

FAMILIES@30

Young Dads: overlooked,
undercounted, but out there

Rt Hon. David Lammy MP



Published by 4Children

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Introduction

Encouraging active fatherhood has been a subject close to my heart since my own father left my mother and our family when I was 12 and I grew up without a father in my life. I have extensive experience of raising awareness of, and highlighting, general policies in relation to fathers, such as paternity leave, including establishing the Fatherhood All-Party Parliamentary Group in 2010, and authoring a paper on fatherhood for Labour Leader Ed Miliband's policy review. However, I am now taking a close interest in addressing issues specific to young fathers.

Over the past few years, there has rightly been a lot of focus on young mothers, with particular public policy concentration on teenage pregnancy. Although this remains an important issue in our society, at least it is accepted that young mums have problems that are specific to them and that need help and support. That rarely happens with the young dads who have fathered those children. Too often we treat young fathers as problems to be solved and not people to be supported or helped. There is so little provision for young fathers that we do not even know how many there are in Britain, because there are no accurate figures. Representing a constituency like Tottenham I know that they exist and that they are frequently crying out for guidance and support.

But what is a 'young dad'? Though there is no formal definition, recent examinations of young fathers in England¹ focused on those aged 16 to 24. Some estimates suggest that just 6% of men aged 16 to 24, and 2% of men aged 16 to 19, are fathers². My own experience is that, though the circumstances of no two 'young dads' are the same, those needing the greatest support tend to be at the younger end of this age range, with some even younger still.

I have often seen the anger that can stem from young dads' feelings of inadequacy in my MP surgeries and at public events I have held as chair of the all-party group. Often, young dads want to be there for their child, but they do not have the personal resources or the social support to live up their own expectations. A home or a job will be difficult to come by and localised, targeted services for young men in a similar position will almost certainly not exist. It is a rare but lucky young dad who comes into contact with a group such as the St Michael's Fellowship in Brixton – a wonderful organisation that works with young dads in some of the most testing circumstances in Britain – or Shane Ryan's excellent Working With Men. I want to see all young

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1. Family Strategic Partnership (2012) [Are we nearly there yet, Dad? Supporting young dad's journeys through fatherhood](#)
 2. Speight S et al. (2013) [Men and fatherhood: Who are today's fathers?](#)
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fathers have the support offered by these groups – as a matter of right, not of luck or charity.

Policy makers need to think about and understand families. Frequently there may not be a relationship between mum and dad and, more often than not, young dads need a lot of support to remain engaged, or they might walk away and never return. This essay aims to contribute to, and move forward, the shape of the debate, and make some clear policy recommendations on what this might look like.

The changing nature of parenting

British society has changed almost out of all recognition in the last half-century. Women have entered the workplace in greater numbers and more men have taken on tasks which for our parents' and grandparents' generations were the mother's by default. Between 1975 and 1997, the average time spent by a father looking after their infants or young children each day increased from 15 minutes to two hours³. Figures for care of children of all ages tell the same story, with fathers spending between three and eight minutes a day on average on child care in 1975 (increasing with higher levels of educational achievement), rising to between 32 and 36 minutes in 2000⁴. This is an extraordinary change – and a very welcome one – but our public services and public policy have not caught up. In fact, they haven't even entered the twentieth century in some cases, let alone the twenty-first.

Our public services too often assume that children will have two parents, one of which will give care and one of which will earn money. If this was ever true, it certainly is not true of many families now, and modern fathers and mothers suffer under the weight of these assumptions. Dads who want to be actively involved in their children's upbringing are often ignored by public services, or even treated as potential dangers. And mums who want to have an active working life outside the home benefit from a supportive partner, and childcare support. Yet, I believe that far too often they find that their partner's best intentions stymied by out-dated assumptions of the service providers who should be there to help.

3. Fisher K, McCulloch A and Gershuny J (1999) [British fathers and children](#) Working Paper University of Essex: Institute for Social and Economic Research (from Fatherhood Institute report)

4. Sullivan O (2010) [Parents treble time they spend on childcare compared with 1975](#) University of Oxford

As society has changed, our public services have often remained stuck in a pre-Beveridge mind-set – particularly when it comes to those issues affecting young fathers. Nobody disputes that teenage mums need specific help – even if there is occasionally vicious debate over whether teenage mums are a good thing. Public services for young dads are patchy at best and non-existent at worst – meaning that no attempt is even made to count the number of young men in need of assistance. For young dads, even the question of whether they need support is frequently contested. And there are no figures produced to gauge just how much support is needed. All we have to rely on is the hard work of the groups that do work with young dads and anecdote passing as fact in some of our media.

Sections of the British press have a number of ‘bogey groups’ – immigrants, welfare recipients and politicians being among them. But of all the groups which are frequently demonised, young fathers must be among the least supported. Too often, sections of our media play to the lowest-common denominator and demonise all young dads as ‘feckless fathers’ and ‘deadbeat dads’. They paint a picture of young men fathering children at will with different partners. Isolated, but regrettable, incidents become the rule rather than the exception. These myths need busting. The true picture of young dads is very different to the uniquely negative myths often presented in the media. I know only too well that these dads are out there, and that they are frequently crying out for help.

Myth-busting: the place of young dads today

Myths about young fathers need busting. I am certainly not claiming that all young dads are exemplary models of fatherhood. As President Obama put it, ‘what makes a man isn’t conceiving a child; it is having the courage to raise one’⁵. Fathers of whatever age should live up to the high expectations which society places only on mothers. But having high expectations of young fathers does not mean that we should not help them to live up to those expectations.

One myth that needs busting concerns the picture, that I see too often portrayed, of young men fathering children at will with different partners and bragging about the fact they have done so. Headline-grabbing exceptions do not make the rule. In fact, fewer than 5,000 fathers in the whole country are paying maintenance for children

5. Obama B (2013) [State of the Union Address, February 2013](#). White House, USA

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with three former partners and fewer than 500 with four former partners⁶. It is quite right that these men should live up to their responsibilities but quite wrong that all dads, and particularly young dads, should be assumed to be in the same boat.

The majority of young fathers are in relationships with the mothers of their children: the Millennium Cohort Study found that 39% of the partners of teenage mothers were living with them during the pregnancy⁷. And the vast majority of young fathers intend to play a full role in their children's lives, and this intention often grows as their child develops. Most young dads do want to play a proper role in their children's lives – they just need more help to do that.

And young dads do need more support. They are more likely to have been excluded from school, brought up in care, or lived in poverty than their older peers⁸. They are three times more likely than non-fathers to fail to complete secondary education⁹, much more likely than their peers to not be in education, employment or training¹⁰ and – unfortunately – are much more likely to be offenders: 12 % of 15 to 17-year-old offenders have children of their own. Among offenders aged 22 and under, nearly half are already fathers or are about to become fathers¹¹.

These are no angels, but many will have been failed by their schools, social services and, most of all, by their own parents. This has to change – our current approach damages young dads, damages their partners and damages their children. A new approach would recognise that young dads are often not perfect fathers (if any of us ever are!), and that they need help to become the kind of active, engaged fathers that, all too-often, their own dads were not. This approach would accept that young dads need more support than dads who have seen a little more of life before they become fathers. But it would not let them off the hook – they have responsibilities towards their child and partner which they have to live up to. It is expecting too much for a young person who has never seen good parenting to be able to become a good dad themselves at such an early age without suitable support.

Young dads and BME fathers are the least likely groups to look for support – even where they are in most need. Research shows that they are more likely to feel that

6. House of Commons Library (2013)

7. Kiernan K (2005) Non-residential Fatherhood and Child Involvement: Evidence from the Millennium Cohort Study. Centre for Analysis of Social Exclusion, London School of Economics

8. Hendessi M and Dowdell C (2009) [Supporting Young Parents: Models of Good Practice](#). YWCA

9. Fatherhood Institute (2013) [Research Summary: Young Fathers](#), July 2013.

10. Family Strategic Partnership (2012) [Are we nearly there yet, Dad? Supporting young dad's journeys through fatherhood](#)

11. Katz A (2002) [Parenting Under Pressure: Prison. Young Voice](#) (From Fatherhood Institute)

their own life is out of control and that they cannot be a 'good dad', which feeds into an inability to use the services and support that is freely available. This then completes the negative cycle, in that an unsupported father is more likely to be one without the necessary self-esteem to bring their children up positively.

However, even those young dads in most need of support and least likely to take-up support are positive about working with their child's mother in the best interests of their child. This is the case even where the relationship between the mother and father has broken down. Young dads still understand that their children's best interests have to come first. The problem is that they may also understand that they don't have the personal resources – financial, emotional, and educational – to put those interests first.

If public services are to reach out to young dads, and to encourage collaborative parenting, they must be designed with fathers in mind – and particularly those dads who are least likely to access the services at the moment. If young dads feel that support and services are not 'for them', they won't be supported, and their children, families and partners will all lose out.

Unlocking and supporting potential

At the moment, we either expect too much from young dads without providing any support, or we expect nothing, assuming that the mother will shoulder the burden which should be the couple's to share. We have to strive for a middle way which recognises responsibility but supports young dads to live up to it.

Even among fathers facing multiple pressures, the vast majority try to stay involved in their children's lives and to be good role models. Those young dads who I have met have told me that they feel they are on their own and are expected to get by without help, support or even recognition of their needs. Too often, they come up against maternity services at children's centres or schools that place no expectation on them as young fathers, and all the expectation on the young mother. From what I have seen, a young father who is engaged with public services is more likely to remain engaged in their children's care as they grow up.

Engaging with young fathers is not only good for their partners, but also good for their children. In my opinion, a father whose role in their child's life is established early is more likely to remain supportive of their child's care as the child grows up,

with benefits for the whole family. Research suggests that the mother's perspective on her care will be determined to a large extent by her partner's views¹². Young mothers who believe that their partner is supportive are more likely to have high self-esteem, low depression and to be positively attached to their child¹³.

This should be a win-win: both young mums and young dads getting the support they need and society having equally high expectations of each. This should lead to more young couples working together, feeling supported, and playing positive roles in their child's development. And that in turn should mean that more children grow up with two engaged parents – whether or not they remain in a relationship – with all the behavioural, health and educational benefits that this entails.

In an era of public austerity, that should be music to the ears of the government as more care will be provided by families and not public services, and fewer children will grow up to need the expensive attention of special educational needs support, local authority troubled families teams, the police and – as happens too often to the children of young parents – prison. But this win-win describes a wish-list, not our current state of play. We need nothing short of a culture change on behalf of our public services, requiring that they focus on the whole family, including the father – however young he may be. Politicians, public service professionals, charities such as 4Children, fathers' support groups and anybody who cares about how public funds are spent should be demanding that this culture change happens now. Some specific policies would help to push that change.

An offer to young dads: policy recommendations

Recommendation 1

The government should legislate to make it a statutory requirement, properly funded by central government, for local authorities to provide tailored services for all young parents, including support specifically for young dads.

Young parents may have access to the Family Nurse Partnership (FNP) in some areas of the country: an intensive, structured, home visiting programme, working with first time mothers and fathers under the age of 20. A specially trained family nurse visits the mother regularly from early pregnancy until the baby is two years old and builds

12. Leach P et al. (2006) [Child care before 6 months of age: a qualitative study](#). Infant and Child Development

13. Department for Health (2009) [Getting maternity services right for pregnant teenagers and young fathers](#)

a close, supportive therapeutic relationship with the family.¹⁴ The programme, whose key focus is in improving outcomes for babies, recognises the value of engaging fathers to improve outcomes for their babies through helping them be the best parent they can be. Research into FNP has shown the benefits of early intervention into families to focus explicitly on fathering. However despite best intentions, family relationships and individuals' starting points are complex and engagement with fathers varies from very involved to no relationship at all.¹⁵ FNP have identified engagement of fathers as a priority and this is an area we should support.

Too often at the moment public service professionals assume that, the younger a father, the less likely he is to want to engage with his children. Making it a statutory requirement to include fathers would reverse that assumption – the younger the father, the more that services would be expected to work with them.

This would undoubtedly benefit the fathers themselves, helping many to see their child as a wake-up call for their own lives, prompting them to take more responsibility for their actions. And it would also benefit their partners. The Royal College of Midwives is doing some sterling work on this¹⁶, but it is yet to filter through to every professional working on the frontline. The government and professional associations have to push this. Public service professionals should be judged on how they engage fathers, just as they are judged on other areas of their expertise.

A recent report from Children's Society stated that practitioners at children's centres identified fathers as one of the most difficult groups to engage with, with a survey of 'non users' revealing that 86% of men said they did not know about services, compared with 67% of women. Their conclusion was that Children's Centres should provide targeted outreach for fathers, including more male-led support and activities (by father volunteers), and with marketing aimed at (and targeted at) men¹⁷.

Recommendation 2

We need to know how many young fathers there are and what kind of help they are currently receiving. These data should be collected in a standardised way and used as the basis for a new statutory duty to engage with young parents, including fathers,

14. The Family Nurse Partnership Programme (2012) Information Leaflet. Family Nurse Partnership National Unit

15. Ferguson H and Gates P (2013) [Early intervention and holistic, relationship-based practice with fathers: evidence from the work of the Family Nurse Partnership](#). Child and Family Social Work

16. The Royal College of Midwives (2011) [Reaching Out: Involving Fathers in Maternity Care](#)

17. Royston S and Rodrigues L (2013) [Breaking Barriers: How to help children's centres reach disadvantaged families](#). Children's Society

but only where this does not place the mother or child in danger. I can think of no other group whose vulnerabilities are clear, but whose numbers are not recorded.

Children's centres often have targets for engaging with dads. Good children's centres, like Earlsmead and Noel Park in my borough of Haringey do encourage such contact, but many will not. All children's centres should publish targets for engaging with dads and should live up to them.

Recommendation 3

The high expectations that we need to have of all fathers should be reflected in our approach to birth certification. At the moment, 45,000 children a year do not have their father's name recorded on their birth certificate¹⁸. 17% of unmarried fathers do not record their name¹⁹ – because the law requires the mother to consent to their inclusion. Often the father is not included, not because the mother does not want him to be included, but because the mother's consent cannot be proven when the father registers the birth on his own. This situation has to change: the government should use the provision in the Welfare Reform Act 2009 to require joint birth registration where this does not put the mother or child at risk. Doing this would bring many more young fathers into their children's lives from the very start.

Recommendation 4

Young dads often experience significant financial hardship²⁰ (this is borne out by survey after survey, but also by my own experience as the MP for one of the most disadvantaged areas of Britain). The best way for young dads to contribute to the family finances is to raise their skills and to gain better-paid work. The government's Work Programme is not currently showing great results for any category of claimant, and the contractors for the programme should be incentivised to prioritise young dads through increased payments, reflecting the value for families in getting young dads into work. Jobcentre Plus should be aware of the specific challenges inherent in working with young dads – and also the enormous benefits for young families when the father finds work.

18. Department for Work and Pensions (2008) [Joint birth registration: recording responsibility](#). June 2008

19. Smallwood S (2004) Characteristics of Sole Registered births and the mothers who register them. Population Trends 100, Autumn (Sourced from The Fatherhood Institute)

20. Family Strategic Partnership (2012) [Are we nearly there yet, Dad? Supporting young dad's journeys through fatherhood](#)

Recommendation 5

For young people whose own experiences of being parented may not have been ideal, help and support is needed. Secondary schools should offer parenting classes to all pupils and the government should revive the Teenage Pregnancy Strategy to include young men and women. Often, professionals can be squeamish about intervening in families' private lives, even when the families themselves are crying out for help. Schools in particular have to answer that call.

What should be a win-win situation is too often a lose-lose one – public services push away a young dad, which leads to a young mum bringing up her child on her own. Personally, I think there is a question to answer as to whether such reluctance to engage with young fathers might also spring from a reluctance to engage young people at all when it comes to sex education.

Recommendation 6

Like fathers in general²¹, too many young fathers are denied access to their children and have to fight their way through the courts. More than a million children in the UK are growing up with no contact with their father²². Without legal aid many men are now presenting to MPs in a breakdown situation with their partners, and they have to supervise themselves through the court system. Expecting an 18, 19 or 20-year-old to do this is nothing short of a national disgrace and the Government should think carefully about their provisions for legal aid in such family cases.

Recommendation 7

Finally, and most importantly, public services should engage properly with young dads from antenatal classes onwards, recognising the different needs that this group of parents may have. Maternity services, social workers, health visitors and children's centres should always record a father's name and details, regardless of their age. It should never be acceptable for anybody working in the public services to assume that a father will not be interested in their child simply because the father is young. High expectations of all fathers should be matched by high expectations of our public services. This is the culture change that will see the greatest results for young dads and their children.

21. Family Justice Review Panel (2011) [Family Justice Review: Final Report](#)

22. Centre for Social Justice (2013) [Lone parents tally heads for two million as numbers rise 20,000 a year, says CSJ report](#): Press release June 2013.

Conclusions

Young dads are not a fashionable group and they don't have access to high-profile advocates in the media or in public life. They are not a particularly visible group, except when they are all damned for the sins of a minority. They do not have deep reservoirs of resources, human or financial. But they are a group whose need is great – and a group that our public services too often fail. We should all care when young dads are ignored and not supported, as these failures will echo in their children's upbringing.

We all need to raise our expectations – of our public services and of fathers of whatever age. But we also need to raise our support of those fathers who need help to live up to our expectations.

Doing that will benefit young dads, young mums, and their children: when families win, so does society. This change is in all our interests. It is time for young dads to come in from the cold – to be counted, recognised and supported.

About the author



Rt Hon. David Lammy MP

David Lammy has been the MP for Tottenham since 2000. He was a Minister for nine years under Tony Blair and Gordon Brown, ending as the Minister for Higher Education.

He is the Chair of the All-Party Parliamentary Group on Fatherhood and is the author of *Out Of The Ashes: Britain After The Riots*.

Acknowledgements/Further Reading

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About 4Children

4Children is the national children and families charity which develops, influences and shapes national policy on all aspects of the lives of children, young people and families and works with a wide range of partners to deliver real support for children 0-19 and families in their community.

4Children (or the National Out of School Alliance as it was originally known) was established 30 years ago in response to growing concern about the welfare of so called 'latchkey' children. Since then the charity has gone on to deepen and broaden its work around the needs of all children 0 – 19 and their families and, starting around six years ago, delivers services including more than 80 Sure Start children's centres, nurseries, out of school clubs and youth and family support.

The charity works with families, communities, local authorities and governments to develop new policy proposals and delivery solutions, to meet the evolving challenge of supporting children and their families.

Find out about 4Children's wide range of support programmes, campaigns, services, products and events at www.4Children.org.uk.

Information Helpline: 020 7512 2100

The views expressed within this pamphlet represent those of the author.

About the series

This essay from Rt Hon. David Lammy MP is the latest in a series of pamphlets being published throughout 2013 to celebrate 4Children's 30th Anniversary.

Young Dads: overlooked, undercounted, but out there

Rt Hon. David Lammy, Labour MP for Tottenham, former government Minister, and chair of the All Party Parliamentary Group on fatherhood, asserts that greater support is needed to help young dads.

This essay, part of a series celebrating 4Children's 30th year, sees Lammy identify young dads as a group that is neither fashionable nor, in many cases, a group that those in the policy world know much about. He argues that though we don't even know how many young dads there are, what we do know is that they need help. He says that too often young dads are repeating the mistakes of their own fathers and, unsupported themselves, fail to support their children and their children's mothers, a situation that suits nobody, least of all the young men themselves or their children.

Lammy says that this is not what young dads want and that, when asked, they say they want to be good fathers and to play a full role in their children's lives: "the problem is they are asked what they want all too rarely, and that public services and support are often designed without young dads in mind, with targeted support for this group patchy at best and non-existent at worst."

"Even where young dads have made poor choices in the past, we should support them to make better choices in the future. We need to give them the tools to be good fathers and to support their children's mothers, even where that relationship no longer exists. Children benefit from fathers who play a full role in their lives but, too often, young dads are not supported to play that role."

"This has to stop. Young dads need targeted services to support their needs and general public services for parents should cater for fathers as well as mothers, seeing dads as resources for their families and not just as potential risks to be managed. Supporting young dads now will be an investment which pays off for years to come for their children."

www.4Children.org.uk/30-years