

# YOUNG FATHERS: FACTS AND FABLES

The UK has the highest rate of teenage pregnancy in Western Europe, yet there are no official statistics on how many young fathers there are. **Sue Learner** meets three fathers who are challenging negative perceptions of young dads

## Jason Parrott

“If I hadn’t become a dad I would have ended up in prison,” admits Jason Parrott, who was excluded from school at the age of 15 and has been in and out of Borstal-type institutions most of his life.

Jason, who works as a parking attendant, lives with his wife Gemma and two-year-old son Samuel, in Loughton, Essex. He says: “I had a bad background and upbringing. I have never seen my dad regularly and because of that it has made me more determined to be there for Samuel.”

When the couple found out that Gemma was pregnant, they were in shock. “We were thinking of having children but Gemma was only 17. She had been on the pill but when she came off we were told that it could take six months for her to get pregnant because of the pill. But she got pregnant straight-away,” he says.

Jason always wanted to have children young. “I felt that after they grew up I would still be young enough to get on with my life and do the things I wanted to do. I will still be young when Samuel is having kids,” he says.

Life has changed since having Samuel. “I just want to be happy and be a family. Instead of going down the pub with my mates, I go for a walk down the river with my son and my dog. I walk along holding his hand and I feel so proud. He is so clever. Just waking up every day and seeing him and knowing he is yours is amazing,” says Jason.

The couple recently got married and Gemma, aged 20, is pregnant with their second baby due in March.

Jason believes there is not enough support for young dads. “Young mums get funding to do courses, but there is nothing like that for young dads. The emphasis is always on getting young mums back into work,” he says. He

finds that people are quite negative towards young fathers and assume “they are on the dole and are having an easy ride”.

“If your child misbehaves, I do feel the older generation is looking at you, saying those are young parents and they can’t control their child,” he says.

Jason has been in and out of work since leaving school at 15. However, since having Samuel he is determined to support his family and challenge people’s perceptions.

“I want to make sure I have a well paid job to support my wife and son. I want Samuel to have a good life,” he says.

## Michael Tanner

Michael Tanner is 23-years-old and he already has three daughters under the age of four.

There’s Lily, aged three, Ruby, aged one and May who is six-months-old. He is engaged to Marie McNulty, 22 but the couple cannot afford to live together. If they lived together, Marie would be forced to give up her benefits and they would have to live on Michael’s wages, which would not be enough for five of them. So Michael is forced to rent a room in a shared house until he can earn enough to support his family.

Marie lives with her daughters in Bradwell village just outside Milton Keynes. She is currently doing a hair-dressing and counselling course. She says: “There is all this criticism in the newspaper asking why there are all these single mothers, but there seems like there is no support for young parents who do want to live together.”

Michael was 20 when he found out Marie was pregnant. “I was scared but I was more worried about what my parents would say,” he says. Being a father was “strange” at first. “I was so tired but it felt good. It took about a year to get

used to it. It has been hard,” he admits.

When Marie first got pregnant, Michael found there was a lack of support for young dads. “None of my mates had any children. I think there should be somewhere for people to go and chat with somebody about how they feel. You can’t tell your partner you are feeling uncomfortable as she wants your full support.”

Michael has found that many of his friends “don’t want to know now I have kids”. He doesn’t miss going out and says: “I think my time should be spent with my family. It is more fun being with them and bringing them up properly. If I wasn’t happy I wouldn’t be with Marie.”

Michael believes he has changed since becoming a father and says: “It has matured me. I have more time for people and I am more patient. I don’t let stresses get to me, as I know that when I walk through the door Lily comes running up to me and gives me a kiss and a cuddle.”

Since meeting Marie, Michael has continually worked and is currently training in his spare time to be a plumber. He started a plumbing course four months ago and hopes to be fully qualified in a year. “So far I have got 100 per cent in all three tests, which I am really pleased about,” he says.

He currently works for a kitchen company on the trade counter. Michael says: “For people like me there should be help to retrain. I have had to get out a loan of £5,000 to train to be a plumber. A little bit of help with training would go a long way. Perhaps the government could give a loan like university students get where you don’t pay it back until you can afford to. There is this view that if you are silly enough to have kids at this age, then you have to deal with it.”

## FACT FILE

- The UK has the highest rate of teenage pregnancies in Western Europe
- Young fathers are largely absent from statistics
- In the study *The Transition to Fatherhood in Young Men* (2002), David Quinton found young fathers were “mostly ignored, marginalised or made uncomfortable by services”
- Quinton also found that by ignoring young fathers, services were ignoring mothers’ wishes



**Karl believes that having his son Liam has made him want to better himself and give Liam a good life**

## **CASE STUDY** UK Youth's Fable and Fact Project

There are a lot of stereotypes and misconceptions about young parents, according to Andrew Cummings, the project worker who runs UK Youth's Fable and Fact, which is currently project funded for 18 months by the Camelot Foundation.

"When people see young parents they always assume the child was a mistake," he says. He has also found that many young couples are forced to live apart because if they live together

they lose benefits. "Yet young couples are under enough pressure as it is without this adding to it," he says.

Fable and Fact was set up to examine issues young parents face and what services they need. Its aim was also to challenge some of the misconceptions held by people who work directly with young parents, such as social workers, health workers and youth workers.

Cummings found 10 parent

champions to lead the project and give presentations to people training to be social workers and youth workers. They hope that about 500 social workers and health workers will take part in the workshops.

Karl Edwards, Michael Tanner and Jason Parrott and their partners, are all parent champions. Jason says: "It is more about saying we are young parents and if you want to help us you need to approach us in this way."

## **Karl Edwards**

Being a father is tough, but being a young father is even harder. Karl Edwards is only 20 but he already has a one-year-old son. He admits: "My teenage life has been cut short because I have a son. I miss going out and being with my friends."

It has been a turbulent time for Karl and his girlfriend Emily Finn since she found she was pregnant at the age of 16. "We split up a hell of a lot while Emily was pregnant because I didn't have a job and because of the hormonal changes that Emily was going through. It took me a while to come to terms with the fact that Emily was pregnant. I was being supportive but not to the extent I should have been as a father," reveals Karl, who found out his son was born after he received a text from Emily.

"The text said she had given birth to a baby boy and called him Liam Joseph. I was very shocked. I cried. My son had just been born," says Karl who lives with Emily and Liam in Milton Keynes.

Emily refused to let Karl see his son for three and a half months. "I got a job at Argos and I contacted her again. We talked for two hours on the phone. When we met up after that, it was as if we had never been apart."

Life is now very different for Karl who says: "My friends laugh about Liam and tease me, calling me the big daddy. But I wouldn't change Liam for the world. So many people judge young parents but teenage parents are still human beings. I think all the Asbo stuff and all the stuff on antisocial behaviour in the papers makes everyone think all teenagers are the same."

Karl would like the government to provide a lot more funding for young parents. "They need to build more houses so we get more help with housing. It would help if the government paid for young fathers to have time off work so they can bond with their children more," he says. He would also like there to be more dads' groups and a rise in benefits.

Karl believes that Liam has made him change for the better. "I was really immature before I had Liam. But Liam has made me think I have to better myself. I want Liam to have a happy family. I never had that and I don't want Liam to grow up as I grew up. I want him to be with his mum and dad," he says. ●