

# Young Fathers: What Works in Practice

## A Practice Guide



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# Contents

1. Introduction .....	2
2. Importance of Supporting Young Fathers .....	3
3. Understanding Young Fathers .....	6
Activity 1 .....	8
Activity 2 .....	9
Activity 3 .....	9
4. Approaches and Strategies when Supporting Young Fathers ...	10
Two Roads Activity .....	13
5. Reflective Practice and Staying Curious .....	14
Reflective Practice Template .....	15
Activity 4 .....	16
Activity 5 .....	16
6. Importance of Young Fathers' Feedback .....	18
Activity 6 .....	19
Activity 7 .....	20
7. Partnership Working .....	21
Activity 8 .....	22
8. Overcoming Partnership Challenges .....	24
9. Family Nurse Partnership and 'Dads at their Best' Case Study ...	26
10. Bringing Professionals Together- A Community of Practice ...	29
11. The Positive Impact of Professional Support and Partnership Working for Young Fathers .....	30
12. Signposting .....	32
13. References and Footnotes .....	33
Acknowledgements .....	36



# 1. Introduction

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Supporting young parents has been a longstanding policy agenda in the UK, and in the past, much of this has been focused on young mothers.<sup>30</sup> In recent times, there has been a wider acknowledgement that young fathers' experiences must be recognised and the differing parenting journeys that they may encounter, especially when compared to young mums.<sup>8</sup> A better understanding of young men's experiences as parents and carers is vital for effective professional practice and policy making decisions.

**Young fatherhood can be defined in different ways but is commonly understood as a young man experiencing the pregnancy or birth aged 25 or under.**

By using latest research and in collaboration with practitioners and key stakeholders, this practice guide has been designed to help professionals across a range of sectors to understand the views of young fathers based on young men's first-hand accounts.

The practice guide also offers tips and advice on partnership working with young fathers. We have seen that successful partnerships can be extremely effective and impactful for professionals and young fathers alike and we share examples to illustrate this.

The practice guide can be used alone or with others and we encourage you to complete the activities as you go along to think about your own practice. At the end of the practice guide, we signpost resources and relevant readings which may be of interest. Once you have completed the practice guide, you can print off the declaration of young fathers' inclusive practice at the back of the document, which can be displayed in your setting.



## 2. Importance of Supporting Young Fathers

As a starting point, it would be useful to understand why it is important to support young fathers. By understanding the value of such work, it can drive and inform our professional attitudes and behaviours.

Young fathers are a diverse group and each young man will have a unique outlook and experience of fatherhood shaped by many factors. Young dads can vary by age, socio-economic status, ethnicity, health, well-being, cultural views, personal characteristics, upbringing, and experience of different personal relationships.<sup>45</sup> These variables can interact in multiple and complex ways which might influence how young fathers perceive and respond to professionals.

Although young fathers should not be homogenised as all being the same, research does suggest that young men who enter parenthood are more likely to experience the following (when compared to peers or older parents):<sup>1, 12, 49, 53, 58, 59, 63</sup>

1. Grown up in an unstable family background
2. Experienced family poverty
3. Experienced Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs)\*
4. Lacked positive male role models
5. Had poorer attainment and/or educational outcomes
6. Been persistently absent from school and left school early
7. Less likely to be in education, employment or training
8. Faced greater employment challenges – from finding work to workplace discrimination once employed
9. Faced greater financial instability
10. Social exclusion
11. Mental health issues and concerns
12. Marginalised backgrounds (with an increased likelihood of facing inequalities such as health, education, employment, and racism)
13. Heightened vulnerabilities such as being a looked after young person or care leavers

\* Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs) includes physical abuse, sexual abuse, psychological abuse, physical neglect, psychological neglect, witnessing domestic violence, having a close family member who misused drugs or alcohol, having a close family member with mental health problems, having a close family member who has been incarcerated, parental separation or divorce on account of relationship breakdown.<sup>22</sup>

**Issues such as austerity, the COVID-19 pandemic and the cost of living crisis have heightened existing inequalities that young fathers face.<sup>8</sup>**

The Government acknowledges the role of fathers and recognises the importance of engaging them within services, to reduce inequalities and to improve young parents' future outcomes. The '*Teenage Pregnancy Prevention Framework*' (Public Health England/PHE and Local Government Association/LGA, 2018) provides government guidance and the '*Supporting Teenage Mothers and Young Fathers Framework*' (PHE and LGA, 2019) helps local authorities and service providers to assess and review their services for young parents.<sup>52, 53</sup>



Given some of the issues that young fathers may face, supporting the needs of young men can overlap with other policy agendas, initiatives and guidance, such as:<sup>5, 13, 15-17, 33-35, 47</sup>

- Relationships, health and sex education (RHSE)
- Sexual and reproductive health
- Promoting young people's emotional health and well-being
- Early help
- Child poverty
- NEET (not in education, employment or training)
- Widening participation
- Supporting care leavers
- Safeguarding

## Useful Links

- ➔ Department for Education (2021). [Relationships Education, Relationships and Sex Education \(RSE\) and Health Education Guidance](#)
- ➔ Office for Health Improvement & Disparities (2022). [Sexual and Reproductive Health and HIV: Applying All Our Health - GOV.UK](#)
- ➔ HM Government (updated 2023). [Promoting Children and Young People's Mental Health and Wellbeing](#)
- ➔ Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities (2022). [Early Help System Guide](#)
- ➔ Cabinet Office (2024). [Child Poverty Strategy Launch Publication.pdf](#)
- ➔ Department for Education (2025). [Identify and Support Young People at Risk of Being NEET](#)
- ➔ House of Commons Library (2018). [Widening Participation Strategy in Higher Education in England](#)
- ➔ Department for Education (2018). [Extending Personal Adviser Support to All Care Leavers to Age 25](#)
- ➔ HM Government (2023). [Working Together to Safeguard Children 2023: Statutory Guidance](#)



Early intervention can prevent problems from escalating, including crisis and emergencies. For every £1 invested in early intervention, the public sector can save £2.40 in the long term. For every £1 spent on addressing teenage pregnancy, it saves £4 on health, education, social care and welfare costs.<sup>41</sup> By supporting young fathers and at an earlier stage, professional support can have the following positive impacts:<sup>4,6,11,51,64</sup>



- **Empowering young fathers as parents**

- **Encourages positive role modelling**



- **Strengthens parent-child relationships**

- **Encourages positive fatherhood involvement which has a beneficial impact on a child's later outcomes (including children's development, health, and educational attainment)**



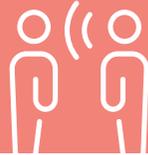

- **Encourages resilience in the young man**



- **Encourages a sense of purpose and belonging**



- **Enhances coping skills**



- **Fosters effective co-parenting strategies**

- **Can raise the young fathers' aspirations, including positive changes to lifestyle and behaviours**



- **Helps young men to enter/re-enter education, employment and training**



- **Reduces risks of social problems**

**The best times to engage with fathers are during the pregnancy and shortly after the birth, when they are most receptive to information, learning and support**

### 3. Understanding Young Fathers

When thinking about young fatherhood, people often have different ideas about who might be a young dad and how they parent. These thoughts may come from personal or professional views and experiences, the influence of the media, gender and cultural norms, or societal values for example.



**“We just get blasted. You could be the best dad in the world, you could do everything, you could be a millionaire and support your child financially, emotionally, everything and you’re still not good enough.”**

**‘Andy’**

As mentioned earlier, young fathers are distinct individuals with different backgrounds, circumstances, and viewpoints.<sup>45</sup> We must not assume that all young fathers are the same, or that they approach and experience parenting in similar ways.<sup>9</sup> Unfortunately, many young fathers have faced negative stereotypes and discrimination for entering parenthood at a younger age.<sup>8,54</sup> Young fathers have shared some of the comments they have received from professionals, friends, family, and even strangers below.

#### **Discriminatory attitudes towards young fathers include:**

1. Does not know how to parent properly
2. Is too immature to be a parent
3. Is a risk to himself and the child
4. Will not stay with the mother
5. Does not care about the mother of the child
6. Is less likely to care about their child
7. Will not fulfil his responsibilities to the child
8. Will not stick around for his child

Although fathers may be younger or more likely to have faced negative experiences, this does not mean that they are ‘lesser’ parents. But they may face greater challenges when compared to older parents due to limited finances, resources, certain societal expectations, and available support.<sup>24</sup> Research has shown a much more positive picture of young fathers.<sup>25,37</sup>

#### **Young fathers in reality:**

1. Love their child just as much as older parents
2. Want to be there for their child and play an active role
3. Want to provide materially for their child
4. Are highly committed to their child
5. Have made many sacrifices for their child
6. Have changed their lives for the better to be the best parent they can be
7. Cares for the mother as the ‘other parent’ regardless of the relationship status
8. Wants to co-parent with the mum

When young men think that others will think negatively of them based on their fatherhood status or age, this can affect how they view the role of professionals and support services, including the development of trust.<sup>64</sup>

Being mindful of how young fathers may be feeling and challenging your own assumptions and biases of young fatherhood is vitally important, especially at the first meeting which can set the scene for future interactions.

**“The dad I wanna be, is the dad that my little girl’s gonna look up to. She’s gonna have a smile and a giggle on her face as soon as she sees me.”**

**‘Seth’**

**“I think the main one for me, was to be here for my child, because I didn’t really grow up with a dad, so that was probably one of the biggest things for me was to be here.”**

**‘Chris’**

**“Just being able to meet all her needs and as she gets older, being able to meet the extra needs that comes along with that. Even when she’s a lot older, being a dad that she can talk to. I don’t want her to feel scared to talk to me.”**

**‘Tate’**



## First Impressions

Here are some examples of young men's initial feelings when meeting practitioners for the first time:

Will they judge me?

How will they treat me?

Will they listen to me?

Do they actually care?

Can I trust them?

Will they be thinking about my best interests as a dad?

Will they try to stop me from seeing my child?

Will they only listen to the mother?



Much can be inferred from what is said and how it is said to young fathers. Thinking about our own interactions, communication style, and body language are all important when meeting and working with young fathers. Bearing such factors in mind will help to develop a family and father-friendly atmosphere, build professional relationships, and foster a positive culture.

## Activity 1

Think about the ways in which we can greet young fathers for the first time. What can we do with our verbal and non-verbal interactions, gestures, and behaviours to form a good impression and to help build trust and engagement.

Verbal interactions and behaviours	Non-verbal interactions and behaviours
1.	
2.	
3.	
4.	
5.	
6.	
7.	



## 4. Approaches and Strategies when Supporting Young Fathers

In an earlier section, the diversity of young fatherhood was stressed and the importance of challenging negative stereotypes that are associated with young fathers. Getting to know the young man is also vital to understand and assess their needs to provide tailored professional support.

There can be a range of ways to learn more about the young father and their views of parenting. This can be through informal interactions, group work and other methods for example, or a combination. It is helpful to think about young fathers' communication preferences and how comfortable they feel about engaging in certain activities as you get to know them. Some dads may prefer written or verbal methods for instance, others may or may not feel comfortable sharing in a group situation.



### Gingerbread man activity

At Swindon Borough Council, the gingerbread man activity is used within the 'Dads at their Best' (DATB) service to get to know young fathers and to promote positive parenting. The support worker asks the young father to write down their thoughts and reflections on two separate and blank gingerbread men.

The first gingerbread man looks backwards and captures the young father's thoughts on his own childhood experiences with their father or a male role model. If anything negative is recorded on the first gingerbread man, this is discussed during DATB and appropriate support is provided.

The second gingerbread man is forward looking and depicts what sort of father that the young man aspires to be, alongside any personal attributes he would like to add. This can be based on positive factors which are recorded on the first gingerbread man and what the young father would like his own child to say about him.

By completing both gingerbread men, the activity acts as a helpful mechanism to support the young man to become the father they would like to be. At the same time, the activity encourages the avoidance of any negative experiences recorded on the first gingerbread man as part of the young father's parenting journey. The activity is revisited during DATB to inform and guide future sessions with the young dad.



An example of a completed gingerbread man and views of the young man's father.

Getting to know a young father is only one part of the jigsaw when it comes to positive and effective ways of working with and supporting young men. Professionals also spoke of key skills and certain approaches that can make the difference to how settings and professionals are perceived by young men, the level of engagement from fathers, and the quality of professional relationships.

## Approaches

<p><b>1</b></p> <p><b>Try to make the service known to the local community and young fathers (e.g., online presence, social media, leaflets etc)</b></p> 	<p><b>2</b></p> <p><b>Assess how the service is perceived – is it dad-friendly? See page 9.</b></p> 	<p><b>3</b></p> <p><b>Gain an understanding about young fathers’ background, circumstances and experiences, which can influence how they respond and react to professionals. See pages 10 and 13.</b></p>
 <p><b>4</b></p> <p><b>Actively include young fathers</b></p>	<p><b>5</b></p> <p><b>Encourage young fathers to ask questions</b></p> 	<p><b>6</b></p> <p><b>Let fathers express themselves in a way that is familiar and comfortable to them</b></p>
<p><b>7</b></p> <p><b>Assess young fathers’ care and support needs in an engaging, sensitive, and respectful manner</b></p> 	<p><b>8</b></p> <p><b>Suitable agenda matching (matching and tailoring support for dads on an individual level and adapting if needed)</b></p>	<p><b>9</b></p> <p><b>Respectful challenge (as a mechanism for young fathers to reflect on their behaviours, encourage accountability, and mobilise change)</b></p>
<p><b>10</b></p> <p><b>Balancing flexibility with professional boundaries (e.g. letting young fathers know when you are available and if not available, what other means of contact and support is in place instead)</b></p>	<p><b>11</b></p> <p><b>Providing opportunities for young fathers to speak to professionals away from others, such as the mother of the child, family members, and other professionals</b></p>	<p><b>12</b></p> <p><b>Persevere – if a young father does not seem engaged, there may be various reasons for this. Do not assume that the young man is not interested or unwilling to seek help</b></p>

## Skills

**1. Have empathy for how the young man may be feeling - this may be their first time working with professionals and/or they may have had negative encounters in the past. See page 9**



**2. Challenging personal biases and stereotypical thinking**

**3. Being non-judgemental. See pages 15-16**



**4. Having awareness of the pressures that young men may be feeling (e.g., masculinities and gender norms, from family members and peers)**

**5. Being approachable and open to building a positive relationship**



**6. Showing respect**



**7. Showing compassion**

**8. Active listening**

**9. Good communication and the ability to communicate via different means according to young men's preferences (phone, texts, emails)**



**10. Motivational interviewing (is a collaborative, goal-oriented style of communication with a focus on change)**

**11. Being adaptable (e.g. changes to timings of meetings, where to meet etc)**

**12. Be reliable and dependable – this is particularly important if young fathers have felt let down by others in the past**



All relationships take time, work, and effort. Professional relationships with young fathers are no different. When professionals support young fathers in the ways described, this can significantly improve how the young men view the service, helps them to build trust with support workers, and can encourage openness and receptiveness to the advice and support provided.

Young fathers may also be apprehensive to approach and engage with services due to traditional views of masculinity and the stigma associated with help-seeking behaviours. As professionals, it is important to challenge such views, whilst underscoring the importance and benefits of professional support to all client users. In *section 10*, we share young fathers' accounts of professional support and the difference it can make.

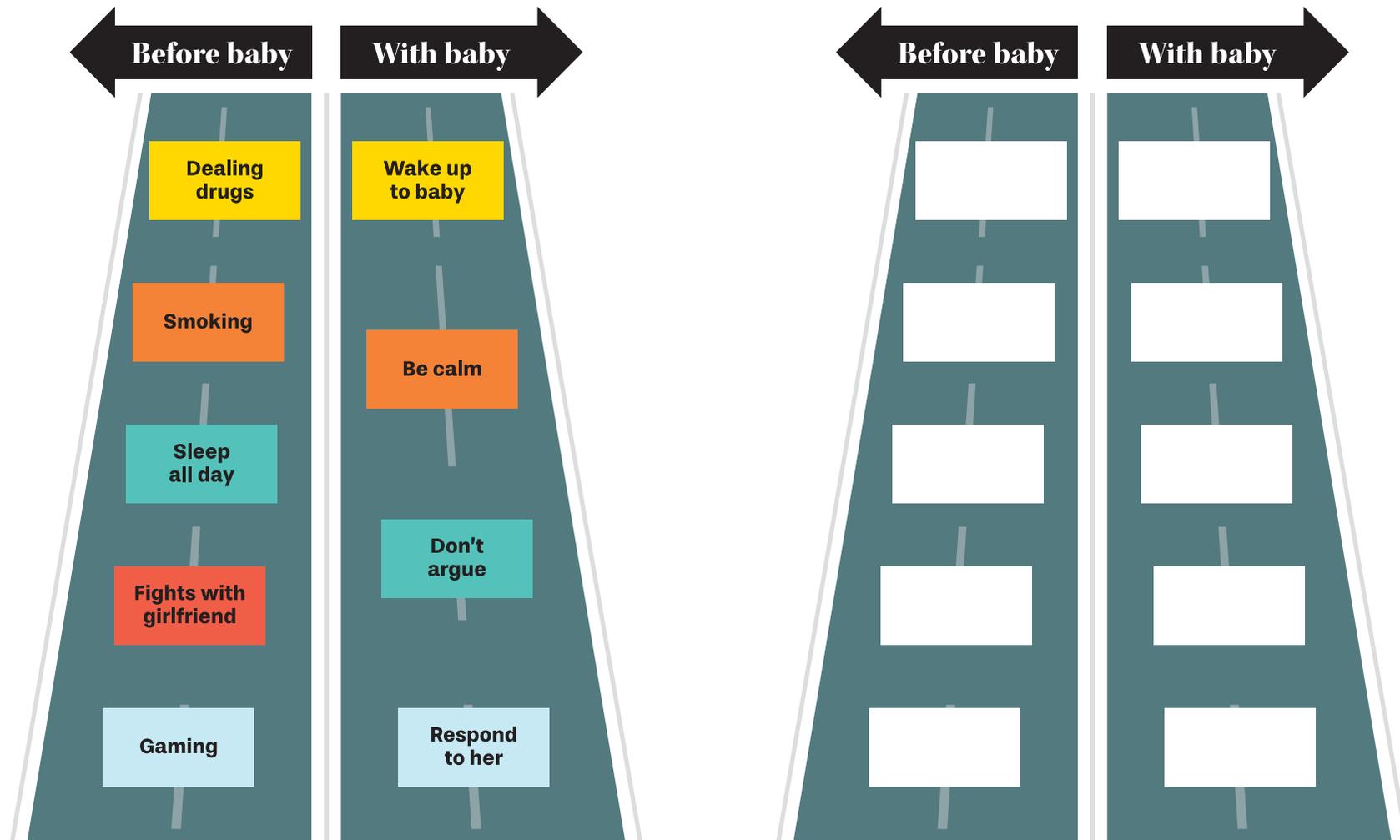
**“Because I’m a young man, I didn’t like to ring up and say ‘I think I’ve got depression and anxiety’, because obviously I’m a young bloke and young men don’t like talking about things like that... I think it’s still criticised a lot about men opening up and admitting that they’re sad and they cry and stuff like that. I feel like a lot of people still look down on men thinking that they should be the strong ones.”**

**‘Tucker’**

## Two Roads Activity

The 'Two Roads' activity was designed and used by the 'Dads at their Best' (DATB) service at Swindon Borough Council, as a useful tool for motivational interviewing and respectful challenge. The activity enables young fathers to reflect on their lifestyle choices and behaviours prior to parenthood on one road 'before baby'. On the second road 'with baby', fathers are asked to write down what actions and conduct are needed to keep their child safe, healthy and thriving.

The two roads can then facilitate a discussion between the support worker and the young dad to discuss the impact of any factors written down on the first road for their child. The activity can be enhanced to add a 'barrier' between the two roads, which can be used to discuss a safety plan around any of the lifestyle choices or behaviours that the young Dad is unable to fully remove from their life.



Credit: Ruth King, Young Fathers' Worker

Here is a blank copy that can be used with young fathers

## 5. Reflective Practice and Staying Curious

Reflective practice is important when working with young fathers and can be described as a process of self-evaluation by looking at individual actions, behaviours, responses and decisions. Through reflection, it can foster personal and professional growth by: <sup>2, 7, 12, 19, 28, 31, 36, 42, 29</sup>

- Increasing self-awareness
- Considering issues of equality, diversity and inclusion
- Understanding strengths and weaknesses
- Considering the impact of your own practice on others (e.g. young fathers and other professionals)
- Enhances problems-solving skills
- Promotes ongoing learning
- Aids the development of future practice

### Useful Links

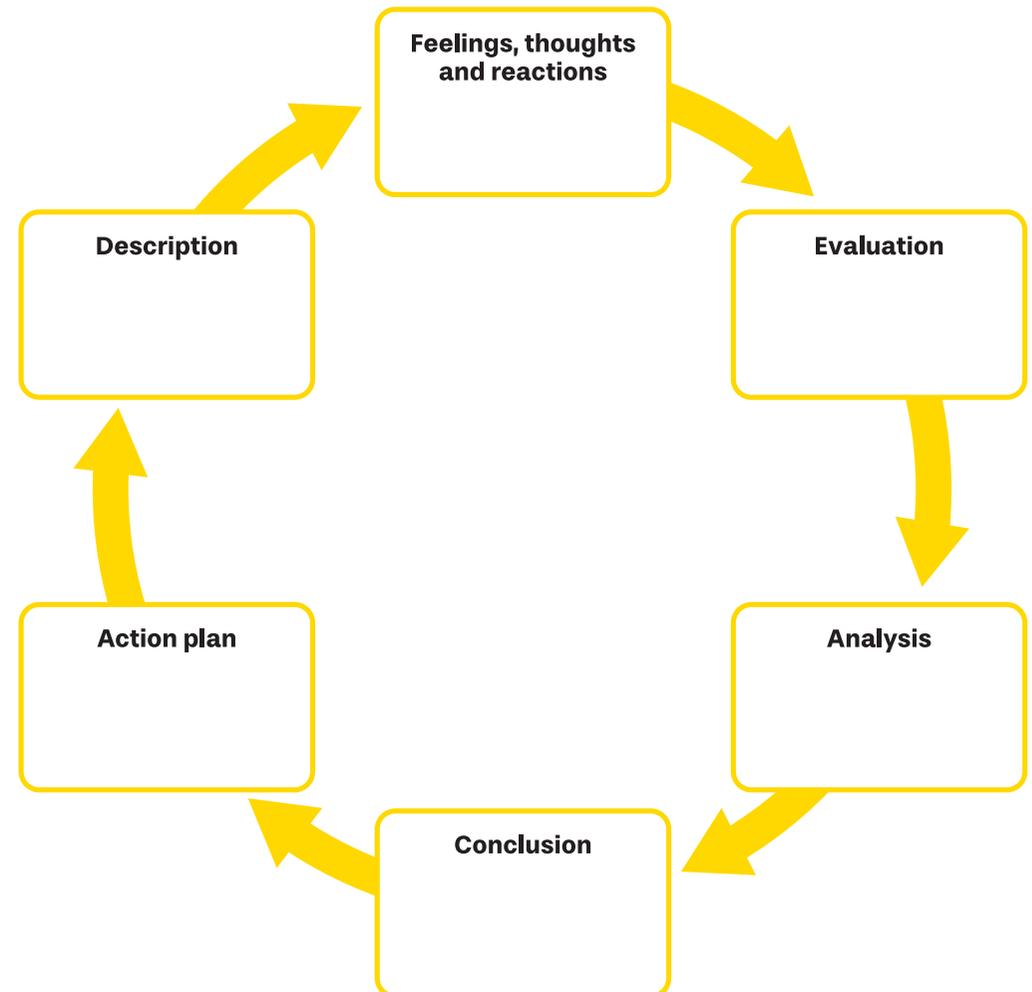
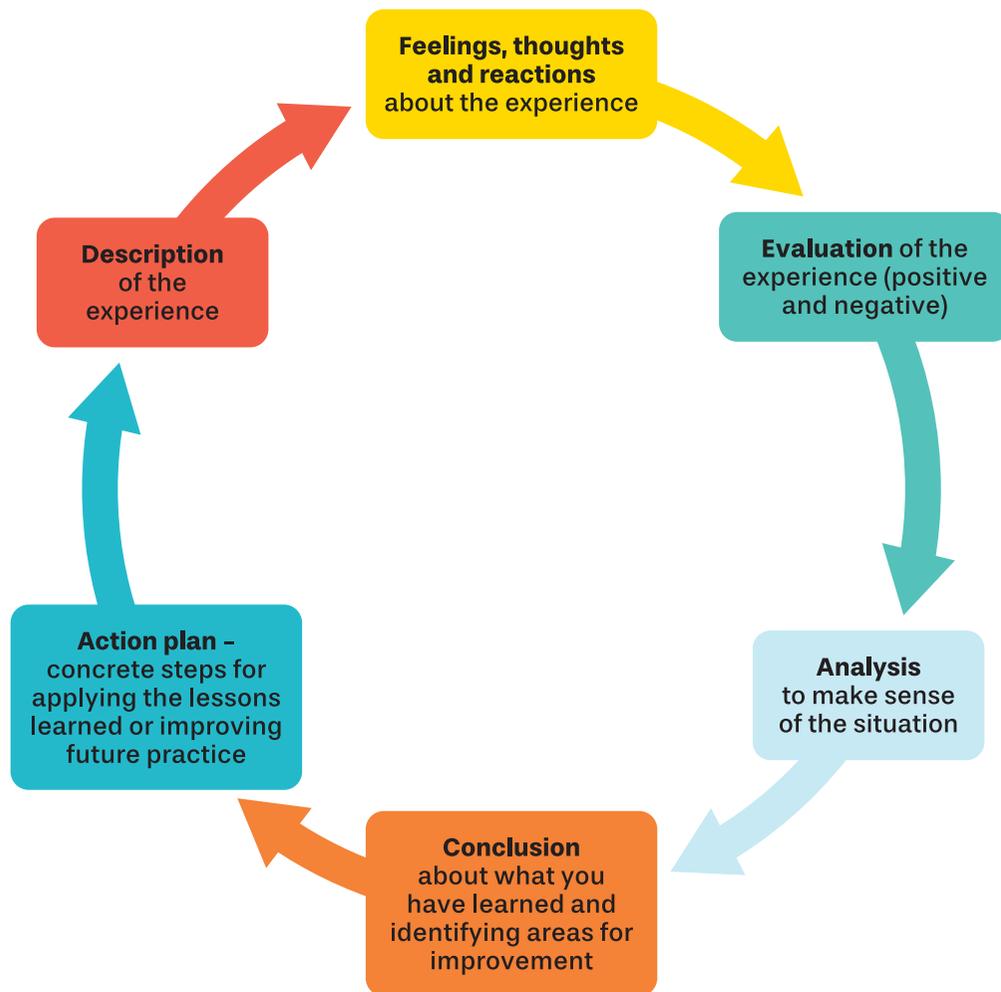
- Health and Care Professions Councils (2021). [Types of Reflective Practice](#).
- Gibbs, G. (1988). *Learning by Doing: A Guide to Teaching and Learning Methods*. Further Education Unit. Oxford Polytechnic: Oxford.



Reflective practice should ideally be a regular and ongoing process, rather than a one-off event. It can be done individually, with a peer, or in teams. Reflection can be made through reflective journals, free writing, utilising models (see Gibbs' Reflective Cycle below), observing others, being observed, professional development (e.g. attending training), and supervision meetings.

How much time is set aside for reflective practice will vary and depend on an individual's preference, the time available, and other practicalities, but even a short time that is dedicated to reflection will be beneficial.<sup>36,42</sup>

A well-known model of reflection is Gibbs' Reflective Cycle, which covers 6 stages.<sup>31</sup>



Here is a blank template to use



## **The Impact of Professional Attitudes on Young Fathers:**

### **A Case Study**

Being aware of our own biases and assumptions are important in the way we think about young fathers and how we respond to them. For example, a small number of young fathers such as 'Jorgi' and 'Logan' who were the primary caregiver had commented on the negative attitudes towards them for being a 'stay at home dad' from several practitioners. Suggestions were made that they should be "out there earning" based on gender stereotypes regarding male breadwinning.

**“Some professionals are a little prejudice and some of them felt a little bit hostile towards me because I’m a bloke.”**

**'Logan'**



Another father, Maxwell, also experienced negative comments from professionals for being a single father and the perception that children "should be" with their mothers.

**“I think professional support is very hard to interact with as a father, especially if you’re going through a break-up or you’re a single father. Because when I was asking for support, I used to get the vibe often that they don’t agree with children being with their fathers by themselves. I think they believe that children should always be with their mother no matter what.”**

**'Maxwell'**

As a result, young fathers felt that professionals had devalued their role as parents and their active contribution to their child's life. This led to the young fathers feeling uncomfortable during encounters with professionals, diminished levels of trust, and concerns that they would be negatively judged. These example demonstrates the care and thoughtfulness needed within professional approaches.



## 6. Importance of Young Fathers' Feedback

To deliver effective professional support, the ability to ascertain the views, wishes, and feelings of young fathers themselves is vital in understanding service delivery and quality, including the extent to which young fathers feel involved within the provision. By being open to feedback from service users, it can help professionals to:<sup>28</sup>

- Identify areas of strength and successful practice
- Highlight areas in need of revision or change
- Improve service users' experiences and outcomes
- Foster positive relationships between service providers and users
- Encourage professional development and reflective practice
- Ensure compliance and accountability

When seeking feedback, asking fathers directly should be prioritised, rather than relying on others to speak on their behalf (such as the mother of the child, partners or family members). The benefits of using direct feedback from service users to evaluate the quality of practice is well recognised.<sup>19</sup>

Ideally, gaining young men's feedback should be continuous and recorded in some way (formally, informally or both) so that you can track progress and any changes. There are many ways to collect feedback such as:

- Questionnaires
- Interviews
- Focus groups
- Spontaneous opportunities (e.g. during or after a session or meetings with a young father)
- Feedback forms
- Comments and suggestion boxes



- Co-production projects – where those with lived experience and service providers come together in an equal and reciprocal partnership in the design and development of services, including evaluation
- Formal evaluations (e.g. by an external provider)



When asking for feedback, there are several factors to consider:

1. **Individuality of young fathers**– How accessible and engaging are the feedback activities and opportunities?
2. **When should you collect feedback?** Depending on the type of feedback needed, it could be straight after an interaction or activity, collected after a certain period of time (e.g. baby's milestones) or as part of a formal review.
3. **Is there enough time to feedback**– Has sufficient time been planned and allocated for young fathers to share their views? If feedback is collected ad-hoc ('in the moment'), will this be enough or will a follow up be useful?
4. **Where are you asking young men to share their views?** The environment itself can influence the young man's ability and willingness to provide feedback. For example, if asking to feedback verbally, can the young man be overheard.
5. **Transparency, consent and GDPR (General Data Protection Regulation)<sup>27</sup> compliance** – Permission must be obtained from the participants. Inform the young men about if/how the information will be collected, stored, then used. Is the process GDPR compliant? Could information be collected anonymously?

## Activity 6

### Checklist: Feedback in your setting

In what ways are you collecting feedback from young fathers in your setting?	How inclusive is this method of feedback?	How often do you collect this type of feedback? (daily, weekly, monthly, yearly, ad-hoc)	Is this feedback recorded? Where will it be stored?	Who uses this feedback?	How effective is this type of feedback?	Can feedback be collected anonymously and confidentially?
1.						
2.						
3.						
4.						
5.						
6.						
7.						
8.						



## 7. Partnership Working

Partnership working is when two or more individuals, organisations or agencies come together to achieve common goals and objectives (also known as multi-agency working, multi-agency partnership, or joint working). The value of partnership working is emphasised within the teenage pregnancy frameworks, which stresses a 'whole system' approach.<sup>30, 52, 53</sup>

The scale, formality and level of partnership working can vary, ranging from collaboration (where both partners work together on all aspects of a project) to less intensive and informal partnerships (such as exchanging information for mutual benefit).<sup>18</sup> The type of partnership working that will be appropriate will depend on different circumstances, such as how much time is available, strategic alliances, cultural differences, levels of trust, and readiness for partnership working.<sup>57</sup> The length of time for partnerships may also vary from short to longer term.

When professionals work together, there can be many benefits, such as:<sup>21, 32, 43, 46</sup>

- Sharing skills, knowledge and expertise
- Cross-pollination of learning
- Gaining a holistic and wider understanding of client users
- Fresh perspectives
- Tailoring strategies to suit local context
- Encourages more efficient methods of working
- Savings on resources
- Reduces financial burdens
- Enables information sharing
- Adds capacity
- Training exchange
- Pooling of scarce resources
- Increases the reach and impact of services
- Opens up new funding opportunities



Within the current climate of reduced service funding, loss of services, fewer resources, and increased pressures on existing provision and staff (all of which have been exacerbated by the impact of austerity and the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic), the benefits of partnership working are further underlined as a way to navigate a challenging external environment for professional services.

### Successful Features of Partnership Working:<sup>3, 21</sup>

- Developing shared purpose, goals and values (revise together if needed)
- Clear expectations
- Establish and agree on leadership, roles and responsibilities
- Setting up clear protocols and accountability
- Mutual benefits identified for all parties involved
- Good communication
- Being open and transparent
- Developing trust
- Mutual respect
- Inclusivity (e.g. being mindful of body language, linguistic barriers or the use of jargon)
- Commitment to partnership at all levels (including senior level)
- Being flexible to cater for different partners
- Shared rewards

### Who could you partner with?

- Those within your own department
- Different areas of your organisation
- Other services (voluntary, private, third sector)
- Researchers
- Local government
- National government

## Activity 8

Use the template below to map out potential partnerships to support young fathers.

What is the vision of the partnership (i.e. purpose and goals)?	Who would be interested in partnering?	How would the partnership benefit partner/s?	How would the partnership benefit you/your organisation?	How long would the partnership be for (short/medium/long term)?	What could be the shared goals, objectives or principle of the partnership?	What resources are needed to develop and sustain the partnership?	What actions are needed to initiate the partnership?
1.							
2.							
3.							
4.							
5.							
6.							
7.							
8.							

The **self-assessment checklist** in the Teenage Pregnancy Prevention Framework is also a useful tool for councils to identify gaps and action plans in terms of local and strategic partnerships.<sup>52</sup>

With partnerships, it is not only important to consider how professionals work with one another, but also the involvement and impact of multiple professionals for the young fathers and their experience of formal support. When working with other professionals, consider your role and responsibilities with the young dad in mind, for instance:

- Keeping the young father and the child at the centre of professional conversations and any decision making
- Ensuring young fathers' needs are met
- Getting the best for the father through partnership working
- Providing a voice for the young man
- Making sure that the young father's voice is heard by other professionals
- Attending meetings with the young man if needed
- Providing explanations to the young father when working with multiple agencies
- Providing support and reassurance to the young man
- Using professional knowledge to help inform the work of other practitioners (e.g. so that the young man does not have to retell their story regarding their circumstances and feelings) and to help provide a holistic view of the young father's support needs

**“We will link in and target the same pieces of work at similar times, so that both parents are getting joined up working and support.”**  
(Health support worker)

**“Partnership working allows a cross pollination of learning which works really well.”**  
(Family support worker)

**“The other professionals have got to know me a bit more thanks to my young dads’ worker. So I feel a lot more included now.”**

**‘Ricky’**

**“ I think before working with the young dads’ worker, I didn’t trust professionals at all. I was very paranoid when it came to professionals. But now I’m a bit more trusting, not as paranoid about them if that makes sense.”**

**‘Chris’**



## 8. Overcoming Partnership Challenges

When multiple agencies come together and collaborate, there can be distinct advantages for those involved, including increased and co-ordinated support offered to the young father. At the same time, the complexities of partnership working can lead to challenges for professionals. Below are some common partnership issues and ways to overcome.<sup>10, 14, 26, 40, 48, 56</sup>

Barriers	Ways to overcome
<b>Agencies have different values or goals</b>	<p>Spend time getting to know each other's perspective, roles, and responsibilities. Understand how your values or goals may align or differ from one another.</p> <p>Develop a shared vision and engage in joint goal setting (this can be intermediary and end goals). By having a shared agenda, it can enhance collaboration, reduce conflict, and lead to better outcomes.</p>
<b>Culture clash of partners</b>	<p>Acknowledge the value and expertise of each partner to foster mutual understanding and respect.</p> <p>Take time to understand any differences and be flexible and adaptable to new ideas, perspectives, or approaches.</p> <p>Agreeing to the same values and goals of the partnership can help create a positive culture to underpin collaborative working.</p>
<b>Communication</b>	<p>Try to get the balance right. Consider the frequency and the most effective format of communication structures between all partners.</p> <p>Be mindful of communication differences and preferences- adjust as needed.</p> <p>Think of ways of communicating that are inclusive and accessible for those involved and avoid the use of jargon.</p> <p>Ask questions and seek clarification if needed and encourage partners to do the same.</p>
<b>Lack of trust</b>	<p>Sharing skills, expertise, resources and co-location of agencies, can help to build trust and mutual respect.</p> <p>Open dialogue and transparency will help to build professional relationships and confidence in the partnership.</p> <p>Regularly checking in with partners can help to build and maintain connections.</p>
<b>Lack of leadership</b>	<p>Having specific leaders or co-ordinators for the partnership can help drive and facilitate the collaboration.</p> <p>Having support for the partnership at strategic and operational levels will be beneficial and will contribute towards the success and progress of the partnership.</p>

## 8. Overcoming Partnership Challenges

Barriers	Ways to overcome
<b>Accountability</b>	<p>Establish and agree who is accountable for what in relation to the shared vision and goals. This means clearly defined roles and responsibilities of each organisation and every professional involved in the partnership.</p> <p>Regularly revisit roles and responsibilities and revise if necessary to ensure effectiveness of the collaboration.</p>
<b>Power dynamics</b>	<p>True equality within partnerships may not always be possible, but efforts to share decision-making and mutual co-operation can help to create a sense of reciprocity.</p>
<b>Professional disagreements and challenges</b>	<p>When different agencies work together, there may be differing opinions or concerns about practice, actions or inactions by other professionals with regards to the safety and welfare of the service user.</p> <p>Respectfully questioning and challenging the decisions, behaviours, and/or processes of another professional or agency for the benefit of the service user is seen as a fundamental responsibility of professionals and a constructive process for working together.</p> <p>Adopt a pro-active approach to resolve any disagreements as quickly as possible and in an open manner. This can be through discussions and/or meetings with those directly involved. If resolution cannot be reached, follow your organisation's policy procedures regarding an escalation process.</p>
<b>Limited time</b>	<p>Creating space and time for partnerships is vital.</p> <p>Understanding the time demands for each partner and ways to work around these, will be important conversations at the outset.</p> <p>Try to formulate strategies to overcome time constraints together. For example, agree reasonable timeframes for activities and any contingency plans.</p>
<b>Geographical barriers</b>	<p>If meeting in person is difficult due to physical distance or travel issues, then the use of online technology to meet virtually can be a practical and a cost efficient alternative.</p> <p>The convenience of meeting online can also encourage better attendance and engagement.</p>

## 9. Family Nurse Partnership and 'Dads at their Best' Case Study

### Background

In Swindon Borough Council, the 'Dads at their Best' (DATB) service was developed in 2021 to address the unmet needs of young fathers and fathers-to-be. The need for such a service became apparent to the local Family Nurse Partnership (FNP) team at the time. The FNP team then became key to the conception of DATB and later models of partnership working as described below.

FNP is a home visiting programme which supports young first-time mothers during their pregnancy up until the child's second birthday.<sup>i</sup> The inclusion of fathers is advocated as part of FNP, but it became evident that additional intensive support for young fathers was also needed, which was not possible within the existing FNP model. Furthermore, there was a lack of local services for young men who were new parents. Within this context, the FNP service model was flexed to develop DATB with the aim of supporting young fathers from pregnancy onwards and breaking down barriers to young fathers' engagement and access to service provision.

### How it Began

The idea for an additional service was proposed at the local FNP Advisory Board and Annual Review meetings, where data regarding levels of adversity and unmet need in young fathers were shared. The data of 90 biological fathers to FNP children showed that 55% had expressed mental health problems, 50% disclosed domestic abuse (88% were perpetrators), 39% were involved in criminal activity, 52% had involvement with illegal substances, and 82% of fathers had contact with their child.<sup>2</sup> The need for a new young fathers' service was clear and led to senior level buy-in as a result.

The views of partners of client-users on the FNP programme were also gathered (i.e. partners of mothers), as to what they liked about the FNP service and what they felt was missing.<sup>ii</sup> This showed that fathers wanted tailored one-to-one support specifically for dads to prepare for the birth and beyond.

Using the data gathered above and in conjunction with the FNP National Unit (now called '0-19 Clinical Programmes Unit', DHSC),<sup>iii</sup> a new FNP service model (see figure 1) was designed based on the structure, governance, supervision, and learning from the FNP programme. In this model, there was a newly created 'fathers' worker' role, which would sit within the FNP team with supervision provided by the FNP team manager. It was envisaged that the fathers' worker would benefit from the knowledge and shared learning within the FNP team, as well as contributing to a focus on the needs of fathers within the FNP service as a whole.

<sup>i</sup> FNP is an intensive nursing programme for young, vulnerable mothers and their partners delivered by specially trained public health nurses. Clients are visited intensively from early pregnancy and up till the child is two years of age. [Guidebook Archive - Foundations](#)

<sup>ii</sup> Swindon FNP local data collection

<sup>iii</sup> DHSC is the [Department for Health and Social Care](#)



## The Integration of FNP Service Elements with Swindon Borough Council Young Fathers' Service



Figure 1 taken from FNP Practice Resource Guide

## Developing the 'Dads at their Best' Model

A project group was established that closely followed the Early Intervention Foundation's evaluation framework to design a new young fathers' offer (i.e. DATB) expanding upon the existing FNP service model.<sup>23</sup> This involved developing a theory of change, a logic model and robust project management. The development of DATB was an iterative process which included the views of the FNP team, the (formerly named) National Unit, local practitioners, and other stakeholders. Early on in the development of DATB, a fathers' worker was employed and they played a role in the development of the DATB service also.

By drawing on good practice from FNP and the latest research on young fatherhood, DATB utilises evidence informed practice and models of working to engage with, and to support young men. This includes weekly supervision, monthly psychology supervision, weekly team meetings, tripartite safeguarding supervision with a named nurse, early engagement of clients, specialised skills to engage and retain clients (motivational interviewing), and knowledge about the adolescent brain and attachment.

As part of their role, the new fathers' worker was involved in the development of a bespoke young fathers' training programme for professionals (including FNP nurses), liaising with a wide range of stakeholders and specialists to upskill and build relationships locally. This has been invaluable in widening the influence of DATB to share learning and practice around working with fathers to other partners in the system.

## Evaluation

A qualitative evaluation of the service was conducted after the third year, which showed it was impacting positively on a range of outcomes, including fathers' engagement with professionals, parenting, co-parenting ability and confidence, attitudes and behaviours of the young men, whilst serving a need in the local provision for young fathers.<sup>7</sup>

## Progress

The new fathers' model has been replicated or adapted in other areas of the country where FNP is commissioned. A national community of practice (CoP) for FNP teams has been established to share knowledge and experience around working with young fathers.

**“My experience with ‘Dads at their Best’ has been amazing. My confidence has improved, my understanding and knowledge of certain things, like positive and negative relationships, health, eating well, living well ... It’s helped immensely with everything.”**  
**‘Ricky’**



## 10. Bringing Professionals Together- A Community of Practice

A community of practice (COPs) are groups of professionals in similar fields that share common goals or interests. COPs come together to develop and share their experience and knowledge for the benefit of themselves and their organisations.<sup>14, 50</sup> In such ways, new knowledge can be gained, including learning improved ways of working and problem solving.<sup>50-62</sup> COPs can be face to face, virtual or hybrid and may be formal or informal. COPs can stimulate and encourage partnership working and collaboration as mentioned in *section 7*.

### Steps to Developing a Community of Practice

1. Identify the focus: Working with fathers
2. Create a 'Terms of Reference': Roles, responsibilities and membership
3. Identify and invite a core group of individuals who share a passion and interest
4. Have leadership support to ensure resources needed are available and to ensure COP aligns to strategic goals
5. Plan the structure: Frequency, format etc.
6. Launch the group: Share agenda, date of meetings, room bookings etc.
7. Facilitate engagement as per the terms of reference
8. Evaluate: Collect feedback to ensure your COP is meeting goals
9. Share outcomes



### Top Tips:

1. Find the right people and create good relationships with group members to keep up momentum
2. Ensure there is adequate time for planning and delivery
3. Empower members to shape the agenda and contribute
4. Maintain a regular meeting rhythm

# 11. The Positive Impact of Professional Support and Partnership Working for Young Fathers

When professionals provide supportive, empathetic, and genuine professional care, this can have a significant and positive impact on young men and lead to improvements in their experiences and future outcomes. This also leads to improved opportunities and outcomes for their children.

Below are some quotes from young fathers about the value of professional support and when professional partnerships have made a difference to them. We hope these accounts will inspire your own practice and provide an insight into the difference that formal services can have for young men.

**“I was really struggling, like really, really bad at first, and ever since I’ve been working with the young fathers’ support worker, she’s just guided me in the right direction. She’s helped me a lot. Pulled me out of some dark places, I can tell you that for a fact.”**

**‘Kirk’**

**“I do feel a lot more comfortable being a dad now than I was before... I think I’m not as scared of it now as I was then. The young fathers’ support worker has made it a bit more manageable.”**

**‘Chris’**

**“Back in the day mums had first dibs and it was all like mum, mum, mum and now it’s different. So working with the young dads’ worker now, I think fathers have a fighting chance as well.”**

**‘Ricky’**

**“The dads’ group is the only place that I can go once a week and be around blokes who are in the same situation as me, who will listen to me and say, like, ‘look, you’re doing a great job. If you want some advice, here’s what you should do.’...I can get a lot of stuff off my chest there, which I would usually keep bottled up.”**

**‘Logan’**



**“Before going to the support setting, I was really building up my walls. I would never let anyone know how I feel, I’d just keep my mouth shut. As long as everyone else is happy, I’m happy. That’s how I was before. I now know that everyone else’s feelings matter, but it’s also about how you feel, and I can’t go around my whole life looking after everyone else and make myself last. So yeah, they’ve really helped me.”**

**‘Stephan’**

**“I didn’t have a clue about it all before, that’s for sure. The support worker has taught me quite a lot, like how to be aware about babies, about all the surroundings, safety, feeding. Obviously I can change him and all that. She’s taught me quite a lot... It’s changed my life.”**

**‘Kirk’**

**“The family support worker has been really good. You know, he’s given some really sound advice and generally really helped us. When he got involved me and my partner were on the brink of splitting up and he’s helped our relationship. He’s helped our relationship with our children too, it’s really helpful.”**

**‘Justin’**



**“Personally, I would say if I didn’t work with the support worker, I don’t think I’d be able to do half the things that I can do now. I had a couple of sessions and I can change baby’s bum, poo, sick, anything, without even battering an eyelid now. So it is really helping.”**

**‘Seth’**

**“To be honest with you, if I didn’t go to the young parents’ group when I was in a bad place a couple of years ago, I don’t think I’d be on this phone call to you today... I would probably be in a ditch by now to be fair if I hadn’t talked to the young fathers’ worker. It has definitely kept me in a good place.”**

**‘Tate’**

**“I think the young fathers’ worker has helped me a lot, especially with my bond with my child. She’s definitely helped me a lot with other things as well, with learning about other aspects of being a dad and all of that.”**

**‘Lee’**

**“They helped me to work on my mental health. They also do a little bit of parenting skills with you. You know, they’re just great. I can’t praise them enough to be honest, they’re really good.”**

**‘Tucker’**

**“The professionals do give out some helpful tips, especially when it comes to children... Because that’s what they specialise in, they’re there for support, guidance, and things like that. So yeah, they’ve been good, I take my hat off to them.”**

**‘Jorge’**

**“Now I can talk to professionals about how I feel. But back then I was very much in the corner, timid, saying the bare minimum but now I say how I feel with confidence... I interact with them a bit more and am a bit more talkative now and I explain scenarios and examples.”**

**‘Ricky’**

## 12. Signposting

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**DigiDAD – By Dads for Dads**

<https://digidad.uk>

**DadPad | The Essential Guide for New Dads | Support Guide for New Dads**

<https://thedadpad.co.uk>

**Father Focused Hub**

<https://hub.fathersnetwork.org.uk>

**Father Inclusion Hub**

<https://fatherinclusion.org/about-us>

**Family Hubs Network - Helping Local Authorities and VCS help Families**

<https://familyhubsnetwork.com>

**Fathers in the Workplace Toolkit – A Set of Accessible, Easy-to-use Tools for Organisations to Support Fathers in the Workplace**

<https://more.bham.ac.uk/fathersintheworkplace/>

**Keeping Fathers in Sight: Good Practice for Engaging and Working with Fathers**

[https://norfolkscp.org.uk/media/zxdfyyi4/kfis\\_good-practice-guide-for-working-with-fathers\\_press-ready.pdf](https://norfolkscp.org.uk/media/zxdfyyi4/kfis_good-practice-guide-for-working-with-fathers_press-ready.pdf)

**Home | Local Government Association**

<https://www.local.gov.uk>

**New Pathways for Young Fathers: Young Fathers' Voices– An Illustrated Booklet**

<https://www.daddilife.com/wp-content/uploads/2022/01/New-Pathways-for-Young-Fathers-Young-Fathers-Voices.pdf>

**Reflective Journal on Father Inclusive Practice for Healthcare Professionals**

<https://path-perinatal.eu/uk/wp-content/uploads/sites/11/2022/06/1.-Fathers-Reflective-Journal-for-healthcare-professionals-final-7.6.22.pdf>

**Supporting Young Parents to Reach their Full Potential | Local Government Association**

<https://www.local.gov.uk/publications/supporting-young-parents-reach-their-full-potential>

**Teenage Pregnancy Knowledge Exchange - Teenage Pregnancy Knowledge Exchange | University of Bedfordshire**

<https://www.beds.ac.uk/tpke/>

**Talking to Fathers and Father Figures**

[https://norfolkscp.org.uk/media/fhmg3iml/kfis\\_talking-to-fathers-and-father-figures\\_press\\_ready.pdf](https://norfolkscp.org.uk/media/fhmg3iml/kfis_talking-to-fathers-and-father-figures_press_ready.pdf)



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This declaration confirms that

Name .....

Name of organisation .....

Has completed the Practice Guide

## **'Young Fathers: What Works in Practice'**

To acknowledge and consider how professionals can better include  
and support young men as parents within services.

Date .....