

Young, single, non-residential fathers: their involvement in fatherhood

A number of research studies investigating young, unmarried parents in recent years have focused almost entirely on the mothers. Little is known about the role of young single fathers in the formation of such new families or about the barriers they may have to overcome if they wish to participate in their children's upbringing. A study by Newcastle University investigated a group of single, non-residential, non-custodial fathers aged 16-24 who did want to be involved with their children. The study found that:

- f** Fathers felt they were made to feel unimportant both during the pregnancy and after the birth. Little effort was made to encourage them to develop and maintain involvement with their child. However, the men themselves saw 'being there' for their children as extremely important. They were keen to be 'better' or more involved fathers than their own fathers had been.
- f** Few young men were aware of their lack of legal rights in relation to their child. There was an amount of misinformation both amongst fathers and those working with them. No information on rights was readily available to them.
- f** Most of the fathers did report contributing towards their child's maintenance. However, this sometimes took the form of gifts, clothing, treats and practical child-care if cash was limited. The men resented the fact that their financial contributions would be deducted from the mother's Income Support and thus not benefit the child.
- f** Difficulties establishing and maintaining a suitable independent home prevented men from having greater access to and involvement with their children. Unemployment and resulting lack of money also prevented young men being involved in the way they wanted to be.
- f** Because of their young age many felt unable to access support from the few fathers groups which existed. They did not feel welcome at general family support groups or support groups established for young mothers.
- f** Both the child's paternal and maternal grandparents strongly influenced the young man in developing an early relationship with his child. Despite the stress it sometimes caused, the fathers' families often helped with accommodation and financial support.

Even allowing for the increase in cohabitation in recent years, there is a greater chance of a child conceived and born out of marriage being raised from birth by a mother alone in the 1990s than there was a decade ago. Whilst research in recent years has focused on single lone mothers, little is known about the role of the men who fathered their children. Birth data do not record details of a child's unmarried father. Thus, single fathers are invisible as a group; we have no way of knowing precisely how many there are or, more importantly, how many maintain a close relationships with their children, or what form their relationships may take.

A previous study by the University of Newcastle upon Tyne highlighted the relationship between disadvantaged background and the young age of some single mothers, and their ability to establish and maintain an independent home on leaving the family home or care (see *Social Policy Research Findings* No 72). It also highlighted the fact that many young women do not recognise the importance of a father's involvement with his child. Building on that, this study sought to understand the relationship between youth, disadvantage and a young, single, non-residential father's involvement with his child. The study focused on a group of 40 young single non-residential fathers from disadvantaged backgrounds, who did maintain relationships with their children after their sexual or romantic relationships with the children's mothers had ended. It highlighted both their perceptions of fatherhood and the difficulties they encountered in maintaining a relationship with their children.

Perceptions and aspirations

By the point of interview the men were no longer in a romantic or sexual relationship with their children's mothers. All the relationships had ended by the time the child was a few weeks old, in many cases before it was born. An unplanned pregnancy was not seen as any basis for committing to a life-time together. None of the men saw a need to marry the mother, although several did begin cohabiting as a result of the pregnancy. Where this was the case cohabitation was short-lived.

None of the 40 men involved in the study had intended to become a father at that point in their lives but once they were the majority were proud of their new status. Only two admitted considering abortion, the rest were strongly opposed to it on moral grounds. They wanted to be good fathers, many expressing a desire to be better or different in their fathering than their own fathers had been. In some cases this related to their own father's bad or abusive behaviour but in most they simply wanted to be more involved with their children than their own father had been with them. When asked what they saw their role as and

what they had to offer to the child, the term 'being there' was often used. All the men felt it was important that a child should know and have a relationship with both parents if at all possible.

Young men caring for children

Most of the men were proud to be seen as competent carers, and displayed a knowledge of child-care issues. Several felt that they were better carers of their small children than the mothers were. In some cases the men expressed concerns about the parenting abilities of their children's mothers. Caring for their children, changing nappies or feeding them was not seen as 'sissy' and often the men's friends would become involved. Several of the men provided child-care enabling the mothers to go to groups, training or work, or simply as a means of respite for the mothers.

Maintaining a relationship

The men experienced a range of different situations and circumstances but highlighted several issues which had an impact on their ability to develop and maintain relationships with their children.

The legal position

Only one of the men understood that as an unmarried father he effectively had no legal rights in relation to his child's upbringing. This lack of information and knowledge was also found amongst many of those working with young men. There was an amount of misinformation including the mistaken belief that paying maintenance or having his name on the birth certificate gave the father equal rights with the mother. There was no system of informing or educating young men about their rights.

The involvement of other people

The young men's relationships with their children were conditioned to a large degree by other people. The most common reason given by the fathers for not having more contact with their children was the mothers' reluctance to let them. Conversely, others said that the mothers were the ones who had insisted on their involvement.

The child's grandparents played a big role in the development of the father/child relationship. This was especially true of the paternal grandparents, who often gave practical, financial and moral support to the young man. Many of the fathers reported that it was their own mothers who had instigated the first contact between the father and his new child.

Most but by no means all paternal grandparents welcomed the child as a new member of the family. However, in many cases this strained the family accommodation and budget, especially where the young father had siblings at home.

Support and assistance

The young men received virtually no professional support with their parenting. There are few services or groups set up specifically for young men with children. The very few father support groups in the country tend to attract older men, and the support and education systems surrounding young single mothers are not well-attended by the young fathers. Some of the fathers in the study had attended parent-and-toddler groups with their children but had not found the situation comfortable or helpful. Youth and community workers were reported as being the most supportive but this was generally ascribed to the attitude of individual workers, rather than the service itself. Social work support was not available for young fathers as a general rule.

The role of housing

Housing and housing policy could make it more difficult for the young man to visit his child or to become independent of his family and have his child visit him. Several of the fathers still living at home with their families expressed a desire to set up stable homes of their own in order to provide a 'second home' for their children. Whilst single person's accommodation is available in the study area, local authority allocations systems, and the disadvantaged nature of the areas where most available housing is to be found, presented problems. Being housed in a different neighbourhood meant men lost their support networks and had to find money for transport to visit their children and families.

Employment, financial situation and maintenance

All the men had experienced unemployment since leaving school. Only four were employed at the point of interview but another 19 had held jobs. Employment had generally been low paid and temporary. Almost all the men had been on at least one training course. The men had poor perceptions of their employment prospects and of employers and employment services. They expressed a desire for a "good job" for the "long term". It may be that their motivation for involvement with their children was driven out of a need to carve new roles and identities for themselves in the absence of a traditional breadwinner role.

The majority (29) of the men reported paying some form of maintenance to the mothers, ranging from under £5 per week to £15 per week. When money could not be paid the men often bought gifts and clothes for their children. Few of the fathers had been contacted by the Child Support Agency, although the mothers of their children had given the Agency their names. Three said they had deliberately

avoided contact. The children's mothers were also happy to accept child-care and baby-sitting as a form of child support.

Conclusions

In the current political and cultural climate, our response to young, single fathers has been based on a range of assumptions about masculinity, changing male roles and, in relation to the youngest men, media portrayal of feckless youth. However, if young unmarried mothers and their children are to be supported, we must understand the role which the fathers can play. This means understanding their reactions to fatherhood and what may help or hinder their positive involvement in their child's upbringing.

This and other studies are beginning to show that young single men are as diverse in their parenting practices as any other group of fathers. Whilst many may be willing and eager to engage in a responsible and caring relationship with their children, a range of issues hinder that involvement.

The researchers conclude that:

- Because of the way in which birth data are collected single fathers are invisible as a group and thus their needs as fathers cannot be incorporated in policy. Younger single fathers may also have additional needs relating to their young age.
- The opportunity which fatherhood offers for encouraging young men into training, education and employment should be recognised. Lessons can be learned from work being carried out with young men in the United States, where fatherhood projects are successful in encouraging young men to re-enter education or employment for the sake of their children. Agencies involved with young men and with mothers need to address the needs of young fathers, in terms of education for parenthood, counselling and support. The parenthood education work being undertaken in young offenders institutions in Britain offers an example of what might be achieved by other agencies.
- Housing services have a vital role to play in supporting young men who are making the transition to independence. For this group of young fathers it is not sufficient simply to supply housing as a commodity; it may be more appropriate to link housing to a package of support. This effectively means a need for a more integrated inter-agency approach to policy-making and delivery.

- When able to, young men may be more inclined to pay maintenance if the child, rather than the state, would benefit directly. Greater recognition of other forms of non-financial support might encourage a father's involvement.

About the study

The research was undertaken by the Centre for Research in European Urban Environments at the University of Newcastle upon Tyne. It focused on the everyday lives and involvement in fatherhood of young, single, non-cohabiting fathers in marginalised neighbourhoods in Newcastle. Forty in-depth interviews were held with fathers between the ages of 16 and 24, as well as other interviews with professionals and a number of group discussions.

Further information

The full report, *Young single fathers: Participation in fatherhood - bridges and barriers* by Suzanne Speak, Stuart Cameron and Rose Gilroy is published by the Family Policy Studies Centre, 231 Baker Street, London NW1 6XE, Tel: 0171 486 8211, Fax: 0171 224 3510 (Price £9.95 plus £1.50 p&p, ISBN 0 901455 10 6).

Further information about the study can be obtained from Suzanne Speak, Department of Town and Country Planning, University of Newcastle upon Tyne, NE1 7RU, Tel. 0191 222 5646.

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Published by the
Joseph Rowntree Foundation
The Homestead, 40 Water End
York YO3 6LP
Tel: 01904 629241 Fax: 01904 620072
ISSN 0958-3815

The Joseph Rowntree Foundation is an independent, non-political body which has supported this project as part of its programme of research and innovative development projects, which it hopes will be of value to policy-makers and practitioners. The findings presented here, however, are those of the authors and not necessarily those of the Foundation.