This autobiographical account traces the experiences of a young man, now in his early twenties, through his transition into fatherhood at the age of 16, and recounts his early years as a young parent. His reflections on the joys and challenges of becoming a parent at a young age provide a compelling snapshot of some of the common issues facing young fathers as they navigate the ‘fast track’ to adulthood. He concludes by considering the value of his support networks, both professional and personal, in managing these transitions.

key words young fatherhood • autobiography

In late September 2007, merely a few weeks into the final year of high school, I was frantically pacing the upstairs landing of my girlfriend’s parents’ house. Coming out of the bathroom we caught each other’s gaze as she nodded. We were expecting a baby.

We both sat down, myself in complete shock, my girlfriend resigned to what she had suspected for a while now. Our immediate concern was: What will our parents say? My stomach was at the point of when you’re riding up a big rollercoaster. You know the only way is down and your mind is in a mix of anticipation and fear. We managed to keep the pregnancy a secret for three weeks while we determined what we were going to do. Were we going to keep the baby? If so, what would our lives be like? What would our relationship be like? What would people say? What would happen next? The answers, we soon found out, were the following. Yes, we were going to keep the baby. Our immediate lives would become intensely public at school through both our peers and our teachers. Our relationship would be forcefully pulled apart by both of our families, albeit temporarily. People would say things that would make us feel reassured, uncomfortable, respected, a joke. Our parents said many things, our own feelings upon finding out transferring directly to them. Every angle was considered and explored. What was decided by my parents was that I would be moving schools. I found out on a Friday at the end of the school week, and joined the agreed school the following Monday.

At the time I could not believe the rationale behind making such a swift decision. Unbeknown to me, my parents had sat down with the head teacher at my high school of nearly five years and had come to the conclusion that it was in my best interests, academically and welfare-wise. My girlfriend’s family lived minutes away from the school and they had reacted very badly to the news, holding myself solely responsible. Looking back, it was the correct decision.
An entire book, let alone an article, could be written on those remaining months of my school life. It is still the most difficult period of my life so far. At home my relationship with my family was strained. At school my relationships with my peers were initially non-existent. I was the new kid that nobody had any interest in opening up their cliques to let in. The first few weeks I spent breaks and lunches slowly shuffling around school, counting down the minutes until the bell rang and I was back in class, forcing people to interact with me. Very soon, news filtered down of the reason why I had moved schools. I became the end of the finger point from groups at the other side of the playground. It meant though that people had a reason to talk to me and towards the end of my time in Year 11 I had started to find myself within a group of friends.

Through secret meetings and exchanges of texts, my girlfriend and I had started to regain some form of relationship prior to our son being born. I was able to attend some scans towards the end of the pregnancy and happily agreed to be present at the birth. Oscar arrived into the world in the early morning of the 21st of April 2008. Put simply, it was my best moment in life. My transition from a 16-year-old boy into responsible father of a newborn, in all honesty, felt seamless. I was proud to call the small being I held in my arms my son. Nothing had truly prepared me for this life experience and if there’s one thing I would change it would be for me to have invested a little more time in the process of the birth. I firmly believe that the combination of eating a chicken sandwich while being promptly informed there was the small matter of afterbirth to remove is the root cause of my being vegetarian!

Mother and son had instantly become the focal point in my life, taking precedence over my impending GCSE [General Certificate of Secondary Education] exams. All my spare time around school commitments was spent with my son and his mother, basking in Oscar’s company. My unstable final year at school fortunately did not dictate how I would perform in my exams and I achieved grades between A* and C in all of my subjects.

After the initial acclimatising phase of both Oscar to his new surroundings, and me and his mother to our son, we quickly agreed how we would structure his time with us across both our families and homes. I would take responsibility for him overnight for half of the week, his mother the same. We both decided that we could juggle both parenthood and college and felt we could still continue down our own paths career-wise. Oscar went to a nursery during our college hours and we found time to study in the evenings and weekends. Towards the end of the first year of college I made the decision to end my relationship with Oscar’s mother. The main factor behind my decision was that we were not the same people we were when we began dating at the age of 14. Our relationship had lasted nearly three years.

At first, the structure we had built regarding Oscar remained the same. Being still within the first 18 months of his life, Oscar did not know or understand the change of relationship between his parents. I was happy with the amount of time I was spending with Oscar and was keen to ensure that I remained an active part of his life. Soon, unfortunately, the break-up between his mother and I influenced her perception of what the long-term nature of my relationship with Oscar should look like. Initially I was told I would not see Oscar. Then I was told I could have him overnight on an ad-hoc basis. While my life at that point fitted between the two, decided for me by his mother, I did all I could to maintain a healthy relationship with Oscar. Understanding the sub-text as to why she was doing this, I never spoke out of turn
about Oscar’s mother around him, nor were my actions designed at any point to undermine or influence his relationship with his mum. I’ve always prided myself on having his best interests central to all I do, and looking back to that point in his and my life I can be happy with my behaviour throughout. But naturally I was very annoyed and frustrated at this very obvious attempt to disrupt my role as a father and, more widely, my life. Looking to the law for help and support I found little there to stem the unhealthy, inconsistent lifestyle that all three of us were leading.

Moving into the second year of college, I started to feel utterly helpless in how my path as a father and as a young person was being re-drawn. By that point I had no doubts that I would be consigned to accepting Oscar’s mother’s demands and would not have any freedom of time or choice. In my spare time away from college and Oscar I was employed by a bank. Working part time, with my motivations two-fold – to provide financially for my son and also to try to enjoy a ‘normal’ teenage social life – I was becoming convinced that university was not an option for me. I purposefully flunked my A-Level exams, rationalising that it was pointless putting effort into something I had fallen behind in, due to the circumstances. It’s a regret that will stay with me.

University was always an ambition of mine throughout my childhood, aside from the brief period where I decided, aged 10, that I wanted to own and run a hairdresser’s. If you had seen my hair, you would be as confused by that ambition as I still am. University, for me, has never been about it being a stepping stone into a career; it has been about furthering my knowledge and appreciation of life generally. At that point in my life where I felt I could not access university, I had sunk into a mentality where I felt restricted and controlled. It was not a mentality that is constructive to a role as a father.

Post-college I became a full-time employee. I was liaising regularly with a legal team who was acting on my behalf to try to establish regular and meaningful contact with my son. Fortunately I was entitled to legal aid, which removed the bill that would have weighed heavily on my back. At the 11th hour, before the legal process was moved into the courtroom, Oscar’s mother relented and agreed to a set of terms to which we could try to work as a team for Oscar’s sake. My son at this point was nearing three years old. The financial threshold for legal aid entitlement, since the former Conservative-majority coalition went into government, has been significantly lowered, meaning that one would have to effectively be out of employment or in part-time work to benefit from this service. If a single father, in full-time employment, felt that the only avenue left to gain appropriate access to his child was the legal system, the costs incurred may remove all financial support he could provide as a father.

Although my relationship with Oscar’s mother was tense and fragile, with Oscar it was positive and close. I had missed a small part of him growing up and felt responsible for this time lost. Seeing him now on a weekly basis, I ensured that time was spent effectively. My thoughts on my future as a father had been eased and I revelled in the growing bond we were sharing as father and son. I continued to work full time until, at the age of 20, I made the decision to reduce my hours and enrol on a degree course through The Open University. The course flexibility was a key factor for me, enabling me to fit studies around work and parenting commitments. Not only was I fulfilling an ambition that I had once felt denied, I was also seeing this as an opportunity for Oscar to grow up and see his father in a career he had chosen himself, not settling for the hand he had been dealt. I have always wanted to lead by example as a parent,
and provide a positive environment for my child to grow up in. The decision to go to university was key in me feeling empowered and in control of my own future.

Gradually over the last two years my relationship with Oscar’s mother has improved and become more stable. I have worked hard to ensure that it is healthy and transparent, putting Oscar central to our decisions and agreements. It’s not perfect but I’m happy with how far we have come. We have developed an understanding and are both open to flexibility regarding when we have Oscar, helping one another with our commitments away from parenthood.

Presently I am halfway through my studies. My aim is to move into a teaching career, towards which I am currently volunteering my time in a local primary school while working in the community as a qualified football coach. My typical week normally involves more hours than are technically available, but this is how I want it. My relationship with Oscar has never been stronger and he is benefiting from having a father who he sees regularly and is positive and committed.

When I reflect back on my journey over the last few years, I can pinpoint the times where my character was tested to breaking point. There have been occasions where I felt like giving up. Where I wanted to forget and be a normal teenager. Where I felt like relinquishing my right to be a part of my son’s life. Looking back I’m not ashamed to have felt like this. The reason I’m not ashamed is because of those who have supported me – those who understood the position I was in and the challenges I faced both as a father and as someone still finding their feet in a serious and competitive adult world. A major part of my support system early on was my learning mentor. He was someone who was completely independent from my situation, someone who wasn’t emotionally involved, who could give me objective yet compassionate advice. The key was that I could see he cared. Support is not enough if it’s laboured. As I moved further into adult life my relationship with my learning mentor came to a natural conclusion. Fortunately though I have had a constant in my life that I firmly believe made the difference long term: my family. As a teenager my somewhat expected response was to look outwards from my family for support but increasingly, as a young adult, I appreciate the impact that having a stable family has had. Without my parents and my brothers around to fall back on when things became tough, I think I could have made bad choices at times. Even away from being a father, just focusing on being a young person, they still play a massive part in my life. To describe adult life, in my opinion, is beyond words. You cannot navigate it alone and to be able to help our children navigate their lives successfully, a proper support system really is crucial. Young parents face many challenges and without good support they can make choices that have ongoing negative consequences for themselves and their children. I would like to see support provided that enables all young parents to make positive choices as they raise their children and grow into adulthood themselves.