



Honest?

Emma's Story

What happens when a relative
is sent to prison

families
outside

voicing the needs
of families affected
by imprisonment

Hello, my name is
Emma and I'm 10.



When someone goes to prison, it can be a very stressful time for everyone involved. It can be difficult deciding whether to tell a child what has happened to their parent or relative. This booklet is for anyone who has a close family member in prison. If children can't talk to their Mum or Dad, they could try talking to a brother or sister, a grandparent or relative, a teacher at school or a special friend. There are carer's notes at the bottom

Hello, my name is Emma
and I'm 10. I live with my
brother Jamie, who is 5,
and my Mum and my Dad.

Usually.

But we've come to stay at
my Gran's house because
Dad has gone away. I'm a bit
scared because Mum is acting
really strange and I don't
know why.



of each page which may help explain to the child what is happening at different stages. It is important that you and your family look after yourselves at this time. You may find it helpful to talk to someone close to you or even an independent person, health visitor or GP. There is a list of organisations at the end of this booklet that you can contact if you would like further support.

Cats can't even speak



Jamie is the same as usual – he asks questions all the time – and Mum has been snappy with him. Jamie doesn't understand and looks a bit confused sometimes but then goes and asks more questions, even to Hamish, our cat.

I *know*, cats can't even speak.



I miss Dad, and I'm worried because I don't know where he is and Mum just changes the subject when I ask. I think I have asked even more questions than Jamie. And there's no-one else to speak to. I can't even tell my best friend what's happening because I don't know what's going on myself. Jamie thinks Dad's on holiday. I think it must be something to do with his work. But no one will tell us, and Gran and Mum are whispering an awful lot.

Children who are not told where their parent or relative is can become confused. It may be damaging for some children and to their relationships if they feel something is being hidden from them, and most children will sense this. They will feel less able to ask questions and will imagine things, which will worry them more. There is also the danger that they will find out what has happened some other way.

Many children can accept the explanation that their parent or relative has gone to prison because a court has decided they have done something wrong. They need to feel that they can ask questions. Children whose parents are in prison may feel embarrassed by what their friends will think or say, afraid to ask questions or talk about their relative and their grief because they are missing that person in their life.



One day when I asked Mum again where my Dad was, she started to cry, and then, because he doesn't like anyone crying, Jamie started to cry too.

Gran came into the room, had a good look around at all of us and then scooped Jamie up and gave him the biggest cuddle ever. Gran is very good at cuddles, and soon enough everyone stopped crying. Then Gran said that she had to tell us something, and Mum nodded.



At times like this, adults in the family can be very caught up in their own feelings and worries. But this can also be a difficult time for children, and they will want to know where their parent is and why. There is no 'right' time or way to tell your child, but it is best to get things out into the open as soon as possible. Your child may already know and understand more than you realise. Try and make time to listen to the child.

Gran told us that Dad wasn't on holiday. Jamie said he knew that because we hadn't had a postcard. Gran also told us that Dad wasn't at work. And I knew that 'cos his favourite tie was in Mum's bedroom. Then she told us where he was. Gran said Dad was in prison because he did something wrong.

I wish Mum and Gran had told us the truth earlier. Don't you just get mad when grown ups keep secrets from you?



It is not always necessary or helpful to give children details of the offence committed. They just need to be able to trust that you have told them the truth.

Jamie didn't understand and started asking lots of questions again. He asked Gran if it was because he had been naughty and had run away from Dad when they went to the shops a few weeks ago. Gran told Jamie that although it wasn't good to run away, this didn't have anything to do with Dad being in prison.



What will he get to eat?

Will Dad be in handcuffs?

What happens after the visit?

When is Dad coming home?

Then Gran asked if we would like to see Dad. Jamie started whooping and racing around the room. At first I wasn't sure – I hadn't been to a prison before and was a little scared – although I didn't want anyone to know that. But Mum told us that we could all go together, and that made me feel better.

The best news though is that we went to see Dad on Saturday.

Children whose parents are in prison may feel guilty, and that they are somehow to blame. A lot of children also worry about what to tell other people, including close friends. Discussion should be encouraged, as talking about worries and concerns can help. It may also be helpful to let the school know what has happened so that they can offer support.

Visiting a parent or relative in prison is one way a child can stay in contact. Carers can help children to cope with separation by making it possible for them to visit. If you have not been to a prison before, you may find it helpful to make the initial visit on your own so that you will know what to expect. This may make it easier for you to prepare the child for a visit.

I couldn't sleep the night before we went to see Dad and got up really early on Saturday morning. Jamie told our cat Hamish all about visiting Dad and was asking Mum lots of questions again – he even asked if Hamish could come with us!

We got dressed and set off really early. We had to take a train, and then a bus and then had to walk a little – Jamie asked a million times if we were there yet.



It is important to prepare the child for a prison visit, especially if it's their first time. Prisons can be frightening places. Talking to the child about the journey and what to expect when they get there may help. Some children may not want to visit, and they should not be forced. Talking to them about why they feel that way can help to reassure them.

Then we came to a big building with a huge wall all around it. When we went inside Gran spoke to a lady at the desk. The lady was called a prison officer and she tells visitors to the prison what they have to do and looks after the people in the prison. There was a dog there too but we weren't allowed to talk to him. It was a special dog to make sure that visitors don't bring anything they shouldn't into prison.



Explaining to the child what will happen when they arrive may help to ease some of their worries. For example, they may have to wait for a while, there will be security procedures and visitors may be searched. There will be a lot of people in uniform and locked doors. There will be a lot of other people visiting, so visit rooms can be noisy and busy places. Sometimes the parent or relative will remain seated when visitors leave.

Jamie had to leave his toys in the special lockers – he'd brought all his dinosaurs – and I had to post the picture that I had drawn for Dad in a special mailbox. Mum and Gran had to leave their handbags too but we were able to pick up everything again when we left.

We were then taken into a big room with lots of tables and chairs. The door banged behind us and made Jamie jump. Inside the room there were more of the prison officers. There were lots of other people in the room and it was very noisy.



Mum was holding my hand really tightly, and even Jamie had stopped asking questions and had gone very quiet.

And then my Dad came into the room and sat on a chair. We gave him a huge hug, and Jamie sat on his knee for ages. Dad looked a little different, a bit sad and spoke very quietly, but then Jamie told him all about our cat Hamish and everyone laughed, and then we were all talking at once. Jamie got a little bored after a while and went to play with the toys in the corner. He made friends with another little boy. Gran bought everyone a drink from a machine in the room.



You may want to find out what facilities are available at the prison. For example, are there play facilities in the Visitors' Centre or prison visits room and, if so, when are they staffed? What types of visits are available? Is there anything for older children to do? Can the children touch their father and move around? What can the children take in (pictures, photos, and letters)? What happens about pushchairs, nappy changing and feeding?

The grief experienced through the loss of a parent to imprisonment can be overwhelming, and seeing a parent or relative in a strange environment can also be upsetting. When you arrive in the visits room, take time to settle the child. If there is a play area, take the child there before the visit starts, so that they know it is safe for them to go again during the visit. Try to make sure the child gets special attention during the visit.

Then a bell rang and the prison officer told us it was **time to leave**. We felt sad, but we knew that we could come back and see Dad again. Dad said that he would write to me and Jamie, and he promised that he would **telephone and speak to us** too. Gran said that she would help Jamie write a letter and he could tell Dad all about his adventures with Hamish.

Dad did phone, and it felt so good talking to him. We all took turns to speak to him on the phone, although we didn't have very long. Then **we wrote our letters**, and Dad wrote back.

Gran has said that Jamie and I are now settled into a routine, which means that **we visit Dad every Saturday**, and we've been going for a few weeks now. And we know when he is going to phone.

It is likely that after a visit everyone will be a bit tired or fed-up. The child may be feeling sad at leaving their parent or relative behind. They may feel angry if the visit wasn't as they expected. It is important that you allow the child time to talk about what's happened. Don't worry if they are upset. Try to see this as a healthy way of expressing feelings rather than having to bottle it all up inside.

I'm not scared of the prison anymore because Gran explained everything. We know that Dad has a routine too and that he is **learning how to work on a computer**. There are **teachers in prison** too. Jamie thinks it sounds a bit like being at school. Dad can speak to lots of people in the prison who can help him with all his questions.



There are different ways of keeping in touch:

- Telephone calls** – try to agree what time the parent or relative will phone and leave time so they get to talk with them as well as with you.
- Write letters** – Encourage older children to write letters or postcards.
- Draw a picture** – Younger children could then post it.
- Keep a scrapbook** – A small box of things children may want to share with their parent or relative when they get home.

Jamie is still asking questions, but Dad will be home soon and Mum is feeling much better.

Jamie and I are already planning what we can do when dad comes home.



All children will cope with things differently. It can help a child to talk about their parent or relative and for their questions to be answered as honestly as possible in a way that makes sense to them. It can also help to listen to their views on what they want to happen. If you feel they are not coping with what's going on, you may want to consider extra help or support.

This can be a difficult time for children and for their parent or carer. Here are some useful contacts who may be able to help with more information.

For children or young people:

Childline

Telephone 0800 11 11
Helpline for children and young people looking for help and advice at any time for any problem.
www.childline.org.uk

Young Minds

Website which offers information and support to children and young people about mental health and emotional well-being.
www.youngminds.org.uk

Who Cares Trust

Telephone 0207 261 3117
A national charity working to improve care for children and young people who are living in residential or foster care.
www.thewhocarestrust.org.uk

For parents or carers

Scottish Prisoners' Families Helpline

0500 83 93 83
Information, support and signposting service for families affected by imprisonment.
www.familiesoutside.org.uk

ParentLine Scotland

0808 800 2222
ParentLine Scotland is the free, confidential, telephone helpline for anyone caring for a child in Scotland.
www.parentlinescotland.org.uk



Breathing Space

0800 83 85 87
Support for young men, and their families, aged 12-40, who are experiencing difficulties in their lives.
www.breathingspacescotland.co.uk

Lone Parent Helpline

0808 801 0323
The Lone Parent Helpline is the UK's free, independent helpline for lone parents and anyone affected by the issues surrounding one parent families.
www.opfs.org.uk

Young Minds: Parents Information Service

0800 018 2138
A national charity committed to improving the mental health of all children and young people under 25.
www.youngminds.org.uk

KIDSCAPE

08451 205 204
A telephone helpline for parents, guardians or concerned relatives of bullied or abused children.
www.kidscape.org.uk

Thank you to everyone, and special thanks to the children who, having been through the experience themselves, made the time to help us with this booklet.

“My dad was in prison for most of my childhood and if I could change anything it would be to ask both my parents to be honest about how things were. We all had to live a big secret – too much to ask any kid I think. I’d say honesty helps loads, keeps things in the open.”

This booklet has been written to help explain to children of primary school age what happens when a parent or relative is sent to prison. It can be a difficult time for all the family. At the bottom of each page we have provided additional notes for the reader to help with any questions the children may have.

If you would like to discuss anything in the booklet, or if you would like to speak to someone about any of the issues around the imprisonment of a relative, please contact Families Outside:

Support and information
Freephone Number 0500 839383

Families Outside provides a free confidential Helpline for families affected by imprisonment in Scotland. We can help by giving you information and support to deal with a number of issues. Visit the Families Outside website at

www.familiesoutside.org.uk

where you will also find an information page for children and young people.

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