

Young dads are painted as feckless or absent, but they're working to change perceptions

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For young dads—those aged 25 or younger—sharing the news of their fatherhood may be more likely to bring raised eyebrows than congratulations.

Young dads are [often portrayed](#) as irresponsible, absent or as "deadbeat dads." [But our research](#) has found that even when pregnancies are unplanned, the children of young fathers are far from unwanted.

Becoming a father for the first time can be a [transformative experience](#), but young dads don't always get the support they need to be the fathers they want to be for their children.

This is a problem because we know that positively involved and engaged fathers [have a positive influence](#) on their children's longer-term social, emotional and educational development. There can also be progress for gender equality when women and men can co-parent effectively together.

Our [research](#) has involved talking to and working with young dads to explore how they can be better supported. We have found that they want to be included in the support offered to their partners and that they [value supportive relationships](#) with health and other [professionals](#) that are free of judgment and based on care, compassion and understanding.

Trying to be involved

Effective support is so important because of some of the disadvantages young dads experience. Being an involved dad can be more straightforward for fathers who have supportive family networks, adequate housing and secure routes to education and employment, as well as access to effective service support.

Yet, we know that young dads, especially those from disadvantaged backgrounds, often struggle to secure [stable employment](#), making it harder to provide economically for their children. If they are on zero-hour contracts or are self-employed they are less able to budget and plan, and they are not entitled to parental leave.

Social security payments are lower for those aged under 25, meaning young dads claiming universal credit are [penalized for their age](#). Access to secure housing is also difficult for young fathers, especially when they can't rely on their parents or if they don't live with their children. Sustaining positive relationships with the mothers of their children, their co-parents, can require living nearby, but housing options may be scarce.

The hurdles young fathers need to overcome often overshadow their strengths and capabilities as parents and their intentions to "be there" for their children as engaged dads. This can lead to issues with [mental health](#) that either go unnoticed or can lead to challenging behavior.

Another issue is that services that provide support with parenting, relationships and employment for young fathers are [few and far](#) between.

Mainstream health services also struggle to include young dads. Dads tell us they want to be included in support, but that this is predominantly aimed at mothers. Additionally, there are few resources for professionals to help them support dads or be more [father-inclusive](#).

Since January 2020, we have been working on the [Following Young Fathers Further](#) study, which aims to remedy this lack of support in a way that is led by young dads themselves.

Collective support

We have been working together with dads and professionals who provide specialist support to create resources that are designed to increase and improve support for all dads, but young dads especially. These include two new Young Dads Collectives—groups that bring young dads together with professionals from health, social care, education and beyond—[in Leeds and Grimsby](#).

Young dads provide education and training for these professionals, sharing their experiences about being a dad and how services have treated them. The young dads have the chance to challenge the stereotypical views that may be held about them. Professionals are also asked to consider how to include dads in their support offers and why this is so important for mothers and children as well. One [father involved](#) in the Young Dads Collectives said,

"Buzzing, love being listened to. It's not just the work with the professionals, it's about meeting up with other dads when we do the planning. We all want other dads to have a better experience."

Since 2022, we have also been working on an e-learning platform called [DigiDAD](#), set up with young dads and professionals from a specialist support charity for young fathers in Gateshead called the [North East Young Dads and Lads](#).

DigiDAD features videos, courses, podcasts and other learning content presented or voiced by young dads. Checked by researchers and other experts for accuracy, the content focuses on parenting skills, managing [social care](#) proceedings, dealing with [mental health](#) difficulties and relationship skills.

Like the Collectives, DigiDAD gives young dads a place to talk openly about shared challenges and to educate wider audiences about the value of supporting dads.

At the time of writing, DigiDAD content has been watched by [over 30,000](#) YouTube viewers and accessed as far afield as Peru.

Our [research](#) work is proof that young dads themselves are working to change the narrative about young fatherhood. They are active in addressing the negative ideas and stereotypes that so often contribute to

the stigma they both experience and internalize. And they are educating health professionals in order to reduce this stigma.

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