

Promoting young fathers' positive involvement in their children's lives

Introduction

The presence of fathers in children's lives is known to contribute to children's chances of experiencing positive developmental outcomes (Jaffee et al. 2001). Absent fathers result in poorer households (female-headed households are about a third poorer than male-headed households) and a lack of positive role models for boys and girls regarding appropriate male–female interaction and shared parenting models. Sadly, South Africa has a high rate of absent fathers, with only one-third of preschool children living at home with both their parents (Statistics South Africa 2011). Reasons for father absenteeism include migrant labour, delayed marriage, gender-based violence and increasing female autonomy (Richter et al. 2012). The 2012 draft White Paper on Families raises concerns about South African families being 'under siege', and lists, among other threats to coherent family life, absent fathers and former spouses or partners who prevent fathers from playing a role in the lives of their children.

Obstacles to fathering have not been well documented. This applies especially to young fathers who became parents while still at school or college. Alongside older fathers, young fathers have frequently been portrayed in the media as unwilling to take responsibility for their children. In contrast, a recent HSRC research study shows that many young fathers want

to be active parents and have a strong sense of responsibility towards their children. They are, however, confronted with numerous barriers to fulfilling their parenting roles.

This policy brief describes these barriers and examines the current policy framework in light of these barriers. On this basis it makes recommendations for policies and programmes to increase young fathers' chances of being positive, involved parents. These include popularising a broader notion of fatherhood (beyond only financial support), providing help for young men to play a meaningful role in the lives of their children and offering targeted financial opportunities for young fathers.

Key research findings of the *Teenage Tata* study

Rather than exploring and facilitating the roles young fathers can and do play in their children's lives, studies have tended to concentrate on negative life outcomes for these young men. These include delinquency (Breslin 1998), lower levels of educational attainment (Marsiglio 1986) and reduced employment opportunities and subsequent poverty (Bunting & McAuley 2004; Pirog-Good 1996). Swartz and Bhana's *Teenage Tata* study (2009) addressed this gap by examining the experiences of young black African and coloured South African fathers living in resource-constrained settings in the Western Cape and

KwaZulu-Natal. Through in-depth interviews with 27 young men who became fathers between the ages of 14 and 20, and members of their social networks, the study describes common stereotypes of fathering and young fatherhood, barriers to a young father's involvement in the life of his child, and support systems available to a young father.

Breaking stereotypes

Media images that describe young fathers as choosing to be absent and uninvolved are not correct. Many young fathers have a strong desire to play active, positive roles in the lives of their children. Many do so, while others are prevented from doing so. Yet others are initially slow to come forward but may well do so over time. Of course, some young fathers do remain uninvolved and disinterested.

Most young fathers well understand what it means to be a good father. They see being able to provide material support as critical to being a good father, and almost all recognise the importance of contact time, physical affection, day-to-day involvement and supportive communication with children.

The young fathers in this study spoke of their many efforts to generate income to support their children, and reported spending less on themselves in order to do so. In addition, concerns about their

future ability to care for their children led to increased condom use and decreased involvement in illegal or dangerous activities such as gangsterism and substance abuse.

Barriers

Being an active, involved father and taking responsibility is not easy, however, and many young men reported on the various financial, cultural and relational obstacles they have experienced.

Financial

Being able to take responsibility and financially support a child are often regarded as synonymous. Financial provision often overshadows other aspects of fatherhood, such as contact time, physical care and emotional support. This is particularly problematic for young fathers in contexts of poverty as they tend to have limited access to finances due to their continuing education and absence of income. In our study, young men were frequently rejected by the mothers' families if they were unable to contribute financially. Naturally, this stops these young fathers from assuming the other roles of fatherhood.

Cultural

For young, black African men, involvement in their children's lives is also hampered by cultural expectations. In the case of an unmarried couple, a father is required to make damage payments to the family of the mother of his child. This may frighten off a young father from claiming paternity, especially if he is unemployed. Again, in the absence of damage payments being made, the family is likely to deny the father access to his child. The young man's parents may also warn him against claiming paternity if damage payments will force him to abandon his education or strain the family's meagre resources.

Relational

Many young fathers or mothers do not have long-standing romantic relationships with the co-parents of

their children. A poor relationship with the child's mother also reduces a young father's ability and desire to play a fathering role. When young parents live with their own parents, and these (grand)-parents play a major role in providing and caring for the children, the young persons' actions are guided (and limited) by the desires and wishes of the grandparents. The young mother's family mostly takes primary responsibility for the child. This means that they often have power to determine the degree to which young fathers have access to and are involved in raising their children. Lack of financial resources or being regarded as 'not good enough' by a young mother's family can cause the rejection and exclusion of the young father, undermining his ability to play an active role in his child's life, both currently and in the future.

Support systems

Our study found that there are few professional or community services aimed at supporting young fathers, and those that do exist are not well known or used. Furthermore, young men reported that their actions towards their children are most likely to be influenced by encouragement and support from their own mothers, as well as by positive relationships with the mothers of their children and the family members of those mothers.

Fatherhood: a window of opportunity

The study makes it clear that young fatherhood, although difficult, provides a window of opportunity for working productively with teenagers. Fatherhood at an early age does not indicate that young men are, nor will always be, irresponsible. In fact, fatherhood often ushers in life changes that are required in order to become a more responsible parent.

A key question to be answered is how these research findings fit the current policy framework relating to families, and parental rights and responsibilities.

Current policy framework

The South African policy framework on parental rights and responsibilities is currently set out in the Children's Act (No. 38 of 2005). The Act aims to provide a legally binding framework for the principles laid out in the 1989 United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, endorsed by South Africa in 1995. Both the Convention and the Act seek to act in the 'best interests of the child'.

The Act is complex, but fundamentally it indicates that legal parenthood status (for a mother or a father) requires that the parent has both the right and the responsibility to care for, maintain contact with, act as guardian for and contribute to the maintenance of the child. These rights are automatically conferred on mothers over the age of 18 and fathers married to, or in a permanent life partnership with, the mother at the time of conception or birth of the child. For biological fathers not in one of these relationships with the mother of their child, paternity requires that maintenance for the child is paid, but does not confer the rights and responsibilities of care, contact and guardianship. Section 21 of the Act outlines the requirements for legal paternity. It states that such a father must:

- Consent to being identified as the child's father, or succeed in being legally identified, or pay damages in terms of customary law.
- Contribute or *have attempted* [our emphasis] to contribute to the child's upbringing for a reasonable period.
- Contribute or *have attempted* in good faith to contribute to expenses in connection with the maintenance of the child for a reasonable period.

The responsibility to assume paternity, then, rests with the father. It requires the

demonstration that he accepts and plays a social and financial role in his child's life over an (undefined) period of time or – at the very least – that he has *attempted* to do so. The Act assumes that fathers have the power to determine the degree to which they are involved in their children's lives. As shown from our research, this is not always the case.

The Act provides for such complications by stating that in cases of dispute between biological mothers and fathers with regard to parental rights and responsibilities, the matter must be referred for professional mediation. In such cases, the term 'attempted' in the Act may have great importance, especially for a young father who wants to play a fatherhood role but has been prevented from doing so. The problem, of course, is that young men, particularly those under the age of 18, are too young to be legal guardians of their children, yet being absent now has implications for wanting to be involved in the future. Moreover, disempowered young men and those living in resource-constrained contexts are unlikely to be able to use or understand how the mediation process works.

The current policy framework as set out in the Act does not seem to adequately account for young fathers' everyday contexts and situations. By assuming that young fathers have open access to play the role of father, the Act introduces unintended implications that are not in the best interests of the child.

Recommendations

The 2012 draft White Paper on Families recommends that one of the strategies for the promotion of family life should be to 'Encourage fathers' involvement in their children's upbringing'. One of the suggested actions listed for this strategy is to 'Elaborate or revise current laws and social policies that restrict fathers from being involved in their children's lives

and replace them with those that create an environment where fathers have the opportunity to care for, engage with, and support their children'. In keeping with this aim we offer a number of recommendations for the facilitation of improved levels of involvement of young, unmarried fathers – and consequently fathers in general – in their children's lives.

1. *Assist young biological fathers in claiming rights of care and contact with their children.*
In South African legislation, paternity claims for unmarried men rest on financial and physical involvement in a child's life for 'a reasonable period'. The legislation does not, however, sufficiently recognise the difficulties some fathers have in accessing their children and providing such input. Many factors may hinder young fathers from actively playing a role in the lives of their children. These factors are often out of their control, such as rejection by the family of the mother of their child. Young fathers, particularly those too young to be guardians (under the age of 18), need additional support and assistance in claiming the rights of care and contact with their children. It is important to educate young men about their rights and responsibilities. A policy initiative may be to encourage a joint custody hearing with the young parents' families present, within the first two years of a child's life, to ensure access. This would be reviewed when the biological parents come of age. The court might also require these young parents to attend, say, two parenting education events along with their parents.
2. *Promote a broad understanding of fatherhood beyond financial provision.*
Fatherhood consists of a broad range of roles and responsibilities. These include the provision of financial, physical and emotional support for a child. The current requirements

for paternity focus only on financial support as the critical marker of fatherhood (Khunou 2006). While fathers should not be allowed to avoid their financial responsibilities by receiving unconditional support for their paternal rights, it should be recognised that poverty and structural constraints may limit a father's ability to provide financially. Consequently, efforts should be made to ensure that a lack of financial support is not automatically equated with inadequate parenting. Along with the 2012 draft White Paper on Families, we therefore recommend that education programmes (including media campaigns) be launched that promote the 'softer' aspects of fatherhood: contact time and social, physical and emotional engagement with children. These programmes should emphasise that a practically and emotionally involved father is ultimately far more likely to provide financially for his children (Graham & Bellar 2002).

3. *Provide relationship training that includes grandparents.*
Grandparents of children born to young parents frequently assume responsibility, including formal guardianship, for raising those children. They are also known to reject young fathers, or exclude them from raising their children. Given this, grandparents should be included in support programmes for young parents and educated in the importance of a father's broad roles in the developmental outcomes of children. At the policy level, a special category should be created for temporary guardianship of children until their parent(s) are able to assume legal guardianship (once they turn 18). In addition, while the support of grandparents should be encouraged, the roles they play in determining the care roles played by young parents should be researched.

4. *Service providers should encourage fathers' active involvement in their children's lives.*
Early paternity identification increases the chances of a father's involvement in his child's life (Maxwell et al. 2012). Fathers' early involvement in their children's lives should be encouraged from pregnancy, continuing throughout the child's life. Antenatal and paediatric care facilities are currently largely set up to work primarily or exclusively with women. These should be re-orientated to work with individual parents of both sexes, and couples and their children, irrespective of marriage status. Healthcare providers and family workers should be trained to treat young fathers as important, active caregivers (Beardshaw 2006). To achieve this, healthcare policies need to be scrutinised and adjusted where they hamper fathers' involvement. Provision might also be made to add fathers' names to birth registration certificates retrospectively.
5. *Assist young fathers in meeting financial obligations.*
Young children have better outcomes if they receive adequate financial support. Financial responsibility is – and should remain – an important aim for young fathers. There is evidence that if patterns of work and employment are favourable, working-class fathers are assisted to remain actively engaged in their children's upbringing (Rabe 2007). The 2012 draft White Paper on Families recommends paying special attention to employment creation efforts directed at fathers to aid them in playing roles in the lives of their children. This should be prioritised for young fathers, including the provision of alternative pathways for completing education while meeting financial obligations. It might also take the form of a focus on public works and community

service programmes aimed at young fathers that teach both job market and parenting skills. Future research and policy should focus on how best this could be done.

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