



**teen**parents  
support programme

**Teen Dads: The Neglected Parents**  
*Engaging with and Supporting  
Young Fathers*

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## **First National Conference**

**18th October 2007**  
**Croke Park**  
**Dublin 3**



# Table of Contents

Acknowledgements	i
Executive Summary	ii
Introduction	1
Welcoming Address: Margaret Morris <i>National Co-ordinator, TPSP</i>	2
Opening Address by Sylva Langford, <i>Director, Office of the Minister for Children</i>	3
<b>Conference Address</b>	
Brendan Smith T.D., Minister for Children	4
<b>Conference papers</b>	
<b>Chair:</b> Sylva Langford, Director, Office of the Minister for Children	
<b>Teen Dads – Growing into Fatherhood</b> Fergus Hogan, Co-ordinator Centre for Social and Family Research, Waterford Institute of Technology	7
<b>Why it’s good for Dads to stick around</b> Finn Murray, Young Father	15
<b>The Da Project: Involving Fathers in Family Support</b> Francis Chance, Assistant National Director of Children’s Services, Barnardos	19
<b>The Young Fathers Project, Derry: Developing and Changing Services for Young Men</b>	27
Julie McGinty, Co-ordinator, Western Health Action Zone,	27
Sharon White, Development Worker, Western Health Action Zone	31
Sean Benson, Project Participant	34
<b>Questions and Answers</b>	36
<b>Presentation and Workshops</b>	
Chair Rosemary Grant, Principal Social Worker, Coombe Womens Hospital	41
<b>‘My Daddy is a Man’: - Things to remember when working with men</b> David Simpson, Trainer and Co-ordinator of “Promoting Fatherhood”	41
<b>Putting this Conference into Practice.</b> Facilitated by David Simpson	45
<b>Reflection:</b> What do you value about fathers and fathering?	47
<b>Scenario 1:</b> You are working for a Teen Parent Support Project: a young dad wants to be involved in the new baby’s life but the maternal grandparents are not permitting this – please help!	48
<b>Scenario 2:</b> A young Mother says “I want the young Father to be involved – Every time I approach him he keeps running away”	50
<b>Appendices</b>	
Appendix 1 Conference Contributors and Workshop Presenters	54
Appendix 2 Conference Delegates	55

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## Executive Summary

This first Teen Parents Support Programme (TPSP) national conference was designed to raise awareness, to share learning and to consider policy and practice issues in supporting teen fathers' involvement in the lives of their children. It was aimed at those who have contact with young parents – mothers or fathers – such as schools, health services, family, support services, youth groups, parents groups, childcare providers, etc.

Margaret Morris, National Co-ordinator of the TPSP, in her welcoming address, spoke of fathers as a protective factor in the lives of their children. She identified the need to learn how to engage with fathers as a key challenge for service providers.

Sylda Langford, Director of the Office of the Minister for Children spoke of the recognition in national policy of the role of parents, grandparents and children in working with services to get better outcomes for children in housing, education, employment, training, welfare and health and family life. There is broad recognition within the Office that when parents are supported, the outcomes for children are more positive.

Minister for Children, Brendan Smith, T.D. attributed the success of The Teen Parents Support Programme to its flexible, non stigmatising, creative and holistic approach. He said that since its inception in 1999, the Teen Parents Support Programme has provided a model of interagency working and collaboration between different bodies in that it brings together key groups, such as government departments, the Health Service Executive and other state agencies and non-governmental organisations to ensure an effective response to the needs of teen parents.

### Common themes for conference speakers included:

- ◆ Teenage fathers as key supports in the lives of their children when supported by teen parent support services and by the fathers' wider family and networks
- ◆ Key moments when men are open to engaging with support services are early in the pregnancy and at the time of the birth of their child
- ◆ National and international research shows that fathers' involvement in their children's lives is crucial to children's development and behaviours
- ◆ We need to father-proof existing supports rather than designing supports especially for fathers
- ◆ The crucial role of maternal grandmothers as gatekeepers in allowing young fathers to have access to their children
- ◆ Fathers, in both parts of Ireland tend to be invisible as they are absent from official statistics
- ◆ Fathers want to be involved in their children's lives but may not have the skills or supports they need to overcome the obstacles to their involvement
- ◆ Involvement by fathers with their children is often discouraged – e.g. receipt of the One-Parent Family Payment is conditional on parents living apart
- ◆ Difficulties for family support services in finding and in engaging with fathers
- ◆ Supports from services and their families have enabled fathers to become involved and to negotiate that involvement with mothers and grandparents

- ◆ Fathers say that attitudes of support services' staff are more important than whether staff are male or female
- ◆ There is a need to address the law and systems which exclude fathers from having rights to their child.

**Fergus Hogan** spoke of the need for boys to receive education on emotional aspects of sexuality, on contraception and on sexually transmitted infections. Service providers need to talk about men's responsibilities in relation to their children, their contribution to their families and the need of children to have positive role models. We need to understand and address the fact of young men and boys being under huge peer pressure to prove that they are heterosexual, often leading to them having sex before they want to and often without protection.

**Finn Murray** spoke of the crucial role of support services such as The Teen Parents Support Programme in his being involved in his child's life. He expressed the view that whether a father runs and hides or stands up and supports his child depends on supports being there, not just for mothers but for fathers as well.

**Francis Chance** spoke of the process through which the Da Project father-proofed Barnardos' services. This resulted in a rise in engagement by fathers of children who are on the Da project from 20% to 50% in the first 15 months of the Project.

Presenters from the **Western Health Action Zone** spoke about the Young Fathers Project, the structures that have been developed and the learning from the project. Seán, a young father spoke of the crucial role played by the project in supporting his involvement with his child and of his current role as an Advisor to the project.

**David Simpson** spoke about how, while we appear to know a lot about the external world of men, we know very little about their internal experiences and feelings. Men learn not to show their vulnerability and end up not knowing when they are hurting someone else because they have learned to hide their own hurt, are unable to recognise their own needs and often end up in difficulty and with low self esteem. Neither can they share their worries. They end up with limited tools for dealing with complex issues. We are not good at seeing men in their own right. We need to learn to sit with men and find ways of asking them about their experience and to listen without comparing or contrasting.

Fathers are no different from any other parent. They love their children and will do anything they can for their children if they feel they have the skills and resources to do it.

Finally, David reminds us that fathers are still an issue in the child's life even if they are not in contact with each other.

## Introduction

This Report documents the proceedings of the first national conference of The Teen Parents Support Programme (TPSP). The Programme originated in 1999 when the Teen Parents Support Initiative was established by the Department of Health and Children under the 'Children at Risk' strand of the National Childcare Investment Strategy (1998). The principal focus of the Strategy was on supporting vulnerable children within their family and community setting.

The TPSP targets young people who become pregnant while still in their teens and aims to support them until their children are, generally, two years of age. Support is offered in all areas of the young parents' lives- health, relationships, accommodation, social welfare entitlements, education, training, child development, parenting, childcare, and anything about which s/he is concerned.

Currently, the HSE funds 8 TPSPs throughout the country with a further 3 planned. The Department of Education & Science provides some additional funding to support young parents remain in or return to education.

Up to the end of 2006 over 1,800 parents were supported by the TPSP. The large majority of these were mothers. At the same time research is telling us that being involved in the lives of their children brings enormous benefits to young fathers themselves as well as to their children.

Teen dads face enormous obstacles in participating in the lives of their children. For the most part they are not living with the mother of their child, are often seen as the 'villain' or perpetrator in the situation and are very dependent on the attitudes of both sets of families and of professionals with whom they come in contact.

This conference is an opportunity to look at issues for young fathers and the value that they bring to their children's lives. It provides a forum for those working with young parents – mothers or fathers - to share their learning and practical experiences. This document attempts to capture and to share that learning with those concerned with working to develop support services for teen parents nationally.

### **The aims of the conference were :**

- To raise awareness of the need to support young fathers' involvement in the lives of their children
- To provide an opportunity to reflect on one's own attitudes and practice in relation to young fathers
- To provide models of engaging with and supporting young fathers.

The conference was aimed at workers who have contact with young parents – mothers or fathers – such as schools, health services, family support services, youth groups, parents groups and childcare providers

## Welcoming Address

*Margaret Morris, National Co-ordinator, Teen Parents Support Programme*

Good Morning. This is the first National Conference of the Teen Parents Support Programme and on behalf of our Programmes around the country, the TPSP National Advisory Committee, Treoir and myself I would like to welcome you all here to-day.

The TPSP was established by the Department of Health and Children in 1999 in recognition of the additional needs of families headed by teen and young parents. The TPSP offers one-to-one and group support to young parents in all areas of their lives. We engage with all the relevant local organisations and agencies on their behalf and we also support the wider family especially grandparents. In all our work the TPSP focuses in one way or another on the welfare and protection of young people, the young parents and their babies. And that is what this conference is about. A key factor in the well being of children is that they know and, as far as possible, have contact with both their parents. In recent years we are becoming more aware and more informed of how important fathers can be as a protective factor in the lives of their children. There is increasing evidence that, in general, children who know both their parents and have contact with both of them have a better chance of growing into well adjusted adults. At the same time, for most family support services, including the TPSP, it is a challenge to attract fathers and to engage with fathers on their own terms and in a way that they find meaningful. Today's conference provides an opportunity to look at how we might do this better both for the sake of the fathers themselves and particularly for the sake of their children.

I would like now to introduce Sylva Langford who is going to chair this morning's session. Sylva is the Director General of the Office of the Minister for Children which was established in December 2005 to improve the lives of children under the National Children's Strategy and to bring greater coherence to policy-making for children. I know that the kind of early intervention work with vulnerable families which the TPSP and many of the other organisations here do is something she values and advocates for. So I have great pleasure in handing over this morning's proceedings to you, Sylva.

*Thank you.*

## Opening Address

*Sylda Langford, Director, Office of the Minister for Children*

Good morning everybody and it's an honour to be here this morning and be in the company of people doing such good work across the country. I'm doubly glad to be here because the work that's being done in this programme is what we consider, at national policy level, the way to actually work. I think for too long we've separated the child from the family and the outcomes that we've achieved weren't as good as if we had worked in the approach that you're all taking. It's all about prevention and early intervention and working with people where you find them. And it's not rocket science. It's actually common sense when you think about it. But, sometimes it takes us a long time to find simple things and the best ways to work. I've known a lot of the people involved in this for a long time such as Rosemary Grant who is The Chairperson of the TPSP National Advisory Committee and Margaret Morris the National Co-ordinator and others. And they have done a very good job in convincing at national level that this is the way to work, this is the way into the future.



*Sylda Langford, Director,  
Office of the Minister for Children*

I'm really glad to be here today because, as you all know, fathers have been, for a long time, excluded. I think part of it was we didn't know what to do and sometimes when you don't know what to do, you exclude. And I think we are beginning to find what we need to do. We tend to do what we think people expect of us. So, if you expect the worst of people, well, they will live up to the expectations. And if you expect more of people, they tend to rise to the occasion. Because of the legalities and complications involved sometimes we avoided people and left them behind. I think we have boxed fathers into a corner which we're now allowing them to come out of.

The final thing I want to say as Chair is that at national level we are finalising what we would call a policy framework – a national policy framework. What we're trying to do is produce a document at national level in which everybody working with children and families in Ireland speaks to everybody else. What we are trying to do is to get what is known nowadays as 'reflective practice' – you actually reflect on what it is you're doing and you reflect on whether you're getting the outcomes that you actually set out to get. We're trying to keep it very short and we are trying to keep it simple. And we hope that the Minister will launch it, hopefully - by November. What we hope will happen is that all of us who are interested in children and families will begin to think smartly about getting good outcomes for children and that this document will help us to work together and in a strategic way.

We've also learned with experience that we all work in silos. We are all for interagency working and working together, until it impacts on our power and our patch and then we run for cover. That's a challenge for all of us as well. You can't get good outcomes if you stay in your own silo, because people's needs are holistic. People's housing, education and employment, training, welfare, health can only be met by a multiplicity of agencies and therefore if all those agencies don't work together, you actually can't get the outcome that you require.

So when we have this policy document published, I hope you will find it useful. We hope it will be a dynamic national policy document. Because life is not static - people change, society changes and therefore you have to keep it updated into the future.

So without further ado I will start by introducing our first speaker today. Fergus is the Co-ordinator of the Centre for Social and Family Research in Waterford Institute of Technology and he will now share his thoughts and his beliefs with us in this area.

## Conference Address

*by Brendan Smith, T.D, Minister for Children*

Chairperson, Ladies and Gentlemen, first of all I want to thank the TPSP for the invitation to attend this afternoon.

I'm very glad to be here in Croke Park today and unfortunately as a Cavan man, I don't get many opportunities to visit Croke Park. So I'm very glad you were considerate in choosing your venue so that I have the opportunity to attend here. Actually the first function I did on the morning after I was appointed by An Taoiseach was here in Croke Park with Dublin City Childcare Committee and I am very glad to be back here this afternoon at a very important event.

The Teen Parents Support Programme, has, since its inception in 1999, provided a model of interagency working and collaboration between different bodies. In many ways it presaged the formation of the Office of the Minister for Children in that it brings together different groups, such as government departments, the Health Service Executive, other state agencies and non-governmental organisations to ensure an effective response to the needs of teen parents. Its success can also be attributed to the flexible, non stigmatising, creative and holistic approach used by the TPSP. Additional funding of €1m was provided to the TPSP in 2007, which will help to expand and consolidate existing programmes and develop three new programmes to bring the total number of programmes to eleven. This amount incorporates funding previously provided by the Crisis Pregnancy Agency. As from this year, the HSE has taken over full responsibility for all aspects of the TPSP.

The area of teenage fathers poses particular challenges. I'm aware that previous TPSP evaluation reports have identified the importance of engaging with teenage fathers and I would like to commend the TPSP for choosing this as the theme for this, their first national conference.

The last number of years have seen significant changes of policy in areas that affect children. The establishment of the Office of The Minister for Children has led to greater coherence in policymaking for children. By bringing together policy areas for the Departments of Health & Children, Education & Science and Justice, Equality & Law Reform, it has created a new environment of cross departmental co-operation. The Office of the Minister for Children also maintains a general strategic oversight of bodies with responsibility for developing and delivering children's services. This integration of policy areas will, I believe, have an immense impact on improving outcomes for our young people and children, by enabling better planning and improved communications between the areas which need to work in co-operation with each other. Those working in the child policy areas recognise how important it is for the Health, Education, and Justice sectors to work together in all areas of children's services. An integrated approach is the only way to deliver better services and ensure improved outcomes for the children in this country.

Recent years have seen a re-balancing of child welfare services towards early intervention and support for families in order to reduce the numbers of children who may become dependent on State care. This is in line with the principles of The Childrens Act of 2001 regarding early intervention. Over €240m. additional funding has been invested since 1997 in the child welfare and family support area. As well as the Teen Parents Support Programme, other community-based services which have been put in place include the Springboard Project and the Youth

Advocacy Programme. The importance of programmes such as this one is demonstrated by the specific commitment of the Social Partnership Agreement *Towards 2016*, to further strengthen and develop the Teen Parent Support Programme as well as other family support initiatives.

Without doubt, one key issue that has emerged continuously in the design and delivery of services in recent years is the issue of integration of service delivery, cross-sectoral working and the joint implementation of policies and initiatives. To this end, *Towards 2016* makes provision for the establishment of The National Implementation Group, a high-level group chaired by my office and linked to the Health Service Executive's expert advisory group. The National Implementation Group was established in November of last year and its membership is drawn from the relevant government departments, the Health Service Executive, representatives of the local authorities, the education sector and other key agencies.

Access to affordable childcare is a major issue for many parents. It is clearly a very significant issue for teen parents, in helping them to continue in their education or in training, and in supporting them as they progress into employment. A substantial amount of progress has been made since the year 2000 when the *Equal Opportunity Childcare Programme* was introduced with a total allocation of €499m. for the period 2000 to 2006. To date, 32,000 new childcare places have been created under this childcare programme and 25,000 existing places have been supported. In addition 2,800 childcare workers in community facilities are being supported by the staffing grants. The *National Childcare Investment Programme*, up to 2010, was introduced last year with a total allocation of €575m. The *National Childcare Investment Programme* continues to provide capital grants for community-based childcare facilities, which continues to increase the supply of quality childcare places. A new Childcare Subvention Scheme from 2008 to 2010, under the *National Childcare Investment Programme*, has also been announced. The scheme will operate from January 2008 and community childcare services will receive subsidies to enable them to charge reduced childcare fees to parents who are in receipt of social assistance payments, such as Family Income Supplement, or are engaged in education, training, or work experience programmes, whereby an underlying entitlement to such a payment is established. This supports a key objective of the NCIP to support families to break the cycle of poverty and disadvantage by targeting resources where they are most needed. Funding amounting to €153m. is being allocated to the new scheme over the next 3 years which next year represents an increase of 16% over this year's funding allocation for the support scheme.

In September, I launched *Teen Space*, the national recreational policy for young people. This is the first time that any government has brought forward a comprehensive policy to address young people's recreational needs. The policy reflects in concrete terms our commitments under the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child and the National Children's Strategy. I believe that the policy represents a great opportunity to support and strengthen young people and their communities, engendering mutual respect and enriching young people's experiences of growing up. As I have outlined the task is to bring to fruition the best of the policies which the different strands of government are working collectively to implement in order to achieve better services for children which deliver better outcomes on a consistent basis right around the country. Never before has there been such a focus on the voice and position of children within the family and within our society.

In conclusion, Chairperson, I would like to pay tribute to all those involved in the Teen Parents Support Programme. It is a clear example of an effective family support programme and I wish it continued success in the future. Since I went into office I had opportunity to meet with the TPSP, putting forward very comprehensive and progressive and realistic policies and I'd be glad to continue that dialogue and to work with your organisation to ensure that we have the effective collaboration that's needed to implement policies that will deliver better outcomes for our children right around the country. I commend you on the organisation of your first national conference. It's been a pleasure to have been invited, to participate for a short period in your deliberations.

Arís, táim fíor buíoch as an gcuireadh teacht anseo an lá seo. Agus déanam comhgháirdeas le gach éinne a bhail páirteach sa dea-obair seo. Obair ann tabhachtach don tír agus go mór mhór do leanaí an tíre seo. Go raibh míle maith agaibh go léir.

Go raibh míle maith agaibh a cháirde.



Brendan Smith T.D. Minister for Children, Margaret Morris, National Co-ordinator TPSP and Rosemary Grant, Chairperson TPSP National Advisory Committee.

## Conference Papers

### Teen Dads – Growing into Fatherhood

#### Fergus Hogan Co-ordinator, Centre for Social and Family Research, Waterford Institute of Technology

Good morning everybody.

Sylda, thank you for opening the conference. You have given me permission to spend the next half hour sharing my thoughts and beliefs with you. I feel a lot more comfortable around sharing my thoughts and beliefs with you, than standing here pretending to be an expert in teenage fatherhood.

It's an absolute privilege and pleasure to be able to be one of the first speakers here today, amongst people who are working so hard in the area, amongst teenage dads - a few in the audience - amongst more men than we'd often see at conferences. But, I'm also quite nervous, so I'm going to try to find my voice. Trying to think about how to begin or to position myself talking about fatherhood and teenage fathers, I wasn't a teenage dad. I became... my eldest son - I have 2 sons - my eldest son, I was twenty when he was born. I have two sons and it was twelve years later when our second boy was born. So, well planned families!. I didn't live with Lorcan until he was six and I got the opportunity to become a dad for the first time as a step dad and over the course of a year or two we negotiated and decided that the word 'step' wasn't appropriate any longer. As he explained:

*'when you live with me longer than my dad did, he'll be my step dad - he'll have stepped out and you'll have stepped in'.*

So, other people might have different positions on that or different beliefs around that. I am committed to biological fathers having an input and a say in their children's lives, but I'm also very clear that step dads, foster fathers and all of us as men can do something to make a positive contribution. Sometimes I feel quite humble, that Lorcan allowed me into his life. I know some people here have spoken a few times about this differently. He's now sixteen and I'm learning how weak, how vulnerable and how useless I am as a dad. Caelum, our four-year old points that out to me on a daily basis.

We might begin just by very simple things, about what is a man, what is a father? Are men essentially important in children's lives? What is the hands-on work of fathering that I or we might do? What is fathers' work? And how can we collectively work harder to encourage and include and allow more men, teenage men, fathers, into their children's lives.

I have been very privileged, I grew up with two brothers and I have two sons. I have a father who hugs and kisses me. I have a great mother. I have been surrounded by positive male role-models - so that's my personal prejudice, that's my background. As a social worker, I also know very clearly that at times, we as men, make mistakes. We do damage, we hurt each other, we hurt ourselves, we hurt our families, we let each other down. I think we are human and we can change and we can grow. At least that's my hope for myself. Reflecting on fatherhood, teenage fatherhood and all men in children's lives, I think we'd all carry a different notion of what is a good dad and what our own fathers were like. How did he spend time with us? How did he show his love for us? What would we have liked him to do differently? I usually end on this, but I thought it's probably as good a place to begin.

Steve Biddulph, the Australian family therapist talks about fathering. He says:

*'fathering is vital, it's honourable. It's an essential part of the fabric of human life and its time that we all acknowledged that'.*

Statistics and research can be read in many, many different ways and we can certainly look to research internationally that points to the damage and the difficulty when fathers aren't included in their children's lives. A very bland summary of it talks about the negative impact of absent fathers:

*'Boys with absent fathers are statistically more likely to be violent, get hurt, get into trouble, do poorly in schools and be members of teenage gangs in adolescence. Fatherless daughters are more likely to have low self-esteem, to have sex before they really want to, get pregnant, to be assaulted and not to continue in their schooling. Families without men are usually poor and children of these families are likely to move downwards in the socio-economic ladder'.*

I really struggle with statements like that because what it does for me, or what it says to me, is that single mothers, lone-parent families where men absent themselves and don't play a role, does it hint that they are worse off? That women aren't able to do it on their own? I don't like that language, I don't like to talk like that. I don't like the notion or simply the language about fathers' rights. I prefer a conversation about men's responsibilities, to make an impact, and make a contribution. There is the whole debate around the chaos and the crises where kids are missing their dads and that we go wild looking for positive male role-models in our lives sometimes.

Teenage births – teenage mothers are measured, counted by the CSO. Teenage fathers are quite hidden. We don't ask and we don't gather the statistics. There's a lot of talk that we have a massive increase in teenage motherhood, a lot of pejorative talk, a lot of blaming women and young girls and holding teenage girls responsible for sexuality, contraception, fertility, motherhood. I think that when we look at the figures closely, there's some good news in terms of social policy. That the teenage fertility rate in Ireland has kept relatively stable over the last 35 years. Last year there were a total of 2,362 teenagers, 48 births were to under 15s, and 577 to under 17 year olds. Most teenage pregnancies happen between 18 and 19. But we haven't had a massive increase in teenage pregnancies. And we don't count teenage fathers statistically and I think that's an important measure of how we don't recognise them – why they are hidden.

Research by the Crisis Pregnancy Agency is showing that, while teenage pregnancies and births are still quite stable, that more and more teenagers throughout Ireland, boys and girls, are having sex at a younger age. They're having it more regularly with more partners. The research is showing that really they don't have a very clear understanding around contraception. They don't practise contraception. They don't have clear open conversations about contraception. They have very limited ideas around sexually transmitted infections. Any of the teenagers that have been researched by the Trinity Centre, or UCD and ourselves in WIT are pointing to the fact that teenagers are having sex, often for the first time, without a condom or without contraception, are doing so under the influence of drink, sometimes. Some of the boys that we interviewed, doing so because they had the opportunity.

Now an interesting piece that's come out of the qualitative studies is that often teenage boys have sex for the first time without a condom and then learn from that, panic, get a fright and don't have sex then again for quite a while, quite a number of years sometimes and become better aware of contraception. But there's a real issue for sex education in schools. The worst and the most difficult and challenging place is all-boys teenage schools. And thinking about teenage-fathers, I think all of us as men, as mentors, older men in our son's lives, have responsibilities. So in terms of sex education, traditionally we seem to have left it to the mothers to explain sex, contraception and that perpetuates the notion that it's conversation for women. And I think and I believe that we as men have a responsibility to talk with our sons and our daughters about sexuality and contraception. I think all children have a right to know the facts of life. Children have a right to know about the dynamics of intimacy, sex and love. And love and lust are different feelings. (I'm still trying to work that one out. I wish someone had taught me that one. I've learned that by my mistakes). Our children have a right to know that our attitudes and beliefs, our faith in regard to intimacy and relationships, is not something that we can simply leave to the state, social workers and crisis pregnancy agencies. Families and parents have a responsibility in this. But for me, I think, all of our children will make mistakes like we do. But when they make a mistake, if it's a mistake, if it's a crisis, if it's an unplanned pregnancy – that we as their parents, as their fathers, still need to be there to support, protect and love them, whether they are our teenage sons or our teenage daughters. This is my contribution, to try and teach the men in the room the difference between loving, lusting and liking. And just as I was getting my head around this, the research that looks at women's sexuality in Ireland is pointing out that women now have sexual agency and some women lust after men. I think that's a fascinating thing to teach our boys.

I think one of the points that we don't educate and we can talk about... some of the guys we interviewed talked about, 'Well, we saw a diagram on biology and I kind of understand the facts of life, the ins and outs of sexuality'. But we don't talk about the emotional side of that, the complexity of that, the struggle to talk openly around sex and contraception. One of the things we don't teach our teenage boys about is women's fertility. We don't have conversations at home, in schools, in public around ovulation. And that for some women, ovulation changes their mood at times of ovulation. So some of the teenage boys we work with in groups, are quite confused about:

*'I think she fancied me this week, but she doesn't fancy me next week'.*

And that can be really charming and inviting y'know, not just for teenage boys, for all men, I think. But it's really important at that moment that we are very careful around contraception. Not just for the women and for the mothers but for ourselves too.

The peer group pressure for teenage boys is huge and this has come out of the research that we've done on men's sexuality and crisis pregnancy. In general, the men we interviewed spoke about feeling under pressure, not just to be heterosexual, but to prove it - a type of conquest masculinity, where we try to prove and we talk with bravado amongst our peer group. The greatest fear for men is to be seen as homosexual, to be gay, a sissy; and that goes from the very youngest ages. Homophobia is a massive influence on Irish society and where we take sexual risks to prove that we're not gay. And it can – the peer-group pressure in all-boys' schools, in boys' sports clubs, in the community, in society, can lead us to have sex before we actually want to have sex, before we can understand the complexity of it or the implication of it.

I thought about not presenting this, because I think it might prove a point that some men are careless, feckless teenagers running around the place. But one man spoke to us about his attitude to girls. Very few men spoke in this crude way, but one man spoke to us. He was 19.

*'Y'know, the way girls go on anyway. They come back from the pub and they're locked and you're locked yourself anyway and you don't give a shit if you're wearing a Johnny or not. Because, well, you should, but back then, three or four years ago, when we were all in college, you didn't give a shit, because, "Oh, I'll shag this one or that one. Kick her out of bed later". That was your attitude in college. "Lads, aw, what did you get last night? What was she like, y' know?".'*

This was a very decent, normal guy and what I think this shows is the peer group pressure to show off, to pretend, to talk about sexual conquest. The girl he was sleeping with had an unplanned pregnancy and they decided together to have an abortion. And there's an increase in teenage abortions, and in teenagers going to England for abortions. Most of the guys that we interviewed weren't like that – they were what we'd call 'steady' or 'impulsive'. They generally were decent, generally wore contraception or condoms, generally cared about women, didn't just want to use them. This guy had become pregnant with his girlfriend. They were going out together during his Leaving Cert and he dropped out of school.

*'I'd be a very placid person when I'm sober. I'd be very set in my ways. I would y'know, I'd know what I'd want and I would know what I shouldn't do. I would be defined by the morals I have. But when it comes to drinking, you just loosen up and things go wrong. Well, I wouldn't say that things go wrong, but you do things that you wouldn't normally do and you would have sex where you wouldn't wear condoms where you normally would. Or the situation would arise where you're there and you're ready and the condoms are over there in the drawer and you're all entangled but you don't get up and use them'.*

It's a great metaphor for sex, isn't it? Entangled. He and his girlfriend decided to keep the child and he dropped out of school to support them.

Not all unplanned pregnancies are a crisis. Many, many teenage pregnancies are unplanned. Some unplanned pregnancies within a long-term relationship are wanted. For some of the men that we've interviewed across the various studies, often the most marginalised men, the guys who dropped out of school, guys unemployed, and there's pockets and pockets all around the country... becoming a father, even an unplanned or a non-resident father was their first opportunity to prove themselves to the world that they could make a positive contribution. And they showed that in very real ways. They brought the children to the interviews, they looked after the children. One young guy, who was sixteen - we met him in Galway – he stopped the interview ten minutes before he knew the baby would wake for her feed. The baby was 3 weeks old and the mother was at home in the bed resting.

We found a social class difference in this, in terms of even teenage boys. Often for the fellas that are going to college, trying to become solicitors, barristers, GPs and follow this type of life career trajectory, an unplanned pregnancy is a huge crisis because it threatens to change their plans and hopes for the future. For men who want to be involved, teenage boys that want to have a conversation, negotiate fatherhood, want to play a positive role - an unplanned pregnancy where they are left out, can be a massive crisis.

This guy dropped out of college, he was in his first year when he met his girlfriend, and they both were living away from home. They'd been going out for 3 months when she became pregnant. He explains the kind of dominant discourse that women seem to carry around feckless fathers and men not caring, not willing to share responsibility:

*'She was thinking it was her responsibility – the girl is always kind of - they get left holding the baby anyway, if the fella f\*\*\*s off. That's where she was, kind of worried about that. She didn't know me like – we'd only been going out for about 3 months before she got pregnant. She didn't know if I was going to f\*\*\* off, leave her, drop this on her. She said, "I just don't know what to do". So we spoke about it and I said, 'I'm not going anywhere, y'know?'. And she said that she kind of wanted to keep it too, the baby. That, if only I was sure. And I said, 'Yeah'. And we spoke about it for a whole weekend, I think. And then we decided we were going to keep it and make a go of it'.*

A number of the men we spoke to and we only spoke to the men - so in fairness we didn't follow through and get the women's side of the story - but a number of the men we spoke to explained to us that they never wanted to be together as a couple but they did negotiate that they wanted to keep the child and keep the pregnancy and support the mother. And the men we spoke to said the mothers also wanted this and were willing to negotiate a type of what we would call a 'post-modern' or 'post traditional relationship' where they would both be involved in caring for the child, but they wouldn't be a couple together.

We also didn't interview the grandmothers. The fathers in these cases said it was crucial that the mother's mother – the maternal grandmother - played a positive role and allowed them have an involvement. So we haven't checked out the depth of the responsibility and the burden that's left to grandparents or to grandmothers in this, in trying to support teenage pregnancies. But international research is showing that grandmothers, maternal grandmothers in particular, are key gatekeepers. Their attitude to the teenage fathers is crucial in influencing the future contact between the father and the child.

International research is showing that teenage girls' attitudes towards pregnancy are strongly linked to their perception of the father's attitude. We can support teenage girls by supporting teenage fathers. Teenage boys, internationally and nationally, seem to know less about sex, sex education and relationships, but they're most appreciative when we do explain it and talk to them directly about that. Fatherhood for many of the men, including the most marginalised excluded fathers, could be a positive turning point as there's research that shows that we have the capacity to open our hearts, open ourselves when we reach a crisis, such as an unplanned pregnancy, or when our child is born. There is a key moment, a fateful turning point where we as service providers can engage and connect with men, including teenage boys, to support that.

However, most men that we met didn't access support services, they didn't know about them. When they did access support services like family support, teenage parent programmes, crisis counselling, crisis pregnancy counselling, some of them felt excluded. They felt that the professionals were doing their best to protect and care for and look after the mother but then were excluding the fathers. That was the fathers' perception of us. They perceived us as women's services. And many of the men kept the secret of the unplanned or crisis pregnancy. The teenage men said that to us:

*'I kept quiet. I didn't talk to my parents, my family, and my friends. Because I was trying to protect her privacy, I was trying to respect her; I was doing my utmost to support her at this time'.*

The difficulty with that is that we guys keep our emotions to ourselves, we don't look for support, and we put on this bravado of stoic support. We're doing our best. Many of the men, who had supported the woman and said:

*'Well what do you want to do? Whatever you want, I will support you'.*

were left after the abortion or after the birth of the child, to struggle with their feelings for the first time. Research is showing that if we can support men to deal with their emotions at the time of the crisis, the unplanned pregnancy, they're better positioned to support the women, the children and themselves. And there is a paradox in this, and I think this is an interesting one. In trying to support women and say as teenagers and men of all ages:

*'Whatever you want, I'll support you'.*

we're removing ourselves from the responsibility to be true to ourselves and of taking responsibility. We're still colluding with the notion that the ultimate responsibility is down to the woman to make the decision and we'll go along with supporting that. But, there's a challenge in how we work with men. And this could be very different, that we need to work with the men and that if men tell us how they feel, and what they want and what they hope for for the future, that might be different to what the mother wants at the time. So if we get engaged with supporting and including fathers, it could be more challenging and difficult for us. The benefits of it though are immense.

In a slightly different study, we looked at family support services. We interviewed social workers and family support workers throughout the country, asking them about how you actually work with teenage fathers. The key response that we got, the top five - this is for the American audience - the top 5 quotes from social workers and family support workers were:

*'there's very few men around'*

*'we work mainly with single mothers'*

*'working-class men are slow to change'*

*'there would have to be real benefit from including fathers'*

*'we have enough to do with working with mothers'*

As Sylva [Langford] said earlier we just don't know what to do with men sometimes. I won't labour this. In all pregnancies there's a man and a women involved. So it's a falsehood that there's no men around. The men are around somewhere, they're hidden. We need to ask for them and we need to look for them.

There are very clear reasons why teenage fathers might be hidden. Many teenagers spoke to us about the shame, the fear, the upset, they had hurt the women, they were putting her in a difficult position, they were embarrassed to talk to their own parents about it, and they wanted to keep it private to respect her. Some of the teenage guys we spoke to were fearful of the legal implications of sex and becoming a father. Some of the mothers (in this study we did interview mothers) spoke to us about the fact that:

*'I've asked him to stay quiet and to keep out of the way because I need to get the lone-parent payment. We can't afford it and if we are seen to be living together...'*

So, in terms of our social support to young, vulnerable, marginalised mothers, teenage parents, we're actively excluding fathers through the lone-parent payment. There's layers and layers of exclusion that happen to these young couples and these families. I don't think any of us would ever think of saying that there has to be 'real benefits' before we will work with the mother of children in terms of preventative, helpful, support work.

Sean was 19 when we met him, when we interviewed him. He had become a father for the first time when he was sixteen. His girlfriend was fifteen and it was her second birth. That is unusual – most teenage pregnancies, most teenage births are first births. She would be unusual in that regard. Her first child was born when she was thirteen and was taken into care. And the social care system, the social work system, with her parents, agreed that the child should be given to foster care. She became pregnant a second time. I don't think you could make this story up and it's in the report. They met when they were both living in a women's and children's refuge for domestic violence. Sean wasn't allowed stay there because of his age. He visited his mother who was there because of violence. He met this girlfriend, they fell in love. And his side of the story -and I have no reason to doubt it – is that she became pregnant the first time they had sex. He said he was a virgin before that. She was absolutely adamant she didn't want to lose her second child to foster care and they were clear that together they were going to beat the system and they were going to work together as a couple. The social service response and her parents' response was to move her one hundred miles and place her in a mother and baby unit. Sean was really appreciative of the social welfare officer who gave him a ticket, a bus fare, once a month to visit her. So as he was sixteen he took the bus up and down to see her. Okay.

He said about the birth:

*'I was chuffed now. I was delighted. It was all magic. I was delighted with myself. I had a camera with me and I had the camera all day I was just using up film after film. Maeve, she was worn out, like. It was a hard enough labour all right. But when I saw him roaring, he was just so small and everything, I was nearly afraid to lift him up or anything. But one or two days later I started picking him up and feeding him. It took me one or two days to get over the nerves.'*

Now in a way I think his quote sums up the boyish excitement, he was delighted with himself. Maeve, the mother just seems an afterthought. She had a difficult labour. Can you imagine him in the labour ward with the camera just clicking away, clicking away – I wouldn't fancy him! And I think the beauty and the intimacy of it is that it took him two days, because he was afraid, he was nervous to pick up his baby. If it's as simple as any one of us teaching a teenage father how to hold his child, that it's okay to pick up a child, how to change a nappy. Many, many of us as men don't have the skills, the simple things about changing a kids' nappies, how to feed them, how to clothe them, how to dress them, because we haven't practiced it as teenage boys growing up. As teenagers in Ireland, we've told teenage boys, don't get involved, and don't baby-sit. And we've traditionally told mothers and fathers:

*'don't leave your kids with teenage boys'*

So, it's as simple as teaching a guy and giving him the confidence that he can be involved in his child's life. The mother, Maeve was very clear:

*'He was trying his best, y'know. He was saying he'd stay by me, y'know. He used to get me things, for me, for the baby. He'd buy me nappies and he'd buy me the baby food and clothes for the child. And he brought me the bottles for him. But he was unreliable then. He'd ring me one day, and then nothing for a month and then he would ring me again.'*

It's a real challenge when we physically separate couples. In terms of family support, and social service supports for the most vulnerable and marginalised, we may actually need to build and create mother and child and father units to hold them together. Because we did find that the teenage fathers were still teenagers at the same time. They still wanted to be out messing around, still wanted to be wild, and still wanted to be playful. We don't talk about teenage girls. We leave them with the responsibility that suddenly they have to grow up. Suddenly, that they have to be responsible. Some teenage dads are still going through that developmental life stage. Now I think we should also be careful, I think we should be respectful of teenage mothers, that they are also teenagers. But we need to talk with fathers, include fathers and build a resource and fund supports that allow men to be involved in their children's lives.

*Thank you.*

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David Simpson, Fergus Hogan and Francis Chance

## Why it's good for Dads to stick around

### Finn Murray, a young father

I just want to say first of all this is really things from my own perspective, how I've seen things and how life has changed since my child was born.

Why it's good for dads to stick around? I don't actually think there's one real answer anyone can give but I can give you some of mine, which is, I stuck around because I love my child, desperately and absolutely. There was no other reason for it. It wasn't because of any social reason, or because of the mother. It wasn't any reason like that. It's just that from the moment I saw my child, it was adoration through and through.

When I found out my girlfriend was pregnant there was this unbelievable panic. It was, oh, hell! This girl was pregnant and I was 22 at the time. I didn't know what to do with myself. Life was just kind of starting off; I didn't know what was going on. And we talked about it over the few days as to whether or not I would be involved and we hadn't really decided whether or not, how involved I would be, whether it would be just maintenance, whether it was just popping in now and then just to see how she was. But I was lucky because she wanted me to be involved with my child. So I considered myself lucky just from the very beginning. Because I know personally a lot of young men who are fathers, who don't have access to their child. And that's actually what my interest is, and that's why I agreed to come here.

I'm not going to do the thing, like how did the family react, 'cause we all know how someone's family reacts when they find out their little boy's going to have a child and they're going to be a grandmother. I think everyone here has parents and everyone knows exactly what the parent's reaction is. It's not the most pleasant thing in the world.

I think what's hardest for fathers is there's no straight connection to the child. Not while the mother is pregnant anyway. It's so different for the mother – even watching my girlfriend, there was such a change in her. She had this huge connection to the child and all I could see, in fairness, was this bump, and the occasional punch and a kick and a hiccup and small things that kind of made my heart jump but they didn't make a huge difference to me.

What really kicked everything into gear for me, when I realised that I was going to be a father and that everything was going to change, was about the time the child was born. It wasn't even during labour, it was when the child was born. And I know you are all probably wondering the reaction and I think it is the reaction virtually every father has – as in – has anyone here seen *Lord of The Rings*? We all know Golum. That was pretty much my reaction. It's Golum..... And it was, it was this small purple thing screaming at me. And that was really it. And I just looked at this child and I saw the colour coming in and she stopped crying. The midwife picked her up and took her to clean her up. So, I stayed with her for seconds and I kind of drifted over like a dream over to this unnamed child. And I asked the midwife when she would open her eyes, which is the standard question... I didn't know. And she said to me, 'don't worry, she won't open her eyes for a day or two. You know, it'll be a few days before any new child opens her eyes'

And I swear this is the honest truth, in that second she opened her eyes and grabbed my thumb and she looked right at me and my heart melted. Everything about me melted. And y'know, from that second on, I went from being a 22 year old who was, y'know, going out with the lads, getting drunk, messin' about, didn't know where I was going in my life and I think I aged about 10 years in the space of 5 minutes. I really did. It just was this huge change. But... now that's the lighter side of it.

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And I stuck around because, some might say it's because I didn't have a father growing up, so I wanted to change that and be the father figure for my child. Now I personally, I think I turned out fine without a father. But I would have loved to have had him. Even if I just knew him that would have helped. That would have made a huge difference in my life growing up and that was one of the reasons I stayed. I don't know – I actually don't know how to explain it to be honest with you. I just had to stay for this child, this dependent being, which was pure innocence I have to say. I know it just sounds like nonsense and pure drivel, but it is the honest truth.

One of the hardest things really as a young parent is this change in your life. You're going to go from being a young person to a parent. Suddenly you're parents. You're everything you've rebelled against. So, suddenly you start to consider your career and your life and you know food just suddenly seems so important. Before you could skip on a months rent and get away with it and now you can't. And I think actually that's one of the things that scares off young fathers so much, including ones I've spoken to. Guys I know. And these were the things that freaked them out. It wasn't so much the child, it was the responsibility of being a father and it was that lack of support for them - that was what got to them more than anything. A lot of them loved their kids but they just can't hack that responsibility.

I was lucky because I happen to have a great family to support me through it. I was lucky enough to have Trish and Teresa in the TPSP. They helped us a lot. A lot. A lot more than I expected, great support from the two of them.

One thing I have to say though that has bothered me for years, is that a very good friend of mine has two children. He hasn't seen them in 5 years, because of the Irish law that states that because they are not married, he has no automatic legal right to his child. Now we all know he can fight a court case - if you have that time and money. If my partner walked out on me tomorrow and said, 'You cannot see your child', honestly there is not much I can do. It's as simple as that – even with my name on the birth cert, even with the DNA, it's the Irish law. But that's insanity. Everyone here has to admit that is insane. And I think that kind of brought us that bit closer in a relationship that went from being friends, very good friends, we were always very close through everything. And that brought us closer together because we had that support for each other. Because she was always very willing and open to let me be there for the child and have that input into my child's life. And, I have to say, it has made our relationship much, much better.

But again that was due to that bit of support from support services and from families. I think also that what scares off a lot of young fathers is that they get freaked out. The mothers get freaked out. They start fighting and they have no real way of solving those issues because there's no real kind of middle person there to help them both. In 90 percent of these cases the fathers do feel resentment towards the mothers and I've seen it a lot of times, resentment towards the mothers.

As Fergus said as well, that in a lot of cases, young parents who are couples, pretended they're not, so that they can get more money. So you have to break the law to live in a house, to earn some money to feed your child. That's wrong. We're encouraging young people to separate. In a lot of cases they end up either separating or breaking the law. So let's just reflect on that one for a little second there. See who made that one up.

I've got all these questions here: How did my friends react to the pregnancy? To be honest with you, my friends were grand. A couple of them made jokes with me. A couple of them said my life was over. A couple of weeks later they all got over it and wanted to know where the baby show was.

As I said, before my baby was born I had no aim in my life. I didn't know who I was. I had these silly dreams of being a famous singer, actor, all of these things I knew I'd never be. And I'd do all these silly courses, law courses, photography courses, they went nowhere. I knew they were going nowhere. But that's because I had no reason to do them. And now I just have this focus. I *have* to provide for my child.

Next year I'm going back to college. I'm going to UCC as a mature student. I'm going to take a career path. But as I say, that's just me, that's not everyone. I'm dedicated to this. I decided not to go this year, because it's better this year if I either (a) go on the dole or (b) get a job. Either way I'll pretty much be earning about the same money.

But being a father has changed everything for me. And it does for every father, no matter what. Whether they run and hide or stand up and support, it suddenly changes everything and it really does come down to support at the end of the day.

The only people who are really supported are the mothers. But Trish in the TPSP showed me a couple of posters they have of fathers, they're starting to push the Programme towards men as well. But support for men is just not out there. It has to be visible. It has to be shown that if you come along to this you are not going to be a sissy woosh or that kind of stuff, because that's what they're worried about. They think it's going to reflect on this image. Now, as you can tell, I'm not your typical lad driving around in a Fiesta and the likes. I'm not.

I think that the best thing for me in being a dad is I've grown up a lot. It's given me a new path in life. It's almost as if I've been born again. It's amazing that this one small innocent beautiful thing, which screams at me just to pass the time, and I have just this infinite patience for this child. I know I'm going to watch her grow up. I'm going to watch her change, she's going to hate me for most of her teenage years. (I'm thinking of going to cryostasis for about 5 years, if that's possible!). And it's just this huge unbelievable love I have for my daughter. It can't be described. And I think that is the only thing that can make fathers stick around – just genuine love for their child. But they have to be shown that they have the support as well. That it's not just about the mother, that it's there for them, that they will have support. Someone can help them.

But first of all changes have to be made and it all comes down to the legal rights, for me anyway. So much of it could be changed just through that. Because there are a lot of fathers who are told that they can't access their child, even from birth and they give up, y'know? I personally wouldn't – there's not a chance in hell. But those are the kind of things that are important. I mean I can stand here all day and be the token father and I could do that for hours on end. But what it comes down to is, all I can say is - some things have to change and it is things like support. I could say it a hundred times and I will – support has to be there for fathers. They have to be shown it's available.

And you have to trust fathers as well because they get this horrible image. Young fathers do not have a good image. When it comes down to it honestly, how many of you, when you see a young mother, you're more likely to coo at the child and talk to the mother. If you see a young father, honestly now, most of us would give him a look. I did even before I became a father myself. And it's those things that have to change as well – it's our own personal views of young fathers. And Fergus and the others can give us all the statistics and everything we want but it's you, it's everyone, it's that silly law, which is, in my opinion, a bunch of rubbish. It's the only way of putting it. It is a stupid, stupid thing.

And that's pretty much all I have to say. So, enjoy the conference.



Finn Murray and Séan Benson, young fathers.

## **The Da Project: Involving Fathers in Family Support**

**Francis Chance, Assistant National Director of Children's Services, Barnardos**

As Finn was saying, it is very easy for the likes of Fergus and me to talk statistics and strategies and things like that. I'm very struck about how personally Finn and also Fergus talked about what brought them to this area and what drives them in this area.

I'm very driven by the importance that fathers play in their children's lives. And I get quite angry at fathers who are not using that opportunity, not recognising the importance of fathers in their children's lives. A father who is separated can drift away from his relationship with his children whom he has had a very close relationship with previously and that makes me really angry.

I suppose that also touches on some of the debate which is going on about fathers in Ireland today. That debate has started from a fathers' rights perspective, from the rights of fathers to have contact and have a relationship with their children. That is a very understandable perspective and I know there are a lot of men who are very angry and very upset about how systems conspire against that possibility. I suppose my starting point and our starting point within Barnardos is from a children's rights perspective, which is a very clear belief that children have a right to have a relationship with their father, children have a right to know their father and to have ongoing and healthy contact with their father and that this is good for children. That doesn't in any way negate the fathers' rights, or the women's rights. It's just very powerful to address this issue from a children's rights perspective.

What I'm going to do is tell a story about our journey and about a particular project which is not a young father's project. But at the end I'll have a couple of reflections in relation to young fathers. One of the things I really need to say to you very strongly is you each need to take your own journey - personally, within the context of your agency and of your service and within the community you work in, and with the fathers you might be working with. It's an individual journey. I hope that some of what I talk about will give you some signposts along the way. But nobody else can take that journey for you and I hope you get an opportunity to start down that road.

First of all, can I tell you a little about the context for the project that we were working within - the Cherry Orchard Family Support Project. It's a *Springboard Project*, one of 16 projects nationally at that time. The Project works with 25 families at any one time. The children are generally in the age range of 7 to 12 although we're operating outside of that to some extent as well. The Project is focused on keeping children within their families and within their communities. It is about prevention - preventing dropping out of school etc. So, they are families who are struggling and who are experiencing marginalisation. Looking at the gender balance within the room, it's great to see lots of men here today. The Project started down this road with an all-female staff and I suppose when we talk about fathers and how important they are in children's lives and how to try to get them engaged in their children's lives and then we look around the room and see only female staff, there's a little bit of a mismatch.

When we started this process in the beginning of 2004, we looked at the level of father participation within the project and out of 25 families, only 20 percent of the fathers were in any way engaged in the Project. With all of those 20 percent, their contact with the project was incredibly peripheral, all had passing contact with the staff. It wasn't meaningful, deep,

on-going contact. That was the level we were starting from. And I would just encourage you to think with your own services and measure where you're at now in relation to the involvement of fathers. Identify where you would like to get to so that you can see your success.

The starting point was the evaluation of then 16 *Springboard Projects* nationally by Kieran Mc Keown, published in 2001. Within that, Kieran drew attention to the fact that right across the family support projects in general and across those 16 projects, there was a very low engagement with fathers. And we decided to take that as a challenge and see if we could do something about it. A funding opportunity arose. The Ballyfermot Urban Initiative had some funding available. We put a proposal in to them and we were successful. Our plan, in our naivety, was to run two ten-week group work programmes to sort out the needs of all of these fathers. One was going to be targeted at fathers and the other was going to be targeted at older male siblings, who might not yet be fathers. We had a wonderful plan – we were very clear about what we wanted to do! And we got money to employ a worker, also to provide training to the staff team and to evaluate the process.

We then started down the road and the first thing was recruitment and getting the right people involved. David Simpson who's going to be working with us in the afternoon was our trainer, and was incredibly influential on the direction we took within the service. Simon Forrest from Working with Men - a UK based organisation- joined us as an evaluator and again gave huge amounts of encouragement, support and critical feedback about the direction things were moving in. And we also recruited our male worker – a part-time worker. But he left. He left following one-day of training with David. And folks, it was the best thing that happened for us. And I hope you'll understand that as we go along. He left because he was used to working with men as groups of men. We were working with men in the child-care agency with a focus on the entire family and he was saying:

*'As a part-time person you're asking me to take responsibility for the group of men that I might be working with and also take responsibility for how that impacts on their children and their families. It's too big a task - it's more than I can do'*

and he walked away. He created a crisis for us and that crisis was a huge turning point. And incidentally, not many people resign after a day of David's training!

In the training that David delivered with us, the key starting point was our own personal attitudes. If there's one phrase that comes out from the training, it was just thinking about the fact that:

*"fathers love their children and children love their fathers"*

So much else falls into place if you believe that. If you don't believe that, then we've got real problems. If you accept that as a thesis, then everything else flows from that. Our understanding of men and fathers – they're not women who dress differently - they tick differently. If you put a group of women into a room, they may end up talking about some meaningful things that are going on in their lives. If you put a similar group of men into the same room they will be analysing what happened outside on the pitch behind us last night. If you talk to fathers about what their support needs are, they find it very hard to articulate that. They find it very hard to say:

*'This is where I need support'*

If you ask them what their children's support needs are, what are their family's support needs, what are their community's support needs, they will talk eloquently about that. You just have to go slightly in different directions in order to get to where you want to get to with men. The other piece which we did with David was the development of strategies – where are we at at the moment and how are we going to move forward from here. It was a very open, honest and challenging process. There was a lot of personal discussion that was linked back into our practice. David challenged us and we challenged one another. And it was an incredibly powerful piece of training which was key in setting up the whole process. As a result we went back to the drawing board tore up the two ten-week training programme plan and re-thought the best way forward.

The first thing we looked at was creating a father-friendly environment within the community where we were working. We looked around our own building at the images of fathers and fatherhood there. We got a set of posters from Birmingham City Council – images of fathers with their children and we went out with those tucked under our arms and we delivered them to every public building in the community. So everywhere within the Cherry Orchard and Ballyfermot area that men went they saw images of men as fathers and men with their children. And David has produced a lovely set of posters in the Northwest. We also sponsored a Father's Day Art and Poetry competition right across the community we work within. We had 400 pieces of poetry or drawings - some incredibly moving material. It was a really powerful experience. We had a major launch of that and the fathers came and stood by their children as the children's prizes were being given out. So we increased the profile of fathers within that community. One of the teachers told us that they'd been really nervous to mention the word 'father' within their school because they knew that children had very different circumstances and maybe it would be very upsetting to talk about fathers within school. Within the schools this piece of work gave teachers permission to talk about fathers. And it was upsetting and children cried. But it was incredibly powerful and they now felt empowered that it was okay to talk about fathers within schools. It's unreal to think that it would be impossible to talk about mothers within schools. Why was it okay within schools to leave fathers off the agenda?

We then looked at profiling the fathers within the 25 families we were working with. We had deceased fathers, fathers living outside of the country, fathers in prison. In some situations we could have had a number of fathers in the same family or the same man being father of children in more than one family. So the group-work approach could have been a little bit risky.

A really important discussion was to be clear about what would be the reasons for us to include or exclude a father from our work with children and families. When we did that first time around, we excluded about a third of the fathers. Then we went back and reviewed each one of those and said:

*'Why are we excluding that father? And on what evidence are we excluding that father?'*

We found we were excluding that father on a rumour, on an opinion from a family member that was unsubstantiated, on maybe an allegation which had never been brought to conclusion or on our own set of biases. When we pushed our thinking, we found that there were very, very few fathers – you could count them on one hand, even on three fingers, I think - out of those 25 families where there might have been a reason to exclude them. And even then, it might be:

*'we're not going to include them now because of the particular dynamics which are going on with the children and the mother at the moment. But we are going to go back and include them at a later stage'.*

So that, rather than saying that we're going to exclude them totally we are saying 'just not now' but we'll choose the right time to engage them.

I do think it's a key part of the work to think about what are the reasons that you, as a service working with children and families and focused on the needs of children, would decide that it was inappropriate for a father to be there. There are reasons but they are very, very few and they tend to get exaggerated.

We looked at our own policies and practices. Our assessment forms didn't mention fathers or else they left a space for one father figure and didn't allow for the fact that a number of children in the same family may have different fathers. If you don't ask for that information, then you won't know who the fathers are. For the staff, it was challenging to go out and have a conversation with a family raising the possibility that maybe there is more than one father there. We looked at our general policies. We revised our referral forms and our assessment forms to make sure that they created the space for a number of fathers to be seen and thought about. Then the most important step was that we went out and we talked to the fathers about what was important in their own lives, what it was like being a father, what were their hopes for their children, what were their fears for their children. We brought the conversation gently around to asking:

*"are there any ways that we can help and support you in being the best father you can be to your children?"*

Then we designed interventions - and those interventions did not involve group work at all. They all involved individual interventions - dealing with the particular circumstances of that father's life. We could have found we had a number of fathers with the same need and group work was appropriate - the way the cards fell in our service, it wasn't appropriate. But, I suppose the key thing was that the intervention was flowing from the needs of the fathers who were there as opposed to flowing from the pre-conceived idea that group work was the way to work with the fathers.

At that stage we talked about the fact that the Da Project, as we had called it, was a project within a project - we needed to rethink that and we started referring to it as the 'Da Process'. It was the process of moving from a service that had very low engagement with fathers and that subtly, for a range of different reasons, was excluding fathers, to become a father-inclusive service in everything that we did. I suppose what we've been seeking to do is to mainstream fathers in all aspects of the agency's work and the agency's policy. And it's not about:

*'Well, we run a fathers' group from January to June every year and then we don't do anything for the rest of the year.'*

Fathers are there in the same way mothers are there and children are central all the time. We started with designated staff to work with fathers and we moved away from that. Now everyone is a father's worker. One of the really important learnings we had, was when we talked to the fathers, they said to us very clearly:

*'attitudes are much more important than gender. So a woman with the right attitude is way more helpful to us than a man with the wrong attitude.'*

So I think it's important for the women in the audience to think about how you approach fathers and how you develop your relationship with fathers. You don't need to feel that you are in some way at a disadvantage because you're not a man, to be working with men. That was a really important piece of the learning and it's a really important in the reality that children and family services are predominantly staffed by women.

Father-proofing all of our work involves thinking about everything that we do from a father's perspective. We did assign one member of the team to be the person whose job it was, when anybody forgot to mention 'father' when they were talking about a family or talking about planning a piece of work, to say:

*'Where's the father in this?'*

And it's something I've got into the habit of doing all the time to the frustration of those who work with me. The big change which has happened is that for the new staff that come into the service and for the new families that come into the service, we don't have a father project. It's integral in how we work. We work in a way that involves mothers, involves fathers and is centred on the needs of children. And fathers are an important part of that.

One of the things that we found when we went to talk to mothers was that we had a fear that a lot of the mothers, particularly the mothers who'd had acrimonious separations from the fathers, would say:

*'Don't go near him, I don't want anything to do with him'*

When we talked to the mothers about the reasons for engaging fathers, we got 100 percent support. The reason was that we framed it positively. International research shows:

*'the children whose fathers guide and inform them are more likely to be productive, industrious, caring members of society.'*

That was taken from one piece of research.

*'Children are more likely to do well in primary school when their father shows kindness, care and warmth towards them at an early stage. Children are more likely to learn when their father also shows a keen interest in learning. Children are less likely to end up in the criminal justice system when they have had regular contact with their father before the age of 11 years.'*

So we drew on key pieces of international research which tell us the importance that fathers bring to children's lives. And the mothers found that acceptable. The only negative comment we had from a mother was:

*'Once he doesn't think this is a way to get back with me'*

Fair enough. Now, that's not the experience everywhere but in the particular circumstances of those 25 families, every mother was an open door when it came to involving fathers in their children's lives.

What did we achieve in terms of the evaluation outcomes? Over a 15 month period, we increased our contact with fathers from 20 percent of the fathers to 50 percent of the fathers. So half the fathers of children in the service were engaged in the service. The depth of engagement increased significantly. Some of them were still peripheral, but a significant number of fathers who were part of the service were using the service and finding the service helpful and an

important resource in their lives. The proportion of families where there was no contact between the children and the father fell from 80 percent to 50 percent. Still a long way to go but it was a significant move in 15 months which was a very short time in the life of a service.

The work with fathers became an integral part of staff's practice. It showed an increase in positive contact between fathers and their children. At least six of the fathers felt that their perceptions of support services had altered. Generally fathers had seen services as having nothing to do with them. You go, you knock on the door and the father answers the door and says:

*"I'll get herself".*

Now they saw the service as having a relevance and an importance to them because it talked to them and was designed around them and their needs. At least 5 of the fathers received practical support in dealing with other agencies.

For some fathers who were in situations of homelessness when we were saying that we want to support you in developing your relationship as father, they responded:

*'Then help me get a home so that I have that level of stability in my life'.*

At least two fathers received in-depth work, where we got down into the nitty-gritty and worked on a lot of issues with them. And again, this was over quite a short period of time. In 9 of the families, we were able to say very clearly at the end of the 15 months, that the quality of children's contact with their father had improved, not just the quantity. Mothers had gained an awareness of the importance of children having contact with their father.

In summary, there were benefits for the entire community that we worked in. We raised the profile of fathers in the community. The group of children in our service were benefiting, the fathers were benefiting and the mothers were benefiting. We were talking to other agencies about this piece of work, trying to encourage them to make similar changes.

I will give four examples of particular things that happened.

One father was in prison. We went to see him in prison and we talked to him about what was going on in his children's lives. One request at the end of that session was:

*'Could I have their school reports?'*

A very, very small request but, for that man sitting there with all that time on his hands - and we all know how people in prison can end up getting into further trouble. He wanted to think about how his children were doing in school and that was going to be important for the children to know that the father worried about that. Also important for his outcome was that he was thinking about what contribution he could make to their future on his release.

We had a father living in Wales and the achievement there was that he and his children exchanged Christmas cards and birthday cards. A very small step which has been hugely meaningful to those children and hugely meaningful to that father.

We had a father who was separated and just needed somewhere to be with his kids other than Mc Donald's. Bringing your children out if you are separated is a hugely expensive and not a very child-friendly experience. What he wanted was to be in a room where there are play facilities and to be able to go into a kitchen and cook a meal for his children. Initially that was

supported by staff. There was a staff member there in order to help the relationship build and after that the staff member faded into the background and it was just providing a place for a father to be with his children. I know that *One Family* are doing some research at the moment into the development of contact centres for fathers and children.

Another father told us that he wasn't allowed to see his children. When we looked into it, there had been an allegation. The allegation had been investigated to a certain point, the social worker had moved on, the file was in limbo, and this father was left in a limbo. He believed and his family believed that there was an instruction that he couldn't see his children and the issue had never been brought to a conclusion. We linked back with the social services. They brought the investigation to a conclusion and they agreed that it was appropriate, with particular safeguards, for that man to re-engage with his children. There was a lot of work involved in doing that but the outcome for that man and his children was very important and it moved all of them out of a limbo situation.

Following the completion of the evaluation, it was important to make sure that the changes we had built into the service were sustained and built on. A key element of this was to have an ongoing evaluation process. This involves regularly counting the potential number of fathers to be engaged, the number of fathers engaged and the depth of their engagement. In this way we can track whether we are still implementing father-inclusive practice to its fullest possible extent and strive to engage all fathers. We got from 20 percent to 50 percent engagement in 15 months. We are always trying to push that forward.

The next phase which we're hoping to look at next year is disseminating the learning and promoting the changes across the entire agency of Barnardos in the 33 sites that we work in nationally. And I am here disseminating the learning to you. We're using other opportunities to disseminate the learning within the community that we work in. We're also very keen to disseminate the learning nationally. On that note - we have three publications: a summary of the evaluation, a practice tool that we developed on the basis of the evaluation and a magazine with articles about working with fathers.

I just want to tie this back to teenage fathers because we weren't working with teenage fathers and while a lot of the issues are the same, a lot of the issues are different. I think this very much reflects some of what Finn was talking about earlier on. The teen father starts off with everything stacked up against him. He's almost invariably seen as the villain of the piece, the *bête noir*, the perpetrator, a problem. The level of anger that exists, certainly on the girl's side of the family and often on the boy's side of the family is huge. There is a need for services to negotiate and mediate. We had a discussion last night on the importance of mediation training in this area.

Young fathers are living in fear of prosecution or the mother and father fear social welfare and housing implications, experiencing Finn's anger at the system. Why would a system be set up in such a way that key elements of it militate against fathers having involvement in their children's lives?

It is important that we support young fathers in the early bonding and parenting skills, supporting them to get to know 'Golum' as Finn said. Fathers can find it very easy when kids can kick round footballs and things like that, but this tiny little thing is quite scary. Getting to know and develop a relationship with this tiny thing - the mother has had 9 months of a relationship already - is quite scary. To do that as a young person often needs a little bit of support. Finn

talked very much about how becoming a father can kick you forward several years in your life. With this growing up fast, you can experience isolation from your own peer group, sometimes being seen as a sissy or something similar within your own peer group if you're wanting to spend time with your child. And another area of particular vulnerability is if the mother – father relationship breaks up, supporting the father to remain a part of their child's life in a situation where the parental relationship breaks up and in particular, in a situation where the mother forms a new relationship. Again there's a lot of negotiation to take place around that.

As I said at the start, that was our journey. Please don't try and take exactly the same journey but hopefully some of those ideas will help you think about the journey that you need to take, personally, professionally, within your service, within your agency, within your community and, most importantly, with the fathers of the children that you work with.

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1, 2, 4 and 5 are available through Barnardos website: [www.barnardos.ie](http://www.barnardos.ie) Click in Barnardos' Training and Resource Service

## **The Young Father's Project, Derry.**

### **Developing and Changing Services for Young Men**

**Julie McGinty, Co-ordinator, Western Health Action Zone, Northern Ireland**

**Sharon White, Development Worker, Western Health Action Zone**

**Séan Benson, Project Participant and Advisor to the Project**

#### **Julie McGinty, Western Health Action Zone Co-ordinator, Northern Ireland**

First of all, I will give you some of the background and the strategic context of the Project. Sharon then is going to talk about the operation of the Project and Séan will tell a bit about his experience - both as a participant on the Project and how he was supported to actually participate on the steering group, in the development of the business plan and the development of programmes.

The Western Health Action Zone was only set up in 2001 and the purpose of the Health Action Zone was to tackle inequality. We use a partnership approach in what we do and a community development approach and we are about inclusion and working with those who are most vulnerable and are most marginalised. We have a whole range of projects and young fathers would be one of them. So we have projects with young fathers and we have projects with migrant workers, we have projects with children in families in poverty and we do quite a bit of work around debt and the impact that it has on poverty and on mental health. So that's just a wee bit of the background.

In 2002 we had a consultation and we asked people in the 5 Council areas in the Western Board what they thought the issues were in our Board and what the Health Action Zone really should be concentrating on tackling. And one of the issues they came up with was teenage pregnancy and parenting and in particular young fathers. And so we put young fathers on the Health Action Zone's agenda. We also put it on the agenda of other organisations. We caused a wee bit of controversy at the beginning, but really our intention was to begin the debate. We had teenage pregnancy strategies, teenage sexual health strategies in which young fathers were mentioned. But, really the work wasn't been brought forward in any real way and what we tried to do really was to up the anti in that.

So we identified a range of stakeholders and we set up a Partnership Steering Group during which we engaged with 6 young fathers. That was really through the work of some of the partners we had on the Steering Group, which included youth organisations. And with those young fathers we developed a programme that looked at discussing and exploring their own experiences of fatherhood and the differences between older fathers and younger fathers and what their perceptions were. Through this - Séan was a member of that group - some of the fathers then stayed and engaged with us for a couple of years afterwards. At that time, we decided we didn't know enough about it and we commissioned some research, which is called *In Whose Best Interest?* Obviously that's in the child's best interest. Really this was an exploration of the experiences and expectations of young fathers and parenthood within the Board. The research engaged with young fathers, with young mothers and with the young grandparents. And it was clear throughout the research that grandparents, in particular maternal

grandparents, have a huge impact on how the relationship develops and moves forward from the moment the pregnancy is announced. But you can get *In Whose Best Interest* on [www.westernhaz.org](http://www.westernhaz.org).

This is a quote from the research and it reflects what's said before and what one of the young fathers had said:

*'I didn't know what the word 'father' meant and the very word scared me'*

And I think there was a lot of fear of being left alone, I think, when young fathers face this situation.

The Western Board currently records around about 300 teenage pregnancies per year. It's coming down very slightly and hopefully that's a trend that will continue. We presumed-not always correctly-that if there were about 300 teenage mothers there must be about 300 teenage fathers. This is not necessarily so, but on the whole most people will have partners from their own peer groups. So, that was because we could not get statistics on young fathers when we were doing our business plan.

The young men were visibly absent and the research that we commissioned was supposed to actually take place in about 6 months. It took over a year to finish and the reason it took over a year is because we found it extremely difficult to identify and engage with fathers to take part in the research. And even the stakeholders who work within Family Support were unable to get us focus groups of young fathers or to identify anyone who would take part in it. And basically it took a long time, it took word of mouth, it took youth workers, it took the 6 young fathers whom we had, who were going out and gathering other young fathers. And it took the perseverance and empathy of our researcher and eventually we had our research. I'm not going to dwell on a lot of this because this has been mentioned by Francis in his last slide. It threw up a lot of the barriers for young men and they don't just run or shirk their responsibility. There's a huge amount of barriers in their way – among those are negative perceptions. But young men do not proactively seek help and support. It's not that there are no services there, but really they are designed for mother and baby and really the evidence is growing that the benefits for the child are huge. There are physical, social, emotional and educational benefits.

So the recommendation of our research was that there are existing services there, but we need to change the way the existing services work so that they are welcoming and so that they are suitable for young fathers. We needed the educational awareness raising and this was also about the perception about young fathers among the general public, about family support, confidence and self-esteem and addressing conflict between families.

So we had our research and our recommendations and the next step really was to re-develop our business plan. We applied to our Lottery fund under the *Change the Future Programme*. We were successful and got over £470,000 to run this project, to pilot this project for the next three years.

I have to say as well, that the Lottery came back to us and said that they would be looking at our project as a model of partnership working to base other programmes on. The partnership, I have to say, in this project is tight and it's good. At the time we had asked First Housing Support Services, who sat on our Partnership Group, if they would be the lead partner, because we felt they were the ideal partner, they would signpost people to housing. They have a whole range

of supportive housing programmes and they have a crèche. And also housing that has 8 or 9 family units within one building. It has mother and baby facilities and at the moment fathers do stay there too – it does house fathers as well.

The Project mission was to support young fathers to develop nurturing relationships with their children. And that would be done by providing mediation, enhancing parenting skills and life skills in order to establish a wider network of support for both young parents.

So, about the partnership. Partnerships don't just happen. You can't say to a range of people:

*'just get into a room, we all want to change something'.*

They don't just happen. It takes a particular range and set of circumstances and skills. First of all it is very important for our own Board or for our Steering Group to examine our own beliefs and perceptions about young fathers, about fatherhood, about absent fathers, about the whole gamut, because we had a whole range of people sitting round that table. The relationship is essential for any partnership and that needs to be nurtured and supported. The partnership also need to be supported to evolve through changes, which can be either intrinsic or extrinsic, whether it's about dynamics which are happening around the table or organisational change. Y'know one organisation can be in a bit of chaos and you're thinking , 'oh God this needs to stay smooth all the way through if the project is going to work'. Partnership agreement was very important. We do have a Partnership Agreement that is quite tight and that ensured the buy-in and the endorsement and the commitment of the partners that were there and also clarified the roles and responsibilities of each partner around the table. So those are the partners who are still sitting around the table today. As with any Partnership Group, sometimes it ebbs and flows and we decide that maybe we need someone else on so it has changed somewhat from the very beginning. But essentially the same people have been there for the last 3 years.

So - the engagement of young fathers. Young fathers were included throughout the process. We had partner organisations who were youth workers. But it was also very important for ourselves, as the managers on the Project, to individually have contact with young fathers. You can't say 'leave a message with my secretary'. We went out on an individual basis - you have to be there, you have to. We had contact through text, through phone, through e-mail. We met the young fathers on the Steering Group in an informal setting before the Steering Group meeting. We talked down through the agenda because we had a lot of senior management team on the Steering Group and it was quite a formal meeting. We discussed all the issues that may arise around the table from different organisations' points of view. So when the young fathers went to the table, they knew possibly what the discussion would be, who would be coming with what and the reasons behind that. And they had talked over their own views and they were able to go in with a good amount of knowledge and be confident about what they said. And that was what happened.

Throughout this process we focused to begin with on young fathers but also held focus groups with young mothers. We decided, very quickly that young mothers were extremely important to engage with. We needed - and I think the way the law stands at the minute - it's essential that you have the buy-in of the young mothers. This kind of Project can be frightening for young mothers. They're saying:

*'God, I've done this all by myself for two years and if he does this Programme, will he come in, will he take the control from me, even take the child from me?'*

It is threatening and people are fearful. And it is essential that you have that buy-in, otherwise it's like building your house in the sand really and the danger is you are building the hopes and expectations of young fathers and they cannot fulfil them at the end of the day. And young fathers have said that:

*'what if we go through that whole Programme for two years. We can do everything you want us to. We can be a great father and if she decides that I'm not allowed to see the baby, then I'm not allowed to see the baby. It doesn't matter'*

So we spoke to young mothers who also developed the programme that we have.

### **Sub group structures**

We have sub-groups that take care of different things within the Group. The partnership is strong now and the Steering Group takes on a lot of the work itself. Good communication really, is the key to not getting mixed messages and making sure that you're right about the decision making – who makes the decisions and where does that responsibility lie. So that's all I'll say about that.

### **Organisational structures**

We are with First Housing Support Services. They have a good infrastructure and they administer the Project. Part of our Partnership Agreement and part of our contract with First Housing, was that our Steering Group would retain a responsibility and the decision-making responsibility for the Project.

### **Monitoring and evaluation**

Tenders for the evaluation went out and we expect to have a comprehensive framework developed before March [2008]. Because our partnership is so varied we're hoping that this person will enable each organisation to collect the right information that they are allowed to share with each other as well.

We are hoping to engage about 20 fathers a year. It probably doesn't sound a lot, but the actions we are talking about, engaging with the fathers, the child, the young mother, and hopefully two grandparents or a grandparent from each side are very demanding. That's what we're hoping to do. Now we've just set up in July [2007] so, I don't know yet how we'll meet our targets. There may be more, there may be less, I'm not sure. We had staff in place in July 2007 and the work really began then.

But could I just say, you had the conversation about male staff or female staff. As we were developing this project through our focus groups and individual interviews and that, we had asked the young fathers themselves:

*"Who do you want working with you? If we had a worker in here, what should they look like?"*

They described her to a tee. They said they didn't care. They said:

*"As long as we trust this person, as long as this person has empathy."*

But what they did say is:

*"We actually would like both. We would like a male because we would like the notion, we'd like that role model and to know that somebody has walked in our shoes. But we would like a girl as well, because we want to know what she thinks".*

It's nearly like getting behind enemy lines! They wanted to know, as they're going along, if we're thinking about a decision, or a particular thing in the Project, what would the woman's point of view be. They actually said that they would like both. But, they didn't really care, if they trusted the person.

I'll pass over to Sharon now. Thank you.

### **Sharon White, Development Worker, Western Health Action Zone**

I'm going to try and keep this as short as I can. I'm Sharon White and I'm the Development Worker with the Project. I've been working now with young people for the last 6 years, working in the Community and Voluntary sector. It's a real privilege for me now, I'm just starting working with young fathers and I'm really optimistic that we can do something really great and change lives for young men within the North-West. We launched yesterday in the Guild Hall. It was very much like what's happening here – it was a great turnout. We had a lot of bodies from the statutory, community and voluntary organisations and we hope to build on that with great success and engage young men in father-friendly services.

As Julie said we have a Steering Group which meets on a monthly basis and provides strategic guidance on the future direction of the Project. And the Steering Group have a vast amount of expertise and experience in improving services for children and young people. And within the Steering Group we have 5 subgroups. And they also meet on a monthly basis. They are responsible for particular elements of the Project and also feed in on a monthly basis. It's also important to remember that young fathers have been involved from the beginning and will continue to be involved from an advisory, supportive kind of role, but we hope too, they'll be regular users of the service.

Drawing from recent research, it was evident that there was a distinct lack of infrastructure that could support the involvement of fathers and carers in services and systems. And there was a need to develop personalised services for young men in order to respond to their needs. And we hope to engage in a strategic way with young fathers. So we looked at our own Project and we saw that there was no point in attracting young fathers to the Project unless we were ready to receive them. So we set in place, a bit like Francis did, all the systems, policies and procedures that were needed to make our service more father-friendly and to meet young fathers' needs. And we were also aware that these services and systems might change the referral process.

We realised that no organisation or service meets all the needs of the young fathers so we looked at an interagency approach. At the moment some people might not come across young fathers in their work, so it was essential for us to gain the support and commitment of all the key stakeholders who were interested in working with young men so that they accept referrals from the Project as well as send young fathers to it.

When we were thinking about families and peers we saw that young fathers were embedded in networks that often provided them with little or really no support in the fathering role. So we thought the Young Fathers' Project had to work with not only the young fathers but with the mothers and the grandparents and the wider family network. And especially to engage young men and also the wider family network to ensure the Project was going to change the lives of the young men.

When we looked at the young fathers themselves, according to the report published by Continue –'I'm a Better Dad Now' - young people generally fall into three categories: chaotic, semi-chaotic and sorted. So the Project, we felt, had to adopt different strategies to engage effectively with young fathers. So we're going to use three strategies: one-to-one support, semi-structured group work and peer support. We're going to start with one-to-one support. We believe that a project that mixes different approaches and techniques is more likely to succeed because young men's lives are so unpredictable.

We thought, and we were always trying to put this forward, that we want a kind of 'father's rights' organisation. We're a children's rights organisation and all the evidence seems to suggest that when fathers are positively engaged in children's lives, then children will do better in a number of measures i.e. through school achievement and positive social behaviour. And so, that's why the project will provide a range of services tailored to meet the needs of individual fathers and we will consider them as a young man and also a parent. We hope to do this through mediation, our parenting programme and the life-skills programme.

Most of you probably know about mediation but for those who don't, mediation has taken up quite a bit of our budget. Mediation is voluntary and the service will hope to bring together young fathers, mothers, parents and the wider family network to discuss issues causing concern. These issues might be anything from relationship issues, parenting issues, stuff like visitation arrangements. And the mediator's job is to act as an impartial third party and manage the process. So, it's just helping all participants to exchange information and feelings in a constructive way and ultimately so that everyone will be heard. And the mediator has no power to impose a settlement. The responsibility for all decisions remains with the participants.

When do we see mediation working? Probably at crucial times – early on in pregnancy and following childbirth when the young father and the mother are still bonded and when the new father's interest in his child is often highest. Mediation can resolve relationship issues between the parents' mother and father and their wider family network. And then especially with obstacles such as when the young father wants to be involved in the young baby's life and obstacles are created by those who believe that the young father is not entitled to access and visitation.

Why does it work? Mediation works because it encourages young fathers and young mothers to set aside their problems and concentrate on the main issues of the children. Mediation provides young fathers and mothers with the opportunity to discuss their relationship issues and how they're having a negative impact on parenting. Mediation can improve the young father's outlook on being a committed and positive role model for his child. It can improve his confidence and knowledge. And mediation can bring together a wider support of professionals for the young father and mother and all the significant adults in their child's life.

Why is there a need for father-friendly programmes? Because, as Julie [Mc Ginty] says:

*'for every pregnant woman, there's a pregnant man'.*

And, I don't just mean physiologically, but in every other way, they are. It impacts on a young father emotionally, socially and financially and they all have to face the same issues that pregnancy brings. And, I believe that if we paid more attention to this issue, then we would have fathers better prepared for their new role. Programmes also need to be geared toward males, rather than added on to existing programmes for females. It's important that boys and men have a safe place where they feel that they can come together and where their needs are met.

### **Parenting Programme**

Our Parenting Programme will be divided into Workshops rather than a four or six week Parenting Programme. We felt that because young fellas' lives are so unpredictable, if a Programme is going on for six weeks and maybe they miss a week, the chances are they'll not come back. We hope that the Workshops are going to stimulate discussion and also practical action on issues that are pertinent to the young men. And the Parenting Programme also will explain why the father's involvement is crucial to the development of his child.

### **Life-Skills Programme**

The Life-Skills Programme will be offered in a series of Workshops and is there to help a young man plan for a career, to manage daily living, to help him make a positive transition into the community, to promote healthy, physical and emotional development and to improve his relationships now and in the future.

Some of the expected outcomes? Different fathers will have different expectations, but we hope that the project should help the young men to identify and build on their own skills and strengths; acquire and develop practical childcare skills and knowledge; solve practical problems in relation to employment, housing, money matters and the law; help them to share responsibility for their children and improve general life skills such as communication and decision making.

And finally, because we believe that mothering is important, a great deal has gone into the development of mother-friendly services. But if we believe that fathering is also important, we must make sure that the same services are also men-friendly. Because we need to get men involved in their children's lives, especially for the sake of the children. Fathers are a crucial element in turning aspirations into reality for children. But to allow this to happen, changes need to happen in both policy and practice at local, regional and national levels. True partnerships need to be developed, but this can only happen if the different sectors have the courage and willingness to work alongside each other to remove the barriers that exist for many fathers.

*Thank you.*



Sylda Langford, Office of the Minister for Children; Fergus Hogan, Waterford Institute of Technology; Finn Murray, young father; Francis Chance, Barnardos; Julie McGinty, Western Health Action Zone; Sharon White, Young Fathers Project Derry and Séan Benson, young father.

### **Séan Benson, participant and advisor to the Young Fathers Project**

Good morning everybody. Just before I start, I just want to thank Margaret in the TPSP for inviting me here today.

When we started this Young Fathers Project I myself had two aims, or things I wanted. The first was to better understand the mental consequences that being a young father had on me. Now, considering I was 18 at the time, this was a scary thought. At that age you don't even think about any consequences it had on yourself. I thought more about the young mother, but I didn't think about it till they approached me and says, "We're developing a Young Fathers Project, do you want to come along?"

And, during the Project, they explored all people's misconceptions of what a young father was. As a result of this, we, as a group, decided that there was one common misconception about what the young father was. And this is what we found out – that we were only interested in having sex and not taking any responsibility. Now it was the experience of myself and other young fathers that these misconceptions were also held by professionals. So for example, doctors and midwives and professionals ignored us young fathers at appointments and any queries we may have had about the young mother were brushed aside.

I was speaking to one of the people here and you still get the Bounty Pack down here. But the Bounty Pack is basically a pack of leaflets and information for mothers that they get when they first visit the midwife. And one of the things we found is whenever we got that, there was not one thing geared to fathers and as fathers we found this very alarming. Because, for every mother, there's a father. I just want to point that out.

Now we found this misconception that young fathers do not want to take responsibility to be untrue. We have 5 young fathers in that group. Two of them were about to become fathers at the moment and they were a hundred percent committed. They wanted to be a father and

take on that responsibility. The other two young fathers were in legal proceedings to see their children which shows me that they want to take responsibility. It was a long and drawn-out process but they still wanted to keep it going and as a result, they now see their children, have regular contact with their children.

And then there's myself. At this point I have two children, one who I had absolutely no contact with and one who I was in the courts about. I realised that if I put all my energy into it, this would enable me to become a good father and a role model because I hadn't gone down the road of slandering the mother. Instead I tried to cater to her needs. That was a better approach for me, maybe not for everybody.

Now, my second aim in joining the Project was to see how I could use my experience as a young father to help other young fathers in the future. To achieve this, I reasoned, well I have to stick with the Young Fathers Project for a long time.

One of the young fathers we had in the group was talking about going into the labour ward and he says, 'I'm not allowed in'. I says, 'What do you mean, you're not allowed in?' He says, 'Well, she wants her mother in'. And through the conversation we had with him and the things we said to him, we gave him the confidence for him to go ahead and go home that day and say, "I'm going in, and not your mother..." and as a result, he's seen his wee bairn being born. And it worked out in the end. He was there and her mother was there (but not in the room at the time) which was good for her.

Secondly we designed a leaflet which was aimed at dispelling the myths around what a young father is and how he behaves. We had a very limited success with this leaflet, but as you well know - you are all in the industry - any success is a success, however small.

The next step we took was the completion of *In Whose Best Interest?* that Julie spoke about. And that was designed by a girl, Rosie O' Hara, in conjunction with young fathers, young mothers and the grandparents. And we used this to evaluate the effects of young fatherhood on all of the above and how we can facilitate more access for young fathers who have been pushed aside from the responsibility of fatherhood. This was the first big step towards what we today know as *The Young Fathers Project*.

And I stand here today, some years later, a few grey hairs more. And my path, like the *Young Fathers' Project* path went in many different directions. I did youth work for three years as a result of the Young Fathers Project. One of those years was spent in university. Now, when I was 18, school-No Thanks! but university-**No Thanks!** And it was through the support of the *Young Fathers Project* that I was enabled to do this because one of the partners we had initially was 'Opportunity Youth' and it was them that invited me to do youth work. So, without the support of the Young Fathers Group I wouldn't have been able to do that.

I've also gained access to my son through the *Young Fathers Project*, through negotiation with the mother and through the support the young fathers gave me. And, every time it comes to seeing him, it's like, I really wanna do it. I can't wait until that day. I can't wait until the Friday when I go and collect him and take him home. And we have a great relationship. He gives me nothing but trouble, but that's the way I like it. Me Mammy says to me,

*"You're getting paid back for what you gave me!"*

Now everything I've experienced since that day is all tied in with the *Young Fathers' Project*. And that's because I came into contact with Julie and without all these people I wouldn't be standing here today, saying I'm seeing my child and I've got another child on the way. And I wouldn't have been up for all this. I would've been shying away as most young fathers do because of the pressure. No, I just want to say, thanks to the *Young Fathers Project* firstly and thanks to Margaret for inviting me down here to speak. But also to all the people out there who work with young fathers and who work with people who work with young fathers. We need to start to work together and we need to start to work together so we can make our young fathers a positive role model in their children's life.

Thank you very much.

## **QUESTIONS and ANSWERS**

**Chair: Sylda Langford, Director, Office of the Minister for Children**

### **Question 1**

I'm a Maternity Social Worker. We just started an Antenatal Support Project for the young women in the area. I am interested to know what age range you provide for or do you have a cut-off point for the young women or the young men who are involved in your project? I ask because we have a cut-off point of 23 years but some of the staff in the hospital felt we were going over the children's age of 18 and weren't willing to consider a referral to the social worker to the Project. The age range we use came from the young women themselves.

### **Responses**

#### **Julie McGinty**

In our Project, the age range is fourteen to twenty five and it's up to twenty five because the Lottery funding takes us up to twenty five year olds. When we talked about this at the beginning we anticipated that we'd need to give more support to younger fathers. However, we also have older fathers who have a range of difficulties and no support and some of the younger fathers are actually in a better place than them. Fourteen to twenty five is ours.

#### **Sylda Langford**

If you ask me the answer to that question, I'd say the child is the centre and it doesn't matter what age the father is when you're working in antenatal. Also, if you look to the future, you are working with the child and the child is the future. You get caught up in the legal ages because of the legislation but the legislation is for a very specific reason whereby there are duties in relation to children under the legislation where the cut-off point is 18. That doesn't mean that the cut-off point is 18 for anything to do with children and families. And I think we impose restrictions on ourselves using something that's meant for something else and we do it all the time. And I don't see how you can justify excluding fathers of any age when you're dealing with the mother and the child.

## **Fergus Hogan**

Sylda's comment reminds me of Francis talking of how slowly they went through with the Da Project, remembering why they were excluding dads. There are far too many rules to keep people out of services when we are trying our best to try and help people. It's going to be hard enough to get the dad as we've heard from the dads this morning. It's hard enough. So if we're going to be working hard in services around the country to include and support them, then we shouldn't make false barriers, I think. But I think there's a lot of nervousness around trying to provide a service for fathers. Sounds like great work you're trying to do there.

### **Question 2**

When I was listening to Julie there, I was wondering about how do you get referrals?

## **Responses**

### **Sharon White**

We have been working on a referral path. We've been going out to organisations and we've been meeting the midwives and health visitors. We've been bringing the information packs with us, doing some explanation around the Project. And, in particular, the midwives have added it to their list. They have a statutory requirement to refer young mothers under 18 to four or five particular agencies on a voluntary basis. There's still a lot more work to be done in changing the attitudes and changing the way the services are delivered. For example, you book an appointment when you're pregnant and at that first appointment they will ask if the father's around, do they know who the father is? And if someone says, 'no' because they've had a fight that week and they don't know if he'll be around or whatever, then they kind of take the first answer and they move on from that. I think it's about the way you ask things and the relationship you have with the person sitting in front of you. That hopefully will change throughout the 3 years of the Project but at the moment that's the way it is.

### **Julie Mc Ginty**

I think it's important too that you have an opportunity to be open to fathers who don't have access to their children, to give them an opportunity to refer themselves. And we prepare men who in the future may have access to his child. So they'll go through the same parenting and life-skills programme.

### **Francis Chance**

In terms of the Teen Parents Support Programme, it's almost entirely young mothers coming into it, being referred by a range of different agencies and the staff within the service then asking 'Where's the father?'. 'Is there an opportunity to involve the father?' And I know that in the evaluation phase of the first three projects, our own project in Dublin South West had a 40 percent engagement with fathers, with 40 percent of the teen mothers the father had a real presence in their children's lives. And that was a good starting point, a point to move forward from. We felt like popping open a bottle of champagne one day when we got our first referral of a teen father in his own right! A school counsellor discovered that the person was about to become a father, knew that our service was there and decided to refer him in terms of his own support needs. It was the first time an agency could see the appropriateness in doing that. And I think the more we can get that word out there, the better.

## **Sylda Langford**

We're trying to make the teen support a national, early intervention programme and the one thing we've learned from experience is that younger parents need space on their own. They can be threatened by older parents and one of the difficulties we've had is where the teen parent programme has been successful but where workers are trying to refer older referrals into it. We just need more of the same but for different age groups. Younger people can need a space on their own. But this is the beginnings of how we would actually like to be working. If we could flood Ireland with projects like this and if we could have more and more fathers wanting to engage with their children and more and more children benefiting from their fathers you'd actually have much healthier families. Children would have a much better quality of life. You would end up with much fewer problems. But some of the ways we've been working actually creates problems and we create loads of problems for ourselves all the time and we complicate things and sometimes we need to sit back and use our heads and our common sense. And think about ourselves and think about if we had a problem, how we might want help or how we might like to avail of services. And sometimes if you work and practise that theory, you get a better outcome.

### **Question 3**

We've started a separate project for young fathers as part of our Teen Parents Support Programme. And last week I was saying 'this is extra work'. Someone said to me, 'no, this *is* your work'. That really struck me. I was feeling daunted by having this extra piece but yes, it is my work. I just wanted to say that.

I also wanted to ask the speakers: are you saying to us that with young men and young fathers an individual approach is better than a group work approach? That that's what young fathers want from a project or can we work in groups? Ultimately I'd like to think I could work in a group with young fathers.

## **Responses**

### **Séan Benson**

It just depends on the circumstances. If we had a young father who didn't want to participate in a group, then our programmes and facilities will facilitate him all the same. I think the best for young fathers - I don't know what Finn has found - but the best for me was working in a group and hearing a lot of other people's experiences and then I was able to draw on their conclusions to their problems to help myself. So it's better as a group. But if your young fathers are not comfortable with it, then the programme should be tailored around individual needs as well.

### **Finn Murray**

Yes, I'd say that working with a group would probably make things a lot easier because most men find it pretty hard to open up. And talking about it in a group would probably make life that bit easier. Personally, one thing that would have made it a bit easier is not being referred to as a 'teen dad', which kind of separates you from the mother but just more as a teen parent in general. It makes it easier if you are just called a teen 'parent'.

### **Francis Chance**

I think the key starting point for us was not to pre-design the programme, but to look at the needs of the particular group of adults that were in front of you at any one time. And the project that I talked about was a project that worked with fathers who'd mainly be in their 20s and 30s. And for a lot of them a group wasn't the first place to be. But there could be situations where groups developed naturally. My sense is that with young fathers it's more likely that group work is going to be an option for some young fathers. But I think there always has to be the choice to say if you want us to work with you individually, then we have the capacity to work with you individually.

### **Sylda Langford**

In asking your question you actually said something very important which is that you considered what you were being asked to do as something additional. And I think that what we're learning now is that when you are trying to do something new people tend to translate that into something additional. Whereas often what's been asked of us is to work in a different way.

And I think that what we're also learning is that we have forgotten about the resilience of people, of children and their families. That there's an innate something in us all that wants us, makes us want to solve our own problems.

And for too long, we've taken children out of families. When we've worked with foster families, with adoptive families, with children in care, we've left the original family sitting, isolated, not doing much work with them. Children then returned home to the same family, to the same community and we possibly could have made the whole situation worse - because of the family. And it's a very exceptional family who wants to damage their child. There are situations where we do have to intervene and we're learning that it's not only attachment theory we need, it's the whole resilience concept.

In the policy document I mentioned earlier that we are trying to develop at national level, we are saying look at resilience theory and think about attachment theories and look at the fact that most of us have been reared in families. Services only come in when you're stuck and we're basically being asked to work in a different way which is what today's conference is all about. Because we've all been dealing with these issues – always, they're part of human life. And we've done it up to now, leaving fathers out of the equation. And, making it so difficult so that sometimes we made them problematic. Their anger probably got turned in on themselves. So that was a very important statement you made, I think, that what you are trying to do is being seen as additional when it's not additional, it's *how* we work.

### **Question 4**

My concern is that we in LIFE often get calls from grandparents and they are distraught. Maybe they have huge problems - maybe dealing with elderly parents themselves or other members of the family. And I'm just wondering what's there for them. So can we include the grandparents to support the young fathers as well? Would there be some supports for them as well?

## Responses

### Sylda Langford

Well, if you take a family support approach, the neighbours can be family. Basically, wherever the person is in their environment and whatever support systems are there, that's what you're trying to work on. It's we, professionals, who divide people into silos and parcels. We don't, in our own lives, tend to separate out neighbours and friends and family and community and grannies.

Can I just ask the projects how they engaged other male figures in the family unit? Such as the non-biological fathers who are living with the young mother and have an influence on a child's life on a daily basis. Do any of the projects work, or how do you engage the other males?

### Francis Chance

For the the Father's Day competition that I mentioned earlier we got art work and poems written about cousins, brothers, godfathers, grandfathers, as well as fathers. So I think the key thing is how does the child see themselves? How does the child see the support mechanism? And if it's the next-door neighbour, if it's the youth-club leader, whoever the key person is, you work with what's there and you work with that child's reality and you support that child's reality. So you throw that net as wide as the child throws it.

### Fergus Hogan

In the project we've been doing in Waterford IT, we've been trying to keep it child-centred. So exactly as Francis has been saying we ask the children and children have a wide range of words to describe people and their relationships – there's a quite staggering difference between, you know: 'that's my dad', 'my real dad', 'my biological dad', 'my step dad', 'my mother's boyfriend' and the language children use to create the reality of their worlds is really key in this. We're only catching up as adults, and as professionals, in terms of the jargon. The kids can really describe who has a meaningful relationship in their lives.

## Question 5

My question is about difficulties in the logistics of running services for teen fathers – meeting fathers who work during the daytime or go to college or something like that. The logistics of providing a service in the evening as opposed to a normal day time professional service. Has that been taken on board?

## Responses

### Séan Benson

The Young Fathers Project have a place called Shepherds View which is a 24/7 hostel. So we're open all the time and if the father's working, we'll work with him after work. We'll visit around their timetable, not our own. So we have that facility there where anytime, day or night, we can work with fathers.

### Francis Chance

We have to work around the needs of the families that are there. So if you flow from designing the service and then fitting the families into it, you've got a problem. If you flow from "Here's the need, therefore we need to run a group, we need to have access time in the evening, we need to do something at the weekends". Then, you know, it's really important that we design services around needs and have the capacity to do that.

## **Presentation and Workshops**

### **Chairperson's Introduction**

#### **Rosemary Grant, Chairperson, TPSP National Advisory Committee**

The speaker this afternoon is David Simpson. David is Co-ordinator of an organisation called 'Promoting Fatherhood' and he's been working with men for over 20 years and with fathers in particular in the last ten years. He is based in Donegal and training is his area as Francis mentioned this morning in his presentation on the Da Project in Cherry Orchard.

He works to encourage, inform and support fathers and fathering by offering consultation, training and mentoring to organisations working with fathers and families. He also develops and runs courses for fathers in the community, for example, fathers and sons.

David's contribution this afternoon is going to take two formats. The first piece is a presentation – 30 or 40 minutes. Then a short break and then the interactive bit comes. This is the bit where the rest of us work instead of listening and taking in what's being said. He's going to talk about the value in fathers and fathering using discussion and feedback and he will also look at the whole area of challenges and obstacles to the involvement of fathers in parenting.

So without further ado, I'll hand you over to David Simpson.

### **My Daddy is a Man**

#### **Things to remember when working with men**

#### **David Simpson, Trainer and Co-ordinator of "Promoting Fatherhood"**

A little bit about myself. I'm a stepfather. I took on two teenagers (who currently aren't parents) when they were fifteen and sixteen years old. I started to live with them in '93 in Derry for four years and when they left home to go to University I then moved up to Donegal. I currently have my 31 year-old back living with me. He's fantastic – the garden has never looked so good - but he has some struggles with walking in and finding me looking at the television. He wants me in the garden as well. That can be a bit of a struggle.

As Rosemary said, I've been working with men for 20 years. My background is in training, facilitation and community development. So a lot of what I'm going to talk about has really come out of my own practice in the work that I've done.

We are in a particular historical period. It is a period in which we know a lot about men from the outside - positions of power, behaviour in relationships, involvement in child-rearing - but we do not know a lot about them from the inside - how we experience things, how we feel about things, what our own reactions are to ourselves and the world.

I was training staff to work with men last week and when I asked: 'What do you value about men?' the participants would start with something and quickly find themselves comparing what they had said to whether it was true of women or whether it was better or worse than what women offer.

It seems to me that another aspect of this historical period is that we are still not good at seeing men in their own right, of listening to them without needing to comment, correct, judge or blame. We need to learn to sit with men and find ways of asking them about their experience and to listen without comparing or contrasting.

There is an excellent poem by Sean O’Riordain, translated from the Irish called: *We Must Not Look Away*:

“There isn’t any fly, There is no moth, no bee Of all God made, no man, Whose wellbeing is beyond Our duty’s proper range - nor any woman either. We must not look away Not caring for their cares. There is no crazy man Who dwells in Madmen’s Glen We ought not sit beside Accompanying while He bears on our behalf Our sickness in his mind.	There is no place, no stream, There is no whitethorn bush However far they be Beyond the beaten track There is no rocky slab Though they be east or west, Whose setting in the world We ought not ponder on With empathy and love, South Africa, though far, Just like the distant moon Is part of us by right. There is no place on earth That’s not our place of birth (We must not look away).
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So - as we learn to sit beside and accompany our young fathers what do we need to remember about working with men?

I believe that there is a process that boys undergo as they become men. The process starts very early and goes on in some cases into their twenties. The first part of the process is that boys learn not to feel or show vulnerable feelings.

I have a nephew who fell badly and cut his leg open. I rushed over to look after him and I said ‘Are you alright?’ He looked at me, he swallowed really hard several times and said: ‘I’m fine’. What was he swallowing? He was swallowing the pain, the tears, the fear and possibly the humiliation of having got hurt in the first place, making himself vulnerable.

One friend said of men:

*‘It is not true that men don’t have feelings. We do. We have two feelings: anger and pride’.*

Boys are allowed to keep the strong feelings: anger, aggression, and competition. They learn to hide the vulnerable ones: pain, grief, sadness, worry and after a certain age affection and love.

The learning is enforced through humiliation, violence and ridicule. You can see this in boys’ games and the bullying and the establishment of who is ok and who isn’t ok. All those words that hurt: sissy, tied to his mother’s apron strings, gay, poof are ways of keeping boys in their place.

In this climate boys end up fearing vulnerability and with it intimacy. They do not learn how to handle their feelings. They end up not knowing when they are hurting someone else because they have learnt to hide their own hurt. They are unable to recognise their own needs and often end up in difficulty and with low self-esteem. There is a good book by two leading child psychologists, Dan Kindlon and Michael Thompson called *Raising Cain*. They describe this process of learning to hide vulnerable feelings:

*'It is a training away from healthful attachment and emotional understanding and expression, and it affects even the youngest boy, who learns quickly, for instance, that he must hide his feelings and silence his fears. A boy is left to manage conflict, adversity and change in his life with a limited repertoire. If your toolbox only contains a hammer, it is not a problem as long as all your equipment is running right and repairs call only for pounding. But as tasks grow more complex, the hammer's limitations become clear.'*

They talk about the effect of this training on boys:

*'...boys suffer deeply as a result of the destructive emotional training our culture imposes upon them...many of them are in crisis, and ...all of them need help'*

Learning not to show vulnerable feelings leaves the boy with a dilemma:

*'what I am supposed to do with all these feelings?'*

He hides his vulnerable self deeper and deeper so that in public no one will guess at his pain. Eventually it is hidden so deep that they develop a split inside themselves: a public/private split. This leaves them unable to share their worries, often because they no longer know what they are feeling. They will not ask for help because that involves making yourself vulnerable. They can end up not knowing when something is wrong.

One father tells a story of him and his eleven-year-old boy. They have a really close relationship and enjoy doing things together. One day he was taking him to school and as they pulled up outside the school the boy said:

*'Now dad no hugs or kisses ok'*

The father was a little surprised as they had a very physical relationship with no embarrassment on either side.

*'Whatever you want. But tell me why?' 'I have my reputation to maintain'*

So they learn to cut off from their feelings and are left with the public half of the split. In this arena they look around and start to learn how to be a 'real man'. This is important because 'real men' don't get picked on or humiliated or show their vulnerability. What makes a 'real man' is different for every boy and varies according to their background, their family, their class, their religion and culture. But there are some common characteristics: 'real men' don't get emotional; they don't ask for help so they leave going to the doctor till it is a crisis; they are not gay or disabled and they get women to be their nurturers.

Unfortunately young men have to prove that they are 'real men' and often one of the options for some young men is risk taking. So it may be risk taking by not wearing a condom. It may be risk taking by drinking and driving, all the stuff that we know about.

But I think there are also passive risks which are about – if you don't have access to your vulnerable self, how do you know that you are connected to other people? And if there are obstacles for young fathers staying connected to their young children, then I think one of the pulls of the men's condition is that it's easier to say:

*'I can't fight any more, I can't push anymore. I'm going to let the child go. Or I'm going to let my relationship with the child go'.*

Now some of you may feel that things have changed and that it is ok now for a man to cry in public. I think it is ok to cry when there is either permission to cry at say a football match or if it's a big enough event like not getting onto Pop Idol. For the ordinary man in the street they would rather die than be seen showing vulnerability of any sort. The lessons still hold a lot of sway in how men behave and see themselves.

I have presented this way of seeing how boys become men to many fathers and they often say: 'you are describing me'. Women who I have trained to work with fathers will often say: 'yes I know a man like that'. It is useful to remember that fathers have gone through this learning and it has shaped who they are today and how they behave. They, in their turn are bringing up boys. All parents try to do a better job than their own parents. But fathers rarely get the chance to learn new ideas. One father attending a course on Raising Boys said:

*'I had worked out not to do the bad things that my dad did to me as I grew up. But no one had told me what were the good things I could be doing, till this course.'*

There is a strange but true tension in this work. We need to remember two things:

- 1) Fathers are no different from any other parent. They love their children, care for them and want the very best for them
- 2) Fathers are different from other parents because of what they uniquely bring to children's lives and development and the conditioning that they have received that leaves them with certain strengths and different ways of responding and reacting to the world.

I would like to finish with a story about a father and son that I heard recently on the television.

This father had a newborn boy who had severe disabilities. The boy could not walk or talk. The parents raised him alongside their other children hoping that at some time in the future, there would be medical advances that would improve his life.

When he was twelve, he got a special computer that allowed him to communicate with them. When he was asked what he wanted to do he said he wanted to run a marathon. The father was not into sport and was middle aged but he set about having a kind of pram made so that he could run with his son. They trained together and ran their first marathon.

Then his son said he wanted to take part in triathlons. So the father upped his training, got fitter and designed a seat to go on the front of a bicycle and got an inflatable dinghy for the swimming part. And they started to do triathlons together.

One day the father felt a lot of chest pain after a race and he was hospitalised. The doctors looked at his heart and said that he should have died fifteen years ago had he not been running, swimming and riding with his son. That had kept him alive. They had after all done 26 triathlons by then.

On this television show where they were telling their story, the son had been asked what his father meant to him, and he said:

*"When we race, I feel as though I do not have any disabilities.  
When I think of my father, to borrow a line from a song,  
'he is the wind beneath my wings'."*

## Workshop

### Putting this Conference into Practice

#### Presented and Facilitated by David Simpson

I want to move from men's internal experiences to things to remember when working with men. I think there are two sides to the work with fathers. In one way fathers are exactly the same as every other parent. There's no difference. They love their children, they'll do anything they can for their children if they believe they have the skills or the resources to do it and they're loved back by their children.

I remember a friend of mine once who worked for the health boards and he rang me once and he said, 'Look,' he said, 'I want to set up a fathers' group with this particular group of people. Tell me what should I do? What kind of questions should I ask?' I said, 'well ask them how many children they have? Ask them their names, their ages. What they love about them, any concerns they have about them, any worries? Do they get on with each other, how are they getting on at school?' And there was a sort of silence and he went, 'Oh, you're right, aren't you? It's just being a parent'.

So on the one hand being a father is absolutely no different from being any other parent. And on the other hand, fathers are different from other parents. And I hope that the input about boys becoming young men and the way that men handle themselves in the world shows in one small way, that fathers are different, they contribute different things to children's lives. And Francis mentioned several of them this morning.

One of the ones that I'm currently really liking is that if a father has a close relationship with his daughter she is more likely to put off sexual experimentation for two years. So rather than have sex at fourteen, she'll have sex at sixteen. So you could say, 'okay, we want to do a teen parenting project. What we'll do is this, we'll spend all our time working with young fathers and fathers in general on their relationships with their daughters". And you could save the services some money because their daughters wouldn't be having sex for two years – two years later.

So fathers contribute different things from the mothers. If a father has a close relationship with his son during primary school years, then that boy is less likely to get a criminal record by the age of 21. There's very specific research on this. Fathers Direct have a document called '*What Good are Dads?*'. And that will give you all the research. You can get it on **[www.fathersdirect.org](http://www.fathersdirect.org)**. So I think that's how we need to think about dads. They're just like any other parent and they're different from other parents and we have to keep the two things in mind when we are looking at developing work.

I just want to say a couple of things about work. Listening to Finn and also to Francis, it's really clear to me that one of the issues is removing the obstacles. You know when we tend to think about work, about developing work, you tend to think, oh, lets develop this bit of work over here. It'll be designed and set up for young fathers. Whereas, actually what we need to be doing is removing the obstacles that are in the way of young fathers using the resources that we have.

I learned this very clearly when I was doing a project with a family-planning project in England. We were doing a project around disability and sexual abuse –sexual abuse was an issue in some of the residential care homes. And what we were identifying was that people with disabilities

couldn't get access to the services. So we worked with the sexual health services. I worked with a guy who had cerebral palsy and who was in a wheelchair. And he and I went off to do the training with different services around the country. And I remember at the first session I stood up at the flip-chart and said, 'we're going to do a little bit about the training style. We're not going to be, 'here's me standing here with the flip-chart, writing a lot on the flip-chart'. And he said 'You're damn right, I'm not going to be standing at the flip-chart!'. I learned very quickly, - I had to watch,....don't make mistakes.

I was talking about empowering people with disabilities and he said from the back of the room, he said, 'Rubbish. (He was supposed to be my co-worker!) And I said, 'what do you mean, 'Rubbish'?' He said, 'You cannot empower me. All you can do is take away the obstacles that are in the way of me using my power. That's your job. Look at your services. Look at what you're doing, look at your practice, look at your assumptions, your values, your attitudes. What of all of those things are actually obstacles to me?' And then he said, possibly even more challenging, 'And once you've removed all those obstacles, what I do with my power is none of your ruddy business!'

This is a challenge for those of you who work in projects where you have to get 20 young dads in between now and next Easter. And they've got to do this and that and something else and something else. So I learned a lot from him about removing obstacles.

Very early on I learned two things about working with men and working with fathers. One is that you have to like them. You have to like men. All fathers are men. It's amazing, isn't it? It's obvious. All fathers are men. If you're going to work with them, you've got to like them.

The second thing I learned was that I knew nothing about fathers. That may seem strange. and as I say, 'I have letters after my name, I have a title!'

I was doing a 'Raising Girls', programme in a Community Centre and three guys turned up. I went into the usual panic – 'how am I going to do that with three men? Of course it's never going to last, we'll be finished in half an hour". And I just thought, 'well, I'll just ask them how their week's been'. So I said 'How's your week been? An hour and a half later, I started the Raising Girls programme.

They all had these stories to tell. One guy had a child who had a tube in his throat that needs to be replaced every fifteen minutes. Another guy, and I didn't know this, was a single dad with five children. So never assume that you know something, even though you've been to this conference and you've heard young dads, never assume that you know. I had to learn that after years and years of work. Basically, I approach every man from the perspective of, 'I know nothing'. So I'm going to learn. Every man is different.

A couple of last things. If you're working with young Dads and they don't have access to the child or the mother, encourage them to keep some kind of record of their own lives. I know that Barnados have done work for men who are in prison. So that when the child grows up or when the child has contact with you, you can say, 'This is what I looked like when you were a week old'. Or, 'This is where I was', or 'These were my feelings at that time'. Encourage them. Even if they are not in the same room, having access to each other, that child is still present to the father. So encourage the father to keep a scrapbook, photographs, diaries, whatever.

Likewise, the story this morning about our fears of mentioning fathers in schools because there

are some children 'who don't have fathers'. Every child, including children who are adopted, every child will have questions about their biological father. So that person is in that child's life, even if they haven't seen him for 25 years. So if you're working with mothers and children and don't have fathers physically present those fathers are still an issue in the child's life. So you still need to do that work.

**Delegates were asked to consider a practice issue and two scenarios for teen parents support projects. The summaries of responses from the round table discussions are given below.**

**Practice issue: What do you value about fathers and fathering?**

Feedback from one of the round table discussions is given here followed by a summary of what delegates in general value about fathers and fathering.

**Round Table Discussion**

We talked about the male role-model and what this brought to the family. There was a lot of talk about fun, adventure and the benefits of rough play. There was a comment about fathers as economical babysitters. A theme running through our discussion was about how men tend to operate very well in the here and now which children really, really appreciate and need. There is none of this, 'Oh, I have the dinner to get on, I have to do this and that' that women will do. The man will actually engage in play, play away and the house will be upside down. We saw that as a positive.

Summary of what all participants valued about fathers and fathering:

- ◆ Their presence provides children with some of their basic rights
- ◆ They provide children with a sense of identity
- ◆ The different contributions they make to the lives of children
- ◆ The extra love and enjoyment children get from fathers
- ◆ Their approach is different, females can be very emotional
- ◆ They provide a different perspective to the mother
- ◆ Provide balance in the relationship- rational,logical,practical,relaxed
- ◆ Their strength, understanding, protectiveness, role as provider, role as mediator
- ◆ The support they give mothers and partners, the way they are willing to share responsibility
- ◆ Support they give in managing children's behaviour
- ◆ Role as advisor and confidante
- ◆ Their willingness to take on new roles as homemaker, carer and homework doer
- ◆ They can provide the child with a model of how to support and work in partnership. 'It takes a village to rear a child'
- ◆ They can be a positive role model for a daughter
- ◆ For sons they can model how to treat women
- ◆ Role as a teacher, someone who passes on traditions
- ◆ Through the father the children have access to another set of grandparents and relatives.

## **Round Table Discussions**

Delegates were asked to consider how they would respond to two scenarios which arise when supporting teen parents.

**Scenario 1 - You are working for a Teen Parents Support Programme. A young dad wants to be involved in the new baby's life but the maternal grandparents are not permitting this. What would you do?**

### **Summary of round table discussions**

Presentations from three of the round tables discussion are given here, followed by the summary of discussion from all tables.

#### **Presenter 1**

We were saying that it's very hard to respond unless you have the background. So you really need to listen, find out and explore what the situation is; what the age is; whether they are under age; why, from his perspective, he thinks her parents don't want him involved. And from that then you can move forward, but until you have that information, you can't really do anything, in the beginning.

#### **David Simpson**

And would you decide then not to do anything?

#### **Presenter 1**

No. Not at all. You'd work with him in moving it forward because it is actually very important that he is involved in the life of the child. We discussed mediation, about getting them talking, to move the process forward.

#### **Presenter 2**

We said that we would start with our focus on 'it's better for the child to have two parents' and to have that clearly in our minds when we meet this young man. We would start off by meeting him individually because he has approached us first, have a chat with him about what was concerning him at the moment, what was going on for him. Then we'd like to take in the wider family, his partner, his own family, his partner's family, keeping the focus all the time on the child and what the child's needs are now and what they'll be in the future. And then try to negotiate from there, whether it be through mediation, whether it be through meeting them as a couple, meeting them individually or through a family welfare conference. And we said that often grandparents can see the bigger picture and that can be a help if a couple is having a difficulty, even though in this case they're saying that they don't want the young man to be involved. So explore that as much as possible. If we had the opportunity of a group within the service, we'd offer that to him, to get involved in a group, hear from other dads, what they're experiencing, and try to just keep it all together and keep it focused on the child.

#### **Presenter 3**

We talked about becoming an advocate on the father's behalf. Maybe he doesn't have the words or he's too full of anger to speak to the mother's family, so to be able to act on his behalf.

## **Summary of responses from all tables.**

### **In relation to the young father:**

At first, meet with the young father on his own. Provide a safe place for him to talk. Get to know him, listen to him and validate him. Keep the focus on him and his needs. What are his fears?

What is the issue between him and the mother? Are there other issues involved? Help him to see that building trust is a process.

Clarify his expectations. What level of involvement is he hoping to have with the child? What's the bottom line for him?

Advise him of his legal situation, his rights and responsibilities. Inform him about putting his name on his child's birth certificate, access, guardianship, maintenance etc.

Develop a work plan e.g. a basic parenting course. Support him to develop skill and confidence to deal with mother and her family. Refer on for counselling or courses as appropriate. Encourage him to keep a diary of how he is feeling.

Help him to build up his own support networks such as his own parents and friends.

Encourage him to come up with his own solutions.

### **In relation to the young mother**

Talk to the young mother, if possible. Assess her situation.

Help her to understand her rights as mother.

### **In relation to the child**

Try to get all concerned to focus on what is best for the child. Be mindful of how the parties have been hurt by this situation.

### **In relation to the maternal grandparents**

The girl's parents may be angry and this anger may be misdirected towards the young father. Explore the grandparents perspective, the reasons why they don't want the father involved. What can be done to address these reasons?

What is their expectation from the father? Do they expect practical help such as financial support?

With support, often grandparents can see the bigger picture for the child.

### **In relation to paternal grandparents**

Where are his parents in this? Do they have any relationship with his child and the mother? Can you use his own parents as part of the negotiation with the other parents?

### **In relation to all parties**

Look at the entire picture. What do the other people involved feel?

Explore all the experiences if possible.

Look at the strengths and weaknesses of the relationships of all involved.

Look at the situation in a holistic way. Talk to all involved re the importance of having the father involved in his child's life. Try to arrive at a 'win win' situation. What's good for all parties?

### **Mediation**

Keep the focus on what is best for the child. Meet in a neutral venue. Give all parties-dad , mum, parents-an opportunity to air their fears and be listened to.

### **Advocacy**

Advocate for the right of the child to have both parents in his/her life and how this will benefit him/her. When talking to the mother's family advocate for the young father.

### **Action**

Bring extended family together. Use family welfare conferencing if possible.

Think in terms of small practical steps such as slowly building up trust between the parties. Set realistic objectives. Would he be happy to have telephone contact with the mother initially building up to access to his child? Supervised access in a safe environment may be necessary at first.

Stay in contact with the father and persevere - he is so important in his child's life.

### **Scenario 2 - A young mother says "I want the father to be involved but every time I approach him he keeps running away."**

#### **Summary of round table discussions**

##### **Presenter 1**

To be honest, we found it easier to do this than the first question, which, I think, goes to show the need for more gender-proofing in terms of working.

I think we dealt with it very differently from the first question and we only discovered that at the end when we went into the discussion.

We said that we'd listen to the young mother, get historical information, things such as the length of the relationship etc. Then we would help her decide what it is she is looking for, what she wants from the young father in terms of his involvement in the child's life.

We'd help her to focus on the needs of the child as being paramount.

We would encourage her to re-approach the young father with very clear expectations about the level of his involvement. It may well be that he's scared that he'll be asked for financial support or for a huge ongoing commitment that he's unwilling to give. We'd encourage her to keep the lines of communication open and allow for the possibility that he may not be ready to have contact with his child immediately, that it may not happen for some time.

Only at that stage would we approach the young father. This is different from the first case scenario where we said we would approach the young mother straightaway. That's because we felt a lot more comfortable about talking to the mother. So we have to be honest and say that.

## David Simpson

That's good. What I notice about the work is that until we put ourselves in the situations where we have to think about it we don't realise the boxes and the silos we're in. In the past I did some training with home visitors and their business was to go and visit the homes and the family in the home and talk to the parents about child development. And as one woman said to me:

*'I went. And I knocked on the door and the daughter opened the window and I said, 'Is your Mum in?' 'And she said, 'No, she's not..' so I said... 'I'll come back'.*

And she walked away and she was half-way down the lane and she thought

*'I was on that training that we did, I have to ask for the father'.*

So she went back and she knocked on the door and she said:

*'Is your father in?'. And she said, 'Yeah, He's in the kitchen.'*

So she was allowed in. She went in to the kitchen, talked with the father about child development and stuff. What happened was that when she left she realised that she felt that the whole time she'd been talking to him, that what he was doing was more important than what she had to say. So she didn't know how small her belief in herself and the information was until she actually had to give the information to a man.

## Presenter 2

We had a different response to the other table there. We would talk to the mother about what her expectations were from the father, what she felt he might be prepared to do- however small. Then we would try to chat with him, establish his fears around involvement and clarify why he doesn't want involvement with the child. Explain to him that a relationship with his child doesn't necessarily mean a relationship with mother. I think there could be that confusion there, that one doesn't mean the other. They are two separate things. And again like the first speaker said start to build up gradually. You might start with something really small - like a Christmas party- and you could build on that. Now mightn't be the right time for him. But maybe that would grow.

## David Simpson

Great. Don't lose sight of where he is sitting. He is sitting with a lot of fear, quite possibly a lot of pain, he may not know that that's what he's feeling down there, but that's where he's sitting. So beware of coming at him with a lot of stuff. He has a relationship with the child, even if he never sees the child. I have a friend who had a child when he was a teenager and he's not seen the child and the child is now at university and he's 21. And he wrote to him recently and the child didn't reply or anything. But I know that he holds that child all the time. I ring him when it's that child's birthday. It's very real to him even though he doesn't have access.

## Other suggestions from the round table discussions include:

### In relation to the mother

Get to know the girl, the background to the relationship and age of child. Look at why she wants the father involved. Find out her approach to date and what has been happening. Why does she think he is 'running away'?

What level of involvement does she want? Name on birth certificate, access, guardianship, maintenance? What does she want from him? Boyfriend/father/babysitter/source of financial support/ source of emotional support/consistency/regular contact?

What are her family values and beliefs about families i.e what is her concept of the role of a father?

Why does she want contact with him? Is it because she wants a relationship with him or is it because she is looking at what's in the best interest of her child? Help her to look at her feelings about the relationship. Explain to her how he may be feeling about the situation they are now in.

Look at her life in general and how she is coping. What supports has she in place for herself?

Encourage her to re-approach the young father with clear expectations around the nature and level of his involvement. Help her to develop decision making and communications skills to do this. She could use different ways of contacting him e.g. write a letter, phone , e-mail.

What is her relationship with her parents? Could they support her in relation to the father's engagement with his child?

Support the mother to accept whatever decision the father makes re his child.

Encourage her to keep communication open and allow for the possibility of contact in the future.

Suggest to her to keep a diary, to keep a record of her attempts to engage with the father.

### **In relation to the father**

Ask basic questions - such as is he sure he is the father of the child? Was he involved during the pregnancy?

What supports has he? Is he involved with any other agency and if so could contact be made with him through that service? Is there anybody else that could talk to him? Go back to him/try to communicate in the future, don't take "no" as "no-never"

If you are meeting him do this on neutral ground. When you approach him offer him support. Listen to his point of view. Why is he 'running'? Explain to him that these feelings are normal and that there is support for him too.

What else is going on in his life, alcohol, drugs? Whats the family history? What was his relationship with his own father?

Advocate for his child, explain the importance of his having a positive role in his child's life. Explain his rights and responsibilities in relation to his child. Explain that contact can take many forms.

If possible introduce him to another young father or a young fathers group.

If possible engage with his parents, they may be the way the child will get to know his/her father.

### **Action**

Consider/encourage mediation which is centred on the child. Set realistic expectations for both sides. Negotiate on behalf of both sides. Start with small steps and build on these.

### **In relation to extended family**

If possible, include extended family and try to get their support. There needs to be trust built on both sides.

### **In general**

Help all sides to see that this is a process; it is slow and will take time.

Encourage them to keep possibilities open. Continue to support the mother –and the father if he is open to support. To be available in the long-term – Be patient.

## **Appendix 1            Conference Contributors and Workshop Presenters**

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