partnership (FNP) a programme for vulnerable young first time mothers, their focus has been towards engaging young mothers. Although these services can and do work with fathers, they are not the main target of their work, which reflects a policy and practice focus on mothers as the primary parent. Fathers of all ages have not been well-served by generic ‘family support’ services and young fathers in particular report feeling excluded by family support services, tending to believe that they are aimed primarily at mothers (Barnardo’s, 2012). Referring to research undertaken to profile users of family centres, Ghate et al (2000) point to one fact which ‘stands out with great clarity: fathers have been largely absent – both physically and conceptually – from the picture.’ (p2). Even in settings where attempts are made to make services more inclusive by using gender neutral terms on advertising literature, research indicates that fathers tend to interpret the word ‘parent’ as meaning ‘mother’ (Bayley et al., 2009). A further barrier to young fathers’ engagement with support services has also been found: whilst teenage mothers may experience stigma and feel that they are blamed by society for their status as young parents, they are nevertheless ‘clearly established as stakeholders with a legitimate claim on services’: this is not the case for teenage fathers (Gilligan et al., 2012: 511). Fathers are then, in child care and family services, regarded as a ‘hard to reach’ group (Daniel and Taylor, 2001).

Are young dads hard to reach?

Although in recent years steps have been taken to increase father’s engagement with services, research indicates that the numbers of fathers who actually do so remain small (Scourfield et al, 2014). Low levels of father engagement can be exacerbated by traditional views of masculinity that make it harder for men to seek help because help seeking conflicts with notions of independence and self-sufficiency (Ghate et al, 2000; O’Brien, 2004). Evidence also suggests that in family support services such as Sure Start, the presence of a predominantly female workforce, a female-centred orientation of services and a traditionally gendered attitude towards childcare and parental roles act as barriers to father engagement (Lloyd et al, 2003). For very young fathers, a lack of awareness of what services might be available to them may be compounded by a lack of confidence or ability to find appropriate support if they are kept distant from their child by difficulties in family relationships. Ross et al’s (2012) study of young parents’ engagements with healthcare services found that they were particularly sensitive to how they were treated by staff when accessing services because they were aware of the negative stereotypes that were attached to them because of their youth. In a study of young fathers’ experiences of the Family Nurse Partnership, Ferguson (2016) identified that their non-engagement arose from a combination of service delivery issues that made engagement difficult, and from some complex issues around their own vulnerabilities and prior negative experiences as service users

“the hostility of men who won’t engage arises partly from the nature of the service and the ways it is delivered and also seems to come from their deep experience of social suffering and pained defensiveness that makes isolation and being unreachable highly attractive.” (Ferguson, 2016: 109-110).

When accessing health and maternity services, experiences of feeling excluded and marginalised were frequently reported by the young fathers in Ross et al’s (2012) study along with reports that antenatal classes were an intimidating environment because of the presence of older couples. These issues are of concern because research evidence shows a clear need to better involve young fathers in support services, because doing so has a range of benefits both for themselves and for the well-being of their children (Deslauriers et al, 2012).

As Gilligan et al (2012) have noted, young fathers do not feel that they have the same claim to service provision as young mothers and so may be reluctant to come forward to take up services that are offered. This can lead to them being positioned as ‘hard to reach’, when in fact it would be more accurate to say that services are hard for them to engage with or know about. Boag-Munroe and Evangelou (2012) argue that calling some groups ‘hard to reach’ can provide a convenient label that disguises the complexities of their lives and the factors that contribute to their disengagement, leading to them being blamed for problems that are actually created by the structure, design and delivery of services. Garbers et al (2006) in their review of Sure Start Local Programmes, found that fathers appeared as a ‘hard to reach’ group for a variety of reasons, including men feeling intimidated by a female dominated environment and the lack of service provision outside of standard working hours which made accessing services impossible for those working during those time periods. This also reinforced the notion that Sure Start provided services primarily for the unemployed. Coe et al’s (2008) study of those who appeared to be ‘hard to reach’ in the provision of Sure Start services found that it was common for parents to be unaware of the range of services offered by Sure Start identifying this as a key reason for lack of engagement.

The ESRC Following Young Fathers study: methods and sampling

The ESRC Following Young Fathers study researched the perspectives of fathers under the age of 25, mapped the availability of services to support them and investigated professional and policy responses to their needs. Here, an overview of methods from the strand of the study on which empirical findings are reported is given; for a fuller account of the design and methodology of the wider study please see Neale et al. (2015). This strand focused on researching the perspectives of a range of practitioners, service managers and those involved in developing and commissioning services. The core aim of this strand of research was to develop understandings of young fatherhood from the perspective of those working in family support services, and also to map out the nature and extent of service provision for young fathers across the statutory and voluntary sectors in the UK. This knowledge enables us to better understand how effective support services for young fathers can be developed and delivered.

Representatives were interviewed from a wide variety of organizations working in the broad field of family support who were involved in the support of young fathers as part of their work: for some this was their core function, for others it was a smaller part of a package of services delivered to a wider client base. Based in varied localities across the UK, the sample included health care professionals (including Teenage Pregnancy Specialist Midwives, the manager of a health visiting team, and nurses who delivered the Family Nurse Partnership programme); managers and staff at a children’s centre; and a Young Parent Specialist PA at Connexions. Those working both in front line service delivery and at the commissioning level in local authority children’s services were also interviewed. Three focus groups were carried out with 10 practitioners and service managers from 8 different organisations. Semi-structured interviews with 20 practitioners, service managers and those working

at the commissioning and strategic policy level from 15 different organisations were also carried out between May 2013 and October 2014. In some practitioner interviews, more than one member of staff was present giving a total of 18 practitioner interviews or focus groups for this strand of the study. Additionally, two young father service users were interviewed to help us to develop our understandings of how they had experienced the support offered in a local authority children's centre setting. Interviews and focus groups were analysed thematically, using NVivo.

In addition to this wide ranging cross sectional approach, some case study work was also undertaken, constructed over time, for two specific local services. These were a phase one children's centre in an inner city part of a large northern city and a service in the same city offering specialist support to teenage fathers via a Specialist Learning Mentor for school age fathers. More detailed reporting on this has been published elsewhere (see Davies and Neale, 2015; Neale and Davies, 2015). The research team also contributed to planning meetings and practitioner training on father inclusive practice in a local authority area as a result of our relationships with key staff there. We were also fortunate to be able to draw on the extensive expertise of the Following Young Fathers project strategy group which met bi-annually over the course of the three year study. The group comprised invited members from 14 organisations all of whom were engaged in front line and campaigning work to support young fathers.

Research findings

Men as risk?

As noted in the discussion at the beginning of this article, the notion of men as a risk to their children (and/or to their partners or former partners) is an enduring one that exerts considerable influence on practitioner engagements with men as service users (see also Ladlow and Neale, 2016 for further discussion of this theme). Although we did not find any evidence that practitioners were unwilling to engage with young fathers and all reported openness to working towards a more father inclusive service, we also identified the presence of a number of unhelpful attitudes which shaped service delivery. Many of these were embedded in the notion of risk, suggesting that this exerts considerable influence on service design and delivery, and on practitioner training and education. For example, several practitioners spoke about situations where training on domestic violence was grouped with more generic training on engaging fathers. They felt that this was unhelpful, reinforced negative perceptions of men being 'risky' (see Featherstone, 2013) and centred the idea that men were a challenging group to work with

“And we've been able to look at how our whole [joint health visiting and children's centre teams], do some training around how we work with fathers... The other part of what they want to do is look at working with perpetrators around domestic violence which kind of is a bit conflicting for me but that's the way they want to do it [laughs]... So it's a bit conflicting for me. And they're wanting to do it in a whole day and I'm quite sure what I think... I think it's because they're wanting to lump it into a day's training... to me it's two very separate things. And I feel, this is my personal opinion, they would be better to do say a half day here and then a half day somewhere else with that rather than lumping them together.” Pamela, health visiting manager

As Pamela suggests, delivering training in this way conflates men with family problems, and prevents them being viewed as a positive (or even neutral) influence on the family: they are perceived primarily in terms of risk (see also Featherstone, 2013 and Maxwell et al., 2012). Reflecting on their own perceptions of fathers, several practitioners spoke of the need to redefine attitudes to young fathers so that they are viewed more positively, noting this as an important step in creating and promoting more inclusive services. This involved being open minded enough to understand that often young

fathers were not *unable* to be a positive influence, but often needed guidance and support in order to be able to do so. Kerryyn suggests that efforts to regard young fathers as a positive influence in their children's lives should be a central part of service development and delivery

“If we want more fathers to be involved in their child's lives and we know the outcomes for children are better, especially young fathers from difficult backgrounds, they need to get more support. It needs to be recognised that if their situation is very difficult, especially if they're not, well whether they're in a relationship with the mum or not. But if they're not, one of the reasons why they behave negatively is because they're not given support. They're not given guidance. And then the mother and her family have a reason to say, 'he's an idiot, he's this, he's that'. So he gets excluded. But actually it's not because he's necessarily bad. It's because he's just come up against a system where he, everywhere he sort of puts his foot in it cause he doesn't know how else to do it. But then he doesn't know how to get out of it. And I think that they need, they really do need more support.” Kerryyn, nurse working in Secure Training Centre

This view was widely supported by others who recognised that fathers were an integral part of the family and could, rather than being seen as a risk to the family, be an important protective and supportive factor in family life. As Strega et al (2008) have noted, true inclusiveness involves engaging fathers and understanding that while some may pose risks, many will be an asset to their children's lives and some will present a combination of the two

“But if you bring the dad in and you work with him and instead of seeing him as a problem, he can be a solution.... You know, they're working with families and children but the dad, he's part of the reason the child is there and why you're working with the family in the first place.” Stuart, young fathers' practitioner

“I think the message from serious case reviews and the like have brought the involvement of fathers or males in the family much more to the ... head around children's safety... and therefore can be a protective factor for children as well... So I think that's been kind of crystallised in people's heads again” Valerie, manager of joint health visiting and children's centre team

Viewing young fathers more positively is thus a key way in which services can begin to be more inclusive, as it involves practitioners beginning from a position that assumes that they are able and willing to develop effective parenting skills, rather than as a problematic person who needs to be dealt with. However, even when practitioners were able to adopt this position, barriers to young fathers' engagement still remained, in particular, their lack of awareness of service provision and how to access it.

Young fathers' access to services

Echoing the findings of prior researchers discussed earlier, a lack of awareness of services was a key reason described by the young men in our study for their lack of uptake and engagement. Whilst we might assume that young people are highly skilled at locating information by searching online, Simon, manager of an information service for young fathers, reported that the young men with whom he worked often had little access to the internet. Even when they were online, their lack of knowledge about what services might be available meant that they were unable to search effectively for them. This difficulty was often compounded by an absence of funding for services to advertise themselves, which could result in low take up because potential service users were unable to know they existed

“Public services never have a marketing budget. It’s just typical. There is no marketing budget. So let’s assume that children’s centres are perfect and they’re ready to go for dads, there is no marketing budget with which to reach the young dads. And that’s a problem isn’t it... how do you let these dads know that they exist?” Simon, manager of young fathers’ information service

From our research with young fathers themselves, we know that when they were made aware of the services that were available, they were often very keen to engage in support services that could benefit themselves and their children

“I think [they] should be more publicised, there should be like more renowned instead of just certain people knowing about them and certain people hearing about them. I think they should be more all over the place. Cause there’s probably people who are in a position that [we] was in, with no support and don’t know of any support. And a place like [a specialist resource centre] is really good.” Jakie, young father

“I knew about Connexions and that’s about all I ever heard about. And even that wouldn’t help wi’ children and stuff like that. But, so yeah, I didn’t know any support. I didn’t know owt about fathers group. I’d never heard owt about owt like that,” Callum, young father

This indicates that providing information on service provision to young parents would be a key way of improving the accessibility of services. It would also go some way towards reducing parents’ fears of the unknown, where they were anxious about accessing services because they had little idea of what to expect from them. Our findings indicate that when young fathers *do* access services, they find the support valuable and worthwhile as, recounting his experiences of working with a specialist learning mentor, Darren describes here

“That support was the best support you can have really... I didn’t have a clue what I was doing but, like, I was skiving school ... but he got me referred on to college, and that got me back into education... He always took us out to places with our son ... and socialising with other young fathers, you know, in the same shoes as us. It’s literally he is the one who taught me everything I know about where to go, what ... help to get. You know what I mean. What questions to ask and everything. He’s always the one who actually helped me out” Darren, young father

Key to the success of this approach was the sustained nature of the support offered, and the strength of practitioner/service user relationships that this model enabled. Young fathers’ experiences of working with the specialist learning mentor in this innovative model of service provision for very young fathers are discussed more fully in Davies and Neale, (2015); Neale and Davies, (2015) and Johnson (2015).

Responding to diversity of needs and experience

As previously noted, our research with young fathers themselves identified a wide range of support needs. Peter, a children’s services commissioner, speculates that to recognise this diversity, an ideal service environment would be one that provided real choice for young fathers

“My perfect service has choice. I’m about diversity, there should be the choice around that rather than you’re under twenty, turn left. You’re over [20], turn right, But then also something that recognises that...if we’re going to create engagement there needs to be a choice that really matches... in a way that’s attractive and accessible and local, timely and well facilitated.” Peter, head of commissioning and market management for local authority

Some specialist service provision can be helpful however, as some of the challenges faced by young parents such as managing the transition to an adult role whilst not yet an independent adult, *are* age specific

“Younger people have a much higher risk of bringing up their family in poverty. So juggling education, parenting, family dynamics, relationships, [is] much more challenging for younger teenagers” Lorraine, Family Nurse Partnership nurse

We need to recognise that whilst some young fathers can and do benefit from targeted, specialist provision, others will not wish to identify primarily as a *young* parent preferring instead to access generic family support services rather than those with a youth focus. Assuming that all young fathers relate to one another and share a set of needs can lead to service designs that do not allow young people to make choices about which services they wish to engage with. It also risks a return to the idea that young parents are inherently risky and reinforces their difference from other, older parents, which can increase their reluctance to engage. An approach that focused too much on addressing past problems could also be problematic, with many practitioners advocating a forward looking and solution focussed approach

“All of their journeys are different... But it’s just to get them to kind of realise that, well just think about the fact that being a good parent, either now or in the future is about developing your life in a positive way.” Kerry, nurse in secure training centre

Previous research has found that young fathers are rarely included in mainstream service planning, despite evidence that they are keen to engage with these services, as well as with services more specifically targeted at them as a specific user group (Osborn, 2015). Several practitioners suggested that an ideal would be to offer age specific as well as generic services so that young people have genuine choice. Indeed there was some resistance to the idea that specialist services for fathers were the best approach as they can, in some circumstances, go against the grain of inclusiveness and reinforce barriers to men’s participation

“if you have a dedicated fathers worker, which is great, but then that dedicated father’s worker is not around when the father walks in [and they’re told] ‘well the person who works with fathers isn’t here, can you come back please cause I can’t talk to you cause I don’t work with fathers’... for me if a father walks through our, our door, everybody’s there for him. It’s not a case of, ‘I’ll get [fathers worker]” David, senior family outreach worker in children’s centre

Careful design and delivery can mean that specialist services form a key part of a package of services that respond effectively to a diversity of needs. This was evident in the children’s centre where David was based, which had an excellent record of integrating specialist and generic provision. Practitioners here all worked effectively with mothers and fathers and whilst David was recognised in the centre, and the wider local authority area, as a ‘fathers champion’ he also worked hard to promote inclusiveness as well as specialism in his practice. Along with colleagues and management at the centre, a welcoming space for parents, including young dads had been created; this was evident in the high quality work undertaken and the strong practitioner/service user relationships that had been developed.

Service user/practitioner relationships

Anxieties around accessing support services could arise from young fathers' fear of the power that some professionals could have, particularly if they had prior negative experiences of being involved with services such as social care

“Some [young fathers] are really keen. They really appreciate it, and particularly if there's social care involved they feel they're not being listened to and there's someone who's able to advocate for them in all that and make sense of it all for them and progress it. Others are very reluctant to have any kind of support with their parenting. I don't know if it's a fear of what services might do. I don't know if it's just that they don't feel they need any help. But quite often people are very reluctant to engage in any parenting work. People can be quite, well not just young fathers and not just people who've been in trouble, people are, I think they feel quite exposed when they're asked, you know, what's wrong and what's right with their parenting and expected to explain that to a professional they don't know too well.” Gary, seconded probation officer

As Pamela discusses in the following quotation, the key to developing effective understandings of service user perspectives lies in going beyond an assessment of what their specific support needs are in the present, and integrating an understanding of an individual's life experiences. Echoing Gary's comments, she suggests that practitioners must work to include an understanding of how prior experiences shape the relationships young fathers are able to have with service providers, and their receptiveness to interventions and support. These skills can be difficult to train, often relying on the experience and sensitivity of practitioners

“It all depends on the situation, the circumstance and where they're coming from. And even their perception of people in professional roles or whatever, for want of a better term, doesn't it depend on what their life circumstances as well isn't it. And how they feel about their own self-esteem and everything else. It's a whole massive package” Pamela, health visiting manager

“I think that sometimes is down to how expert a practitioner you are as well and being able to pick up all those subtle cues around what's going on. A lot of that does boil down to experience and working with families and really being able to pick that up.” Pamela, health visiting manager

This practitioner reflexivity is extremely important for informing service design and delivery, and a key skill that enables the development of effective relationships. A central aspect of this relationship building lies in working to better understand young fathers' needs and using this knowledge to create an environment in which practitioners are able to work with those who appear unwilling to engage. Models of masculinity that emphasise independence (see Connell, 1995) can lead to a reluctance to engage with support services and an unwillingness to accept help (Ghate et al, 2000; O'Brien, 2004). Some practitioners were particularly skilled in recognising engagement when it did not appear conventional. This enabled them to work with young people effectively because they were open to understanding young parents as individuals, rather than expecting particular patterns of behaviour

“[health visitor] was talking to a, a young mum, in the living room in this flat. And the young dad appeared in his dressing gown eating a pot noodle. And he came in and he sat down between them on the sofa and turned the telly on. And he sat there in his dressing gown eating his pot noodle. And it's kind of fascinating because she coped with that really well and managed to interpret what was going on, that he was putting himself right in the middle of it. He was actually getting in and being involved. He didn't know how to come up and say, 'oh I want to find out this? What do you do?' Sitting there, turned the telly on. Even him, he was

doing his bit and she kind of interpreted that. And for most health visitors they would have been outraged and disgusted.” Programme manager, fatherhood think tank

The importance of early engagement

Our evidence suggests that engaging with young men early in their transition to fatherhood is important in building and sustaining effective relationships. Across the range of services represented in the study, engaging young dads early was identified as a key factor in ensuring their continued involvement. The peri-natal stage provides a key moment at which fathers are especially receptive to interventions, and keen to be available to provide care and support to their child (Cowan et al., 1988). As young fathers can find this transition particularly challenging, it is a crucial moment at which services should be accessible and offer effective responses to their needs. Emotional expression on becoming a father is increasingly culturally acceptable (Dermott and Miller, 2015) and this provides opportunities for fathers to be engaged as caring and active parents. As Ferguson and Gates (2015) identified in their recent study of the work of the Family Nurse Partnership, early help is key to tapping into young men’s redefinition of themselves as caring fathers during the early stages of their child’s life. In our study, practitioners spoke at length about the importance of involving young fathers in family support services and the many benefits of doing so at an early stage. Practitioners reported that their experience showed that the most effective services were those that focussed on building a relationship with young dads as a central part of practice. Tim, a specialist learning mentor who worked with school age fathers, identified two ways in which building these relationships was of central importance: firstly, in order to ensure a young man’s engagement with that service now, but also because this engagement had long term benefits for outcomes for both father and child

“It’s right from midwifery making, at the first appointment, if there’s a young man there, making him feel he’s part of the process... by telling him, ‘you are really important to this pregnancy. I would like to see you at the next appointment because... you will want to know what’s going on’. And it’s just that communication. Likewise with health visiting, ‘Your role is key in this because of the outcomes for your child’... And then feeding [that] into centres that already work on the family approach as well.” Tim, specialist learning mentor

New parents’ connections with midwifery and early childhood health services were identified by others as a key point at which good relationships could begin to be built so that these positive outcomes could happen. Although there was widespread recognition amongst practitioners of the importance of early engagement, in practice it was not always straightforward because of the way services were structured and delivered, as Pamela describes here

“because the Preparation for Birth and Beyond is very much around infant mental health, that attachment, that bonding, that whole mental neurodevelopment... For dads to understand that in that early point and for them to realise that they’ve got a big part to play in that, that will really help... I’m a great believer in that’s where we need to start, from those really early antenatal days. Unfortunately the midwifery services are aligned with the acute trust. If they were in the community and part of us and [joint health visiting and children’s centre team] it would be superb but they’re not.” Pamela, health visiting manager

Specialist services such as the Family Nurse Partnership and the Specialist Teenage Pregnancy Midwives had a key role to play here, as a focus on early intervention and intensive support was integral to their service design. Although the primary remit of both services was to support young women, we found that they could also work extremely effectively with young fathers. There were clear benefits in doing so as it helped young expectant fathers to prepare for the arrival of their child

“during the pregnancy, services are provided to the woman and so it can sometimes feel to men as though they are an add-on or an addition to... I think a lot of the dads I’ve worked with have said that the reality of being a parent didn’t really hit home until they saw their baby and then it’s a bit of a shock to the system really.” Layla, Family Nurse Partnership Nurse

It is important to note however, that involving young men in this way could present challenges for mothers, or divert resources away from them and the baby. Practitioners from the FNP that we interviewed suggested that whilst it was rare, they had experienced cases where young fathers had dominated their visits which presented difficulties both for the young mother, and the practitioners who were working with the family

“when there are sort of serious relationship difficulties between the couple, where there’s a lot of control issues and actually you’re trying to ensure that the mum and the baby are safe, it can be quite a tricky road to walk actually. The mum and baby need to become the priority and the focus.” Lorraine, Family Nurse Partnership nurse

Accessing young men early in order to support them in making the transition to parenthood is especially important for those who do not have support from their own family, or a father as a role model as Sadie describes here

“I think that the young fathers we work with are still at the stage of sorting out who they are, but their own identity is not fully clarified. And, often they know they’re becoming a father, but it wasn’t something that they’d gone into with their eyes open. It wasn’t planned. They may well be looking forward to it, or wishing to take on responsibility, but they really don’t know what is entailed in that. And, I suppose, the other thing that’s really important for us is that the majority of the young fathers we are working with don’t really have a concept of what it is to be a father, because their own father doesn’t exist... I mean the young man has no contact or if they do have contact it’s very, very limited. So that they’ve not grown up with that father child relationship. And we know that it’s our own experiences of parenting that are the biggest influence on how we parent. And so, many of them don’t have that blueprint framework to take forward to, sort of, prepare them for what it’s going to be like to be a father. I think that’s really significant.” Sadie, Director of family support organisation

As Ferguson and Gates (2013) found in their research on the FNP, the early nature of the help delivered by the programme, the strong and enduring relationships built between those providing and those using the service and the holistic support it offered were key factors in ensuring its effectiveness. This has been a central finding of the Following Young Fathers research too: the most effective support for young fathers was based around sustained support, offered early and with a wide and holistic remit. This was recognised by practitioners from a range of services, though as noted by Pamela above, they were often aware that their own service(s) were not always structured in ways that made this kind of offer possible. This article will now go on to consider some of the structural issues that can make delivering these services challenging.

Service challenges and funding sustainability

Building and sustaining good quality relationships with service users can be a slow process, and the practitioners interviewed acknowledged that it often took considerable amounts of time to build them in a way that enabled effective engagement with young fathers. With those more reluctant to engage (or ‘harder-to-reach’) this process could be even slower. This means that service sustainability is extremely important, not only in terms of ensuring the longevity of particular projects and services,

but also in retaining and developing the skills of those members of staff who have developed good working relationships with users of their services.

However, service sustainability is contingent on sustained funding sources, and, in a wider environment of austerity and cuts to national and local funding streams, funding insecurity arose as a huge issue of concern in interviews undertaken with those managing and delivering family support services. As Churchill (2013) has highlighted, the reduction and reconfiguration of funding for children's services under the coalition government reduced social support services, despite initial hopes that cutting these frontline services would be a last resort. Our findings indicate that this lack of funding security impacts negatively on service planning, development and delivery as well as on the training and retention of staff which then impacts on relationship development between staff and service users. For small scale and time limited projects, it was often difficult to demonstrate efficacy or results as there had been insufficient time to 'bed-in' the project and this could mean that the project funding was then withdrawn or not renewed as there was no provable impact, despite practitioner awareness that such projects were being received positively by those who were engaging with them.

The shift away from the provision of universal services, and the increasing fragmentation of service provision that resulted from the lack of secure funding streams also meant that it was extremely difficult for practitioners to keep track of what other services were available in a locality, and so they were unable to refer or advise young people of services that they might benefit from. In case-study research undertaken within a particular local authority in the north of England we found that despite their efforts, individual workers were often unable to keep up to date with the changing landscape of provision. Although issuing small pots of funding for small projects was often seen as valuable for undertaking or testing out small scale specialist provision, in practice this funding model actually inhibited the long term development of services

“And, I think there's been difficulty with youth services in the past is that they've had money for certain projects, and the project will be like we'll give you six weeks. Six weeks isn't very long, and after six weeks if things haven't taken off they're going oh, we can't continue. And it's been the funding taken away, so where things take a lot more than six weeks to, to establish.” Isabel, children's centre manager

As noted earlier, these difficulties are compounded by an absence of budget to market projects and services, which makes accessing men and drawing them in to make use of provision extremely difficult. In addition to the problem of project funding often being extremely short term in nature, our research found that funding guidelines were, in some cases, so specific that it inhibited the ability of practitioners to provide an effective response to young fathers' needs. Stuart, a specialist dads' worker who works to support young fathers in a disadvantaged London borough, describes here how the specialist nature of funding, and the way funds were often ring-fenced for specific activities, meant that needs could not always be met. He argues that this represents a lack of understanding of the complex nature of young parent's needs, or how severe their financial needs could be,

“I've applied for money to get one of my clients, it's called Housing and Homeless Fund. The money is supposed to be for getting items whenever you move into a new house, assuming you can't afford it [laughs]. You can't get them the houses... Even if they had got a house and I had the money to buy them toasters and microwaves, they still needed money to buy food... they can't even afford to buy the food to put in the microwave to start off with.” Stuart, young fathers' practitioner

Others spoke of the challenges of managing the end of a support relationship that had been built with a young parent. This could be particularly challenging when a relationship had been built over an

extended period of time, but there was no opportunity to devise an ‘exit strategy’ for the end of the project or of the practitioner’s employment contract

“Sometimes you’re not given that chance to actually let go of that a little bit and do that ending work with them... I had a girl that was working quite closely with the Salvation Army. And their funding was pulled really quickly. So this girl went from seeing this lady three, four times a week to nothing and didn’t even get an exit strategy or anything like that. So I think funding definitely does have a role to play in that... I don’t think that’s good practice whatsoever. I think there needs to be moving on and exit strategies done gently, over a period of time.” Mandy, Connexions young parent advisor

In order to better meet service users’ needs, there must be better recognition in service planning work of the importance of this relationship in and of itself, rather than just seeing the practitioner as a vehicle for the delivery of a programme of services. We know from research with young fathers themselves that these relationships are highly valued and for some the practitioner is the steadiest presence in a complex life: a sudden exit of this trusted person from their life can have serious implications for their well-being. Lack of funding security had negative implications for staff too, giving little job security, which as well as presenting personal difficulties, meant they were unable to plan and innovate in their projects and services

“I’ve been in the job for six years and every year’s groundhog day... every year it’s like, ‘oh but we don’t know if we’re getting funded next year’. I remember one saying to me, ‘thirteen members of staff, two or three, three of them were working with dads, two are full time, one was half, part time, and now we’re down to five members... you’re always working but you can’t really plan for next year.’” Stuart, young fathers’ practitioner

A commissioning process that is focussed on outcomes and takes better account of research evidence is clearly needed

“We have to get commissioning that smartly identifies the need to engage with young fathers... It’s about, going back to outcomes to make sense of the impact that young fathers have on outcomes and look at that intergenerationally.” Matthew, communications manager at national fatherhood charity

Conclusions

The findings discussed here have echoed those of Cortis who found that “relationship-based, client-centred, inclusive practice approaches” (Cortis: 2012, p.356) are key strategies that are effective in connecting with clients regarded as ‘hard to reach’. Our research found that young fathers have a wide range of often complex and interconnected support needs (see Davies and Neale, 2015; Neale and Davies, 2015), including, but not limited to, poor quality housing and homelessness, poverty and relationship difficulties alongside facing the challenges of becoming a parent at a young age. We found that this was widely recognised by practitioners who acknowledged that an understanding of the complex nature of individual experiences was central to the development of good working relationships and effective service delivery. As well as understanding the complexity of these needs, recognising the impacts that prior negative experiences, especially in relation to social care involvement, can have on engagement is central to the delivery of effective services that develop and sustain engagement with young fathers. These findings are consistent with those of Ferguson and Gates (2015) who also identified the importance of enabling and encouraging young men to access support services as early as possible in their transition to parenthood in order to support them to adjust to their new role as young adults with caring responsibilities.

This article has also highlighted the significance of service structures in ensuring or inhibiting service user engagement and suggests that placing responsibility for engagement with service users themselves by defining them as ‘hard to reach’ is based on an incomplete understanding of their needs and experiences. In emphasising the importance of relationships, service sustainability and funding security the paper suggests that many of the issues around a lack of engagement actually arise from within service design and delivery models themselves. Our findings suggest that, rather than seeing young fathers as ‘hard to reach’, services need to acknowledge that rather than being a failure of this client group to engage with services, it is often a failure of the service to put in place effective engagement strategies (see also Cortis, 2012) that leads to their lack of uptake. These challenges are frequently compounded by a funding environment that does not allow for the longevity of projects and services, with no sustained funding available for small but valuable projects that have the potential to offer quality support through intensive engagement with young fathers. Promoting service sustainability alongside an emphasis on the centrality of relationship building should be regarded as an important element of designing and delivering effective provision. Keeping young people connected with support services is an ongoing process rather than a one off event: provision that develops a key pathway over time will, in the process, move from being hard to access to creating much more welcoming spaces in which young fathers can access the help and support that they need to take care of themselves and their families.

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