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Following Fathers: The lived experience of teenage parenting over time

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Background

Youthful fertility has long been a concern of social policy in the UK. In 1999 the government launched a new teenage pregnancy strategy to increase sexual health, reduce pregnancies and provide support to young parents (Ingham 2005; DCSF/ DoH 2010). However, much of this support focuses upon the mother, while young fathers remain relatively under-served and unsupported. Qualitative insights into the lives of young fathers are lacking and we currently know little of how their lives unfold over time (Alexander, Duncan and Edwards, 2010). As part of the Young Lives and Times project within Timescapes (2009-12), we are intensively tracking a group of ten teenage fathers over time. We are exploring early fatherhood as part of the life journeys of the young men: their histories, family backgrounds, and future aspirations. Our aim is to produce in-depth knowledge about the life chances of young fathers and their children for professional practice and policy.

Methods

The Following Fathers project was developed in collaboration with a regional network of specialist service providers during 2010. Nine of the ten young men were recruited via a local authority educational mentoring service, located in a metropolitan city in Northern England. Our close partnership with the local team enabled us to engage with a marginalised group that would be 'hard to reach' using indirect methods of recruitment or survey techniques.

The project combines in-depth qualitative methods (interviews, focus groups and participant observation) with longitudinal methods - 'walking alongside' the fathers over an 18 month period. QL (Qualitative Longitudinal) designs are ideally suited to tracking policy initiatives 'on the ground' as they unfold.

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An ESRC Qualitative Longitudinal Study

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Key points.

- **The circumstances and life experiences of teen fathers are complex and varied. Despite unplanned pregnancies and lack of preparation for parenthood, these young fathers attached great importance to their children; stereotypes of 'feckless' fathers are unhelpful where young men are striving to become good parents.**
- **Teenage fathers face a raft of challenges in entering and sustaining parenthood. Beyond the learning curve of direct childcare, these include conflicting identities and lifestyles, difficult negotiations with the mother and one or both sets of grandparents, practical issues of income, housing, and schooling, and, in many cases, complex needs arising from troubled childhoods. The future horizons of these young people may necessarily be limited; where long term goals give way to short term decision making this may hinder the sustained commitment needed for parenting.**
- **Support from family and professionals is vital. Most professional care focuses on mothers, with few dedicated resources for young fathers and a lack of knowledge of where to find support. Young men benefit from professional involvement that is impartial and flexible and that offers emotional as well as practical support. Dedicated one to one mentoring is particularly valuable. Support focused on the wider family network, and encompassing the grandparents would also be helpful.**
- **Bringing fathers more actively into the orbit of Family Nurse Partnerships would be beneficial; the positive focus of this service is highly beneficial and can complement the child protection focus of social care teams.**
- **Intensive support is important but this should not detract from the need for sustained support operating flexibly over time for those with complex needs.**
- **Understanding the tenor of young people's lives, their histories and future aspirations is important if young people's life chances are to be improved. Qualitative longitudinal research is ideally suited to capturing these data. Research techniques for capturing life course dynamics could usefully be incorporated into professional practice.**
- **The active involvement of practitioners in the process of tracking individuals over time can be mutually beneficial. QL research has wider potential as a useful navigational tool for the implementation of family support policies.**

We have used timelines to record significant events in the life journeys of the fathers. Capturing imaginary futures at each follow up is a powerful way to understand the changing aspirations of individuals, and how and why their life chances are forged, enabled or constrained over time.

The fathers initially took part in focus groups where they were invited to reflect on public perceptions of teenage dads, and to share their experiences and support needs. These events were jointly organised by the researchers and support worker and followed up by two waves of qualitative interviews in 2011, again facilitated by the support worker. The young men rely heavily on the support worker, both practically and emotionally, to engage with the project and reflect on their lives. Further in-depth interviews, a follow up focus group and interviews with professionals are scheduled as the research continues.

Characteristics and circumstances of the young fathers.

We focus here on seven of the fathers in the sample. They were aged between 16 and 22 at the time of their first interview, and were at different stages of fatherhood. One was a soon-to-be father, while the rest had children ranging in age from 8 weeks to 6 years. In 6 cases the fathers were under the age of 16 when their child was conceived. They were living in varied circumstances, with differing levels of contact with their children. In six cases the fathers were from disadvantaged and often chaotic backgrounds.

It was common for these young men to talk in terms of family 'troubles', ranging from incidents of parental drug addiction, prison sentences, mental health problems and physical abuse, to frequent changes of abode, periods in social care, and tenuous or volatile relationships within and outside their families.

The young men themselves were often troubled during their upbringing, describing anger management problems, dangerous activities, involvement with the police and disengagement from school. Their lives continue to be fragile. They have experienced significant changes in circumstances, relationships and living arrangements since the project began.

Findings

Becoming a Father: Navigating complex identities

For each of these young men, entry into parenthood was unplanned. Adjusting to their dual status as young people and as parents was invariably a challenge, requiring them to rethink their teenage lives and modify their behaviour and plans. Becoming a young parent can involve a sense of loss as well as gain. Daniel, for example, who was 16 when he became a father, had enjoyed good quality family relationships as a child. He values his social life and schooling and has good career prospects. In the short term he now has to balance child care responsibilities with time to live his life as a teenager, while over the long term he has put his higher education on hold in order to secure employment and provide for his son. Even so, he is very committed as a father.

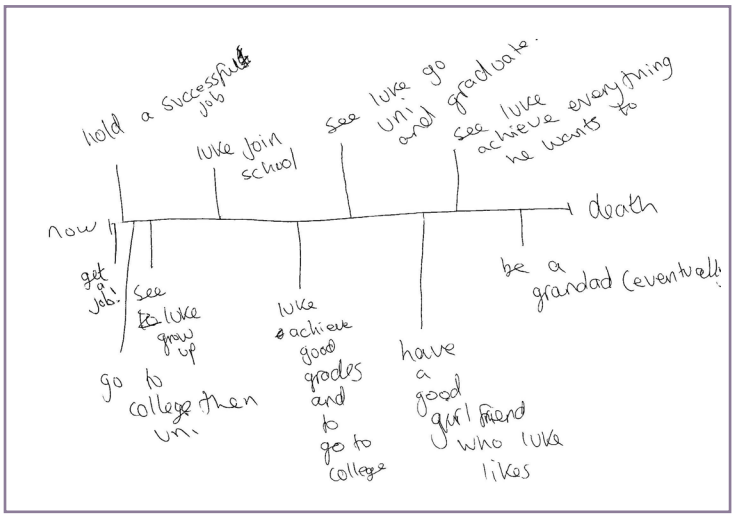
For the more disadvantaged young men in this sample, with less family support, and fewer educational opportunities or career aspirations, the transition to parenthood was seen as a positive development. Where other forms of material and social

resources are lacking the status of fatherhood becomes a valuable resource, a marker of adult esteem and young masculine identity.

The young men spoke of 'growing up' and taking on more responsibilities as a result of becoming a father. For example, they gave up smoking or soft drugs, curtailed nights out and physically dangerous pastimes, and began to save money for the arrival of the baby.

Where the process of growing up has been troubled, the arrival of a new generation can create a new sense of family, while the baby can help repair relationships across the generations. As Jamie's timeline (fig.1) shows, it can create a sense of purpose for the future.

fig.1.



Abortion was not seen as an attractive or viable option for these young men because of strong moral objections to 'taking away' a new, vulnerable and innocent life. Some young parents try

to keep the pregnancy a secret initially, to avoid pressures to have a termination. The arrival of a new child was, therefore, something to celebrate.

Father-Child Relationships

None of the fathers were well prepared for their entry into fatherhood, yet they all attached importance to their children and aspired to 'be there' and to provide love and support. These guiding principles were worked out in different ways. While some embraced the ideals of 'new' fatherhood, involving direct emotional and practical care, others relied more on masculine and gendered accounts of parenting, with a focus on sharing fun activities and providing discipline.

Providing materially and financially for a child remains an important dimension of fatherhood. The young men placed value on learning a trade and finding steady work to support their children, but, at the time of interview, only two of the fathers were in steady employment. In some cases, lack of opportunities shortened their time horizons; planning tended to take place from day to day, rather than over the long term.

Relationships with the Mother.

During the pregnancy none of these fathers had an established relationship with the child's mother. The task of negotiating these fragile relationships was challenging yet vitally important, because father-child relationships tend to be mediated, at least initially, through the mother. Even where the bond between the parents is well established, fathering can be hampered by the central role of mothers in the birth and early nurturing of children (Shirani and Henwood, 2010).

Alex, for example, was deeply committed to the mother and managed to establish a more stable bond with her towards the end of the pregnancy. He spoke of the positive effects that parenthood had had upon their relationship.

After the birth Alex struggled to find a role for himself but was doing his best to engage with the intensive professional support that was provided primarily for the mother.

Where relationships with the mother have come to an end, the challenges are all the greater. Active fatherhood in these circumstances is highly provisional and requires a great deal of dedication. Some fathers spoke of their anguish where contact with their child was curtailed. In these circumstances they sought legal involvement to redress the problem. Continuing volatile relationships between the young parents could be detrimental to them both, as well as to the child. One father reflected on this at his first interview, and at his follow up interview reported a change in his approach, which had led to improvements in relationships.

Cross Generational Relationships

The young mens' accounts show that grandparents provide significant practical, financial and housing support to young parents. This was appreciated and could foster positive family relationships. In some cases, however, this dependency on the older generation could tip over into control of the pregnancy and the new baby, policing of the parents' behaviour, or interference in the relationships between the young parents. These patterns reflect the conflicting status of the young men – responsible for their children, yet themselves continuing to be the responsibility of the older generation.

Professional Support.

These young men needed professional support to help in the transition to parenthood. Yet while young mothers encounter universal services such as midwifery and health visiting, there is no such systematic contact with young fathers.

The six fathers who were receiving specialist emotional and practical help from their mentor regarded this support as vital in their lives. The support is flexible and impartial, involves referrals to other agencies to meet a wide range of needs, and is provided by a male worker, someone who is in tune with their lives and whom they can trust. The sustained nature of the support is also important; referrals were via the young men's schools, but the support has been ongoing. The mentor has actively engaged with the young men in this research and encouraged them to reflect on their life journeys. He has adopted timelines as tools to think with, using them with the young men to draw out past experiences and to help them form realistic aspirations for the future. The one father in this study who is not in receipt of this support feels isolated as he grapples with ongoing problems.

Beyond this, levels of professional involvement varied greatly among this group. One young father is involved with 11 separate agencies. While he is appreciative, he also feels at saturation point, with little co-ordination of support. Two young families had been referred to child protection teams. They described having to 'jump through hoops' to try to get these professionals 'off our case' The involvement was perceived as surveillance rather than support, with few opportunities to talk through problems or work out strategies.

The young men spoke of these encounters as a subterranean battle of wills, requiring them to outwit their interrogators. Whatever the rationale and need for these interventions, such attitudes could be counterproductive and undermine their effectiveness.

One of these young families had been referred to the Family Nurse Partnership programme (Barnes et al 2011). This provides intensive nursing support over a two year period. Both parents valued this and it was perceived to be supportive and flexible. In this case, the programme acted as a foil to the surveillance of the child protection team.

Policy and Practice Implications

Despite being unprepared for early entry into parenthood, and in most cases having complex needs themselves, the fathers in this study were all committed to an involvement in their child's life. They did not wish to be defined as irresponsible or 'feckless'. Their efforts to sustain fatherhood and to better themselves run contrary to the popular belief that young fathers, "abandon the women they have 'impregnated' and then shirk from all their corresponding familial responsibilities to the woman and child" (Wallbank, 1997, p.198).

Even so, young fathers may well lack the resources for parenthood, particularly where they have complex needs themselves. Entry into early fatherhood therefore carries risks that need to be better understood (Reeves et al. 2009). This has implications for service provision, which is currently focused on the mother and child and which may marginalise fathers and inadvertently undermine their efforts.

The circumstances and backgrounds of teenage fathers are highly diverse and their needs are complex (c.f. Swann et al 2003. 4). Understanding their individual circumstances, complex masculinities and family dynamics would be beneficial. In particular, a greater insight into the tenor of young fathers' lives, their personal histories and imagined futures, and a greater focus on forming achievable aspirations would help to improve their life chances.

Young fathers are likely to benefit from dedicated emotional support that is tailored to their specific circumstances and that provides a first point of contact for addressing complex needs: the 'critical friend' identified in policy discussions (DCSF 2010.35). In families where child protection is an issue, the provision of positive interventions such as the Family Nurse Partnerships, which aim to nurture strength and instill confidence, may help to balance the protectionist concerns of social care teams and reduce the stigma felt by young parents.

Family based support, encompassing the needs and perspectives of mothers, fathers and grandparents across the generations, may also be beneficial. In particular, grandparents may well need strategies and practical help in simultaneously parenting their children and grandchildren, and accommodating to the changes in their children's lives.

The timing and sustainability of support for young parents are critical issues. The rationale for early years intervention policies (Allen 2011) is that skills and confidence can be imparted at the point of entry into parenthood and ongoing problems can be circumvented. However the focus on early intervention should not detract from the value of sustained support that can be mobilised flexibly as and when it is needed to provide a longer term safety net.

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