

Talking to Children about Imprisonment

- When someone goes to prison it can be a very stressful time for everyone involved.
- Families of prisoners can feel that they are being punished too and may feel isolated and alone.
- It can be difficult deciding whether or not to tell your child/ren what has happened to their parent or relative. This information sheet may help you with this.
- You may also find it helpful to talk to someone close to you or an independent person.
- If you would like support you can phone Families Outside Support and Information Helpline on 0500 839383 – or speak with your Health Visitor, GP or child/ren’s teacher.

Telling Your Child What Has Happened

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. 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.

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

It can help to plan when you are going to tell them so that you have are sure you have time when you won’t be disturbed. It may be helpful to tell them with another adult whom the children feel they can trust.

In some cases it will not be appropriate for a child to have contact with a parent in prison, especially if there is a risk of harm to the child. This will need to be explained to them.

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

can accept the explanation that their parent/relative has gone to prison because a court decided they have done something wrong. They need to feel that they can ask questions, and find out what they need to know when they need to. They may feel it is they who have done something wrong and that is the reason why their parent has gone away. If so, they need to be told clearly that it is not their fault.

Children need to feel that they are listened to and understood. Listening to a child, offering reassurance and trying to understand things from their point of view can help them cope with the situation. It may be helpful for them to talk to another family member or school teacher as children may not want to cause more upset by sharing their own worries and fears with those closest to them.

Changes in children’s behaviour

If there has been a change in the family situation, because their mum or dad has gone to prison, you may see changes in your child's behaviour. This is likely to be a sign that they are trying to deal with the many different feelings listed below. They may show this by going back to younger behaviour like bed-wetting or temper tantrums. They may find it difficult to concentrate at school.

If they don’t know what’s happening it may be a sign that they know something is wrong but feel too frightened to ask. You may find it

helpful to speak with your Health Visitor or their teacher at school.

Unfortunately you may not be able to stop other people knowing about your situation which means that there may be times when you will have to help your child deal with people saying or doing things which upset them. You can support them and reassure them that they have done nothing wrong.

Children whose parents are in prison may feel:

- WORRIED that you will be taken away too
- ASHAMED about why their dad's in prison
- ANGRY with dad for leaving them, or with the authorities for taking him away.
- EMBARRASSED by what their friends will think or say
- FEAR OR CONFUSION about what will happen next
- AFRAID to ask questions or talk about dad
- SAD that the family has changed
- GRIEF because they are missing their dad and all he did for and with them
- RELIEF if there have been a lot of rows or arguments
- GUILTY in case they have been to blame somehow
- BURDENED if they have to keep the imprisonment a secret
- WORTHLESS - low self-esteem often follows on from these other feelings.

How Can You Help?

As far as possible help children stay in contact with their parent or relative. You can do this by:

- Taking them on visits to see their relative
- Allowing the children to visit with another family member or friends if you don't want to take them yourself
- Answering any questions as honestly as possible in a way that makes sense to them
- Encouraging children to talk about their parent/relative
- Listening to their views on what they want to happen
- Not turning them against their parent/relative (especially if you are no longer with their mum/dad)
- Reassuring them that their parent still loves them

- Keeping things as normal as possible
- Telling the school, so that they can support the child.

Different ways of Keeping in Touch

- Telephone calls - try to agree what time mum/dad will phone and make sure the child/ren are around. Leave time so they get to talk with them as well as with you
- Letters – encourage them to write letters to mum/dad
- Pictures/drawings – younger children could draw a picture and post it
- Scrap book – encourage children to keep a scrapbook of things they want to share with their parent/relative when they get home e.g. photos, schoolwork and pictures.

Families Outside has produced two booklets aimed at children and young people explaining what happens when a relative is sent to prison. Both of these publications are free to family members:



Honest? Emma's Story is aimed at children between the ages of 5 and 11 years.



What's the story? Jenny's Journey is for children and young people aged between 12 and 16 years.

Please contact Families Outside Support & Information Helpline on 0500 839383 if you would like a copy of the booklets.

Our information sheet 'Visiting Prison with your Child' may also help you to prepare your child for a prison visit and also lists a number of organisations that may be able to offer support.

We would like to thank Barnardo's, Northern Ireland for granting permission to Families Outside to reproduce excerpts from their booklet "Supporting a Child when a Parent is in Prison".