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Getting started - engaging strategically with young fathers

Adrienne Burgess for FATHERS DIRECT
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1) The Four Domains

There are four domains in which you have to think strategically if work with young fathers is to succeed:

a. Within agency: there is no point attracting young fathers to your service if the service is not ready to receive them (and will alienate them); furthermore, the whole team should be involved in identifying and engaging the young fathers – if this is left to the ‘Fatherworker’ alone, s/he will achieve little, burn out, and leave (the [Fatherhood Quality Mark](#) process can help you achieve father-friendliness in your agency: see [or](#), to start with, purchase the Fathers Direct Six Step Guide to [Working with Fathers](#) (£6.95)

b. Inter-agency: no agency or service can meet all a young fathers’ needs, and many will not come across young fathers in the course of their work. It is essential that local agencies pull together to provide referrals both ‘into’ and ‘out of’ the service (Fathers Direct’s programme of [Local Leadership Roundtables](#) can help you here

c. Families and peers: young fathers are embedded in networks that often provide little or no support to them in their fathering role – you need to work with members of their networks in order to engage effectively with the young men themselves, or to help them make changes in their lives. Mothers, mothers-in-law, fathers, fathers-in law, the mother of his child, his close friends - all need to understand ‘where he is coming from’, and help him to develop skills and self-confidence in caring for his baby. Very often, young fathers feel intimidated and pushed out when the young woman’s kin (and sometimes their own) swoop in and take over. Help the ‘care bringers’ to be aware of this; help them to help the young dad, not shut him out.

d. The young fathers: according to the ContinYou report [‘I’m a Better Dad Now’](#) these young men tend to fall into one of three categories: ‘chaotic’, ‘semi-chaotic’ and ‘sorted’. All need help and support, but they will have very different reactions to your approaches. Different strategies will be required to engage effectively with young fathers in these different groups, and one-to-one work will be very important, particularly among young fathers identified as ‘chaotic’ and ‘semi-chaotic’

2) Consultation

It’s important to consult with the young fathers and their families all the way down the line, but at the beginning the young dads may have no idea what they want or need if you ask them directly. Consultation ‘too early’ is not useful; and their sense of entitlement to ANY service will be low. You will

News

- Parental Responsibility
- When Lads become Dads - Yvonne Roberts (the Guardian)

Practice

- Innovative local poster campaign promotes condom use among boys & young men
- U-Too Young Dads Project DVD

Policy

- The young father's guide to Paternity Leave
- Policy should support fathers in young-parent-families

Training

- Working with Young Fathers (2 day)
- Working with Young Fathers (3 day) Accredited

Diary

- Conference on 'troubling men'

Research

- Young dads and their partners
- Parents can be vital to young fatherhood

Links

- Working with Men
- Newpin

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identify their needs by observing them, as well as by asking them. Often consultation can be used as a strategy to engage the young man in your service: you get him to help you define what other young dads need, and this helps him engage. Here are some strategies to think about:

- run consultation events – and then follow up with another activity/invitation shortly afterwards, approaching each young dad individually, and persisting if he doesn't engage right away
- make a video with the young men (you learn a lot about their perspectives as you identify their issues and address their needs)
- brainstorm with the young fathers the 'basket of services' local young dads need
- consult both with men who do and don't use your service
- consult with the mother of their child
- consult with grandparents (BOTH families)
- consult with the young men's peers (you may find that helps them to help him to stay engaged)
- keep your work under review
- develop visions for the work

3) Inter-agency working

a. Strategies for identifying local agencies

- Having brainstormed the basket of services young dads need (see above), you then brainstorm pathways to help them reach and make use of these services. This helps you identify key agencies with which you must create partnerships
- Find out what skills and education the young men already have (in parenting and other areas) and link them with other agencies that can fill in gaps

b. Likely local agencies

- Schools (giving boys information – getting them to think about their future roles as fathers - normalizing that; and working with young women around fatherhood, too)
- Leaving Care Services (engage before they leave care)
- Probation
- Maternity services (this is likely to be the most important)
- Social Services (some young men receive substantial support, often from their child's social worker – or support may be forthcoming if you press for it)
- F.E. colleges
- Homelessness projects
- Drugs and alcohol services
- Mental health services
- Health and fitness/healthy living centres
- Young people's information and advice services (and other youth services)
- Basic skills agencies/family learning (Family Learning advisors will help if you can get 6 clients together in a group)
- Connexions
- Job Centre Plus – young fathers are often young enough to come under the New Deals
- Contact centres
- Domestic violence projects (for women)
- 'Perpetrator' programmes (for men - if there are any)
- Local courts
- Family courts /mediation services: let them know you exist – they may be delighted to refer young men to you, who need support with parenting and other social skills
- sexual health workers – working on fatherhood can help them meet other objectives (young men who become serious about fatherhood will want to wait until becoming a father; this will impact also on STI rates)

c. Tips for productive multi-agency working to support young dads

- think first of your own agency as a source of referrals
- Let other agencies KNOW YOU EXIST: identify their goals, then see if you can help them see how engaging with young men as fathers (or helping YOU engage with them) can help them meet their existing goals, including the needs of the people they define as their main clients (often the young mum)
- be always willing and able to present reasons to your own, and other agencies, as to why you work with young fathers – and why you work with them in the way that you do
- make sure you demonstrate tangible benefits of your work to the partners/children of the young fathers – not just to the young dads (so build in evaluations with EVERYBODY)
- keep giving out information to local agencies (and to your own agency) about what you can offer to young fathers who are referred to your project, and how your work is developing
- in particular, keep communicating with all those in your area who work with parents, from ante-natal staff to Health visitors, Sure Start programmes etc.: they will be a good source of referrals, if you gain their confidence; and they will help you reach other family members, who you may also need to work with
- make yourself part of the local network of those who work with parents: take part in meetings relating to teenage parents, sexual health, Children's Centres: this will help you influence local strategies
- build strong links with the front-line workers in these, and other relevant organisations and maintain regular contact with them
- make sure they feel you are supporting their work
- look to see if you need to explain to partner-agencies the different staffing requirements work with fathers may require – another agency may mis-trust a fathers' worker who is not formally qualified as, say, a family support or childcare worker would be
- re-assure them by explaining your worker's strengths, and ensuring that any unqualified worker you employ is given training that will lead towards qualifications
- don't set up unrealistic expectations or pander to other people's: work with young fathers can be slow to get off the ground - other agencies (and one's own) may hold unrealistic expectations about the speed with which the work can 'succeed'
- in particular other agencies (and one's own) and FUNDERS may have an impact/outcome focus which may not be appropriate in relation to a fledgling dads' project has first to FIND the fathers: negotiate around this
- other agencies (and one's own – and probably you yourself) will hold negative stereotypes and make unhelpful assumptions about young fathers: don't get cross – work with these, gently exploring the stereotypes and where possible introducing them to young dads who are doing their best to be engaged with their children
- remember that other agencies (and one's own) may not take male activities (e.g. football/snooker) seriously, and may see it as a 'club' for young men, and not relevant to them as parents (by contrast, massage or keep fit for mums would be taken seriously). If this is the case, explain why you are engaging the young dads through a 'snooker morning' rather than a 'coffee morning'
- let the young fathers you are working with be your project's ambassadors: other agencies' experience of positive behaviour from young fathers will help break down stereotypes
- provide training and support for other agencies to become 'father friendly, (not forgetting staff within your own agency)
- join (or set up) a local support network for fathers' workers; identify regional networks (many exist) and attend these and national training and development events: you yourself are likely to feel isolated and marginalised (just like your clients!) and you must develop support for yourself; explain to your manager why this is important
- look for opportunities to develop a Fathers Direct Local Leadership Roundtable to help you enlist local support for your work <http://www.fathersdirect.com/index.php?id=0&cID=357>

4) Funding and Sustainability

- Recruitment and retention:
 - o It is necessary to have someone as a 'reference point' for fatherhood within your team. This person need not be the same person as the Father Worker
 - o When hiring a Father Worker, particularly when seeking a male, draw from as wide a pool as possible (even without formal qualifications)
 - o Provide training leading towards qualifications
 - o Try to obtain funding for a full-time employee (perhaps share the cost with another agency): this is likely to result in the most stable, high-quality employee
- Set up evaluation systems from the start – you may need to demonstrate outcomes to achieve further funding; and evaluation can teach you a lot
- Seek locally based support (e.g. from health promotion units) for help to promote your work – e.g. creating publicity materials; developing a media strategy
- Look for ways of embedding your work in your agency's practices, paying particular attention to the routine gathering of data on the men in children's lives
- Work towards your service/agency's work receiving national recognition and fully developed practice through the Fatherhood Quality Mark
- Devise exit strategies when the work may come to an end, so that all learning and experience are not lost
- Funding sources change all the time (keep your eyes open for regional and local funding streams) and you may need to lobby locally to get fathers' work included in the objectives of some bodies (e.g. a local teenage parenting strategy). Funding sources for young fathers' projects include, have included, or are likely to include the following:
 - „X Renewal and regeneration funding (incl. Connecting Communities)
 - „X Teenage parenting strategies
 - „X Health action zones & health authorities & PCTs
 - „X Department of Health & DfES
 - „X Voluntary sector organisations
 - „X Sure Starts/Children's Trusts
 - „X Extended Schools Funds

5) Training to work with young fathers

Fathers Direct regularly runs one, two or three day courses on Working with Young Fathers. The three day course is accredited. The courses can also be run in-house, or for a consortium of local agencies. To see course outlines, look down the [Course List](#) and click on the courses entitled 'Working with Young Fathers'. If you want to enquire about booking a place on an Open course, phone 0845 634 1328 or email us on training@fathersdirect.com. If you would like to talk about running a course inhouse, contact d.bartlett@fathersdirect.com or telephone David Bartlett on 01422 847825

6) Your feedback is invited

We are always keen to learn from those 'in the field': if you would like to add or challenge anything in this paper, PLEASE DO SO by emailing a.burgess@fathersdirect.com

THANKYOU!

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