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The Transition to Fatherhood in Young Men: Influences on Commitment

Background.
Failure to accept the responsibilities of fatherhood is a major concern because of its deleterious effects on child development, on the resources of the mother, and because of the consequent social costs. Young fathers are largely absent from public statistics. There are no population-based data on the age at which fatherhood starts, compared with the voluminous statistics on motherhood and female fertility.

Earlier studies generally highlight a number of background risks for early fatherhood including lower parental education, large family size, not being raised by both birth parents, and financial hardship. Associations have also been found with low educational attainment, psychosocial adjustment, antisocial behaviour and low self-esteem.

However, most research has focussed on these risks. There are no data on young fathers’ continuing relationship with the mother and baby, even though stable intimate partnerships are known to be one of the most powerful factors in promoting transition out of social disaffection and the problems in social functioning that are associated with poor childhood experiences.

Objectives. The objectives of the study were:
1) To document the experiences of young first time fathers, especially those young men at risk of not accepting the parenting role.
2) To identify the predictors of continuing involvement with the mother and child one year after the birth.
3) To examine how fatherhood becomes part of young men’s identities, and how this affects the transition to adulthood and out of social exclusion.
4) To look at the preparation and support for high-risk young parents by services and to see how these might be changed better to include prospective fathers, and thus encourage commitment.
Methods.
On the basis of the literature review we defined early fatherhood as expected parenthood between age 17 and 23. A sample of 94 prospective first-time mothers with partners in this age range was consecutively recruited from all those booking-in the Avon health district between June 1999 and April 2000. The couples were interviewed separately in their homes at about 5 months into the pregnancy and again at nine months after the birth. Ninety two women and 74 men were interviewed during pregnancy and 78 women and 52 men at follow-up.

Checks on the representativeness of the sample showed that it was similar in age profile to the full sample of booked in cases and that similar proportions of young fathers were not engaged with the mother and baby at follow up. In our sample, sixty nine percent of couples were living together at follow-up. Thirty seven percent of men were not significantly involved as fathers.

Experiences of the young men. For the majority of the men the pregnancy was a complete surprise and feelings at first were negative or mixed. By the time of the interview many more had come to feel positively about it but $2/3$ had no clear image of themselves as a father.

Just over half attended most clinic appointments, but very few had any contact with preparatory or advice services, despite reporting significant levels of worry about aspects of the pregnancy and birth. There was clear evidence from their accounts that, on the whole, services did not know how to deal with them. Although there were exceptions, clinic staff often talked only to the mother-to-be and did not look at the prospective father.

Risks in the young men’s backgrounds. It was clear that our sampling did recruit young fathers with high levels of risk factors. About one third had experienced unhappy or discordant family relationships, the majority had hated school or found it boring and nearly two-fifths showed problems in their work patterns and nearly one third in their social functioning prior to the pregnancy.
Family relationships. Parents were till very much part of these young men’s lives. For example, 36% still lived at home during the pregnancy and another 51% saw one or both parents weekly.

However relationships were often poor and unsupportive. About one 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 one half of the prospective grandparents were clearly positive and supportive. There was a picture of persistently poor or cool relationships between the them and the young men and women and one sixth to one fifth of their own mothers and nearly one third of their fathers.

Risk and low post-natal involvement.

- One way in which childhood and family risks are related to early fatherhood is through their impact on the young men’s social functioning, and this link was true in our sample. Nineteen percent of young men with lower family risk scored high on a measure of poorer social functioning, as against 52% of those with high family risk. However, poorer social functioning was not more common amongst the younger men.

- The age of the young parents and whether the mother-to-be was living with her own parents during pregnancy were strongly predictive of the man’s involvement at follow-up. The effect of age applied especially to the youngest age groups of both men and women. The strong association between the woman’s place of residence during pregnancy and the man’s involvement was strongly related to her age.

- It was striking that, in this sample, neither poor childhood family relationships nor poorer social functioning were predictive of the man’s involvement at follow-up. Neither was the quality of relationships with the man’s and the woman’s kin.

- On the other hand the couples’ own judgements on their relationship- especially the woman’s- were related to post-natal involvement, even though both partners were inclined to be positive and hopeful during the pregnancy. Interviewers’ judgements were the most predictive, although these were often wrong.
Preparation and support for young parents. These data strikingly point towards a lack of support and preparation of the young parents by services, especially the men, in their transition to parenthood. There were examples of good practice but for the most part the man was ignored, marginalised or made uncomfortable by services, despite their stated desire for information, advice and inclusion.

Discussion. In reviewing the main findings 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 at follow-up.

On the other hand the lack of a connection between family and individual risks and the men’s involvement at follow-up, as well as the importance of the couple’s relationships, point to the potential for first fatherhood to be a transition out of social disaffection. However, the risks may reappear as negative influences if things get tough further down the line. Conversely, positive family supports may also become important in a way that they are not during this early period of transition.

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