

# Supporting Young Fathers

EXAMPLES OF PROMISING PRACTICE

Nigel Sherriff



Trust for the



Study of



Adolescence

## About TSA



TSA was founded in 1989 to help improve the lives of young people and families. We believe that there is a lack of knowledge and understanding about adolescence and young adulthood. We're trying to close this gap through:

- doing applied research
- providing training and projects that develop professional practice
- producing publications for parents, professionals and young people
- influencing policy-makers, service providers, and public opinion.

## Acknowledgments

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We are grateful for the comments and suggestions of the Teenage Pregnancy Independent Advisory Group members. We would also like to thank the various anonymous reviewers who gave us invaluable feedback on an earlier draft of this guide.

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Finally, thanks to Kevin Lowe for bringing his extensive knowledge, experience, and editing skills to this report.

A 4 page executive summary is available free to download from TSA's website ([www.tsa.uk.com](http://www.tsa.uk.com)).

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1. The views expressed in this publication are those of the author and not necessarily those of the Teenage Pregnancy Unit or the Department for Education and Skills

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## FOREWORD

It gives me great pleasure to write this Foreword to *‘Supporting young fathers: examples of promising practice’*. This is an important publication, both timely and unusual in its scope. It is timely because there does appear to be a growing recognition of the need to develop practice in this area. It is apparent from the research that Nigel Sherriff has carried out that there are projects up and down the country which work with young fathers, and yet it is an area of work very much in its early stages. The publication is unusual in that this is the first time that anyone has put together examples of promising practice in this field.

This publication is a result of collaboration between the Teenage Pregnancy Unit, which funded the work, and TSA, whose staff carried out the research and wrote the guide. I am delighted to see collaboration of this sort working so well, particularly since I have close links with both organisations. Beyond my personal feelings, however, lies a wider point. An objective of organisations like TSA is to disseminate research findings so that they can be useful for both policy and practice. This publication is a perfect example of work that can do just that. Both policy makers and practitioners should find information in this book, based on research, which will prove of great value.

The publication is also of note because its focus is on a topic that has been far from popular with the general public. Unfortunately young fathers do not get a good press, and we know that it is essential for that to change if children are to benefit and families of young parents to function effectively. The intention of this book is to share promising practice and generate ideas for workers in this field, to provide information on work with young fathers for those who are new to this area, and to provide material for discussion and reflective practice.

I strongly commend this publication, and the work of Nigel Sherriff and Kevin Lowe. I believe that the book will enhance work with both young fathers and young mothers, and that it will prove an invaluable resource for years to come. I hope that it will be widely read by all in the parenting field.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'J Coleman', with a stylized flourish above the 'J'.

**Dr. John Coleman, OBE**

Founder, TSA

Deputy Chair, Independent Advisory Group for the Teenage Pregnancy Unit.

## SECTION ONE - INTRODUCTION

### Who is this guide for, and who wrote it?

This guide was written by Dr Nigel Sherriff and edited by Kevin Lowe Co-director of the Trust for the Study of Adolescence (TSA). It is based on research undertaken during 2006 which explored interesting and innovative examples of work with young fathers from around England. In doing so, it presents thematic examples of how existing work has attempted to best engage and sustain contact with young fathers including those from Black and Minority Ethnic groups (BME)<sup>2</sup>. Based on case-study evidence, it also provides practical examples of how this has been achieved focusing on issues such as learning and employment, housing, health, and parenting.

We carried out this work because there is a lack of information about promising practice in working with young fathers, particularly in terms of those working with teenage and/or school-age fathers. In general, where young fathers work does exist, findings are rarely disseminated fully or developed for other organisations and agencies to learn from. We therefore hope that this guide will be particularly helpful for individuals currently working, or thinking about working, with young fathers (e.g. fathers workers, Children's Centre staff, teenage pregnancy coordinators, reintegration officers, Sure Start workers, teenage pregnancy midwives, health visitors, Connexions and youth service staff etc). The intention is for the guide to convey the voice of practitioners (and young fathers) and provide the kind of information practitioners would share were they discussing their work in an informal setting. In this way, the guide may also be useful for those who are not currently working with young fathers, to make their first informed steps in that direction.

We hope you find it useful!

Dr Nigel Sherriff and Kevin Lowe  
TSA

### What does this guide contain?

Founded on a series of in-depth individual and focus group interviews with practitioners, this guide provides practical advice and illustrative examples of promising practice of work with young fathers. It helps to de-mystify young fathers work for less experienced practitioners whilst also offering useful 'hints and tips' for more experienced practitioners.

The main section of the guide is organised around areas that projects and agencies have told us are important in working with young fathers. These themes were also the issues practitioners raise as the ones they are most keen to learn about from others. Throughout the guide, we draw upon interview data and evidence from the literature to demonstrate and illustrate the points we make.

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2. We use the phrase Black and Minority Ethnic as it is currently the most commonly used and accepted phrase by a number of agencies, equality organisations, and some official government documents (see [www.dfes.gov.uk](http://www.dfes.gov.uk)). However, we also acknowledge the potentially divisive nature of the term in that it can be construed as all-inclusive that does not recognise the diversity of ethnic identities subsumed within it.

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### About the research

The case examples of interesting and innovative practice that we refer to are drawn from 33 projects and services for young fathers. These agencies were identified through the Teenage Pregnancy Unit's (TPU) networks, existing research and publications on young fathers work (e.g. Mordaunt, 2005; ContinYou, 2005a, 2005b), and from personal and professional contacts. We initially contacted the agencies by phone and e-mail to gather background information (e.g. specific client group, focus, aims, objectives etc). We then identified the projects to explore in more detail by taking into account a number of factors such as geographical location (different parts of England as well as a mix of urban and more rural), types of organisation (e.g. 'mainstream'/universal services, special or targeted projects etc), and the ethnicity and age of the young fathers the agencies were working with. We were also keen to feature agencies whose work was less well known, as well as more established pioneers in this field. The overall aim was to feature as broad a spread as we could.

Our selection criteria aimed to ensure wide diversity in the work that is taking place with young fathers and an important conclusion (see page 59) is the need to recognise that young fathers are not an homogenous group. However, it was not possible to identify the extent to which projects were reaching specific marginalised groups such as young men in custody, refugees and asylum seekers, young gay fathers or those with physical and/or learning disabilities. Nevertheless, material emerged that suggests that some young men from such groups are being reached, for example young fathers in public care. There remains great deal of scope for future publications to address such diversity in more detail. We hope that the current guide may act as a forerunner in this respect.

Following the identification of examples of promising practice, the author then visited projects and agencies delivering services for young fathers during June and July 2006. In-depth individual interviews and focus groups lasting between 1-2hrs were conducted on these occasions, and some telephone interviews were also carried out. In addition, background information was also collated and used in the case evidence that follows. Draft sections of the publication were sent to each of the projects and services involved for final comment and to help prevent any inaccuracies. A list of contacts for projects and organisations working with young fathers included as part of the evidence-base for this report can be found on page 60.

It is important to note that this research has not in any way 'validated' the practice described as this was beyond the scope/resources of the project. We therefore use the term 'promising' practice (rather than 'good' or 'effective') to reflect practitioners' views on what appears to be 'working' in the light of the emerging agenda of key challenges for such work.

## How to use this guide

### This guide can be used in several ways including the following:

**To share promising practice and generate ideas** – This guide provides an excellent opportunity to see how young fathers projects and other agencies delivering services for young fathers, have been innovative in their work with young men. Our hope is that by sharing promising practice and raising awareness of work with young fathers, practitioners can build on the learning and experiences of others.

**As an information source** – This guide can also be used to learn about what is currently happening in relation to young fathers work. It also provides sources of information, ‘hints and tips’, useful resources, research, and the contact details of many practitioners and young fathers projects so you can find out more about those of particular interest or relevance.

**To promote discussion and reflective practice** – Many of the topics and issues we discuss are not clear cut, but do provide a convenient opportunity to debate key arguments in policy and practice. This guide may also help professionals to reassess their own practices and ideas in relation to working with fathers, and perhaps share ideas with other colleagues.

### Note on terminology

Although we use the term ‘young fathers worker’ throughout this guide, we do so in a rather general way to mean ‘the person who is working with young fathers’. We do not wish to imply that organisations will, or should necessarily have specialist posts dedicated to solely working with young fathers, nor do we assume that young fathers workers in such posts should necessarily be male. The complexities of this issue are covered in section two part 6 (p39).

## Background

In this section, we provide a brief overview in relation to current knowledge and understanding about young fathers. It is not intended to be a full literature review, rather to signpost some of the most pertinent issues and research relating to practice. We have drawn out a number of themes in order to set the context for what is to follow in the guide.

### A blurry picture of young fatherhood

The UK is reported to be at the top of the league tables for the highest rate of (live) teenage births in Western Europe (UNICEF, 2001; Ward, 2005). Whilst detailed statistics are available, there are little data describing the young fathers<sup>3</sup> of these babies. The birth registration system does not routinely record their details, and mothers are not legally required to name the father or supply any details regarding paternity. Consequently, we do not know how many there are or how numbers may have changed. However, what we do know is that young fathers are likely to be a few years older than the young mother (Burghes *et al.*,

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3. Young fathers are defined as those who became a father before the age of 25 years.

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## INTRODUCTION

1997; Coleman and Dennison, 1998), and that like young mothers, young fathers are more likely to come from lower socioeconomic groups, from families that have experienced financial difficulties, and are more likely than average to have left school at the minimum school leaving age (Swann *et al.*, 2003).

Despite the extensive and growing UK literature on fathers generally, there remains a dearth of research that recognises the wide diversity of fatherhood and the specific needs different fathers may have (e.g. young fathers, fathers in custody, non-resident fathers, ‘non-white’ fathers etc; see Ashley *et al.*, 2006; Lewis and Lamb, in press). Surprisingly little is known about what fathers want or need and written accounts of fatherhood from fathers themselves are relatively scarce (*c.f.* Mordaunt, 2005; Rolph, 1999). Of the gaps in research knowledge, the lack of focus and data on young fathers and/or the partners of teenage mothers is particularly striking. Young (teenage) fathers are invisible as a group, yet they are more likely to require support services and be affected by unemployment, poor housing, and a lack of education than older parents (say, in their earlier twenties) who may be working (e.g. Speak *et al.*, 1997). A report by the Health Development Agency calls for this gap in the evidence base to be urgently rectified (Swann *et al.*, 2003; see also Rouch, 2005).

The current blurry view of young fathers is compounded in a number of ways. For example, the belief of many professionals that young fathers (particularly the very youngest fathers such as school-age fathers) do not exist in their communities is a significant barrier (Ferguson and Hogan, 2004). Invisibility is also created by some young mothers being unwilling to involve young fathers in what they see as their business (Ghate *et al.*, 2000). Moreover, young mothers may not mention the involvement of the young father because of the belief that to present as a couple to services is problematic (e.g. for fear of losing benefits or will raise child protection concerns). Young fathers may also be absent for other reasons such as not knowing that they are fathers, imprisonment, or exclusion by the mother’s family. It is also likely that much of young fathers invisibility occurs because workers do not routinely collect data about them or include them in services that are for young ‘parents’ (Pollock *et al.*, 2005; Quinton *et al.*, 2002; Ryan, 2000).

### Young fathers in policy

Until relatively recently, fathers have generally been absent from policy initiatives aimed at parents. When the spotlight has occasionally fallen on them it has been more likely to focus on what they are failing to do, or are doing poorly. This has been described as promoting a ‘deficit model’ of fatherhood (Doherty, 1991).

In the last few years though, there has been an increased emphasis on fathers within the context of family-friendly policies (e.g. paid paternity leave, examinations of directives concerning working hours, and attempts to restructure the Child Support Agency; Lewis and Lamb, in press). Indeed, the need to engage with fathers is a strengthening theme in government policy (e.g. DfES/DoH, 2004; Goldman, 2005). For example, the Sure Start Children’s Centre Practice Guidance (DfES, 2005) highlights the need to develop ‘personalised’ services for fathers, male carers, and other male relatives. More specifically, the guidance proposes that services should consider and respond to fathers’ needs including areas such as finding work, help with benefits and housing, and supporting fathers in developing positive relationships with their children.

In relation to young fathers, recent national policy frameworks such as the *National Service Framework (NSF) for Children, Young People and Maternity Services* have emphasised the need for greater engagement with young fathers by professionals. Similarly, the Social Exclusion Unit's (2005) report *Transitions, Young Adults with Complex Needs* acknowledges the need for improved assessments of the needs of young fathers. In September 2006, the Department for Education and Skills (DfES) published *Teenage Pregnancy: Accelerating the Strategy to 2010* which announced that the DfES would be issuing guidance on all aspects of delivering support for teenage parents for local authorities in early 2007 as well as the present publication on promising practice on supporting young fathers. In relation to young fathers, it is envisaged that the forthcoming guidance will look at how maternity services and Children's Centres can be better tailored to meet the needs of young fathers. Moreover, it will also look specifically at how young fathers can be supported to engage in education, employment and training and how best to support them to take greater responsibility for contraception (over which male partners can have a strong influence) to help reduce second and subsequent unplanned pregnancies.

### The benefits of young fathers work

Work with fathers is important because they make a particular contribution to their children's development and family life. Men's involvement in family life is changing, and whether resident or not, fathers have a significant role to play in the development and well-being of their children (Lamb, 2004; Lewis and Lamb, in press; Lloyd *et al.*, 2003; Warin *et al.*, 1999). Research confirms that fathers can have a substantial impact in terms of both positive and negative outcomes for their children (Cawson *et al.*, 2000; Lamb, 2004; Lamb and Lewis, 2004; Lloyd *et al.*, 2003), and has also highlighted the need to support young and vulnerable fathers in the involvement with their children (e.g. Mordaunt, 2005). For example, evidence suggests that children do better among separated families when there is close and positive contact with both parents (e.g. Amato *et al.*, 1999). Moreover, high levels of positive father involvement in two parent families is associated with a range of desirable educational, social and emotional outcomes for children and young people (e.g. Flouri, 2005). These include including better examination results, better attendance and behaviour, less criminality and substance abuse, better peer relationships, higher self-esteem and confidence, and better mental health. Furthermore, studies have found that when fathers are involved with their children at age seven, this can act as a protective factor in relation to education, crime, mental health, and homelessness. Once fathers are involved, they are also more likely to remain so (Flouri, 2005; Welsh *et al.*, 2004).

However, it is important to acknowledge that an increased level of father involvement is not always positive. For example a range of negative developmental outcomes for the child have been associated with some fathers' poor or neglectful parenting, anti-social behaviour, and substance abuse. Whether a positive or negative influence, what is clear is that everything a father does impacts on the child, and as Burgess (2006b) points out, although negative behaviour by some fathers could be seen as an impetus to exclude men from family services and support programmes, the alternative view is that such behaviours actually accentuate the need to work with fathers in public services.

The recognition that parenting matters (mothering and fathering), and is an important and critical influence on a child's life, has been stated explicitly in the government's 2003 Green Paper *Every Child Matters* (ECM). In section three of

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the document ‘*Supporting Parents and Carers*’, it states that ‘*In the past, public policy has paid insufficient attention to supporting parents and helping families find solutions for themselves*’. It goes on to acknowledge the need to build responsive and flexible services to support children that involve parents without excluding fathers:

*‘...the government would like to develop more and better universal services...which could include...support programmes for fathers as well as mothers so that all children, but especially those who are living apart from their fathers, develop positive relationships with both parents.’*

ECM is important because it has led to children and young people’s services being radically reshaped to bring about a new focus on the prevention of poor outcomes. Such an emphasis offers a unique opportunity to develop services that relate to families as a whole (i.e. including fathers), rather than just parts of them.

### Young fathers and services

A growing body of research (Pollock *et al.*, 2005; Ryan, 2000; Quinton *et al.*, 2002) suggests that services often exclude young men through a combination of ‘traditional’ mother-focused approaches, ignorance of male perspectives, and sometimes through overt discrimination. Services that cater for young parents almost invariably focus on young mothers, and even where they also aim to support young fathers, they often struggle to find ways to do this effectively (e.g. Ghate *et al.*, 2000; Ryan, 2000).

In their report examining research findings relating to fathers involvement with social care services, Ashley *et al.*, (2006, p.19) point out that practitioners are often reticent about engaging fathers in services because of the ‘*possible impact on women and children attending who may have experienced domestic violence, and because of more generalised concerns and worries about child sex abuse*’. This means that in many instances, professionals are continuing to juggle with constructions of the father as a ‘risk’ *vs.* the father as a ‘resource’ (Featherstone, 2001). In their study of young prospective Black fathers, Pollock *et al.*, (2005) also highlight how young men are excluded by services. The authors found that the young men were committed to involvement in fatherhood and the future care of their child. However, the authors report that the young men’s experiences of antenatal care at the hospital, together with extensive involvement of the mother’s family and friends, tended to reinforce feelings of being marginal to the pregnancy. Consequently, Pollock and her colleagues, argue that there is a need to challenge the established ways of working with young fathers in maternity provision in order to promote the development of more father-inclusive services.

Practices focusing almost exclusively on the mother are deeply embedded within the teenage pregnancy sector, and probably stem from an understandable desire to empower and respect the young mothers whom agencies are in contact with. But there is a lack of confidence and clarity in many local programmes and services about how to work effectively with both young mothers *and* young fathers. Practitioners who are used to working with young mums often find it hard to understand the relevance of young fathers to their work (Burgess, 2006a). As a result, even services that do engage with young men place little value on their roles as fathers, and rarely ask questions about parental status as a matter of course. Services that have not been proactive in trying to engage with young fathers are not held sufficiently to account for this failure, either locally

or nationally. Work with fathers is welcomed when it happens, but it does not lead to many searching questions about local effectiveness if it does not happen.

However, there is perhaps an important caveat here in that it is likely that a genuine dilemma exists for some practitioners in terms of their core beliefs about legitimate client focus. On the one hand, there is the issue of whether mainstream services (where the well-being of the child and/or the mother is usually the main focus), should be engaging with young fathers who may not be involved with the child or mother (e.g. because of exclusion or non-residency). If so, then there is a legitimate argument for the need for more specialised (as oppose to generic mainstream) services that can offer dedicated support for young fathers. However, on the other hand, and as discussed earlier, research has demonstrated the impact a father can have on the developmental well-being of the child. Consequently, this suggests that even if young fathers are not directly involved with the child and/or mother, then mainstream services should try to engage and support young fathers as part of their broader remit of ‘working with parents’ in the same way that already happens with young mothers.

So far in this section, we have drawn attention to the need for more ‘father-friendly’ services. However, it is important to acknowledge that some young fathers are wary of involvement with services and collude with the historical service focus on mothers and children. For some, engaging with such services may be seen as ‘unmanly’. Such ideas form part of wider (and changing) notions of popular ‘masculinity’.

Although there is an extensive literature on the concepts of masculinities and femininities (and it is beyond the scope of this publication to review it), it would appear that knowledge of contemporary thinking is very patchy amongst practitioners working with young fathers/parents. Whilst some agencies and projects are rooted in a deep understanding of such ideas, amongst others there is possibly a tendency to oversimplify. In such circumstances, promoting services for males is championed as a way of redressing the perceived excesses of feminism, rather than part of responding to a more complex understanding of how masculinities and femininities function in current society. From the author’s perspective, it would appear that a working knowledge of such ideas and how they might impact on young men and women in relation to fatherhood would be valuable for practitioners.

### Beliefs about young fathers

Incessant stereotyping of young fathers has led to widespread ‘deficit beliefs’ which include notions that young fathers are not interested in their children, are irresponsible, uncaring, and that young mothers are better off without the (young) fathers of their children (Burgess, 2006a). Research evidence strongly contests the stereotypical view of the worthless and ‘feckless’ young father (Lamb and Lewis, 2004). For example, Suzanne Speak and her colleagues (1997) have shown that many young fathers fervently want to be involved with their children but often face significant barriers in doing so including inadequate housing, low income, and resistance from the mother or mother’s family. Other studies by Quinton *et al.*, (2002) and Rolph (1999) confirm that many young men want to become and remain involved in their children’s lives, and that fatherhood for many young fathers, is viewed as a source of pride rather than something to run away from.

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It is now well acknowledged that the attitudes and ambivalence of many professionals' towards young fathers, needs to change. Recommendations from TSA's young fathers project (Mordaunt, 2005) advocate that challenging the way language is used in policy and practice, can act as an important catalyst for change in attitudes about young fathers. Similarly, in a telephone interview Roger Olley from Fathers Plus (Children North East) argued that government policy documents need to be reviewed to ensure that the word 'parent' is not used as a euphemism for 'mother'. This view was echoed by a number of projects we spoke to in this research, and is an issue we discuss at various points throughout the guide.

*'It's important you don't say teenage parents - you say "teenage mums and dads" - until professionals understand that when you say teenage parents, you really mean it!' (Practitioner, TPSS, Hull)*

### School-age young fathers and older young fathers

It is clear that although 'young fathers' generally are more invisible than their older counterparts, there is a group of even younger men who are further subsumed within this category. Significant gaps in research, discussion, and practice about school-age fathers are only too evident. As we discuss later, few young fathers projects or services engage specifically with fathers under the age of 16 years, partly because of perceptions that they can be so 'hard-to-reach' but also because of beliefs that they simply are not 'out-there' - such perceptions need to be challenged. Moreover, whilst there are mechanisms in place to identify and support school-age mothers, no such mechanisms are available for school-age fathers. Yet very young vulnerable men are equally at risk from exclusion and are likely to require considerable emotional and practical support in their daily lives.

As we discuss in *'Being Strategic'* (see p23) it is also important to acknowledge the heterogeneity of young fathers needs, and discern how they may differ according to various characteristics such as age, ethnicity, and socio-economic status. Sexual identity and whether the young man has a disability will also be relevant, and young men from particularly marginalised groups such as those in public care tend to experience additional difficulties not shared by their wider peers. There is a tendency in the literature to talk about young fathers as though they are a homogenous group of young men. However, services and those working with young fathers need to recognise the diverse agendas young men may present.

### Next steps

Throughout this publication we argue that mainstream services need to engage more fully with young fathers so that they ultimately become 'normal' and legitimate clients and that the term 'parent' genuinely begins to mean both 'mother' and 'father'. We also argue that whilst there is a need for the development of more system-wide strategies and service provision that are young father-inclusive, there also needs to be a mix of specialist services aimed at young fathers but that are still integrated with mainstream father-inclusive services. This is an issue we explore at various points in sections two and three of the guide.

## Supporting young fathers: examples of promising practice

Work with young fathers continues to be patchy across England. In some regions it hardly seems to exist, whilst in others, the profile is high. However, the signs are positive as evidence of promising work continues to emerge. In the course of collating the material for this report, it has become clear that there is some excellent work currently being carried out with young fathers across the country. For example, well-established projects such as boys2MEN (London), the Mancroft Advice Project (MAP; Norwich), Base 25 (Wolverhampton), and Fathers Plus (Newcastle), continue to develop and build up dedicated expertise in work with young men<sup>4</sup>. At the same time, newer, less established projects and services are also beginning to make headway such as Fathers First (Isle of Wight) that works with teenage and school-age fathers, Lewisham Young Fathers Project offering integrated services for young fathers, and research and consultancy work with Black and Minority Ethnic young fathers in Bradford and Luton.

It is of course always difficult to have a complete handle on what is happening ‘on the ground’ in terms of young fathers work. A common cry from practitioners working with young fathers (or those about to), is that they often do not know what is going on ‘out there’: they tend to only get snippets of information about existing young fathers work. Consequently, new work with young men is not always built upon the learning experiences of others. This guide therefore aims to provide a productive first-step by identifying and sharing examples of promising practice of work with young fathers from around England. It is hoped that this will not only communicate the priority that Beverley Hughes (current Minister for Children, Young People, and Families) has placed on engaging with (young) fathers, but at the same time offer useful and practical advice on how work with young men can be taken forward.

In this publication we have aimed to move beyond generalist descriptions of agencies’ work. Instead, we have tried to provide the practical details that practitioners told us they want to learn about.

We have deliberately included a lot of reference material at the end of the guide, including a list of contacts which summarises the work of individual agencies, details of other useful organisations, and a list of resources. We hope this will enable readers to network with each other and delve more deeply into the issues that particularly interest them.

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4. A list of young fathers projects consulted in the writing of this report can be found on page 60.

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