

Supporting Young Fathers

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Background

- This report is a summary of the Trust for the Study of Adolescence's publication *Supporting Young Fathers: Examples of Promising Practice* (2007).
- It is based on research which explored interesting and innovative examples of work with young fathers from around England.
- The report was developed to address the lack of information about promising practice in working with young fathers, particularly in terms of those working with teenage and school-age fathers.
- The TSA was commissioned by the Teenage Pregnancy Unit (TPU) at the Department for Education and Skills (DfES) to collate examples of promising practice of work with young fathers and write a publication based on these examples. The guide aims to de-mystify young fathers work for less experienced practitioners whilst also offering useful 'hints and tips' for those who are more experienced.

'It's important you don't say teenage parents - you say "teenage mums and dads"- until professionals understand that when you say teenage parents, you really mean it!'

The need to engage with (young) fathers is a strengthening theme in government policy. Recent documents (e.g. DfES/DoH, 2004, DfES, 2005, 2006; Goldman, 2005; Social Exclusion Unit, 2005) acknowledge that there is a need to develop 'personalised' services for fathers, and to respond to their needs such as finding education opportunities, training or work, help with benefits and housing, and supporting fathers in developing positive relationships with their children.

Progress on the ground however has been slow and young fathers continue to remain on the fringes of service provision. Promising work with young fathers is happening but it remains rather piece-meal and not fully mainstreamed in all areas. In some parts of the country it is limited whilst in others, the profile is high. Where promising young fathers work does exist, the findings are not always disseminated fully or developed for other organisations and agencies to learn from.

Our research aimed to provide a practical first-step by identifying and sharing examples of promising practice of work with young fathers from around England. The guide aims to convey the voice of practitioners and provide the kind of information practitioners would share (and ask for), if they were discussing their work in an informal setting. In this way, the guide may also be useful for those who are not currently working with young fathers, to make their first informed steps in setting up young fathers work.

What the guide includes

The main section of the guide is organised around subject areas that projects, agencies, and services have told us are important in working with young fathers. These themes reflect the issues practitioners raised as the ones they were most keen to learn about from others.



What we found

'...we started with £50, no dads turned up for 3 weeks – but then one did, and it all started from there.'

Getting started

In *Getting Started* we highlight how work with young fathers does not necessarily need to rely on large amounts of money, nor does it always need to be startlingly innovative. Instead, projects and agencies tell us that dedication, careful thought, and consideration about how best to meet young fathers' needs are more important. Examples of

promising practice in this respect come from T-BAG in Halifax, B2b+ in Sunderland, and Barrow Dads' Group in Barrow-in-Furness who have all demonstrated convincingly that effective work with young fathers can happen by recognising, understanding, and addressing the needs of young fathers.

'Successful work with young fathers is not rocket science, it doesn't have to be "innovative", in fact it's often not innovative, its about listening to what they want.'

Reaching and engaging young fathers

We asked a number of projects and organisations about the methods they had used in reaching and engaging young fathers, the ones that had worked and the ones that had not. We also asked what they had learned about engaging young fathers and what they had to tackle along the way.

'If you can engage young fathers-to-be before their baby's born, you can sow the seeds, whereas coming in later is much harder.'

Our research showed that young fathers (including teenage and school-age fathers) are not as 'hard-to-reach' as many professionals believe. Although significant barriers do exist that can make engagement difficult (e.g. cultural issues, negative perceptions of young fatherhood, and poor referral systems), these can be overcome as many projects and services we spoke to demonstrated. The Health Initiatives Team at Education Leeds and Ladz 2 Dadz in Northamptonshire have both successfully engaged with a number of teenage and/or school-age fathers leading to positive

outcomes for the young men and their children. For example, workers from Ladz 2 Dadz said that through the service, some young fathers had been able to find somewhere to live, negotiate regular and sustained contact with their child, and develop new parenting skills including how to cook food for their babies.

Being strategic

In *Being Strategic* we stress the need for projects, agencies, and services supporting young fathers to adopt a planned approach to their work. In particular, we present two aspects of being strategic that practitioners have told us are especially important: consultation and developing integrated approaches. One example of

'It is about listening to what they want... if something doesn't work, don't flog it to death!'

promising practice comes from the B2b+ project in Sunderland who view consultation as an integral part of their work. Asking young fathers what it is they need (and ensuring that future plans are influenced by these discussions) occurs at every stage of their planning process. With regards integrated working, the TPSS in Hull

have demonstrated particularly promising practice in their work with teenage (including school-age) parents both mothers and fathers. Provision for young fathers is integrated completely within services for 'parents'. As such, fathers work is a part of everyone's role within the team:

'One of the reasons we have been successful is because young fathers work isn't just seen as fathers work, it was seen as work with men generally... fatherhood issues are built into everything we do, rather than being a discrete element.'

Examples of young fathers work

Talking about young fathers work is sometimes quite abstract unless we shed light on exactly what it involves. In our research it became clear that there is little information detailing what young fathers work actually is. In *Examples of Young Fathers Work* we provide concrete illustrations of activities which projects and agencies do in their work with young fathers, focusing on areas such as housing, education and training, parenting, and health. For instance we present examples of one-to-one work from Fathers First in the Isle of Wight, ante-natal group work from Sure Start in Berwick-upon-Tweed, and peer support from the Barrow Dads' Group in Barrow-in-Furness.

Individual, group, and mixed approaches

Some projects and agencies providing services for young fathers have been criticised for becoming too focused on working in groups. In *Individual, Group, and Mixed Approaches*, we illustrate some of the different approaches used in delivering support for young fathers. In this way, and through other parts of the guide, we attempt to de-mystify young fathers work and offer some interesting ‘food-for-thought’. Examples of promising practice in this section come from Brighton and Hove Young Fathers Project, Base25 in Wolverhampton, and the Mancroft Advice Project (MAP) in Norwich.

‘Young fathers work is not just the remit of the young fathers’ workers role - it is the whole team’s responsibility.’

Young fathers workers

In *Young Fathers Workers* we explore a number of issues relating to practitioners who work with young fathers. Our research tells us that in relation to dedicated young fathers’ posts, these individuals are most likely to be men. However, we examine whether this is a necessary criteria

and discuss the role of gender and ethnicity in delivering both specialist services (such as specific young fathers projects), and more generic mainstream services. We also present learning points regarding the skills practitioners may need to have, or be willing to develop, in order to work successfully with young fathers.

Working with other organisations

In this section, we outline the importance of networking and developing partnerships with other agencies and organisations in order to increase the chances of successful outcomes for young fathers, their children, and their families. In doing so, we present examples of promising practice that show the positive benefits of multi-agency working. We asked practitioners about the benefits and pitfalls in developing positive relationships with other agencies. They also offered ‘hints and tips’ for those wanting to explore ways of partnership working.

‘You need to find out what other agencies are out there - making them aware of your work - and understanding its benefits...’

Amongst others, Lewisham Young Fathers Project, B2b+ and the TPSS all showed promising practice in working and developing partnerships with other agencies and organisations. Moreover, Base25 and Fathers Plus in Newcastle have also developed practitioner support networks to share ideas for practice and build upon the experiences of others.

Thinking about your work

The final section on *Promising Practice*, draws attention to the need for projects, agencies, and services to be critical and reflective when looking at provision for young fathers. In *Thinking About Your Work* we argue that although such evaluative processes do not always have to be formalised, it is important that they do happen in order that services are able to meet young men’s needs more fully. Most projects and services we spoke to reported evaluating their work in some way. For example, Base 25 and Fathers Plus have both appointed external evaluators to critically examine their working practices including taking into account the views of young fathers who use their services. Similarly, following a reflective whole-team whole-system review of their practices, B2b+ changed the wording in all their policy documents so that the word ‘parent’ was replaced with ‘mother’ and ‘father’.

‘Some professionals don’t see a lot of positives in young men... it’s important that whoever’s in this [fathers worker] role challenges that. It might challenge somebody on the same team... but there’s a need to ask those awkward questions.’

‘Agencies hide behind the ‘parent’ word. Use of the ‘F’ word in policy and documentation - the “father” word - is absolutely crucial. It changes the whole timbre around teenage pregnancy strategies.’

Conclusions

The need to engage and work with young fathers is undoubtedly becoming a more central theme in practice, policy, and research. Our research provides vivid illustrations of what is happening to support young fathers ‘on the ground’. These examples are clearly encouraging but there is much more to be done, with a great deal of scope for increased mainstreaming of support for young fathers around the country. Learning from promising practice is one way of helping increase the pace of this work and we hope this guide will play a key practical part in extending support to young fathers and their families.

Further information

This Executive Summary is based on TSA's *Supporting Young Fathers: Examples of Promising Practice* written by Dr Nigel Sherriff and edited by Kevin Lowe of the Trust for the Study of Adolescence. A hard copy of the full report can be purchased from TSA's publications department (ISBN No. 978 1 871504 81 1).

Alternatively this Executive Summary report is available free to download from TSA's website (www.tsa.uk.com).

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