

Researching and promoting father-inclusive practice and policy ecosystems: Learning for the Family Hubs

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Father-inclusion in the Family Hubs?

- The Family Hubs/Start for Life Programme have put support for dads and co-production more firmly on the agenda again,
- Both aspects of fathers' support needs and how to involve them in service design and delivery explored in various research studies,
- Evidence that men as-fathers experience a mix of support, sidelining and/or surveillance by services and the wider social welfare system (Neale and Tarrant, 2024),
- Insights from Following Young Fathers Further on methods for engaging fathers in processes of service design and delivery.
- Evaluation of the County Durham Family Hubs and their commissioned service offer for young fathers.



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Fathers in Sure Start

by

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KEY FINDINGS (2003)

- Fathers interviewed said that being a father was important to them and that their children were a vital part of their lives,
- However, there was difficulty in engaging with local fathers,
- Engagement tailored for fathers' preference for fun and active sessions over discussion-based ones,
- Few male members of staff working at their local Sure Start programme,
- Managers found it difficult to recruit male staff for childcare positions,
- Other barriers:
 - predominantly female environment/lack of male presence;
 - Sure Start opening hours and fathers' employment hours;
 - Traditional, gendered attitude towards childcare and male-female roles: 'mother knows best';
 - Female-centred orientation of services;
 - Lack of beneficiary knowledge about Sure Start

The challenge for Family Hubs: Including dads in a context of father exclusion

- A primarily focus on mothers and challenges in properly engaging fathers (Maxwell et al. 2012; Ferguson, 2016; Scourfield et al. 2024),
- Men as fathers are under-served across the social welfare system,
- Professional support for fathers is hampered by:
 - Men's perceptions and responses to services,
 - Gendered thinking about fathers,
 - Limited access to training and reflective supervision for professionals,
 - Constraints on workload capacity,
 - Sidelining and/or surveillance (a 'risk' framework, Neale and Tarrant, 2024),
 - Maternal gatekeeping (Ferguson, 2016; Bateson et al. 2017; Phillip et al. 2018), and
 - Access to specialist support services a 'postcode lottery' (Tarrant and Neale, 2017).

Little to no policy change in the past decade...

The present parenting support offer across the UK is fragmented, with little leadership from national government. With family policy spread across a number of departments, a lack of joined up government is a key barrier to any successful parenting support . . . Any parenting support scheme must not be overly prescriptive and cannot be seen by parents as a punishment if it is to be successful . . . Fathers are an important resource in early years child development . . . but are under used and often side lined when family services are developed. (David Lammy, All Party Parliamentary Group, 2015)



The ask: towards *father inclusion*

- Greater national priority given to policies that are about and for fathers and driven by an ethos of father-inclusion,
- Under-theorised and unsettled as an idea but essentially about how we better support fathers to be involved as fathers and engaged in service support.
- A sensitising concept? (Blumer, 1979)
 - e.g. including fathers as an idea that multiple actors can work towards and translate for their own practice and contexts,
- How do we create a national practice and policy ecosystem that is more father-inclusive? (Tarrant, 2023)
- What might the role of the Family Hubs be in promoting and embedding this idea?



‘What works’: the evidence

- Personalised, strengths-based and needs responsive support based on effective relational work:
 - building trust and a culture of care and compassion,
- Paying attention to processes of ‘getting, keeping’
- Displaying positive images of fatherhood,
- Providing a ‘hook’ – food, music,
- Regular staff training for CPD,
- Service audits.

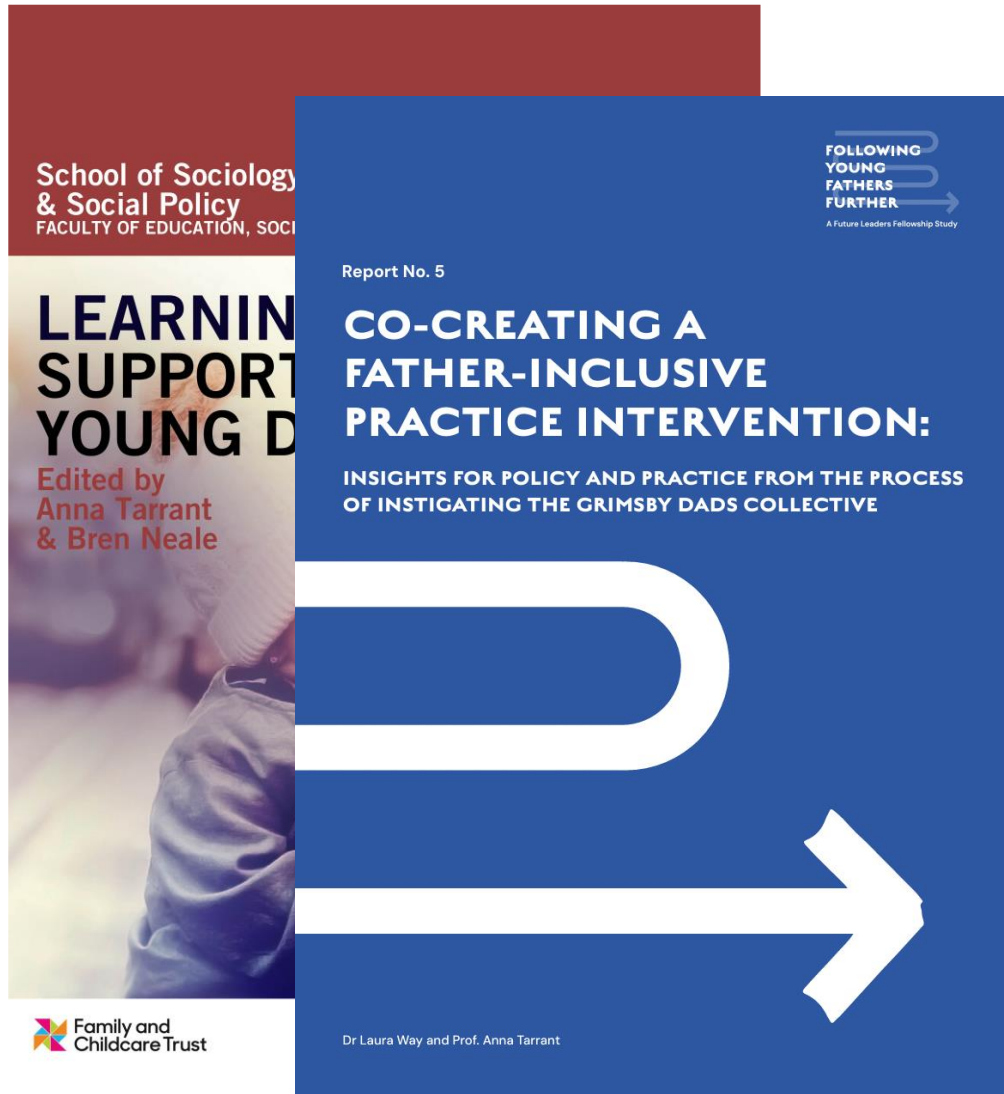
What works: Learning from past recommendations

- Increasing the visibility of male workers at all levels to make the Sure Start environment male friendly.
- Early programme focus on involving fathers where father involvement is deemed desirable.
- Collection of quantitative information on father attendance at Sure Start activities to provide a baseline and to monitor progress.
- Broadening programme 'office hours' opening to include evenings and weekends.
- Developing outreach strategies to engage fathers pre-natally and around childbirth.
- Increasing provision of 'father-focused' services - building on men's interests (e.g., carpentry, sports or 'fathering').
- Guidance for programmes on strategies/approaches for encouraging father involvement in collaboration with specialist fathering practitioners and voluntary sector partners.

What works? Learning from past recommendations

- Developing sensitivity to the needs of different groups within the community of fathers:
 - lone fathers, sole carers, estranged or separated fathers, disabled fathers, fathers working shifts, fathers from minority ethnic and faith groups.
- Fathers with differing experiences and different requirements may respond best to services tailored for them.
- Utilisation of mothers/female partners as potentially important facilitators of fathers' involvement in activities.
- Use of mixed gender practitioner group leaders to model collaborative working between men and women.
- Carrying out local evaluations of the impact of father involvement in Sure Start on child, maternal and paternal well-being.

Co-creating with (young) dads



- Highly possible, productive and rewarding way of developing service design,
- Working with and creating new dialogues between fathers, professionals and researchers to produce resources and interventions promoting father-inclusion,
- The Young Dads Collective:
 - Training young dads as ‘experts by experience’ who deliver education and training to professionals a feasible, evidence-based model
- Premised on listening to dads as key to understanding ‘what matters’, ‘what works’, and ‘how things work’,
- Dads benefit from investments in skills training and confidence building, as well as in parenting skills

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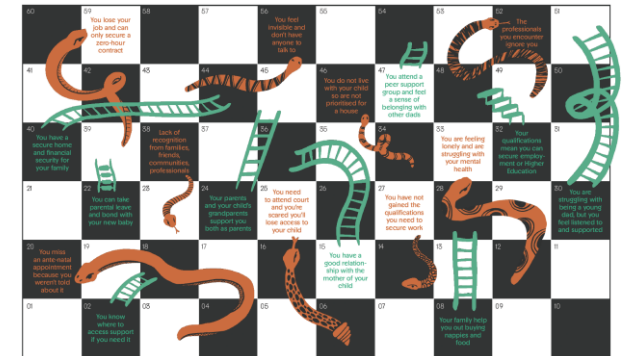
The YDC model **recognises the importance of fathers in keeping children safe** and has provided an **opportunity to include men and dads in local conversations, both strategically and operationally**. The **credibility** of the YDC, FYFF research, and its preceding studies have enabled us to advocate for a more equitable policy and practice environment. Since the project was launched, **there has been a shift in the number and accessibility of advice, activities, and services for dads of all ages**. The training for professionals, and the process of promoting and championing the project, have contributed **to improvements in the strategic and operational environment in Grimsby** that have had a positive impact on families' lives.

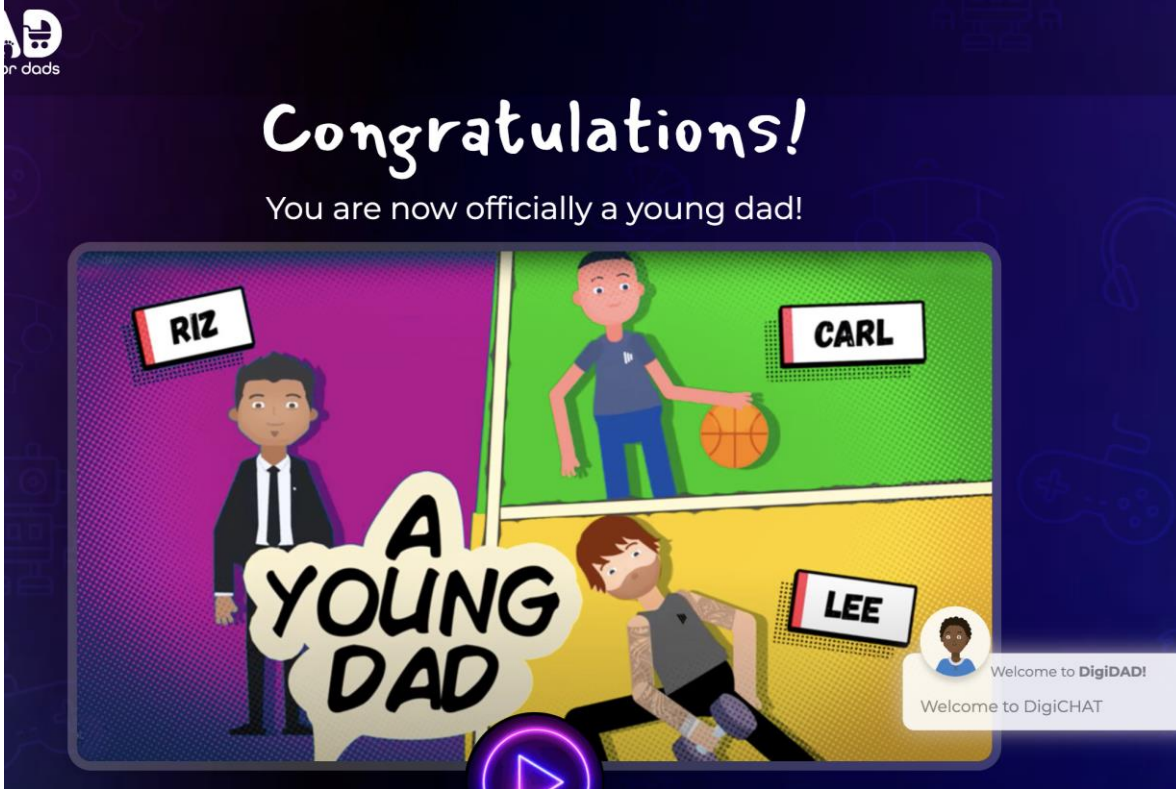
Policy manager, Grimsby

Co-creating with the North East Young Dads and Lads

<https://fyff.co.uk/files/7ea3c3c0fe76f0ee59ace7ce62fdc820153ce10a.pdf>

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Innovation in Fatherhood
Research

THE DYNAMICS OF YOUNG FATHERHOOD

Understanding the
Parenting Journeys
and Support Needs of
Young Fathers

Bren Neale
and Anna Tarrant

Resources

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