

Young Fathers Project
WILD Young Parents Project, Cornwall

Summary: A Sure Start initiative to support young fathers based within a young parents project.

Background/Context: WILD is a well established young parents project in Mid and West Cornwall and has been working successfully with young mothers for over 10 years. A pilot project had started some work with young fathers and although it had taken time it had been possible to work with some young fathers and support them in returning to education or training.

When the Sure Start programme was established in the area it presented an opportunity to focus on young fathers and a worker was appointed for two years to develop this in the Penzance and Camborne areas of Cornwall. Both areas have high rates of unemployment and are economically disadvantaged due to the decline in traditional industries such as fishing and mining.

The teenage conception rate for Penzance is 51.4 per 1000 and higher in Camborne.

Project Description:

A Young Fathers Development Worker was appointed in 2000 to develop work with young fathers under 25 years in Penzance and Camborne (2 days a week in each area). The workers primary aim is to support young mens' relationship with their children and their relationship to the mother of their child.

- Currently two groups have been developed for young fathers (one in each area) which meet once a week. The groups act as informal support groups where young fathers meet with the development worker for a chat and plan trips out with and without their children (this is popular) and sometimes focus on a project (a recent one was on drugs). The groups are small (4 to 5 young men regularly attend) and are used more by men aged over 20 years.
- Two young fathers have been trained as peer educators as part of the Peer Education Project at WILD. They have been delivering a peer education package in schools to 14 and 15 year old boys talking to them about the realities of being a father (young mothers deliver similar sessions for the girls). This was quite demanding as it is 9 sessions of 45 minutes.
- The development worker also undertakes one to one support with young fathers and this is used more by the younger men (16 to 18 year olds) and those who are experiencing problems (such as some fathers who have sole care of their children, those who are experiencing problems with their partner etc).

Achievements:

- The young fathers who participated in the peer education project stuck with the project and got an enormous amount from it - in particular they were able to be very positive about being a father and how much they got from it - they were presenting being a father as something very important in their lives even though this was balanced with the difficulties of being a young father (economically and practically)
- Two young fathers recently participated in a Youth Achievement Awards ceremony held annually at WILD. They read poems (one about love written by the young father and the other an extract about fatherhood). This made quite an impression on the professionals attending (and even some who didn't have mentioned it). There is a view among professionals that young fathers can't be engaged with these kinds of issues - so this was a public demonstration that some young fathers do want to be involved in their childrens' lives. There is a need to keep reminding professionals that this work is worthwhile.
- The two groups have found that planning activities and trips to do with the children are very popular and provide a vehicle for discussing parenting issues and giving the young men the opportunity to spend time with their children in an enjoyable way. For some of the young men the trips are very special as they may not be living with their child and so may not have many opportunities to develop a relationship with the child on their own.

Key Learning:

- The young men initially are not comfortable with talking but do want someone to talk to about what is happening in their lives. The younger men (under 18's) are often in a state of shock once they realise their partner or ex partner is pregnant and have no idea what to expect. Some say they want to meet someone else who has had a baby. Those who are living with or involved with their child often want to talk about similar issues to mothers such as the role of grandparents (are they interfering or being helpful?). Mostly the young men just want someone to show an interest in them and how they are getting on with being a dad. For many of them their own fathers were absent or not very involved with them - it is hard for them to be a father if they have never experienced having a father.
- For many of the young men one of the most important issues is their relationship with the mother of the child, especially if they are no longer together but the young man wants to remain involved with his child. There is very little support for young men to do this and as they are young they don't have the skills and experience to negotiate their way around this - some young men become disconnected from the child and eventually they give up trying to maintain their relationship.

Difficulties/Challenges:

- It is hard to reach the young men in the first place. This may be because the group or support it can offer is often presented to the young man via someone else in the first instance such as a health visitor or midwife and this is highly likely to be a woman. The focus during pregnancy and the post natal period is the mother and baby so the young man may not even be present when it is raised (and even if he is there he may feel invisible and has no active role to play). If the referral has come via an official service then there may be anxieties on the part of the father that something is wrong and he is not a good parent. Also the concept of a group of men talking together is not usually viewed positively by young men so it is difficult to get across just what might be on offer. The project has tried leafleting on the street (approaching young men with babies) but this was not successful. Recently a Sure Start Midwife has been appointed and more referrals are being made of young men with pregnant partners and it may be that making contact with young men at this early stage will be more productive. The development worker has begun to visit new referrals at home to introduce himself and the project and keeps in touch with them but finds this needs to be done gently so that a relationship grows without them feeling they are being chased up.
- The young men who have become involved in the project are young men who have come to realise that they need some support - even if it is just the chance to meet with other young men who have children and develop friendships. However many young men do not get involved and remain very hard to reach (in particular the under 18's). This raises many questions about the role of young fathers - they do seem to be invisible and most professional attention focuses on young mothers and the baby. How much do we really know about young fathers' experience? It seems we need to know a lot more and consider what their contribution might be and how they could be supported in that.
- Many professionals involved in teenage pregnancy are sceptical about the role of and involvement of young fathers. There is a very negative view of young fathers and although they are sympathetic they don't really believe they will get involved or can be engaged. In addition most professionals in this area are women who are working with women - there are very few men. This work is important as we know that the young people who have children at early points in their lives often have had little family support and little involvement of a father themselves but we are not finding ways of supporting young men to be young fathers. WILD recently organised a day for professionals that included a workshop on young fathers - this was useful in getting people thinking about this work and reminding professionals that although it is hard it is also worthwhile. We need to do more of this to raise awareness of this issue and start discussing it.
- This work is very hard to establish and takes a long time. There is no instant take up or quick successes. This can be very hard for those delivering the project and hard for other professionals to see progress and see where it might fit in with other initiatives. One way of keeping on track is by looking at the quality of the work rather than the quantity.

Contact Details	
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Setting/Context	Group work in youth and community settings plus home visiting
Target Group	Young fathers aged under 25 years and with children under 4 years
Identification of need	Considerable work had been undertaken with young mothers but almost nothing was on offer for young fathers.
Young People's Involvement	The young men plan the programme of activities for the group meetings and two young men have been trained as peer educators to work in local schools
Evaluation	The peer education programme is currently being evaluated
Funding	Sure Start monies fund the development worker post
Staffing & Management	The project worker is employed 4 days a week and is managed by the WILD manager.
Lifespan	This is a 2 year project that commenced in 2000

