



teenparents
support programme

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

First National Conference

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

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 woman 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