



Supporting young fathers

One single parent in 10 is a father, and fathers are frequently the main childcare resource for mothers who work. Yet parenting support specifically for dads is thin on the ground. We look at a pioneering project in West Lothian that offers help to the youngest fathers

“I have learnt a lot of things my wife doesn't know, good for my confidence. Made me feel more of an equal partner and encouraged me to read further and discuss more with my wife”

In March 2004, an innovative pilot was launched in West Lothian. The Dads2B courses aimed to help prospective fathers – particularly young dads, in their mid to late teens – to take a more active role in supporting partners through pregnancy and childbirth, and build confidence in caring for and building a relationship with a young child.

Today the West Lothian YD2B (Young Dads-to-Be) group is going strong and providing a model that local authorities and social services across Scotland are keen to emulate.

The group was originally developed through a unique partnership in Scotland between the Sure Start team within West Lothian Council and NHS Parent Education Services at St John's Hospital in Livingston. The 2001 Scottish Executive report *A framework for maternity services in Scotland* encourages health professionals to take all steps to ensure partners do not feel marginalised in antenatal and postnatal care, yet available support for fathers-to-be is regularly tagged on to women's services and often demonstrates stereotyped attitudes. Add into the mix the difficulties facing the youngest fathers, who are much more likely to be living separately from the mother of their child, possibly homeless or in supported accommodation, and often dealing with additional problems ranging from employment to mental health, and it isn't difficult to see why young dads in particular can struggle to access those services that may be available.

The YD2B course now consists of a 6-week programme facilitated by Sure Start Early Years Development Worker Andy Brough, with input from a midwife and other health professionals. Sessions

cover labour, birth and healthcare, but a large part of the course is practical: bathing and changing young children, how to cope with a crying baby and baby massage, for example.

The father's health is also a focus. Postnatal depression is recognised far more readily in women than previously, but that the condition can also affect men is far less widely known: yet recent statistics suggest that one father in 25 may now be considered to be suffering from some form of postnatal illness. Men are far less likely to admit to feelings of stress or inadequacy, and very much less likely to visit a doctor, leading to suggestions that the figures may in fact be much higher. In 2002 the National Suicide Prevention Strategy for England found suicide to be the leading cause of death in men under 35, with two thirds of these being fathers.

“My knowledge of all things ‘baby’ has improved 100%”

Through YD2B, young fathers have access to information on the services available to them in the form of helplines, websites and, if necessary, medical support. “Do talk, don't suffer in silence” is the message, and Andy Brough also facilitates a young fathers' group for after the birth which dads can attend with their child, offering the chance to socialise with other fathers, share problems, ask questions and learn parenting skills.

On average, fathers in YD2B are around 18, though the youngest dad has been 15 and the oldest in his early twenties: individual

circumstances, particularly personal maturity and self esteem, are the main deciding factors in whether the group setting is the most appropriate support in any particular case. Most young fathers are

not in education or employment, and may have limited access to their child: in some cases distance and lack of transport can create difficulties, in others the mother or her family may not be supportive of contact. For many, evenings and weekends present the best opportunities to spend time with their baby.

Andy also works individually with young dads whose circumstances make attending the group difficult; sometimes because of lack of confidence, or as a result of issues such as mental health, drug use or anger management. The average length of attendance at the group is 4 to 5 months, although there will be a whole range of personal circumstances and factors that may dictate why a father stops coming along.

Work with the young fathers has been so successful that the need for a more generic course open to all dads became very apparent, and the pattern has been adapted to provide a 4-week antenatal course on a Monday evening, timed to suit working fathers and facilitated by NHS Parent Education Coordinator Michelle Davidson, with input from new fathers on their own experiences of labour, birth and parenting. The groups have proved hugely popular.

Over 400 dads have accessed the West Lothian service, which received good practice recognition from Quality Improvement Scotland in 2007. Despite increasing evidence that greater involvement of fathers is correlated with lower parenting stress and depression in mothers, many men continue to experience barriers that inhibit their parenting. West Lothian's Dads2B courses are proving an effective way of addressing a significant need.

West Lothian's YD2B group featured in a workshop at Breaking down stereotypes and engaging fathers in services for children and families, held to look at key findings of Children in Scotland's survey into Gender Equality Duty activities and explore practical solutions to the challenges of engaging fathers and achieving gender equality in services for children and families.

Another seminar will take place in Aberdeen on 9 March: for more information, contact Sara Collier at scollier@childreninscotland.org.uk

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