

February 2008

### Young Parent Survival Guide

Following extensive consultation and preparation the first issue of the *Young Parent Survival Guide* is ready. Funded by the Crisis Pregnancy Agency, the *Guide* was launched on March 11<sup>th</sup> in the Rotunda Hospital by the young mothers from the St. Catherine's Moving On Programme in Carlow. These young mothers acted as consultants in the preparation of the *Guide* and their help proved invaluable.

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Topics covered in the *Guide* include *Pregnant and panicking?*, *Coming home with your baby*, *Survival tips for mums and dads*, *Money for you and your baby*, *Safer sex*, *Legal jargon*, *Is there school after baby*, *Easy food for you and your baby* and much more.



Nicole Pender and Edel Kirwan who launched the *Young Parents Survival guide* on behalf of the Young Mothers on the Moving On Programme in Carlow

The *Guide* will be available free of charge, from Treoir, [info@treoir.ie](mailto:info@treoir.ie), LoCall: 1890 252 084 or 01 - 6700 120 for copies

### The Launch of “Links”: Young Parent Services in Cork University Maternity Hospital

Cork University Maternity Hospital launched its new service: *Links: Young Parent Services* in Autumn 2007. Under this new programme, the Clinical Social Work Department offers a counselling service, where young parents can explore their feelings about being pregnant, and discuss the options open to them. The programme also offers support and information when attending Ante Natal clinic appointments.

An exciting development has been the antenatal classes for expectant parents aged 23 and under. These are held every Wednesday afternoon, with each session run over three weeks. Each class is facilitated by a Midwife, Physiotherapist and Social Worker. Information is given regarding the pregnancy and birth, a tour of the hospital facilities, and also looks at practical supports and parenting skills. It is also an opportunity to meet other young parents in the area.

Since their launch in 2007, the classes have been well attended and the feedback so far has been extremely positive. Places can be booked by contacting Support Services on 021-4920758. Booking early in the pregnancy is advisable as the classes fill up quickly! For those who feel unable to join the bigger group, individual sessions can be organised. It is hoped to offer a post natal group later.

For further information please contact Margo Fenton, Clinical Social Worker, Cork University Maternity Hospital on 021-4920583.

**Supporting Young Fathers**  
**Examples of promising practice**  
**Nigel Sherriff**  
**Trust for the Study of Adolescence 2007**

This study is based on research undertaken during 2006 which explored interesting and innovative examples of work with young fathers from around England. The term 'promising' practice (rather than 'good' or 'effective') is used to reflect practitioners' views on what appears to be working in the light of the emerging agenda of key challenges for such work.

Work with fathers is important because they make a particular contribution to their children's development and family life. Men's involvement in family life is changing, and whether resident or not, fathers have a significant role to play in the development and well-being of their children. Research confirms that fathers can have a substantial impact in terms of both positive and negative outcomes for their children and has also highlighted the need to support young and vulnerable fathers in the involvement with their children. For example, evidence suggests that children do better among separated families when there is close and positive contact with both parents. Moreover, high levels of positive father involvement in two parent families is associated with a range of desirable educational, social and emotional outcomes for children and young people.

The current 'blurry' view of young fathers is compounded in a number of ways. For example, the belief of many professionals that young fathers (particularly the very youngest such as school-age fathers) do not exist in their communities is a significant barrier. Invisibility is also created by some young mothers being unwilling to involve young fathers in what they see as their business. Moreover, young mothers may not mention the involvement of the young father because of the belief that to present as a couple to services is problematic (e.g. for fear of losing benefits). Young fathers may also be absent for other reasons such as not knowing that they are fathers, imprisonment, or exclusion by the mothers' family.

It is also likely that much of young fathers' invisibility occurs because workers do not routinely collect data about them or include them in services that are for young 'parents'.

Until relatively recently, fathers have generally been absent from policy initiatives aimed at parents. When the spotlight has occasionally fallen on them it has been more likely to focus on what they are failing to do, or are doing poorly. This has been described as promoting a 'deficit model' of fatherhood.

A growing body of research suggests that services often exclude young men through a combination of 'traditional' mother-focused approaches, ignorance of male perspectives, and sometimes through overt discrimination. Services that cater for young parents almost invariably focus on young mothers, and even where they also aim to support young fathers, they often struggle to find ways to do this effectively.

Practices focusing almost exclusively on the mother are deeply embedded within the teenage pregnancy sector, and probably stem from an understandable desire to empower and respect the young mothers whom agencies are in contact with. Practitioners who are used to working with young mums often find it hard to understand the relevance of young fathers to their work. As a result, even services that do engage with young men place little value on their roles as fathers, and rarely ask questions about parental status as a matter of course.

However, it is likely that a genuine dilemma exists for some practitioners in terms of their core beliefs about legitimate client focus. On the one hand, there is the issue of whether mainstream services (where the well-being of the child and/or the mother is usually the main focus) should be engaging with young fathers who may not be involved with the child or mother (e.g. because of exclusion or non-residency).

If so, then there is legitimate argument for the need for more specialised (as opposed to generic mainstream) services that can offer dedicated support for young fathers.

However, on the other hand, and as discussed earlier, research has demonstrated the impact a father can have on the developmental well-being of the child. Consequently, this suggests that even if young fathers are not directly involved with the child and/or mothers, then mainstream services should try to engage and support young fathers as part of their broader remit of 'working with parents' in the same way that already happens with young mothers.

However, it is important to acknowledge that some young fathers are wary of involvement with services. For some, engaging with such services may be seen as 'unmanly'.

Incessant stereotyping of young fathers has led to widespread 'deficit beliefs' which include notions that young fathers are not interested in their children, are irresponsible, uncaring, and that young mothers are better off without the (young) fathers of their children. Research evidence strongly contests the stereotypical view of the worthless and 'feckless' young fathers. Some research has shown that many young fathers fervently want to be involved with their children but often face significant barriers in doing so including inadequate housing, low income and resistance from the mothers or their family. Studies confirm that many young men want to become and remain involved in their children's lives, and that fatherhood for many of them is viewed as a source of pride rather than something to run away from.

It is now well acknowledged that the attitudes and ambivalence of many professionals towards young fathers, needs to change. Challenging the way language is used in policy and practice can act as an important catalyst for change in attitudes about young fathers. Policy documents need to be reviewed to ensure that the word 'parent' is not used as a euphemism for 'mother'.

Mainstream services need to engage more fully with young fathers so that they ultimately become 'normal' and legitimate clients and that the term 'parent' genuinely begins to mean both 'mother' and 'father'.

The examples of projects already working with young fathers provide concrete illustrations of promising practice with young fathers. Different approaches used by various projects and agencies are presented.

The guide challenges the notion that fathers' workers must be male, cautions against the blaming of women regarding the supposed 'feminisation' of mainstream support services. The guide also explores some of the skills and training those working with young fathers may need.

The main section of the guide is organised around themes that are important in working with young fathers, including:

- Getting started
- Reaching and engaging young fathers
- Examples of young fathers work
- Different approaches
- Young fathers' workers

Each section contains feedback from consultations with those already providing services to young fathers, top tips, learning points and key questions.

The guide finishes with a summary of the issues relating to young fatherhood that emerged from the research.

1. Work with young fathers does not necessarily need to rely on large amounts of money nor does it always need to be startlingly innovative.
2. Young fathers may not be as difficult to 'reach' as many professionals may believe. Many projects mentioned in this publication have demonstrated overcoming these obstacles.
3. The guide shows the importance of consulting with and developing integrated approaches to young fathers. The importance of networking and developing partnerships with other agencies is emphasised.

Copies are available from the Trust for the Study of Adolescence, Tel: 0044 1273 693311, or [www.studyofadolescence.org.uk](http://www.studyofadolescence.org.uk)

## HSE Achievements Awards

The Teen Parents Support Programme for Co. Louth has won the Innovation category of HSE Dublin North East Better Service Awards for 2007. The Innovation Award is made for 'initiatives that are innovative, cutting edge and may be experimental or involve an element of risk but have the potential for learning for significant service improvement consistent with the priorities of the HSE's Transformation Programme'.

The Louth TPSP was established in 2004 and aims to respond in a supportive manner to teenage parents and provide an accessible, integrated service which connects to supportive networks within the community. As part of a variety of work carried out with parents on an individual and group level the Louth TPSP has facilitated a group of young fathers, provided infant massage, childcare supports for those returning to education and established an Educational Toy Scheme.



Louth TPSP team receiving their innovation award.

Speaking after winning the Award, Programme Leader, Joanne Murphy said:

*The programme has been a huge success in Co. Louth with excellent uptake of the service. The award is a great endorsement of all the hard work and dedication the team has given to teenage parents in Co. Louth".*

The Louth TPSP is now going forward to the National Awards on the 31st March 2008 in Dublin.

### **Guidelines for Best Practice –supporting students who are pregnant and those who are parenting within our education system.**

This publication has been developed by the Limerick Teen Parents Support Programme in co-operation with schools and other interested parties in Limerick city and county. Its purpose is to enable schools/centres of education to put in place supports aimed at ensuring that students who become pregnant or who are parents are supported to continue in education. This publication gives guidance on how to respond to a disclosure of student pregnancy, how to support during pregnancy (including a student care plan) and how to support the student after the birth. The *Guidelines* apply to young fathers as well as mothers.

The TPSP National Co-ordinator is currently distributing copies of the Guidelines for Best Practice to all second level schools which are not in TPSP catchment areas. These Guidelines are relevant to any centre which provides education or training for young people. If you would like a copy please contact Margaret Morris. Contact details below.

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