

Is this the right time? Equality begins with care.

This publication is part of the Equal Play exhibition that, from September 2021 to September 2022, has taken over BALTIC's ground floor galleries. Equal Play proposes a space for play and exploration, where decision-making is in the hands of the players.

Adjacent to the active space of the play installation, a space for reflection invites the audiences to explore care and equality through the lens of childcare - and men's involvement in it. This space contains a selection of writings, poems and films related to men, childcare, and fatherhood, produced in the 70s and 80s by members of the Achilles Heel Collective and Crèches Against Sexism. These were collectives of men that came together in response to the Women's Liberation Movement. They wanted to explore new forms of masculinity that would support and embrace Feminist ideals.

Fundamental to my practice is the realisation of temporary social spaces in order that diverse groups can meet, share their knowledge and experiences, and engage in a process of co-creation. Equally important to my work is revisiting alternative archives from the past that may offer us tools to think about our lives now and in the future.

Can we make use of the experiences of previous generations to help us imagine new ways of being in the future?

With that question in mind, from November 2021 to March 2022, Dylan Brown, Jed Donnelly, Nathan Noble, Robert Oughton, Will Patterson, Jordan Pike, Jordan Richardson and Mark Ridden - a group of young fathers from the North East Young Dads & Lads Project (NEYD&L) met at BALTIC, to explore the materials from the exhibition and to think of how they may relate to their own experiences of fatherhood. The group worked with myself, Jonah York, youth worker at NEYDL and Dr Michael J Richardson, lecturer in Human Geography. The sessions were supported by Vicky Sturrs, BALTIC's Head of Learning and Civic Engagement.

Throughout the project the group talked, worked and played, inviting their children and partners to join them in some of the sessions. They also met former members of the Achilles Heel Collective Paul Atkinson, Andy Metcalf and Paul Morrison.

This publication you are holding is the result of our conversations; a compilation of some of the thoughts on fatherhood that emerged during our time together. We hope it carries the warm, wise, funny, and sometimes angry voices of the young fathers, opening a window into their experiences. A clear message runs through its fragments -the importance and value of care as a tool to build a better future.

Albert Potrony & Vicky Sturrs. March 2022

The following people have shared their energy, experience and expertise in order to realise this publication:

Paul Atkinson Dylan Brown Donna Burns Jed Donnelly Founded.Design Emma Hatterslev Stephanie Hession Rachel Jemison Doug Laidlaw Nathan Noble Paul Morrison Andy Metcalf Robert Oughton Will Patterson Jordan Pike Albert Potrony Jordan Richardson Dr. Michael J. Richardson Mark Ridden Vicky Sturrs Jonah York



There are moments
when every young parent has questioned it
did I have kids too young?
I could be out there
doing what my friends are doing
getting pissed
and not even worrying about tomorrow
go traveling...
But when I think about it

I wouldn't change a thing.

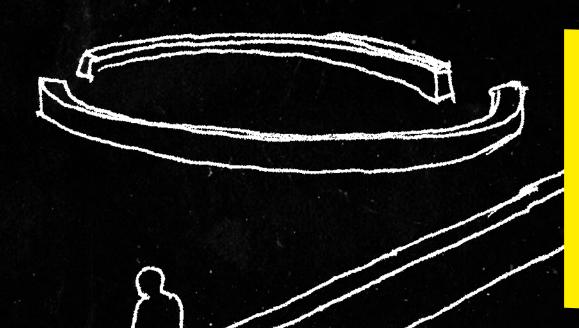
When is the right time?

Is there a right time?

Is there a wrong time?

What is the right age to have a child?

Sometimes things happen and you have to be ready.



It took me at least a month

to start feeling more confident with my baby.

When the nurse gave her to me

I thought

Ok! what I am meant to do with this now?

Help please!

For me it was really hard to get into it.

They said

'Here is your baby'

and I was AHHHH!

I didn't want to move.

Most people would probably research in advance.

It has a lot to do with anxiety.

I tell myself that
a hundred years ago
there was no Google.

You did it how you thought you were supposed to do it.

I used to phone my nan
and ask her
how do you do this?

I realised it's more natural.

When you become a father

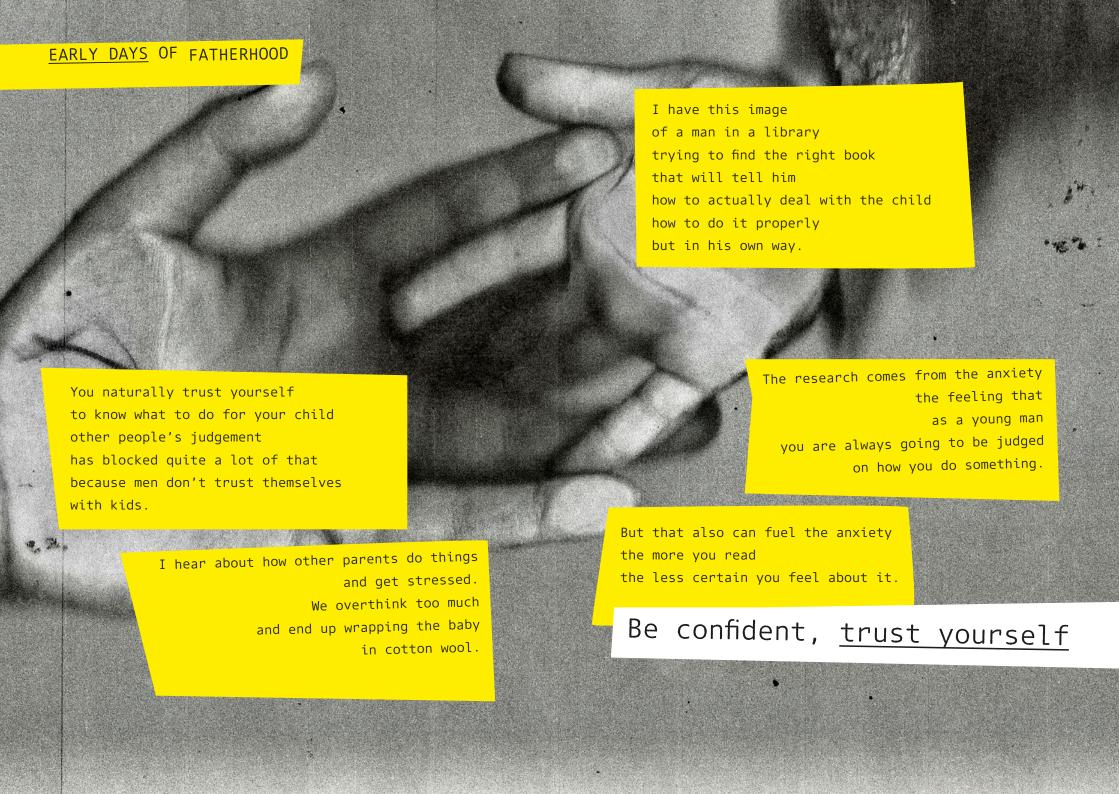
it's like you subconsciously tap

into a pre-existing archive of knowledge

it's almost like you already know what to do.

EARLY DAYS OF

FATHERHOOD



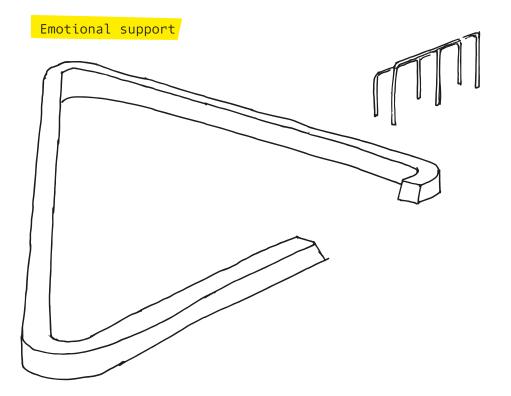
THINGS that worry me about being a dad...

How my children react to things

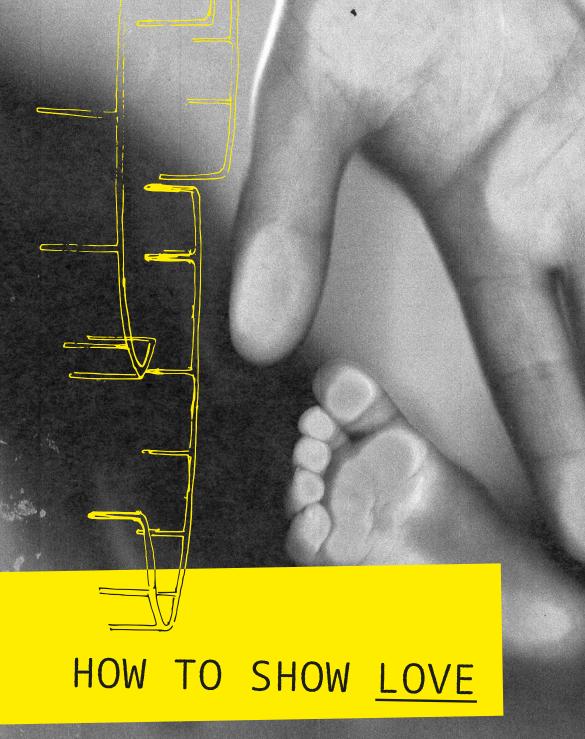
When they stay out

Being there for them and trying to make their day fun filled

Having a child who won't care about me







When you first have your child they say that skin to skin is the best thing you can do. I don't wear a top in my house it's so natural for me to pick up my baby and for her head to be on my chest on my skin.

I can tell she is more comfortable like that than when I am wearing clothes.

I am the calmest person in the house

It feels like the baby knows

that if I hold her

I am just going to be relaxed

and chilled with her.

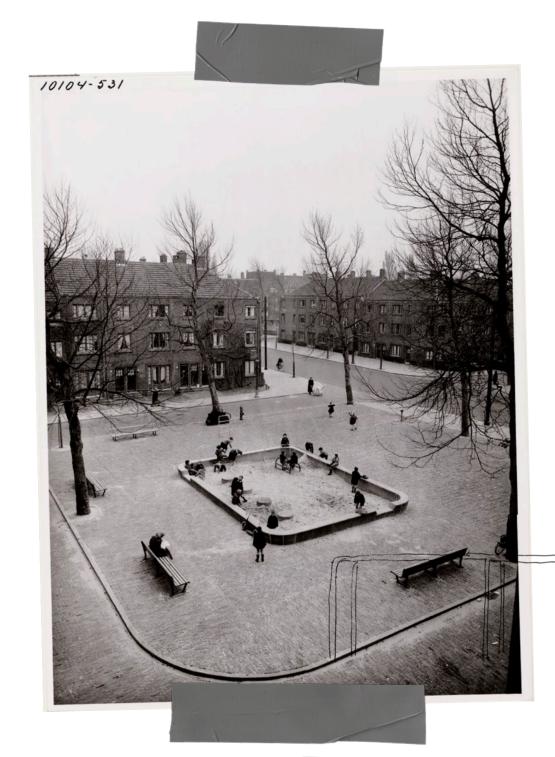
It's the mindset

the baby gets in the same mindset

as you.

Each time I see my daughter
she looks back at me
and does the biggest
cheesiest grin
you'll ever see
and then she just continues with what she is doing.
But for a brief second
when I go up to her
she smiles
and then continues with her stuff.

She <u>acknowledges</u> the <u>safety</u> of her father.



I give my CHILD

I give my children respect and they give me respect back

Teaching

I give my child my heart and my caring

Reflection

Understanding

I give them what they need, not what they want

Love

I give my child the best version of me



HOW
TO BOND
WITH
YOUR CHILD

I picked up my two girls from school and as soon as we get to the bus stop Ella she is the oldest sticks her tongue out at me and farts.

And then she says 'Daddy I farted!'

The bus is always full when we get back from school and we'll be sitting there really quiet and Ella will make the sound of a fart and say 'Ugh dad you farted!'

Grace started calling me funny names all the time but she does it for fun she is just joking and I carry it on and she finds that really funny.

Ella is only four but she understands a hell of a lot for her age and we can have full blown conversations sometimes.

Watching TV
Ella likes watching princesses
Poppy
she has always been obsessed with cars
so she will watch Top Gear
and things like that.
It is what it is...

Connor every night time he will fall asleep lying on my chest every single night.

With Ella, she will go straight in the bedroom and she will go straight to her bed. She likes a bit of background noise on but she never wants to go to sleep. She's like a vampire.

With my daughter Grace the two best times for me are when we are walking from school to take her home.

There will be these conversations of what she's been doing at school or what she's going to be doing that night time with her mum.

Stuff like that.

And the other time is just before bed. When she goes to bed she doesn't necessarily want any stories she just wants to talk and we talk then and that's it.

These two times are specific times for the two of us to talk.

GETTING TO <u>KNOW</u> YOUR <u>CHILDREN</u> or HOW TO <u>BOND</u> WITH YOUR <u>CHILD</u>

I usually get pulled in at school

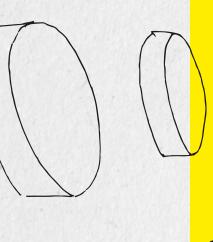
last time I was pulled in it was because Poppy and Ella decided that they were going to pour paint in each other's pants. The school said if you find paint in any places when you bath them just to let you know that they have been pouring paint in each other's pants.

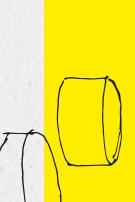
and when I bathed them they had bits of orange and pink and yellow and...

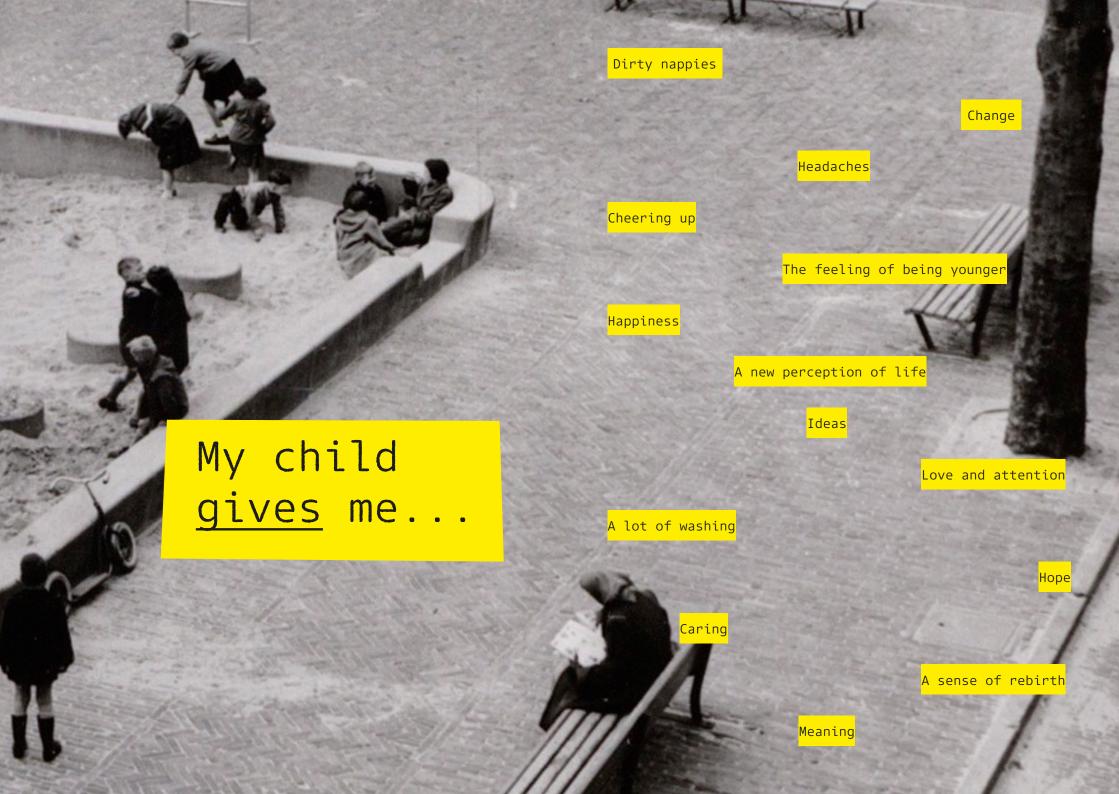
One has started to talk I think that's the only difference at the minute he is not really a baby anymore.

The other one she is almost walking on her own.

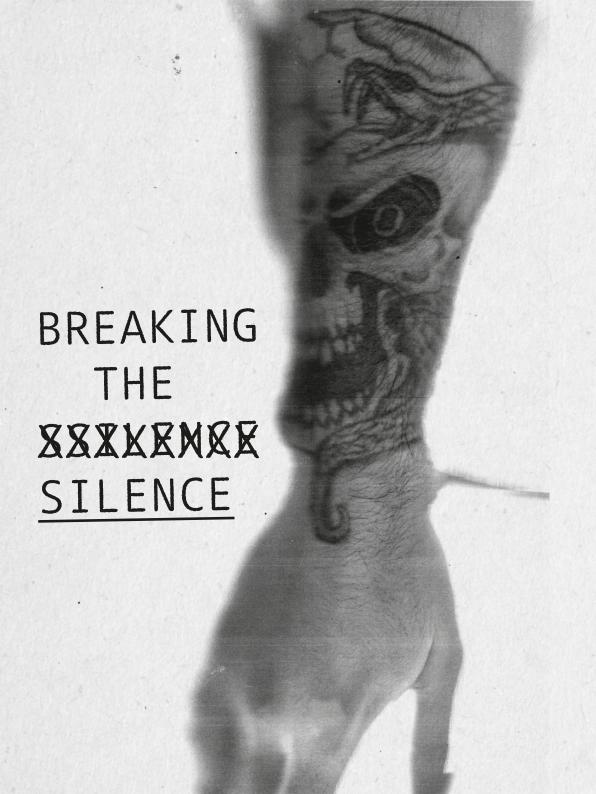
They are similar but very different you can't really explain unless you see them unless you watch them grow.











Silence.

You end up very silent, you don't talk about anything. You don't feel comfortable with even coming out to anyone you are close to to talk about problems.

And then when you do you feel you get judged for the things you are saying.

I may say
I am actually quite upset
and depressed
about this
and they may go
'Yeah, ok'

Around young dads there is a lot of mental health. Being scared...

and then you start talking about it and you feel like you are being judged and you go home thinking maybe I shouldn't have said that because now I am in the shit feeling like you are not capable of being a father.

You need support
but they are just like...
'you are doing well, why do you need support?'
I need support for my mental wellbeing
and if it is not met
how the hell I am meant to deal with it?



As a new father feeling frightened and isolated you are home with the baby for the first couple of weeks. And then going back to work...

I felt so guilty.

I knew I had to go back to work but I knew that I wanted to be at home with my son as well.

Most services don't start with the 'congratulations on being a dad!'

they start from the 'Oh my god!

this is going to be so hard and difficult.

What were you thinking!'

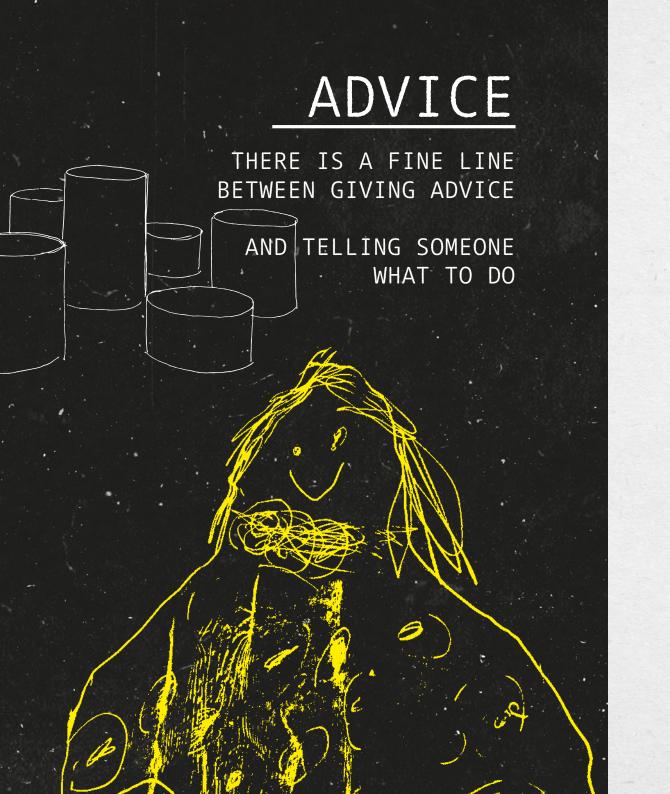
They start from the negative from a place of judgement.

Traditionally
men have been the ones that go to work
and bring money back.
Now we are staying more at home.
We are trying the get the support
and the mental fortitude
to continue.
But the support networks aren't there.

My mum keeps asking
'Are you looking for jobs?'
but
since when do I have time for this?
I am a full-time carer
I have no time.

I don't even have time for myself.





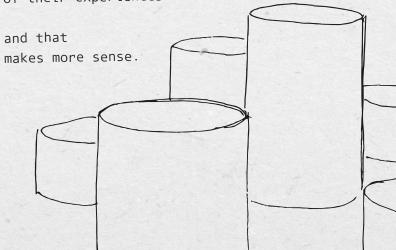
I don't ask for professional advice anymore.

If you can't figure it out if you are struggling when you go to a service for advice it's usually a woman never a dad.

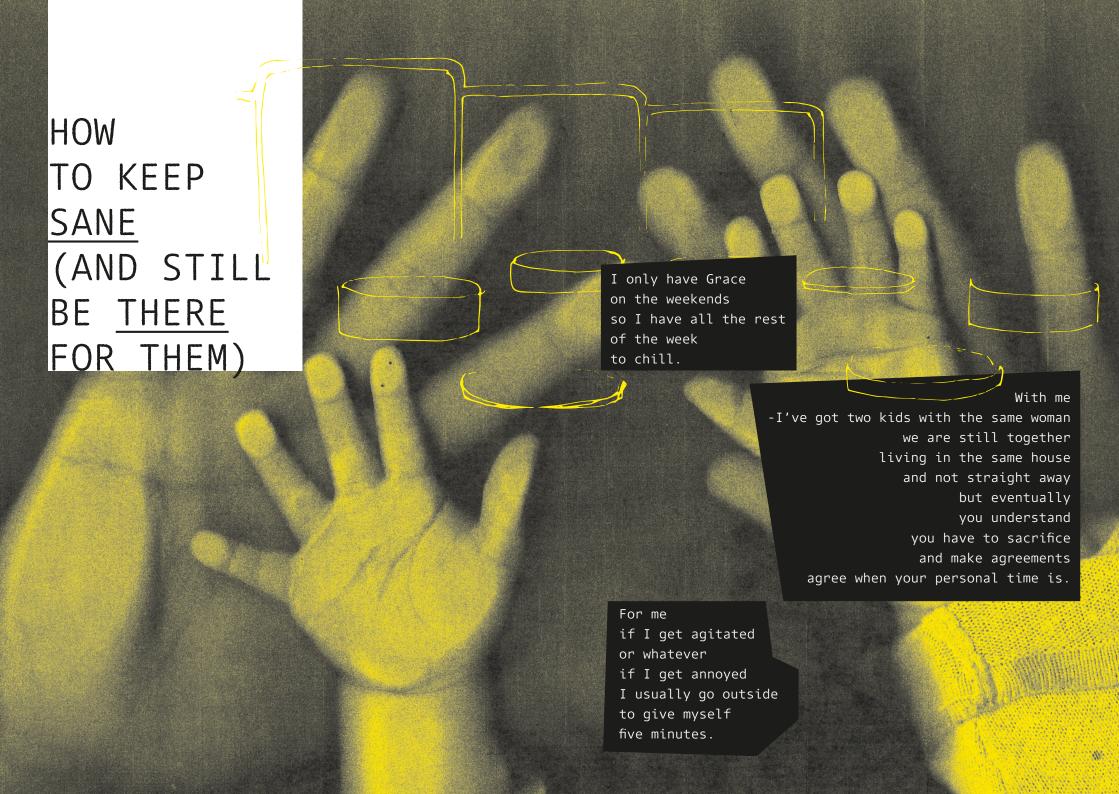
The first bit of advice would be before you ask try yourself trust yourself first.

With professional help you can one hundred per cent tell if they are giving advice from experience.

Usually
when you talk to a professional
who has had similar experiences
they will tell you
the story
of their experiences









I like to take my daughter
to a cafe round the corner
to eat
she loves it round there
and she asks
can we have breakfast there?
and I would love to
but sometimes
I just have to say to her
I don't have the money sorry
and she just goes
'Ah ok!'

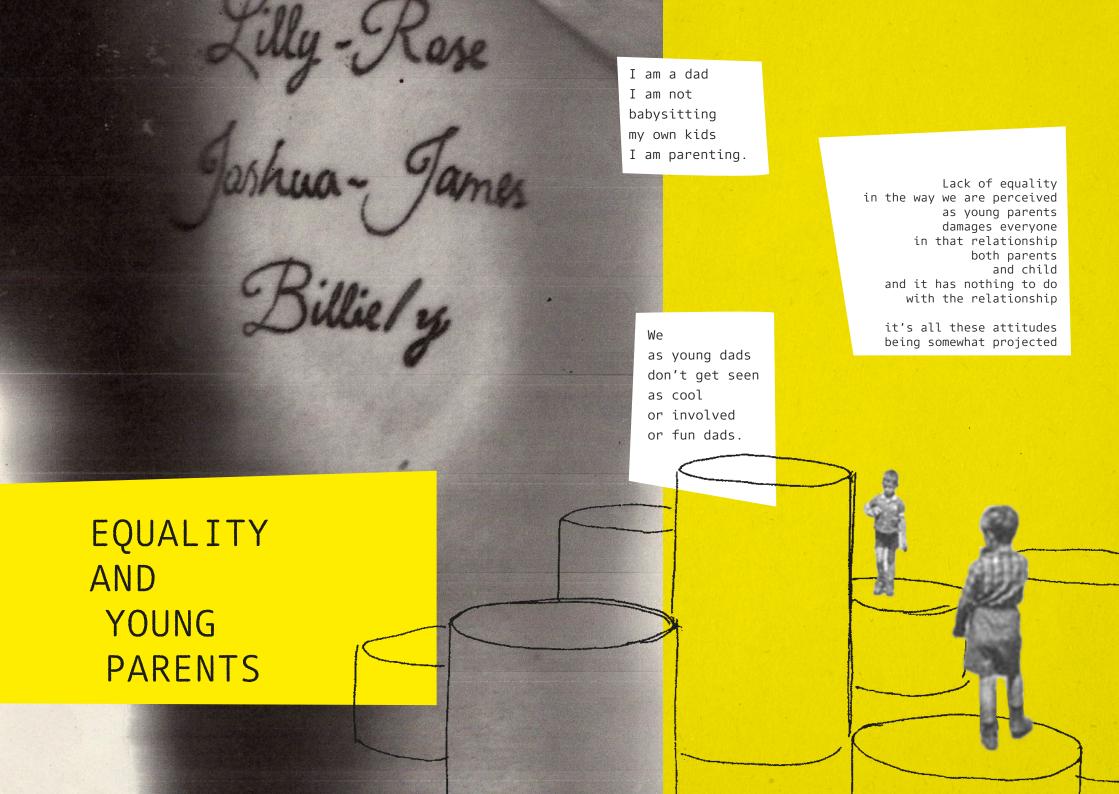
But I would love to be in the position where I could take her anywhere.

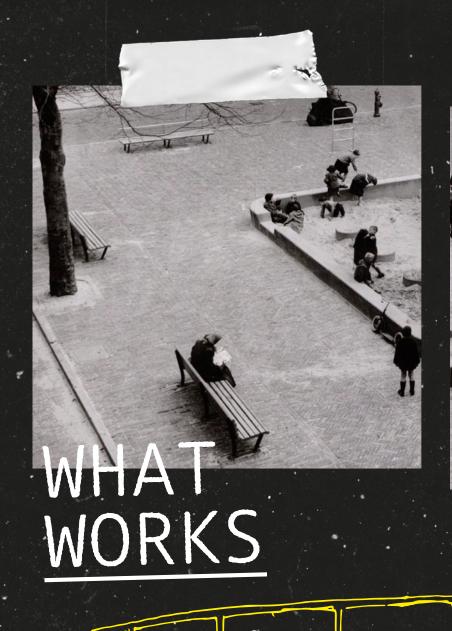
It's a big pressure
when it comes to Christmas
and birthdays
and stuff.
The pressure
and the judgement
from other people.

I know people
that for Christmas
will fill
their whole living room
with presents
just for one kid.

Me
I've just spent
probably 500 quid
on presents
and nothing gets played with.

To be honest I never used to have any toys. I remember I had this one friend who use to have boxes full of plastic toys and action figures and stuff and I was just happy with a game console. Mud bombs best thing in the world we used to get lots of mud and make balls and throw them as a snowball fight.





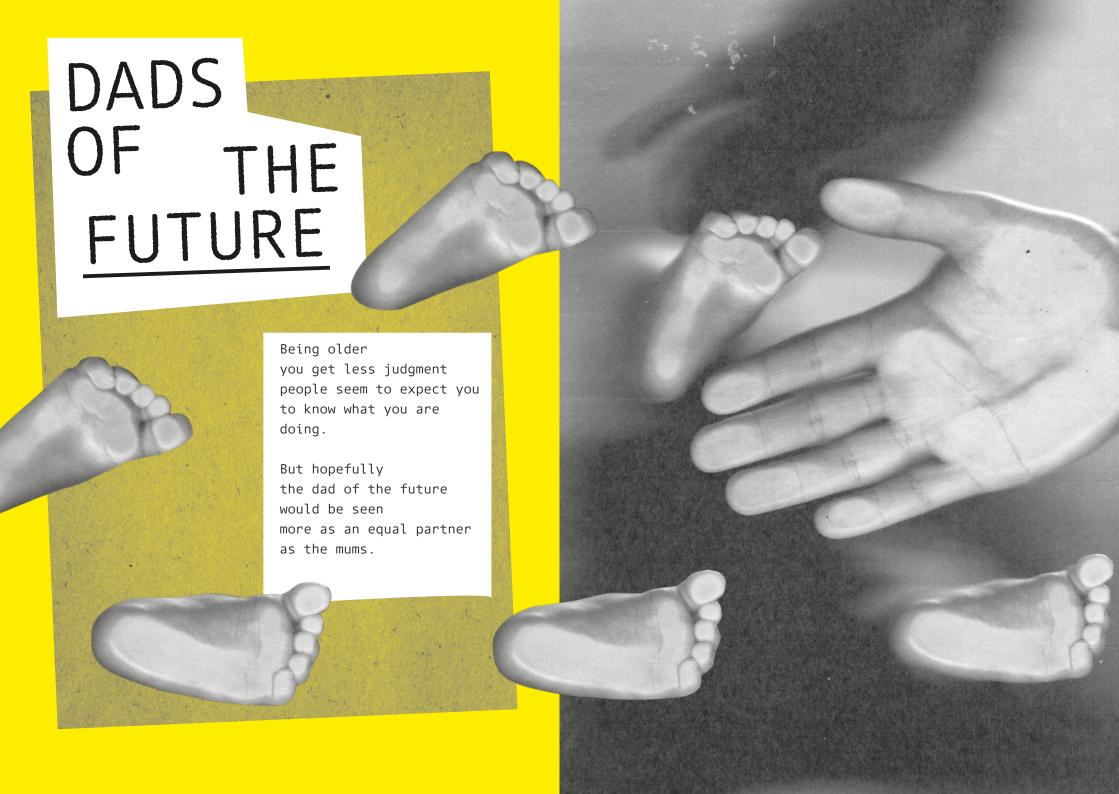
With Grace
and her mum
I don't live with them during the week
but we communicate
and if Grace ever needs
anything specific
we will talk about that.

It's always Grace first.

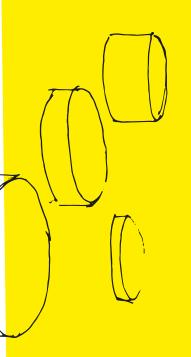
When that priority switches and it goes somewhere else things always go downhill from there.

You should always prioritise your children.

A lot of people don't get that and it's fundamental.



DADS OF THE FUTURE



If you are a young father or a young mother people say 'Do you know what you're doing?' as if they were complete experts.

I just think
it's a weird thing to say
I would never say that
to anybody
it's just ignorant
I think.

Even now you've got the experience but it's not like you know absolutely everything nobody knows absolutely everything.

You've got that experience and you are more comfortable

you know your child more.

Building self-esteem so that people are happy to embrace how they are parenting.

If people have self-esteem they are happy to go out how they want normalise it change people's ideas.

It takes time it doesn't help now but it does for the future.







Through the Eyes of Young Fathers

Being a strong family unit in whatever aspect or way is all about listening, hearing different opinions and creating genuine partnerships through trust and respect, through our ten sessions we managed to create this family bond between young dads, BALTIC, Albert Potrony, NEYDL and Dr Michael Richardson. Whether you dropped in for a few sessions or were present throughout there was always a sandwich, chair and ear for you no matter what you had to say. This group made sure what you had to say was heard, and that you felt welcome whether you were a partner, other young dad or child. We explored vast topics over a short period of time talking about our fathers, society's pre-conceptions of young dads, what your child thought about you, how we might communicate and play with our children and our experiences of being in different social environments with our children and how people perceived that. Our work was always filled with love and joy, from playing with our families at BALTIC and testing the Equal Play exhibition to its limits we shattered preconceptions brought to the table about 'feckless' young dads or young families. We parented with confidence and community and explored and shared sensitive stories in a safe environment free of judament.

We'd like to thank BALTIC and Vicky for its hospitality and creating an environment where we were supported whatever our needs. We'd also like to thank Albert who anchored our project with fun, passion and creativity. Lastly, we'd like to thank Dr Michael Richardson for providing the possibility for this project and his warm and kind additions to our conversations.

Robert Oughton and Jed Donnelly

North East Young Dads & Lads

NEYDL started life in 2015 with a simple brief: to find out what, if anything, could be done to support young dads (aged under 25) who live, work or study in the North East of England. At the time, there was no blueprint for this work, so as experienced youth workers we went out and met young men on their terms and figured things out together.

NEYDL is a unique youth support service that is dedicated to helping young men and young fathers to play an active and meaningful role in the lives of their children, within families and wider society. We offer a non-judgmental service that is based on mutual trust, respect and honesty. We listen and respond to the challenges facing young men and work with them on a voluntary basis to find positive and long-term solutions. We operate a 'revolving door' policy that enables young men to return time and again for help, assistance and friendship. Due to the honesty and courage shown by these young men, we now have a better understanding of the difficulties facing young men who are fathers, along with an admiration for the resilience and determination they continue to show in the face of, often, extreme adversity.

Whether it be through our peer supported offers of football, the Wheely Good Dads Cycling Club, our DigiDAD e-learning portal or the introduction of our family group days we provide a safe non-judgmental space where Young Dads can express themselves, talk about their children and families and be a part of ground-breaking youth work.

Inspired by these ideas, our workshops together helped respond to the threshold-crossing critiques of arts and cultural organisations. A central question was what would encourage young men to come through the doors at BALTIC and engage with this artistic project? What emerged was a journey from threshold-crossing to radical hospitality, through the creation of a space that young dads and their children not only felt part of, but took pride in and a sense of ownership over. In other words, we wanted young dads and their families to feel welcome in a space that they had never previously felt was for them. In doing so, we found Albert's artistic workshops at BALTIC unlocked creative potential and tapped into the young men's emotional intelligence. We thank everyone involved for their emotion, energy and enthusiasm.

Dr Michael Richardson and Jonah York

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