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Supporting Young Dads

Final Report

THE USE AND VALUE OF COMMUNITY
GROUPS FOR YOUNG MEN WHO ARE
FATHERS

Dr Esmée Hanna, Centre for Men's Health

Summary

Community groups can be settings which enable people to come together, meet with peers and engage in positive activities and support. Little is known about community groups for young men who are fathers and young men can often feel marginalised in and from other services and family support settings. This report therefore details findings from a qualitative research project into two different projects which are providing groups for young men who are fathers. The research is based on interviews with stakeholders and participants within the two projects and this report looks at key themes and findings around the use and value of groups for young dads.

The research shows that groups can be a useful way to create peer support, and that young men enjoy spending time with other young dads and having spaces to relax away from home. Groups can help improve skills, increase confidence and help develop parenting practices so can have multiple benefits. Working with young dads in group settings requires careful consideration of the context of young men's lives, how the group is facilitated, and having an activity focus seems to be effective.

This report then sets out the possible use of community groups, offers the voices of young men about their experiences of groups and makes suggestions of areas for consideration for those thinking about working with young men.

Acknowledgements

Firstly a massive thank you to all the young men who took part in the research, this work would not have been possible without you all, you made such valuable contributions. I am deeply grateful for your time; it really was a pleasure to work with you all.

Also to the father's groups who supported the work and to the stakeholders who generously shared their experiences with me, thank you and I hope we continue to work together going forwards. The enthusiasm of the stakeholders for this piece of research was exceptional- I am in awe of the work you all do. Thanks also to CommUNity at Leeds Beckett University for embedding such an important community focused ethos within our faculty, your support and commitment has been invaluable to this piece of work.

Finally to the University, for the support with funding, to my mentor for his advice and encouragement, and my colleagues within Men's Health who have been fantastic in their support of this research.



Thank You!



Background

In recent years young men who are fathers have been more widely researched and more information about the experiences of young men as parents has become available in academic literature. Much of this research explores what it is like being both young and being a father, (Reeves, 2006; Neale and Davies, 2015; 2016). There is also research around young fathers' engagement with services and other professionals (c.f. Ferguson, 2016; Reeves et al., 2009; Maxwell et al., 2012), and some have conducted research around young fathers wellbeing, e.g. Garfield et al., 2014). However, very limited research exists around how young men experience what we can call 'dads groups' or projects for young dads. Some research has been conducted about a community initiative for fathers in a low income location in England (Robertson et al., 2015) but this focused on fathers of more 'average' age rather than the under 25's who we would view as 'young' fathers. Group support has been recognised as good practice for supporting young fathers (Sherriff, 2007; Barnados, 2012) however we still have limited knowledge from young men, as well as those who organise and run, about the experience of such groups.

This research then sought to explore the 'on the ground' reality of young dads groups, to find out their use and value for young men, but also to explore any challenges or issues with such groups. The research looked at two groups, one in Leeds which offered a variety of activities and events during the week for young men to attend both with and without their children, as well as personal and tailored support for men. The second group in Edinburgh offered a more specific course format to bring young dads together, focused around the activity of building a balance bike which young men could then give to their child/children. Thus the two groups offered interesting organisational differences at the outset, yet shared similar aims and objectives around bringing young men who were fathers together to help improve their wellbeing.

Methodology

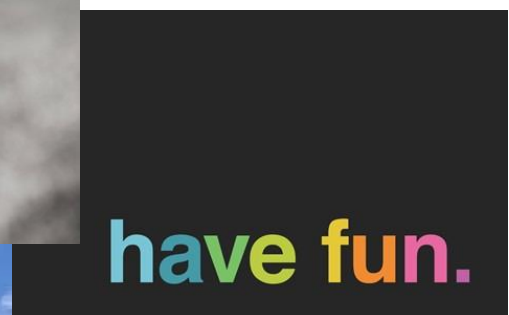
The research conducted was qualitative, and aimed to capture richness and depth in the data through engaging with the experiences of those involved in the groups. As noted above, the research examined two young dads groups, one in Edinburgh and one in Leeds. These groups were different in their setup, but both had similar aims which were around bringing young men who are fathers together within community settings. Interviews were the primary method of data generation, although image elicitation was also used within the interviews with the young men. The researcher collected a number of images from online sources which were considered to potentially be relevant to how the young men may have viewed the group they attended. The interviewees then chose images they liked best and discussed these at the start of their interviews as a means for beginning the interview conversation. The images gathered were not exhaustive, but added a further interactive dimension to the interviews and assisted with breaking the ice during the interviews.

A total of four stakeholder and nine participant interviews were conducted. Stakeholders were either those working on the 'frontline' with young men, or who had set up the provision for young men. The participant interviews were initially devised as being individual interviews, however a number of the young men expressed a preference to be interviewed in small groups, and as such the interviews included two pairs of young men, a group of three, and then two individual interviews. The interviews were recorded and transcribed afterwards, ethical approval for the research was gained from Leeds Beckett University and no real names or identifying information features in the analysis to protect the anonymity of those who took part in the interviews.

The data was analysed using thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2006) and the findings of this report are based on the key themes from the stakeholder and young men's interviews and will be presented in turn before general thoughts and conclusions are made.

Visual representations of the group

Across the interviews the young men often picked similar images and a selection of the most popular from across the interviews is included below. The central image of a father and child's hand is positioned at the core of these images as the men all saw this image as representing family time and child focus. This was what the men felt the groups had at their centre, and reflected that fatherhood was often central for them in their lives.



Findings-Stakeholders

Context of setting up and running groups

So where's the really young dads...? Who's doing work with them? As far as I can see nobody is, so I think there's something really important about trying to grab those dads (Stakeholder 4)

The context of young men's lives were viewed as relevant in informing the aspects of support offered and the formation of groups for young men. The projects examined for this research were both situated in areas which could be described as deprived, and structural constraints such as lack of money, and intergenerational factors were noted and seen as relevant to the context of young dads' lives and their potential or actual engagement with projects. Stakeholders showed a strong awareness that the lifestyle that young men may be leading can be influential in terms of whether they want to and can engage in projects such as those examined here. Stakeholders often felt young men's lives were 'chaotic' and that some of the young men may have experiences of the criminal justice system. This understanding of some of the ways in which young men may have been, or be living was seen as important knowledge in order that workers could set up and run projects for young dads in ways which would be meaningful and sensitive to their lives.

Well some of them live very chaotic lives in some incidences (Stakeholder 2)

There was also awareness by those working with young dads that there was often seen to be negative social portrayals of young fathers within society and as a result it was often hard to find positive exposure of young dads within society.

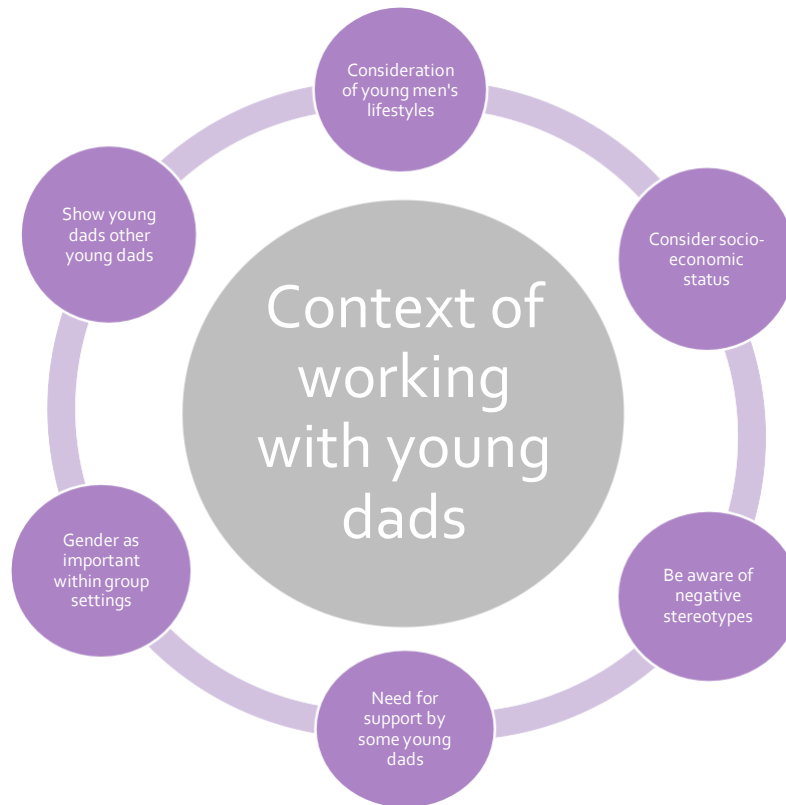
Young dads saying the only time they got services was almost like two fold; one was when they were at risk of anti-social behaviour, and the other time when they were deemed to be the culprits as it were of unintended teenage pregnancy. So it was all very negative so what we did was work up a scheme, a project really, to engage specifically young dads, so young dads facing young dads (Stakeholder 1)

Stakeholders suggested that young dads themselves may not see many other young dads and this lack of visibility contributed to social portrayals remaining unchallenged. Being able to bring young men together positively was often part of what the stakeholders felt their work entailed. Young men were also seen as being shy and therefore perhaps reluctant to speak up about both their own positions in society and also to challenge stereotypes.

Stakeholders identified that family services, provisions or spaces were often quite feminised, and women were sometimes perceived as 'gatekeepers' to men; this created a barrier sometimes to working with young dads.

The challenge was speaking to these community centres or clubs, and going in there and getting predominantly what would have been the mums, or the girlfriend who are there. And we were getting oh no he won't be interested cos of this that and the other, or he's not around (Stakeholder 3)

Understanding these wider social factors contributed to the tacit knowledge of the stakeholders around young dads' and helped them in the formation of their views around 'need' in relation to young dads support, and was therefore instrumental in facilitating the foundation of group projects for young men who are fathers. The diagram below sets out some of the context stakeholders' identified:



Stakeholders therefore suggested that in order to facilitate good working with young men who are fathers' consideration of the context of men's lives and of the factors which may impact on positive work occurring was important.

Mechanisms for success in groups for young dads

Stakeholders were able to identify some of the features that they felt were enabling the groups they were involved in with to work successfully.

The seemingly most important aspect of enabling young men to attend groups was the provision of pragmatic support in terms of transport or transport costs, refreshments, activities and facilities as free to use. This was viewed as directly relevant to the understanding of young men's lives as discussed in the previous section; stakeholders identified that young men did not have an excess of money so the groups needed to be free to use, in order for them to be accessible to young men.

One of the keys for success for really all groups is just making it as easy as possible for people to on very low income to access groups. So transport, refreshments, child care, absolutely crucial (Stakeholder 1)

Meaningful activity was seen as important by both groups, and offering activities for men to engage with was seen by stakeholders as an important feature of provision for young men.

Often there is a focus of a particular task that they can do. So that's kind of an ice-breaker, and it's something that can allow them to gradually form friendships and bonds hopefully (Stakeholder 2)

Having an activity to advertise was seen as a good 'hook' for encouraging young men into groups and it was viewed as significant that activities were positive, i.e. helping build skills, team work, or physical health by stakeholders and were free to participate in.

The stakeholders identified that the group facilitator(s) were hugely significant in the experience men had in attending the groups and in overcoming any of the perceived difficulties of working with young dads in group settings. Confidence in interacting with young men, and empathy for young men's lives and experiences were seen to be vital for successful engagement. Being able to understand the context of young men's lives and to work within that was seen as vital for positive working.

Someone who has worked with, or experience of working with young dads in their social setting if you like, or their own particular social setting (Stakeholder 3)

The gender of workers was also discussed across the interviews, and there was no definitive sense that a male worker was the 'key' to success, but having a man facing other young men, to offer positive role modelling and to move away from some of the gendered ideas around provision for families was seen by stakeholders as being useful in their experiences.

I think you could work with women with young fathers, but I almost in my head as soon as I say that I almost feel like they might want to do something that's more nurturing or maybe health based if you are working with women and young fathers (Stakeholder 4)

Getting the setting of groups right, considering young men's lives, offering them activities and group settings which were accessible and cost neutral, and ensuring that facilitation was sensitive to young men was therefore seen as part of the 'recipe' for working with young men in groups.

Value of groups

Stakeholders identified a number of benefits that group settings had for young fathers, these included:

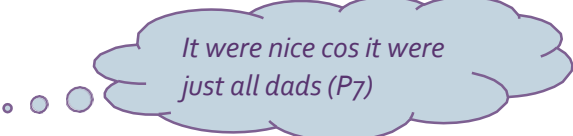
- Creating relationships and peer support with other young dads
- Strengthening father and child relationships
- Improving young men's wellbeing and confidence
- Giving dads a voice

Coming together meeting dads that are perhaps of a similar age, of an older age, or a younger age, so they can kind of swap notes on life if you like (Stakeholder 2)

Engaging young dads in activities of groups which help them build, improve parenting skills and improve their bonds with their children (Stakeholder 1)

Findings- Participants

Young men who participated in the interviews spoke really positively of their experience of attending the groups in Leeds and Edinburgh and identified aspects which they thought worked well within those groups, as well as how they felt the groups had improved their lives. Whilst the young men often had little complaints about the groups they did make suggestions of other activities or things they would like to see within group settings in the future.



It were nice cos it were just all dads (P7)

What works

- Activities were seen as a hook for encouraging men to come to the groups and as a means of learning new skills and having a focus when in the group

I don't know I think with groups like that and any that exist you can't just have a banner saying come down there has to be some sort of...there has to be something to catch the fish with (P3)

- Home was often seen as a possible source of stress so having the chance to spend time out of the house was valued

'Aye cos that in the house and bairns get in the way or the misses get in your way and does your nut in (P2)

- Space for young dads was seen as important, and the men only aspect of the group was viewed positively particularly given the lack of provision young men felt there is for dads compared to mums

Then there's a mum's group and my girlfriend goes to like two or three mum's groups per week, and she's there all the time and she's met loads of wee pals in there aye. It's a shame because there's hardly anything out there for dads but there's load of things for mums (P2)

- Opportunity for socialisation. Young men enjoyed developing friendships with other dads and felt that it was important to get to know dads as they may not have that beyond the group

You talk to other guys who haven't got kids and they are all about going out drinking and that, whereas it's not about that when you are a parent, it's you really do need people who are dads (P5)

- Peer support opportunities were created by the groups; that the groups were young dads facing young dads gave them the opportunity for getting advice from other young men which they thought was positive

And other young dads and that. So it is nice and obviously you can all relate like with each other and communicate. You discuss some good things in there and I don't know I've learnt a lot from going to all the groups (P7)

- The cost neutral aspect was seen as very important in the context of their lives. That the groups were free and that transport, refreshments etc were provided, made them feel welcome

P1: I'm not saying I'm a tramp by that. Free's better

P2: Free is always good

- Support from the worker(s) was seen as vital; the more personalised one-to-one support offered by the Leeds project gave the young men the opportunity for role modelling and for new opportunities within their lives

It may sound daft but I look up to [young dads worker] as a role model (P6)

- That the groups took different approaches to other services was seen as being important. Young men said that it felt like the two projects were offering something that was very positive and something that the young men all felt was needed for young men who are fathers

It's kind of a shame really, if there was more people like [Young dads worker] and more places like this then maybe the world wouldn't be so much as it is right now (P3)

- The project facilitation was seen as being really good within both projects, and the young men liked that it was men who were running the groups and doing activities with them and they felt characteristics like enthusiasm and being youthful were important in facilitators

He's got that tone and you just want to come again (P9)

- It was seen as being important that those who set up such groups were dads themselves so that they 'got' what being a father entailed and gave a man's viewpoint on parenting

I feel it should be a man running a dad's group. You need a man's perspective...it's like me going over and running a mums group, it's pointless cos I'm a bloke (P8)

- Recruitment and participation came from different routes which possibly enabled men to get involved and be involved in the group from various ways

Well I started going cos my mate told me about it, and then I've just helped out, do everything really. And then my mate got banned so...yeah I liked what went on and stuff. I still go now, so I like it anyway (P4)

Case study 1: A young dad's view of the Leeds group

"If it weren't for [project worker] I don't know where I'd be"

"[Project worker] is like a whizz kid. He knows so many things and I don't know where half of the organisations come from that he even mentions...He puts opportunities in your path to make your life better. We were discussing with the boys thing can change your life hopefully and he's putting opportunities in your way to change your life and make your life better, which a lot of people don't get...[its] mind blowing to be honest (P3)

Impacts

Young men felt that attending the groups had positive impacts on them. These can be broadly divided up into personal and family/parenting impacts as shown the table below:

Personal impacts	Family/parenting impacts
Increased confidence	Bonding opportunities with children
Space to relax/ de-stress	Getting advice from other dads
Learning new skills	Opportunity to role model with other men
Time for themselves	'If dad's life is better the kid's life is going to be better' (P9)
Something to look forward to	Parenting practices e.g. spending time with children doing activities

The young men then felt that the groups did have positive benefits for their lives and they could see that attending the group had enabled other positive aspects in their lives to flow or develop (particularly in the Leeds group where the men were getting more individual support). The value of groups for young men can thus be seen in terms of multiple potential benefits.

It's not just your physical health, you have got your mental wellbeing. Actually being around people and being able to talk about stuff, which it's definitely good to get people out of their shells you know (P9)

I'm looking forward to seeing my wee laddy's face on Christmas when he gets [balance bike] like (P2)

I've made friends there, and obviously before I met [project worker] I was the quietest person you would ever meet, and he's brought me out of my shell. I started talking to people and obviously made friends then, and also enjoy the activities that we do (P6)

Since I've been involved with dads' group I have learnt a lot more skills than what I knew (P5)

Future directions and challenges of group working: Thoughts from stakeholders and participants

The young men were keen to stress that they wanted the groups to carry on and that there were not many areas which needed improving or adapting. There were some discussions of inclusion of other activities which the young men said they were interested in, such as different sports, cookery, and focusing on emotional skills around being a dad. A common theme across both groups was the desire for groups to be able to offer 'dad holidays' for young men to go away cheaply together;

Be something like a dads going away for like a week or something with the kids, just like a dunno, a residential thing, like everybody obviously chip in and like a tenner for you and a bairn towards a minibus or whatever and then just obviously go away, book somewhere up the north of Scotland somewhere maybe and take the bairns away for a week and just to have bonfires and BBQ's if it's sunny, Scotland could probably rain, just get away for a week or something (P2)

Yeah I mean there is always room for improvement anyway, but yeah. I mean there is already a lot of activities that we already do isn't there? Like coach trips, like more money to go to [seaside] or somewhere like that for us all for the day.... We can't afford a holiday, so I think every dad is entitled to some sort of break at least you know (P9)

The major premise of what men wanted for the future of the groups however was *more*. Young men knew that more money would be needed to sustain and grow the groups, and they wanted more dads to attend, and to be able to spend more time doing activities in Edinburgh, and more nights at the group in Leeds.

More x 3

"Just the time limit, like extend the time limit a wee bit, maybe like 4pm til 7pm or something and gives the boys who are travelling in from wherever the chance to get here and that" (P1)

"Make them more than on one night a week. I wouldn't say every night because obviously you've got funding and stuff like that...If money is no object then every night yes. Or week day nights" (P3)

"I'd say if we can get another couple more going, that's the only thing I would change" (P6)

Stakeholders identified that running these types of groups had challenges, and resources were identified as a major part of that as the nature of the provision would change if young men were asked to pay;

As soon as you charge 50p or one pound you are making something different (Stakeholder 4)

Funding is always an issues and that is something that we are looking at to increase and improve and as more funding is realised, fingers crossed, touch wood, hopefully we will be able to do more with the groups (Stakeholder 2)

Group working was also seen as *energy intensive* as well as *resource intensive*, and the challenge of that work could be overcome by the right facilitator but stakeholders felt it was important to note that;

This is it is not easy work. It takes great commitment and energy (Stakeholder 1)

Part of the challenge of the working was about the generational aspects of it and the cultural norms of young men;

We just don't speak the same way (Stakeholder 4)

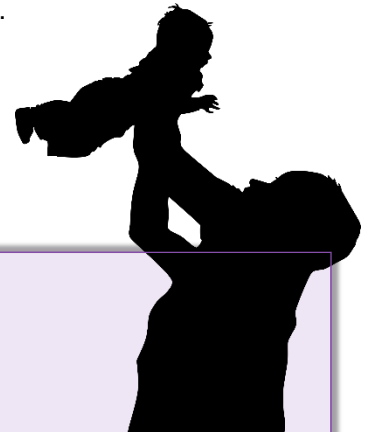
Recruiting men into the groups was the final major challenge the stakeholders experienced. Whilst the young men who were attending were positive about the groups, there was still relatively small numbers engaging, and this was seen as a complex puzzle for stakeholders in terms of how they reached out to other young men, especially if young men were not going to come to them in the way that other services sometimes expect.

...cos actually trawling through the streets and so on for young dads they are not going to come out of the woodwork are they? (Stakeholder 1)

Some of the young men suggested that young dads might be shy, and that might be why they are nervous about coming to groups initially. Welcoming approaches by facilitators seemed important to young men in encouraging them to participate in the groups.

'Feeder routes' from other services was a possible way of engaging young men but stakeholders were constantly thinking about how they would engage with men and about the 'carrots' they offered to encourage men into conversation with them and then potentially into the groups.

Engaging young men to 'own' groups was a possible future means for encouraging sustainability for the groups and making the worker resource component less central which may help with resourcing aspects..



Case study 2: Edinburgh stakeholders hopes for the future

The Edinburgh group hoped that ultimately the young dads work could be 'owned' by young men themselves.....

"I do want the dads to be involved, and you could argue about the dads in build a bike, they are really, we are not young dads, so if we have got a young dad who can do something with other young dads and facilitate it" (Stakeholder 4)

"I said to them from the very start this is your group. We are going to or one of the guys will facilitate it but you need to give him feedback as to what you would like to do and he will feedback to young dads if that is possible or not". (Stakeholder 3)

Conclusions

This research has explored how both young men and stakeholders find the experience of groups for young fathers, and has explored some of the aspects which those who took part in the research feel contribute to groups being successful. The young men interviewed felt that the groups had been positive within their lives and they could identify changes in themselves and their lives as a result of attending the groups. A sense of enjoyment and enthusiasm was evident in the way the young men spoke about the projects, and the lack of things they would change about either of the projects examined here reflects that. Young men may not have had positive experiences with other services or projects and often faced barriers due to social perceptions, *"us lads, we are used to being slapped in the face"* (p9), so these projects provided something different and the young men were evidently grateful for that.

Groups can therefore have good potential for bringing young men together and engaging them in positive activities. As one stakeholder suggested, groups can be a way of *"reclaiming natural civilisation"* (Stakeholder 1). However groups can be resource intensive to run and may not be something that all young dads want to engage in and it is important that we remember that not all young dads will be the same or interested in the same things. Young men did feel that groups could help young men give back to society in the long run so the benefits of groups may exist over the longer term too. The overall key aspect from both stakeholders and participants appeared to be that focusing on young dads was positive and needed.

...kids need their dads and even though there's some dads out there like that don't want to know their kids and that we're not all like that (P7) ...so this is a good place to come to focus on dads (P9)

Suggestions for group working:

- Find out what young dads lives are like, listen to them, ask what they might want to do and what their needs are
- Try to ensure accessibility in terms of having groups near where men live, or facilitating men getting to groups and providing hospitality to make them welcome
- Young men may be shy initially but reaching out and showing them that you are doing something different and the possible benefits to them may can help overcome that
- Think carefully about who will facilitate the group and the characteristics of that person, including gender if you want male to male role modelling to be part of the project
- Young men liked projects being focused on dads but that does not necessarily mean that dads groups need to be about dads coming along with their children (although that could be offered)
- Being a dad is seen as stressful, so having spaces for men to come to relax away from home in positive ways is important
- Facilitate peer support by providing groups that are solely for young dads and be mindful of generational issues and aspects in the set up and running of groups
- Meaningful activity can be a useful 'hook' and a means for encouraging skill development, improving confidence in young men and giving a focus to groups whilst men are getting to know one another

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