

## Putting the ‘father’ in Family Hubs: Gateshead, Middlesbrough, County Durham and Sunderland

Established in 2017, the North East Young Dads and Lads (NEYDL) provides intensive and often long-term support to improve the lives of disadvantaged young fathers, expectant dads and non-birthing people aged 25 and under. NEYDL’s vision is for young dads to be valued and supported in their role as parents.

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Their mission is to enable young dads to play a safe, active and meaningful role in their children’s lives by supporting them with their parenting and creating opportunities for them to influence wider practice.

The findings of self-reported survey data and independent evaluation led by Newcastle University, De Montfort University & Leeds Beckett University, Bradford University and The University of Lincoln demonstrates the effectiveness of this approach. It enables young dads to gain new skills and confidence as parents and form closer relationships with their children, reducing loneliness, anxiety and poor mental health, whilst addressing other challenges.

In 2021, four North East councils, Gateshead, Sunderland, Middlesbrough and County Durham commissioned NEYDL to establish and deliver young father inclusive services in their Family Hubs in support of two of the programme strands: ‘Perinatal mental health’ and ‘Parenting Support within the first 1,001 days of a child’s life (zero to two years)’.

Shaped by young dads with lived experience who continue to play a central role in the co-creation of NEYDL, Young Dads Support Workers (qualified and experienced youth workers) and Peer Enablers (young dad volunteers who have progressed into paid employment) were appointed to provide a comprehensive support programme. This provided an average 48 hours support for each young dad per year across the 4 localities. Together they deliver:

- **One-to-one support** to address self-identified needs and goals associated with parenting and relationship skills, loneliness, mental health and wellbeing, school exclusion, unemployment, children’s social care and private law proceedings.
- **Group activities and support groups** that enable young dads to gain new skills and meet other young fathers.
- **Training and information** including access to [www.DigiDAD.uk](http://www.DigiDAD.uk) and face-to-face training leading to qualifications in youth work, paediatric first aid, mental health first aid, food handling and hygiene, peer research and film making.
- **Influencing policy and practice:** Young dad beneficiaries can progress into leadership positions within the charity by joining our AmbassaDADS programme, and/or as Trustees and employees.

Since the start of the programme, NEYDL has reached and supported 217 young dads across the four localities. In addition to intensive one-to-one support, the following peer supported group work activities are now delivered;

- Weekly five-A-side football sessions in three localities and the launch of an 11-A-side tournament team (NEYDL United) represented by young dads from all 4 localities.
- Monthly father and child cycling activities in each locality.

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- Weekly young dads peer support groups in two localities.
- Twice weekly video gaming sessions moderated by young dad volunteers.
- Representation by four young dads in Family Hub Parent and Carer panels in two localities.
- Twice monthly AmbassaDADS community leadership sessions attended by 21 young dads.
- Weekly stay and play sessions for young dads in Family Hubs across all four localities.

Impact has been captured via a comprehensive evaluation framework and self-reported survey tools completed at intervals. Positive outcomes include 88 per cent of dads feeling closer to their child, 62 per cent reporting reduced anxiety and 90 per cent feeling less lonely. NEYDL's Durham Family Hub Service has also been positively evaluated by a research team from the University of Lincoln, who conclude;

"The County Durham Family Hub offer is proving to be a pioneering national example of effective service provision for young fathers. Both the staff and the young fathers are very positive about the service offer."

(Tarrant and Ladlow, 2024)

### Lessons learned

- Young dads have to be found. They are not visible in the statistics nor is the extent of their unmet need. The experience of NEYDL is there are a lot of young dads in the community who are unsupported and often in crisis.
- Young dads need and deserve face to face support. Commissioning a parenting app for dads and placing a 'Young Dads Welcome' poster in the window are not short cuts to young father inclusive practice.
- Young dads do not always believe they deserve help and support as parents. Encouraging young dads to seek support can sometime feel like a hard sell. But effective support for young dads can be lifechanging so go the extra mile and don't accept one missed appointment or unanswered phone call as a rejection.
- When working with young dads, park your judgements and look for the potential in every young dad. Apply a strength-based approach not a deficit or risk-based model. With the right support, young dads will surprise you.
- Most young dads have never encountered another young dad, so look for opportunities to connect them together, establish a peer support network and sense of belonging.
- Effective support for young dads benefits the whole family.

### **Young father case study: How NEYDL's Middlesbrough Young Dads Service has helped**

David (aged 20) self-referred to the charity in August 2023 after finding out he was going to be a dad for the first time. A care experienced young man with a history of drug misuse, David identified a range of support needs including loneliness, lack of a positive friendships and male role models, help to develop parenting skills and understand private family court proceedings to ensure that he could be part of his unborn child's life.

Since joining NEYDL, David has completed over 200 hours of engagement across six different programmes including football, beekeeping, AmbassaDADS and father and child focused stay and play sessions. With the support of NEYDL staff (acting as a McKenzie Friend), David applied for private family mediation sessions prior to completing a private family court application (Parental Responsibility and Child Arrangement Order) and is currently representing himself through court.

David has learnt a lot from our support, gaining new skills to manage his own mental health, completing courses focusing on parenting and paediatric first aid, becoming an accomplished beekeeper, digital content creator and developing practical parenting skills. As a member of the charity's community leaders programme (AmbassaDADS)..., David has shared his lived expertise and represented the charity at key events including:

- Presentation to the online fatherhood forum Agenda Dad hosted by Future Men.
- Presentation to 'Think Dad' conferences.
- Interviewed by BBC's The One Show.
- Represented young fathers as a Middlesbrough Family Hub champion.
- Steering Group member of Young People, Parents and Carers, a DfE and Home Office funded research study focusing on family focused practice of multi-agency safeguarding hubs (MASH) led by UCL and Newcastle University.

At the charity's last celebration event for young fathers held in County Durham in November 2024, David's contribution to young fatherhood was recognised by a regional award.