

Disadvantaged young fathers-to-be

Mike White looks at fresh starts and second chances

Attachment theories, in focusing on the mother, tend to underemphasise the role of the father in caregiving. A review of the literature (Lewis & Lamb, 2003) pointed out that there is an assumption that men have an important influence on their children's development but that the supportive evidence can be difficult to locate and summarise. However, the review concluded that fathers in two-parent households do affect their children's development in diverse and significant ways. Indeed, studies have shown that children with active fathers do show greater general sociability and ease with strangers (Frascarolo, 2004), improved cognitive functioning (Nugent, 1991) and fewer behavioural problems (Aldous et al., 1998).

So, fathers are important. No surprise there. Rather more surprising perhaps are the results of Canadian research, which has shown a strong biological link between fathers and babies in the womb (Berg & Wynne-Edwards, 2001; Storey et al., 2000). During a partner's pregnancy an expectant father experiences biological changes, including unexpected hormonal shifts, which prepare him for parenting. So fathers-to-be are important as well. If this is surprising, it ought not to be.

What we do know is that many young fathers-to-be, particularly those who are disadvantaged, feel excluded during their partners' pregnancies. One of them has said: 'After we had our child the midwife was really nice, but before that I couldn't

get a word in edgeways. I wasn't allowed to tell her that my partner wasn't eating properly or feeling sick all the time. She never asked me how my partner was doing even though I was around all the time. It was just asking my partner and my partner saying, "Yeah, I'm fine, I'm eating"... that was it' (see <http://dads-matter-too.blogspot.com>). Although the Royal College of Midwives has long encouraged the inclusion of men throughout pregnancy, this practice is still not fully inclusive. Recognition that this is the case can be found on a website aimed at the right audience: 'fathers... may have been overlooked by their expectant partner and maybe healthcare professionals such as midwives' (tinyurl.com/ye5jthb). I have been running a course for young dads-to-be in Swindon and Wiltshire for the last five years, and many of the young men I meet echo these views.

The government recognises there is a need 'to develop a culture in which the starting point is that young fathers' involvement in the pregnancy and birth is beneficial for the mother and child and that services should be designed so that they are inclusive of young fathers' (DCSF, 2007, p.60). Its recent publication of a revised guide for midwives and other health service professionals underlines the need for midwives to engage with young fathers-to-be (DCSF, DH, 2009). One teenage pregnancy midwife says that she addresses 'both parents-to-be at each visit, slowly building a relationship with both of

them. I offer the dad-to-be my mobile number... in case he has some concerns or questions of his own. I think this helps him to feel valued and as important, perhaps, as the mum to be.' There is a measure of cross-party support for this approach. In one of its many documents, the Centre for Social Justice suggests a prenatal package, including First Steps to Parenting which 'recognises the pivotal role of the father and helps cement the father-mother bond' (Allen & Duncan Smith, 2008). A more recent study (Page et al., 2008) has noted that health services were not seen 'as adequately identifying and engaging with fathers, particularly young fathers, during the important initial stages of pregnancy and birth'. The authors list five ways of enabling fathers to engage with family services but, curiously, omits to mention provision for fathers-to-be in that context. Children's Centres might find this omission of interest, given the difficulty they experience in persuading fathers to use their service.

The Family Nurse Partnership (FNP), a joint Department of Health/Department for Children, Schools and Families project, offers a structured programme to at-risk, first-time young parents from early pregnancy until the child is two years old. Early experience has shown that the programme increases the involvement of fathers (see tinyurl.com/yd7vf6n). Professor David Olds, who has led the development of the FNP programme, told me that 'the involvement of fathers has been part of the programme plan since day one'. His work, published over a 30-year period, bears this out. If assistance is offered before the birth of the first child, when all families have questions and special needs, parents are less defensive (Olds, 1981). When young mothers-to-be are recruited to the programme, their partners become more interested in the pregnancies (Olds et al., 1986) and the programme has significant effects on the child's biological father (Kitzman et al., 2000).

It is quite clear that the FNP offers an important way forward. But although the

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programme 'includes' fathers-to-be it does not offer them a programme that is specifically theirs. This situation is echoed in a recent academic perspective which states that 'there is very good evidence that targeted intervention...preferably starting in the antenatal period and covering the first two years of life... improves long term outcomes' (Polnay, quoted in Pople 2009, pp.16–17). There is nothing to disagree with here. It's just that, once again, there is no specific focus on the father-to-be. However, there are some people who are much clearer about the value of engaging with this group of young men. One study (Sherriff, 2007) quoted a teenage-pregnancy worker who said: 'If you can engage young fathers-to-be before their baby is born, you can sow the seeds, whereas coming in later is much harder.' This insistence on working with young fathers-to-be is made much more explicit by one researcher who advocates that more educational and support programmes be made available to men well before their babies are born (Leite, 2007).

Evidence that such programmes are of value is outlined in a recent American study (Bronte-Tinkew et al., 2008b). Eighteen fatherhood programmes were assessed and ten common features of effectiveness were identified; for example, a high staff-participant ratio; a variety of teaching methods designed to focus on fathers as individuals and so personalise the information; staff who engage in one-on-one relationships with fathers; provision of incentives to engage fathers and families.

An experimental evaluation of the programme found that participating fathers significantly increased their knowledge of pregnancy and prenatal care and infant

development and care. Findings also indicate that an increased knowledge of these topics may translate into more supportive behaviours towards the mother and expected infant (Bronte-Tinkew et al., 2008a).

The course I run for young dads-to-be incorporates at least seven of the features mentioned above, and we achieve similar outcomes. Because we run courses for young mums-to-be we have easy access to partners, so they do not constitute a hard-to-reach group. That doesn't mean that they are all eager to be reached. Although over half of the young men felt relieved when they learnt that they could go on a young dads-to-be course, nearly half of them said that they weren't sure it would be helpful. However, after they had been on the course over 80 per cent of them said they were more confident about becoming a father, they all felt that they had learnt a lot, and they all said they felt better about themselves. Over half reported

that their partners felt better about them. Furthermore a third said that both sets of expectant grandparents felt better about them as well. These outcomes are very encouraging in the light of recent research (Bronte-Tinkew et al., 2009)

showing that a mistimed

or unwanted pregnancy is associated with higher levels of paternal depression and with lower mother-father happiness, which in turn are associated with lower coparental supportiveness and higher coparental conflict.

But the benefits don't stop there. Apart from the obvious practical issues relating to housing, finance, education, employment and training that can be tackled as a result of the relationship that develops between tutor and young father, contact becomes the means of developing

longer-term therapeutic relationships with both partners, which becomes the fundamental benefit of this intervention. One young dad has confided that he had been subjected to sexual abuse when he was much younger, and was anxious that this might affect his ability to relate appropriately to his young son. Another expressed considerable anger about his inability to be clear about the identity of his biological father, and has recognised the need to seek counselling because of the impact of his feelings on his familial relationships. Several talk about the difficulties they experience in sustaining their relationships. Partners have talked about the concerns they have about their partner's anger and inappropriate behaviour. Such disclosures mean that individual and couple work becomes possible, and referrals can be made to other agencies when necessary.

Of the group of young men I am currently working with, over half left school either early or with no significant qualifications, and 60 per cent are not in education, employment or training. Bearing in mind that at the time these young men were starting secondary school the average boy was 11 months behind the average girl in speaking and listening skills, 12 months behind in literacy and six months behind in numeracy (Hannan, 1998), a simple course preparing them for fatherhood gives many of them the first taste of a positive educational experience. It's therefore no surprise that they feel better about themselves as a result. As one of them said, the course 'makes you think about how you could improve yourself and your relationship with your partner, parents, etc.' The course becomes a way of re-engaging this group of young people in accredited learning programmes. Several young men have moved on to an Open College Network (OCN) course in Personal Budgeting & Money Management, and five of them, together with four of their partners have gained Bronze-level Arts Awards.

In addition to the disadvantages arising from low educational achievement many



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of these young men are further disadvantaged as a result of faulty relationships with their own parents – particularly, but not exclusively, their fathers. Men who report loving and secure relationships with their parents are more sensitive and involved with their children than fathers with less positive memories (Cowan et al., 1996). But among the young men with whom I work, one teenage father reported that ‘the relationship I’ve had with my father has affected the way I interact with other people [so] I find it difficult to bond with, and sometimes, appreciate my children’. Furthermore, three quarters of them say their fathers have left them and over half of them say they never speak to their fathers. Their responses when asked how they thought their relationship with their fathers affected the way in which they approached fatherhood included:

‘Quite a lot because I don’t want my kids to follow the way of life I had.’
‘I haven’t seen my biological father since I was 10 years old so it has had an effect on me and made me more determined.’
‘I want to do things with my son... my dad never did with me.’

So they enter fatherhood with a fierce desire to do a better job than their fathers before them, as another piece of recent research has acknowledged (West et al., 2009). But they are dogged by educational and emotional disadvantage, which makes their task of being a father and partner all the more difficult, and ongoing support all the more important.

However, there is not much support about. Pockets of work are taking place with young dads-to-be. The FNP programme may help to engage more of them. The Fatherhood Institute offers another States-developed programme, Hit The Ground Crawling, which has been designed specifically for young dads-to-be. The simple information-giving course of the kind I run, alongside courses for young mums-to-be and young mums, offers another way forward. I don’t believe it matters at this stage which approach workers use, so long as the young men are offered something.

Perhaps it is too much to hope that a national pilot project for young dads-to-be is funded and properly evaluated to determine its value for young parents, their children and our society as a whole. Such a project would need to run for several

years, but those of us who are parents know that parenthood lasts for the rest of our lives. Perhaps, as a nation, we should be developing a longer-term view of the needs of a particularly disadvantaged group of young people and the ways in which we might meet them. It may not be too fanciful to suggest that this intervention might be one way of impacting on the cycle of disadvantage. In many cases these young people are the children of parents who have been part of that cycle. By supporting them over a significant period of time, the possibility exists of improving their own life chances, and might also enable their children to break out of that cycle. However, we would need to take a generational view of such an intervention. Of course, the chances of that happening when politicians cannot usually see beyond the next election might present a particular challenge, but perhaps this is the time to encourage them to adopt such a view.

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