



COMMUNITY BASED PROJECT

**INCREASED AWARENESS AND
SUPPORT FOR YOUNG FATHERS
IN THE COMMUNITY**

PROJECT CONDUCTED

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Please note: The Youth Minister's Round Table of Young Territorians is an independent advisory council. The views expressed in this report are those of the authors and are not necessarily those of the Office of Youth Affairs or the Northern Territory Government.

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Thank you to Kristian Goodacre who has helped me with not only his past experience of the Round Table but also through his work with NAPCAN and professional knowledge of the issues concerning young fathers.

Also thanks to all fathers that have had input into the project who will be directly affected.

ABBREVIATIONS

- | | |
|----------------------------------|-----|
| 1. Northern Territory | NT |
| 2. Northern Territory Government | NTG |
| 3. Royal Darwin Hospital | RDH |

1. EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The Northern Territory (NT) has the youngest median population out of all States and Territories in Australia. As well as having the youngest population in Australia we also have the third highest population growth rate at 2.2%, which is 0.1% higher than the national average¹. Due to these facts it can be deduced that the NT as a whole has a large number of young fathers in the community.

Through the NT health system there is a lot of support for mothers and young families with a lot of promotional material on every issue you can think of when it comes to mother's issues and questions. Fathers on the other hand have very little and in some case no information given to them through the entire process that deals with being a father. They, become fathers and it seems they are expected to know what to do without any help or information.

For young fathers it can get pretty daunting when they suddenly become a father. A good example of this is the waiting room on the 8th floor at Royal Darwin Hospital (RDH) when a couple waits to see the midwives or the doctors they are surrounded by promotional material and health services, but only for mothers, there is not one piece of information in regards to fathers, and this includes any information on where they can find some resources.

"Fathers most of the time feel unsure about what is expected of them." This is a direct quote from the 'Being a Dad' tip sheet on the Northern Territory Government's (NTG) families website (www.families.nt.gov.au). It seems that the community just expects young fathers to know what to do when they become a father. One could assume that young fathers do

¹ Bureau of Statistics, Australian Demographic Statistics, March 2009

not have the same level of life skills and knowledge as men who wait until later in life to have children. Due to this young fathers need all the support they can get through both government and non-government agencies. The lack of knowledge on being a father for a young man has potential impacts on other family and social issues, from alcohol and drug abuse to separation and even domestic violence.

We as a community including the NTG need to give these young Territorians the tools and pathways so that young fathers understand clearly what their roles and responsibilities are to their children, partners and the wider community. Another quote from the NTG families tip sheet says "... fathers know what they don't want to do from memories of their own childhoods..." This is one reason why we need to act to help these young fathers know what to do now because when their children grow up and become fathers for themselves we want them to look back at their childhood and know what they should do because of their own father was a positive role model.

Due to the research that I have conducted in the Northern Territory there is in fact support available for young fathers, as well as young mothers. The main issue is that there is not any single place where all the information and services, provided by both government and non-government organisations, can be found. The NTG families website does have links to some services that young parents can access, but only a few, and when I was researching, I found it by accident, not because I knew it was there.

From my research it seems that young fathers usually find it hard to ask for help with all this new responsibility thrust upon them, they want to be strong for their family and asking for help can be seen as a sign of weakness (of course it is quite the opposite). These fathers may need help but are reluctant to ask or look for it because of the stigma they may

feel. This is why information needs to be as easy to find as the information that young mothers receive.

As a result of my project I have come up with four main recommendations for the NTG to consider.

1. Acknowledge the importance of fatherhood.
2. Increase funding for father-based family initiatives both from within government and through private/community organisations.
3. Create a government funded day for fathers eg: we could call it "Fathers in the Park" and have a large picnic at East Point Reserve with games, activities and information for all fathers.
4. Make existing resources more available to young fathers.

These recommendations will be explained in more detail later in this report.

2. INTRODUCTION

This project aims to explore ways in which young fathers can better access support services and information when help is needed. It also aims to increase awareness of organisations and programs that exist for young fathers (less than 25 years of age) in the Northern Territory (NT). This particular issue is close to my heart due to the fact that at 22 I became a young father and my personal experience was not ideal. Now I am bracing for our second child. I thought participation on the Youth Minister's Round Table of Young Territorians would be a great way for me to inform people about this issue.

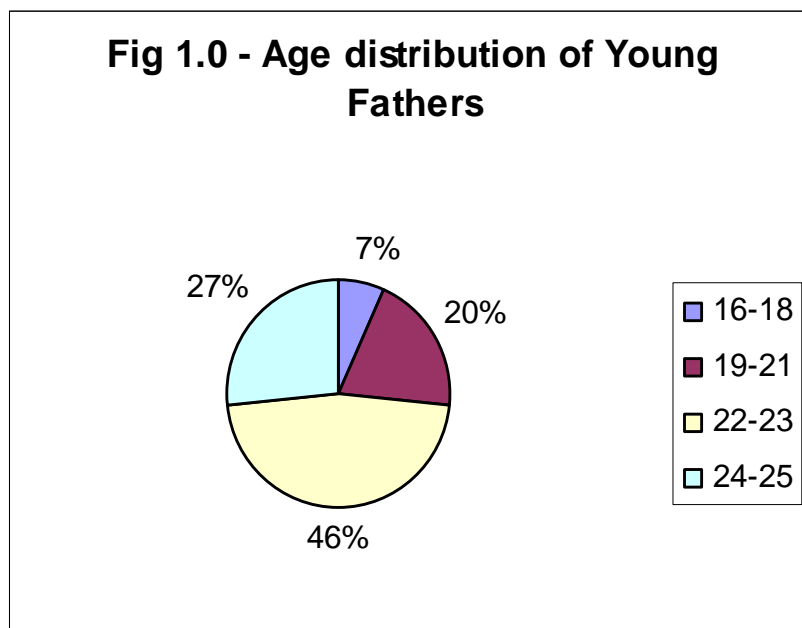
The issue of more support for young fathers came to light for me when I myself became a young father and had no clue what to do and no idea where or who to ask for help. When my partner was in hospital after the birth of our son there were two young fathers from my rugby league team in the room next door. Both had the same issues and concerns I did which made me think, what was out there for us? Throughout this project, I investigated what types of support fathers receive both pre and post natal, what types of relationship they were in when their first child was born and what types of support would have helped them along the way.

Included in this report are my findings on young fathers and the support they receive, also recommendations that I think will be a proactive way to assist this issue into the future.

3. DISCUSSION/MAJOR FINDINGS

The main source of data came from one on one interviews to develop in depth case studies of other young fathers' experiences. Most were conducted over the phone but some were held face to face. All interviews were undertaken with young fathers in the Darwin region. I would like to have my recommendations affect the whole of the Territory but I cannot speak for the other regional centres without further investigation. Although I believe most findings would be transferable.

The interview questions were initially written up as a survey but were thought to be more effective conducted in an interview style. Asking the questions and seeking a verbal response allowed the fathers interviewed to elaborate on details and I was able to gather an insight as to how these young fathers saw themselves and their relationship not only with their child/children but also their partners. In figure 1.0 you can see the ages of the young fathers interviewed, almost half of the young fathers at 73% were aged between 22 and 25 years. The remaining distribution (27%) was between 16 and 21 years of age.



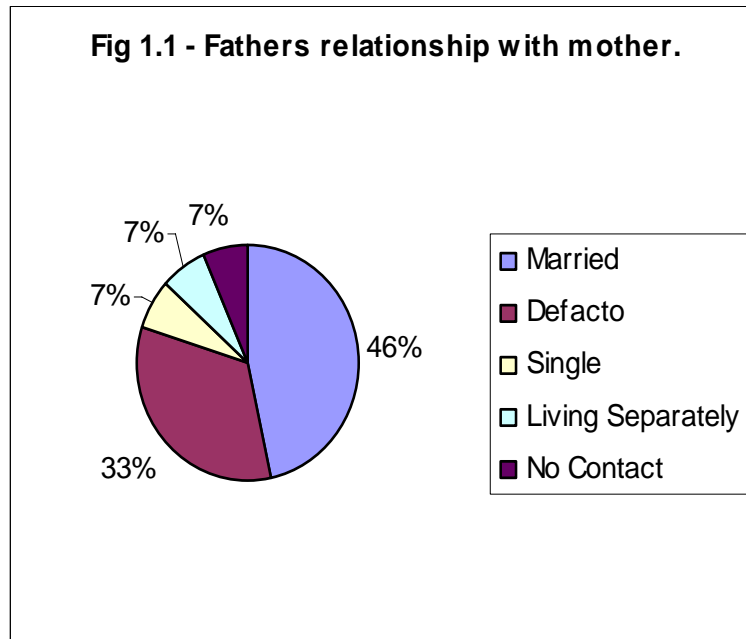


Figure 1.1 shows what type of a relationship these young fathers were in when their first child was born.

As the illustration shows, 79% of young fathers were in a stable relationship with the mother when the child was born with 46% married and 33% in a defacto relationship. The data also shows that 14% of young fathers do not have the support of having the mother of the child around all the time, by being single or living separately to the mother. Only 7% of young fathers had no contact with the mother when she gave birth.

A lot of the young fathers interviewed did provide more information when it came to the support of the mother towards them and vice versa. One father said *"I was glad I was at the birth, I didn't know exactly how hard and how much work my missus had to do"* That was the general feeling amongst most of the young fathers.

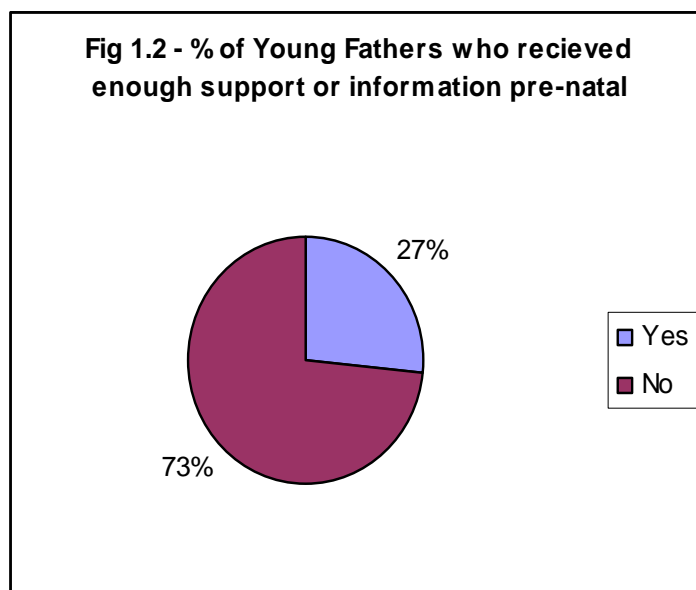
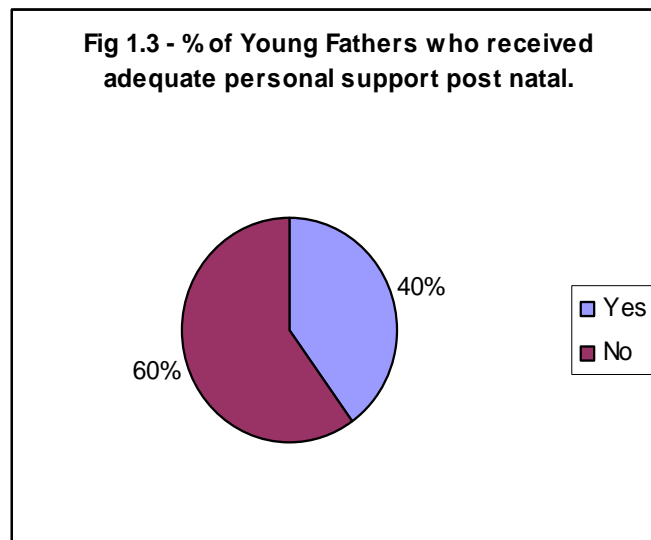


Figure 1.2 shows why this issue was pursued and points to the core of what this project aims to achieve. This statistic shows that 73% of young fathers did not feel that they received adequate support or information before their child was born. This brings me back to the first sentence from the 'Being a Dad' tip sheet on the NTG Families website "Fathers most of the time feel unsure about what is expected of them". Figure 1.2 shows why this is the case. The education for young fathers must start as early as the first appointment for their partner to see the midwives.

Despite this overwhelming figure, through my research I did identify that there is in fact a lot of information out in the community for young fathers, be it through NTG sources or private organisations.

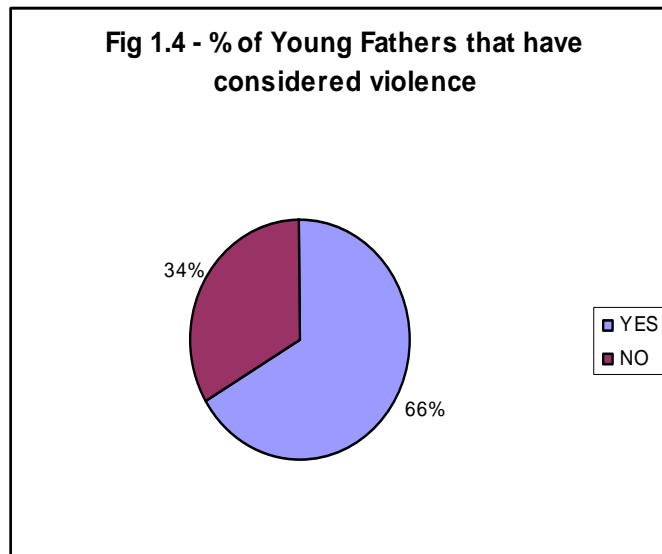
A significant gap exists between the information's existence and the distribution of it to young fathers. A good example one of the young fathers gave me was "...I was freaking out because my wife was in so much pain, next thing I know they are handing me my baby girl, I didn't even know how to hold her..." this type of information is basic but unless communicated to the father before hand, how is he supposed to know? A lot of the young fathers told me that it seemed that they were supposed to know everything about a baby and what to do. As it turned out most of the fathers were scared because they had no idea what to do.



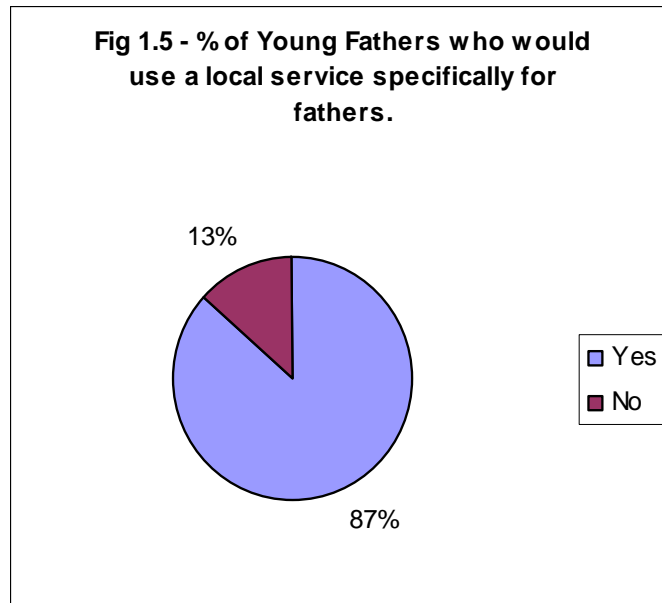
In figure 1.3, 60% of young fathers felt they did not receive enough support after their baby was born. It seemed that often brothers were the best outlet for these young fathers, as a few communicated during the interview. The issue with these young fathers not receiving the emotional support they need affects the extended family as well as the immediate family in many ways.

When it came to the emotional side of becoming a father, all were more than happy to express how much their child means to them, and their love and pride of being a father. But when it came to their emotional issues a lot of the talking stopped. None of the fathers felt comfortable talking about their pre and post natal emotions. One of the fathers summed this up nicely when he said “when I talk about how I feel and how I am not coping with constant screaming from the baby and no sleep and my wife always tired and upset, I just don’t!...I feel stupid.” This statement summed up what most of the young fathers felt.

The young fathers obviously found it a little hard to talk about their feelings and emotions, as a young father myself I know what they were feeling because I am the same. There was an overwhelming consensus that even though it was hard for them to talk to me it was harder for them to talk to their partner or their family, for the fear of being judged and thought of as an incompetent father.

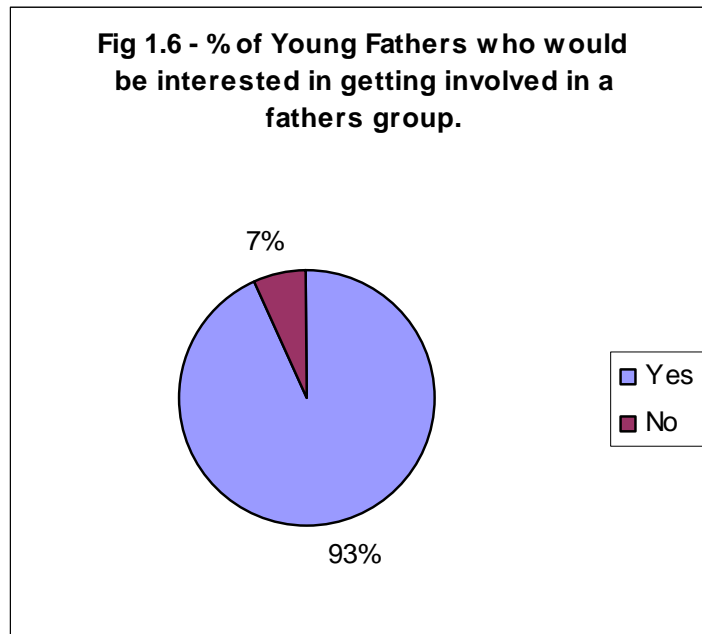


As in figure 1.4, taking into account the lack of information and lack of support young fathers felt they received, 66% of respondents have considered violence towards their child/children or their partner at some point. Almost all of the young fathers put this feeling down to frustration of not knowing how to handle different situations that arose, and not having an adequate support base as an outlet. If you take a closer look at both figures 1.3 and 1.4 you can see that almost the same percentage of young fathers who did not believe that they received enough support pre and post natal also have considered some form of violence towards their family. I believe that if this issue of educating and preparing fathers for fatherhood is addressed we can start dealing with the issue of domestic violence as well. Obviously this is not an excuse for domestic violence but a contributing factor that could be reduced with the correct lines of support.



When it came to the issue of support, when asked the question “if there was a local service specifically for fathers to gain more information or get some support would you use it?” 87% of young fathers said they would. Some of the young fathers informed me that they had tried calling parent line a few times for advice but when they were left on hold for upwards of 20 minutes they thought it was a waste of time and hung up. I myself called these lines and found the same issue. In the ‘Being a Dad’ tip sheet from the NTG families website there is the parent line phone number but also a phone number for the formerly named Office of Children and Families, I called this number as a father who was looking for some assistance. At that time there was no one there who could talk to me so I left my details so they can get back to me, I still have not received a response.

It is very encouraging that 87% of young fathers say that they would use a local service if they knew about it. Perhaps even, what is probably more encouraging is the percentage of young fathers interviewed that would be interested in getting involved to some extent in a fathers’ group.



As seen in figure 1.6, 93% of young fathers interviewed would get involved in a fathers' group. Even though not all of these fathers would use the service for an extended time, it is encouraging to see that they want to seek help and share experiences with other fathers. One of the young fathers said "I have been pretty lucky in the support I have received from my family and friends, but I know other dads haven't got that so I would like to help in some way."

All the young fathers indicated to me what type of support would best benefit them and; almost all had the same response: The idea of having someone to talk to who they know is in the same position as they are and who has been or is going through the same issues they are experiencing was paramount. A lot were sick of getting advice from mostly women who did not seem to fully understand what their problems were.

4. CONCLUSION

The objective of this report was to increase the awareness of resources available and the support for young fathers in the NT community. By interviewing young fathers in the Darwin region, I was able to get a further insight as to how young fathers personally felt about their fatherhood experience. By talking to these fathers I believe that any action undertaken by the NTG would have a positive affect on young families and the local community in general.

It has become clear to me that a lot of fathers feel they don't have a lot of support when it comes to their issues. I think that the process of researching for this report alone and the involvement of the young fathers was a great step towards increasing awareness, with the young fathers knowing that they are being listened to as well as being made aware of some resources out there.

I discovered that there is a lot of support out there for young fathers to tap into but they just don't know it is there. For a positive effect on young NT fathers/families the following recommendations are made.

5. RECOMMENDATIONS

1. Acknowledgement of the importance of fatherhood.

The first recommendation is directed at the importance of the issues of young fathers in any future funding or projects undertaken by the NTG, and how these decisions will affect not only young fathers directly but young mothers and young families as well.

2. Increase funding for father-based family initiatives both from within government and through private/community organisations.

The second recommendation has been aimed at the support services for young fathers when they need help. There is a lot of help for fathers and families after problems arise but not much before most problems arise. New resources must be appropriately targeted and distributed to reach young fathers pre-natal. There is a good example of this being undertaken at the moment by Anglicare, where they are producing a DVD package for young fathers with accounts from other young fathers discussing issues they had and solutions they found. This will be a fantastic resource for young fathers into the future.

3. Create a government funded day for fathers.

The third recommendation would be a day in which young fathers are acknowledged for their importance in our community. This could be held on father's day perhaps. The goal behind this would be to increase the awareness within the NT community of how important fathers are to our children and our community. As touched on previously this could be done through some sort of large picnic with activities, information for fathers and the ability for these fathers to network with other fathers.

4. Make existing resources more available to young fathers.

The fourth recommendation seeks to make information more easily available to young fathers. There is a lot of information in the form of booklets, promotional gear and services available but most of the time young fathers do not know where they are or where to start looking. Whenever young mothers are provided with information, young fathers should equally be given an information pack or details on where to seek information and support.

REFERENCES

- Australian Bureau of Statistics – Australian Demographic Statistics, March 2009. Catalogue Number: 3101.0
- Office of Children and Families 2004, 'Being a Dad' Tip Sheet 26, <http://www.families.nt.gov.au/asp/index.asp?pgid=7284>
- Fatherhood Foundation, 'Fathers in Families: Strengthening & Supporting Fathers and Turning the Tide of Fatherlessness in Australia' 2002

APPENDIX

Questions asked when interviewing the young fathers.



This interview is for a report titled "INCREASED AWARENESS AND SUPPORT FOR YOUNG FATHERS IN THE COMMUNITY". This project aims to explore ways in which young fathers can better access support services and information when help is needed. It also aims to increase awareness of organizations and programs that exist for young fathers (under 25 years of age) in the Northern Territory (NT).

1. How old were you when your 1st child was born?
2. Where was your 1st child born?
3. How many children do you have?
4. What type of relationship did you have with the mother of your 1st child at the time of its birth?
 - Married
 - Defacto
 - Single
 - Living Separately
 - No Contact

5. Did you receive enough support or information before your child was born?

Yes No

If yes what did you receive and from whom? _____

6. After the baby was born, did you receive adequate personal support?
Yes No

If yes, what did you receive and from whom?

7. Have you ever been violent or considered violence towards your child or partner out of frustration?

Yes No

Details: _____

8. Did you seek to find more info or help on what to do as a father?

Yes No

9. Where did you go to find the information and was it useful?

10. Do you think there is an equal amount of info for fathers as there are mothers?

Yes No

11. If there was a local service specifically for fathers to gain more info or get some support would you have used it?

Yes No

12. If there was a local group of young fathers that met on a regular basis would you be interested in getting involved?

Yes No

13. What information and support do you think would have benefited you in becoming a father?

14. Is there any more comments or advice you would like to give other fathers?

EVALUATION

This project has really tested me. I am not one that you associate with documents like this. I have learnt a lot more than I thought I would, not just in relation to the skills I have received by producing this project but from the facts and interviews I have collated. Being a young father of a two year old with another one on the way, this project also had a very personal meaning for me. I have got to talk to other fathers in the same situation as myself and that have had to overcome the same obstacles. When I started this project I thought that there was not a lot of information out there for young fathers but I quickly realised that there actually is and there are organisations like Anglicare and NAPCAN in the community that do a lot for young fathers and young families.

There was a few times I thought that there was no way I was going to get anywhere near finishing this project, but every time I saw my son it gave me the kick I needed to get going again. This report was not just produced to try and benefit young fathers but it is also designed to have a positive influence on young mothers and young families.

I believe that this is a subject that not many people take into account and I just hope that if nothing else this project just puts the issue of young fathers into the mixing pot when decisions are made.