



The transition to fatherhood in young men

When young men do not take on the responsibilities of fatherhood, it has serious consequences for the child's development, the mother's resources and consequent social costs. In contrast, stable intimate partnerships can help both young men and women overcome feelings of social alienation and problems associated with poor childhood experiences. New research from the University of Bristol explores how first time fathers aged 17–23 experience the pregnancy, birth and early parenting process. It examines the factors that keep a father involved with the mother and baby, how fatherhood affects young men's identities, and how services could be improved to include prospective fathers and encourage commitment. The research found that:

- Families were often ambivalent about the pregnancy, with a third of the women's and men's parents responding negatively when the news was first broken to them.
- Interviews with the young men at about five months into the pregnancy showed that 71% felt positively about it but that 66% had no clear image of themselves as fathers.
- Couples were overwhelmingly positive about their relationship during the pregnancy. The vast majority said they were generally compatible, moderately to highly committed, and that their relationship had a moderate to high level of stability.
- Young men often felt excluded from involvement with ante-natal and post-natal care by health service professionals.
- Health care professionals often knew little about the fathers, did not see them as central to their task, and felt they lacked the skills to engage with men.
- Nine months after the birth of their child, 69% of couples were living together, while 37% of men were not significantly involved as fathers.
- Men in the youngest age group were least likely to be involved with the child at this time. Only 20% of 17 year olds were much involved, compared with 65% of those aged 18–19, 56% of 20–21 year olds and 76% of 22–23 year olds.
- The most important factor predicting men's post-natal involvement was the quality of their relationship with their partner during pregnancy rather than earlier family or social difficulties.
- The study supports the hypothesis that successful intimate relationships can act as a positive turning point in young men's lives.

Background

There is little research on fatherhood compared with the enormous amount of information available on motherhood. Recent studies have been based on data collected in the 1970s. However, there have been major changes in people's approaches to parenthood since then, with the majority of young mothers now giving birth outside marriage. Currently, there is less pressure for young men to take on the responsibility of parenting, but also less support and guidance for them.

Large-scale studies reveal a number of social disadvantages in young fathers' families, such as low levels of parental education, large family size, not being raised by both birth parents and financial hardship. There are also links with low educational attainment, psychosocial adjustment, antisocial behaviour and low self-esteem.

Most research has focused on these predictors of early parenting. There is no information on the continuing relationships between young fathers, mothers and babies, even though a stable intimate partnership can be a powerful factor in counteracting social isolation and problems experienced in childhood.

This research examines the suggestion that successful partnerships can help young men make positive changes in their lives. It is the first study of young fathers to explore the transition to fatherhood as a process rather than as an event.

The aims of the study were:

- To document the experiences of young first time fathers, especially those at risk of not accepting the parenting role.
- To identify the factors linked to a father being involved with the mother and child a year after the birth.
- To examine how fatherhood affects young men's identities, and its impact on social exclusion and the transition to adulthood.
- To discover how health services can include prospective fathers in a way that offers support and encourages commitment.

Impact of adverse experiences

About one third of the young men had experienced unhappy or discordant family relationships, and the majority had hated school or found it boring. Nearly two-fifths showed problems in their work patterns and almost a third had difficulties with their social functioning prior to the pregnancy.

Previous research has suggested that such poor family experiences lead to poorer social functioning, and therefore to early and less protected sexual activity, lower commitment to the mother and baby, and less involvement after the birth. Within this study there were links between adverse family backgrounds and poorer social functioning, but *not* between poorer social functioning and fathers' involvement nine months after the birth.

Relationships with family

Family support can be particularly helpful to a young couple as they cope with the birth of their first child.

Parents were very much still part of these young men's lives: 36% lived at home during their partner's pregnancy and another 51% saw one or both parents weekly. However, relationships with parents were often poor and unsupportive. About a third of both the women's and the men's parents responded to the first news of the pregnancy in a negative way, and less than half of the prospective grandparents were clearly positive and supportive in the early days of the pregnancy. There was a picture of persistently poor or cool relationships between the young men and women and a fifth to a sixth of their own mothers and nearly a third of their fathers.

Feelings about the pregnancy

For the majority of young men, the pregnancy was a complete surprise and feelings at first were negative or mixed. By the time of the first interview, many (71%) had positive feelings about the pregnancy, but two-thirds (66%) had no clear image of themselves as a father.

Young fathers excluded

The research pointed to a striking lack of support from health services for young men preparing for parenthood. There were examples of good practice, but men were mostly ignored, marginalised or made uncomfortable by services, despite their desire for information, advice and inclusion.

Just over half the young men attended most clinic appointments and even more wanted to attend. However, very few had any contact with preparatory or advice services, even though they reported significant worries about aspects of the pregnancy and birth.

Clinic staff often talked only to the mother-to-be and did not engage with the prospective father. Interviews with health visitors revealed that 53% knew little or nothing about the father. In addition, health professionals rarely saw work with young fathers as central to their task, and often felt that they lacked the skills to engage with men.

These findings underline the importance of developing the skills of health service professionals, specifically in working with young men to help support and stabilise their intimate relationships in the early months of their transition to fatherhood.

Post-natal involvement

The study investigated whether couples were living together nine months after the birth and the extent to which young men were involved in parenting and supporting the mother, whether or not they were living together. 69% of couples were living together, 37% of men were not involved as fathers, 32% were involved in a rather routine way and 31% were active fathers.

Significance of age and residence

The age of the young couple had a significant bearing on young men's involvement. When both the man and woman were aged 17 or under, only 12% of men were involved with the child nine months after the birth. But as men's ages rose, so did their involvement, regardless of the age of the young mother. For women in the youngest age group, the proportions of involved men grew to 43% for men between the ages of 18–21 and 100% for men aged 22 and over. When both

partners were age 20 or over, the proportion of involved men was also high, at 82%.

Men were much less likely to be involved after the birth if the mother lived with her parents during the pregnancy. This is related to the woman's age, as 63% of the youngest group of women were living at home, compared with only 13% of those aged 22 or over.

Quality of the couple's relationship

The study explored how couples felt about their relationship during the pregnancy, asking: how committed each of them felt towards their partner; how compatible they thought they were; and how stable and secure they thought their relationship to be.

Couples were overwhelmingly positive about their relationship during the pregnancy:

- 72% of men and 67% of women rated their commitment as moderate to high.
- 93% of men and 84% of women said they were generally compatible.
- 90% of men and 84% of women said their relationship was moderately to highly stable.

Women were somewhat more cautious than the men, but not significantly so, and both men and women saw the younger men as less committed.

Neither poor childhood family relationships nor poorer social functioning prior to the pregnancy affected young men's involvement nine months after the birth. Nor did the quality of relationships with the man's and the woman's family. However, the couple's own evaluation of their relationship was related to post-natal involvement. When people rated their relationship in pregnancy as particularly stable, the man was much more likely to still be involved nine months after the birth.

The role of the father

It was clear that the young men often had problems seeing themselves as fathers. About a third had not become involved with their child after the birth. On the other hand, the lack of association between earlier experiences and post-natal attachment suggests that fatherhood may help young men at high risk of social exclusion to create a new identity and a more positive engagement in society.

Conclusions

It is important to point out that this is a sample of couples where paternity has been acknowledged and where the young men were sufficiently interested in the impending birth to take part in the research. Nevertheless, over one third (37%) of the young men were not involved or only very weakly involved in parenting nine months after the birth.

The young men in the study had high rates of adverse family experiences, poor school experiences, poor social functioning and poor relationships with parents. Preliminary analysis suggests that early fatherhood can help young men to move towards more socially inclusive lifestyles and behaviour. The reason for this conclusion is the lack of a connection between family and individual risks and the men's involvement at follow-up. Instead, the most important factor at this stage appeared to be the quality of the relationship between the couple themselves.

The young couples appear to be reassuringly optimistic about their relationships. However, if things get tough further down the line, some problems may reappear. Positive support from the family may also become more important at that later stage.

The transition to parenthood is clearly a *process* and not an *event*. It is also a complex process in which a wide variety of influences may be at work. However, the results so far are illuminating and consistent with a more positive view of young fathers than the stereotypes sometimes allow.

About the study

This research (The Transition to Fatherhood in Young Men: Influences on Commitment) was carried out by Professor D L Quinton, Ms S B Pollock and Professor J Golding of the University of Bristol. It involved two sets of interviews with first-time mothers and their partners. The sample included men who became first-time fathers between the ages of 17 and 23, recruited to the study from hospital lists at the time of the first scan. The couples were interviewed separately in their homes five months into the pregnancy and again nine months after the birth. The first interviews included 92 women and 74 men, with 79 women and 52 men taking part in second interviews. There were also interviews with 105 health visitors, primarily to check whether those young parents who agreed to take part and those who were missed were different. All research procedures guaranteed the confidentiality of the potential research participants.

Further Information

The full report **The Transition to Fatherhood in Young Men** by David Quinton, Sue Pollock and Jean Golding is available on the ESRC database REGARD at <http://www.regard.ac.uk>

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