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Authors

This briefing was written by Nicola Ross, Stephanie Church, Malcolm Hill, Peter Seaman and Tom Roberts and was edited by Jennifer Flueckiger and Kathryn Backett-Milburn.

The Study

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Centre for Research on Families and Relationships
The University of Edinburgh,
23 Buccleuch Place, Edinburgh EH8 9LN
Tel: 0131 651 1832
Fax: 0131 651 1833
E-mail: crfr@ed.ac.uk

Young fathers and their experiences of forming families

The male partners of teenage mothers are often ignored or portrayed negatively. This briefing outlines a study that set out to see what could be learned about fathers' roles by interviewing young couples who were committed to each other and their baby.

Points

- Many men were very enthusiastic about fatherhood, grasped the opportunity to consolidate their relationship with their partner and developed a positive identity as a young father
- Most of the couples had been together for at least 6 months prior to pregnancy and stayed together over the course of the study. In most instances both parties were positive about their situation
- Some men who had separated from their partner were still actively involved with their child
- Many of the young men had previously been involved in crime, alcohol and gang violence. The turning point for most had occurred before fatherhood as a result of the strong relationship with their partner
- Most men were excited, happy and proud about becoming a dad, although many felt marginalised by maternity services
- According to both fathers and mothers, who did what around the house was based more on notions of mess and practical needs than gender

Background

At a time when many people do not start childbearing until their 30s, having children before the age of 20 has become more of an anomaly. Much concern has been expressed in the media about the high rates of teenage pregnancies in Scotland and the UK. Policy responses have focused on reducing the numbers of teenage mothers, while little attention has been given to the role of fathers, despite the gradual trend to reinstate men in discussions about parenting more generally.

As with policy responses, most previous research carried out with young parents has focused on the experiences of lone teenage mothers. In the research that does include fathers emphasis has been on deficits. Economic pressures, inter-family conflicts and identity factors have been shown to lead to disengagement by young fathers. This project built on previous work on resilience (Seaman et al 2006; Hill et al 2008) and sought to explore young parents' experiences of pregnancy and early parenthood to identify factors and processes that contributed to more 'successful' fathering.

The study

Young couples who both intended to be involved with their children were recruited for this study. The couples were recruited through maternity hospitals and lived in the West of Scotland.

Thirty men and their female partners took part in the study. When first interviewed, the men ranged in age from 16 to 25 years and the young women were 16 to 19. Nearly all of the 30 pairs of young people interviewed (28) planned to stay together as a couple after the birth of their baby.

Young men and their teenage partners were interviewed twice. The first individual interviews were held in the last few months of the pregnancy. All were invited to take part in a follow up interview. 50 of the original 60 were interviewed again when the child was around 18 months old (24 pairs plus two fathers).

Findings

Young men's backgrounds

Partly because they were in the upper age range of young fathers, the men interviewed were, as a group, not as disadvantaged as previous studies have shown. Nevertheless, three had been in care, as had two of the mothers. Few had advanced school qualifications, most having left school at 16. Many described negative experiences at school. Some reported having experienced significant family traumas and/or serious parental drug/alcohol problems. Half of the men admitted to previous involvement in crime, evoking police involvement. Alcohol and violence linked to gang activities featured in many of their lives from early adolescence.

Couple and peer relationships

Contrary to stereotypes, hardly any of the pregnancies resulted from brief encounters. Most of the couples had been in their relationship for at least 6 months prior to conception. Many of the men described a strong relationship with their partner prior to pregnancy. Many of them said that this relationship had already marked a big change in their lives. For example, the relationship had triggered a move away from lifestyles and peer relationships associated with alcohol use, crime and violence, which they now saw as negative.

‘Since I met [her] I have come back on the rails... [Before that] I was getting in trouble with the police... fighting a lot.’

This disengagement from ‘negative’ lifestyles was not usually initiated by impending parenthood, but the prospect of being a father reinforced the trend. Rather, it seemed to be linked to a growing sense of responsibility and maturity, alongside a more positive purpose and identity.

A minority found it harder to give up their problematic friendships or activities. This was a major element in conflicts with partners and in separations.

At the second interview, about half the couples had never separated (16), five had split but come back together and 9 were no longer partners. While other research has shown a frequent deterioration in relationships between teenage partners following birth of their child (Bunting and McAuley 2004), in this study both parties in the majority of cases remained positive about their relationship. Eight couples were engaged and one had married. For most others marriage held little relevance.

Even so, nearly one third (9) were no longer partners, even in this fairly favourable sample. Five of these young men were interviewed after the child arrived. Three were co-parenting and two had more infrequent contact with their child, though all expressed a desire to be involved in their child’s upbringing.

Employment

Before the birth of their child, the majority of fathers were employed (20). Three were still in education and 7 were unemployed. At the second interview, the proportion unemployed had increased from 23% to 38%, a few by choice as they believed they were better off on income support than working in low-paid, low-skilled jobs. A few were in relatively well-paid, more secure employment or had secured an apprenticeship.

Many men stressed the importance of work as providing both a secure future for their family and a role model for their child. Some, though, experienced tensions between



the time demands of employment and their ideal of being a hands-on dad.

Living arrangements and household status

At the first interview, the majority of the young people were still living with a parent or other relative, some as a couple and some apart. However, most of the couples were living together at least part of the time. A third of the couples were already living together in their own home.

By the second interview, most of the couples who were living together had their own home (15), all in rented accommodation. The remaining six lived with one set of their parents or moved between their parents.

Many of the couples were unhappy with their housing situation after the child arrived, though for different reasons. Some aspired to better accommodation, which was out of reach because of difficulties in accessing council housing and not being able to afford home ownership. Several men had seen taking on an independent home as a requirement of fatherhood, but struggled with the demands of managing their own home and finances. Couples who had benefits reduced when they began living together found this unfair and burdensome. Conversely, some experienced tensions in still living with parents, but continued to do so for financial reasons.

Support services

Many couples worried about potentially negative reactions by others to the pregnancy and some delayed telling people, thereby missing crucial health advice and support. Most of the young mums found the midwives very friendly and informative, other hospital services less so. Generally the men felt more marginalised by maternity services.

‘They don’t ask me questions which bugs me.’
‘They never told me nothing.’

However, a few described positive experiences of individual midwives. Views varied about the desirability of mixed gender ante-natal classes, post-birth support and special groups for young parents.

Becoming and being a dad

During the pregnancy, most men described feeling excited, proud and happy about becoming a dad. Only a few expressed regret. National figures indicate that only 12% of births to mothers aged under 20 are planned (GUS 2007). In this sample, however, many stated that the pregnancy was either planned (one third of couples) or was readily accepted as cementing an already strong relationship with their partner. In addition, some men spoke of having a strong desire for children.

Like older fathers nowadays (GUS 2007), all the men were present at the child’s birth and most described this as a powerful and positive emotional experience. Many of the young men spoke eloquently about the great pleasure that having a child had brought to their life and the satisfaction of spending a lot of time with their child.

‘(I) would do anything for her now. [I’ve] a different purpose for doing everything.’

Some lacked confidence about looking after an infant at first, a few expressing fears of harming the baby whilst changing, bathing or feeding. Normally the young men learned the practicalities of child care quickly from parents, parents-in-law or their partner – hardly ever from a professional. A minority felt well prepared to be a father because they were accustomed to looking after younger siblings or children of relatives or friends.

An ideal of fairness and sharing was expressed by most of the men, with little reference to traditional gender roles. Usually the mother carried out a higher proportion of domestic duties, but at times young men shouldered more of the responsibility. With a few exceptions (among the couples who had temporarily or permanently separated), most mothers confirmed the young men’s own accounts of frequent and multi-dimensional involvement in caring for their baby. All of the dads who were together with their partner at the second interview contributed to activities such as feeding, nappy-changing, dressing and bathing.

Some young men who were separated from their partner also regularly undertook many of these tasks. Several of the separated men expressed frustration at not being able to have as much contact with their child as they wished.

Most of the young men made connections between their own experiences of being ‘fathered’ and current aspirations as a father. Those with positive accounts of commitment shown by their own fathers or occasionally another male relative wished to emulate this. Others who felt neglected or ill-treated by their fathers wanted to try and make sure this was not replicated with their own children.

‘I never really saw my Dad much...that made me want to be there for Grace even more.’

Family support and relationships with parents

A previous study had shown that young lone mothers living in Scotland tended to receive less condemnation and more support from their parents than those living in England (Portier-LeCocq 2008). With some exceptions, this study also found that the parents of both the men and the women offered wide-ranging support. In general,

the families had responded to the news of the pregnancy positively or with only very temporary concern.

Tensions and conflicts were also reported. The nature or intensity of help and advice was sometimes experienced as crossing the line into interference and control.

The majority of the men reported a good relationship with their own fathers, both in childhood and currently. Occasionally the older man acted more positively in the ‘grandfather’ role than he had as a father.

Managing parenthood and difficulties experienced

The majority of couples reported managing parenthood well. A few did encounter serious problems. Several of those who lived apart reported couple conflicts and unwelcome interference by parents. In three cases, social work services removed the child. In one instance, it seemed

likely the child would be adopted, but in the other two cases the child was being looked after by a combination of the grandparents and parents at the time of the second interview.

Policy and practice implications

- Public representations of fathers involved in teenage pregnancies should include portrayals of the more positive end of the spectrum, where some young men are highly participative and committed as parents and/or partners.



- It is important to recognise that this older group of young parents is making the transition to parenthood in similar ways and with similar ideals as older parents.
- All services dealing with parents should give greater recognition to men as parents.
- Services supporting pregnant women and families in the early years should develop attitudes and models that are inclusive of fathers.
- Practical changes can help young fathers engage more with services, such as the timing and location of meetings, explicit recognition of fathers in leaflets and web-based information, and the availability of men-only sessions or individual contacts for those who prefer that to mixed gender groups.
- Employers should allow time off for parental engagements.
- Limited job and apprenticeship opportunities made some men feel constrained in fulfilling their aspirations as fathers.
- The interface between the benefit system and low wages continues to pose problems, despite the minimum wage and family tax credit.