

Working with Children and Families of Prisoners

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The Facts

- It is estimated that 170, 000 children every year are affected by the imprisonment of a relative, primarily a parent.
- This is around two and half times the number of children in care and over six times the number of children who have Child Protection Plans.
- 7% of children will see a parent imprisoned during the their school years.
- 25% of men in Young Offender Institutes are, or are shortly to become fathers.

The Facts continued...

- 30% of children of prisoners suffer significant mental health problems compared with 10% in the general population.
- Boys are twice as likely to become convicted offenders if their father had a criminal conviction.
- 43% of prisoners lose touch with their families during sentence.
- Each year living arrangements of 18,000 children are affected by the imprisonment of a mother, with only 5% remaining in their own home during sentence.

SCIE Resource Guide 11 (April, 2008)
Action for Prisoners Families (2008)

Invisible Children

- When a significant member of a child's or young person's family is sent to prison, that child's life is turned upside down....
- These children have done nothing wrong themselves, they are **invisible** inside and outside the school system.
- Currently there is no requirement on any agency/person to let the school know that they are caring for the child of a prisoner.

UN Convention on Rights of the Child

- Important articles within the framework:
 - Article 2: protection from discrimination or punishment because of their parents' families' status or activity.
 - Article 3: everything affecting children requires to be in the child's best interest.
 - Article 5: respect for the responsibilities and rights of parents to provide appropriate direction and guidance.
 - Article 9: safeguards the right of a child separated from their parents to maintain contact with their parents.
 - Article 12: children have a right to express an opinion and to have that opinion taken into account in matters affecting them.

Aims of the Guidelines

- To provide **information and guidance** for those working with children who have a 'family' member in prison.
- To **raise awareness** and **understanding** of the needs of children with a 'family' member in prison.
- To promote **social inclusion** and **equal opportunities**.
- To develop a **consistent approach** and good practice across Oxfordshire Local Authority.

Every Child Matters Agenda: A Change for Children (2003)

- ECM calls for improvements in opportunities and outcomes for children and young people through services which:
 - Ensure all children can be healthy, stay safe, enjoy and achieve, make a positive contribution and achieve economic well-being.
 - Provide more opportunities for all, and narrow the gaps in provision.
 - Support parents, carers and families.
 - Deliver a shift to prevention, early identification and intervention.
 - Are integrated and personalised.

Barriers to Achievement in the ECM Outcomes for Children of Prisoners

- **Being Healthy:**
 - Children of prisoners have about three times the risk of mental health problems compared to their peers.
 - Fear and anxiety increases the likelihood of mental health problems and stress-related illness.
 - Visiting prisons can be stressful and physically exhausting for children.
 - Children can feel alone and need support to recognise and rationalise their own feelings.
 - There may be issues of self-esteem for the whole family.

Barriers to the ECM Outcomes...

- **Stay Safe:**

- The embarrassment factor or stigma leads some parents to decide not to inform school, leaving the children vulnerable and isolated.
- Being bullied and becoming a bully.
- Unwelcome attention from media, the local community or associates involved with drug or alcohol abuse.
- Crime may be viewed as a normal part of everyday life which may present a risk to children.

Barriers to the ECM Outcomes...

- **Enjoy and Achieve:**
 - Regressive behaviour which makes school difficult for the child or young person.
 - The worry and anxiety which prevents children's relaxation/recreation.
 - Cognitively and emotionally preoccupied, often leading to limited engagement within their learning environment.
 - Non-Attendance, restricting opportunity to learn and achieve.

Barriers to the ECM Outcomes...

- **Making a Positive Contribution**
 - Children of prisoners have three times the risk of anti-social/delinquent behaviour compared to their peers.
 - Lack of self-esteem and confidence, children can become withdrawn and avoidant. Socially isolated from their peer group.
 - A lack of understanding about changes in a child's behaviour might bring negative response rather than encouragement and support.

Barriers to the ECM Outcomes

- **Achieving Economic Well-Being:**
 - Imprisonment can have a negative financial impact on families, leaving families vulnerable to financial instability, poverty, debt and potential housing disruption.
 - The cost of transport for families visiting prison and/or getting access to local services.

Ormiston (2007)

The Emotional Impact

- **Shock:** Can take the form of physical pain or numbness but more often manifests in apathy and withdrawal, uncharacteristically calm or angry.
- **Denial:** This can last for hours, weeks or longer. No loss is acknowledged so the child is protecting themselves.
- **Mixed Emotions:** Children may feel they are 'different' because of the unexpected waves of strong emotions that surge through them over which they sometimes feel little control.

The Emotional Impact

- **Anger:** At the person whom they perceive has let them down, family members for not stopping the chain of events, the police, the courts, school for not understanding.
- **Depression:** Emptiness, the pain of loss, the feelings of lack of self-worth and loss of confidence.
- **Guilt:** As they assume responsibility for contributing to the behaviours which led to the imprisonment of the 'family' member.
- **Anxiety:** About the changes in new responsibilities that are taking place and the loneliness and isolation they may experience.

'The Journey'

- There are a number of stages which may impact on the child/young person:
 1. Pre-arrest activities
 2. The arrest
 3. Court
 4. Finding out about the imprisonment
 5. Visiting the prison
 6. Special events
 7. Home visit
 8. Release

Factors affecting the child/young person

- The age of the child at the time of imprisonment.
- The length of the parent's sentence.
- The disruption and change to home life.
- Availability of family support.
- Nature of the parent's crime.
- Witnessing the arrest.
- Lack of information or discrepancies in information provided.
- Any previous experience of the imprisonment of a parent.
- Distance away from home that parent/family member is held.
- Poverty as a result of imprisonment.

'The Voice'

When he got arrested is caused loads of fights in the family. I missed him but I was ashamed and didn't want to tell people.

I just kept thinking why doesn't anybody ask me what it is like for me?

Dad won't be able to come home when he is released because he is a bad influence on the family. He's got to prove himself to be a good dad.

I'm his son, he tells me that I'm the one that makes him hang on. I feel that I'm keeping the family together

No-one knows at school. It made me work harder because my mum has asked me to try and do my best. I want my mum to be proud of me.

It makes me feel horrible, like I have done something too. They watch you and make you feel guilty just for being there. It is scary being searched. We didn't even talk when I saw him, I couldn't think of anything.

Homeward Bound DVD Action for Prisoners' Families

- Connor's Story – The Effects of Imprisonment on Children.
- Connor Visits Dad in Prison.
- Connor Talking About the Future.

Role of a Designated Member of Staff

- Named person within the school and/or setting.
- Designated person should have received training in dealing with sensitive issues and liaising with other agencies.
- Designated person would benefit from access to supervision and debriefing.
- Act as the advocate for the child.
- Liaise with the family and/or other agencies as appropriate to establish the needs of the child.

School Records

- Be careful about what is committed to writing and in what context.
- Be non-judgemental, record only facts that all potential readers need to know.
- Some concerns may be better conveyed verbally than recorded, which may risk labelling the child.
- Computerised records are over accessed except in cases such as the Child Protection Plans where access is restricted.
- The parent in prison has a statutory right to receive copies of all information sent out about their child.

Confidentiality

- Guidelines on the sharing of confidential information should be laid down in existing school policies.
- Only those who need to know should be told and all information received and passed on should be treated as confidential.
- Confidentiality in school can never be absolute but on a need to know basis.
- The systems and policies that your school has in place for dealing with Child Protection issues can be usefully drawn on with the children of prisoners.

Basic Principles of Good Practice

- See the child as an individual with individual needs.
- Be non-judgemental. The child has not committed a crime.
- Avoid treating the child as a victim or being over protective.
- Acknowledge the child's own preferences.
- Don't ask about the crime.

Additional Advice within the Guidelines

- Attendance Issues
- Prison Visits as an Experience
- Linking with Probation and the Youth Offending Services
- Resource materials available for 'invisible' cohort
- Useful contacts
- References

Thoughts/Reflections...

- Copies are available of the Guidelines
- References are included in the Guidelines
- Contact Details are provided in the Guidelines

Thank you for listening 😊