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## The Role of Schools in Supporting Families Affected by Imprisonment

**Sarah Roberts**  
**Consultant**

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**“The view is that people in prison should be punished and part of that punishment is no contact with the children but the children shouldn’t be the ones who suffer – they suffer enough.”**

**Social Worker, Western Australia**

## Background and Literature Review

Recommendations and good practice from the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child Day of General Discussion 2011:

*Guiding principle: Schools provide a major opportunity to support children of incarcerated parents and to help meet their needs.*

*Recommendation: Guidance should be prepared and training provided so that teachers and other adults in schools are aware of the particular needs of children of incarcerated parents and can appropriately support such children in their performance, attendance and behaviour.*

**From: Collateral Convicts: Children of incarcerated parents, School and Education (p51)**

For several years I was Principal Teacher Support for Pupils in an Edinburgh secondary school. During my general teacher training, and subsequent training on specific issues pertaining to children and adolescents, I had at no point been made aware of, nor indeed had I thought about, children who have a parent in prison. It was only in supporting 3 siblings whose mother is serving a long-term prison sentence that I began to engage with this largely overlooked and highly vulnerable population of young people. In my case it was visiting their mother regularly in prison and involving her in the children's education that prompted further questions:

- Why are schools generally unaware of which children are affected by imprisonment?
- How can staff actively support children and their carers through the school system?
- In what ways can imprisoned parents continue to engage in their children's education?

In April 2012 I undertook an 8-week Winston Churchill Travelling Fellowship in Australia and the United States looking specifically at the role of schools in supporting families affected by imprisonment. In this report I provide an overview of the main issues relating to schools and parental imprisonment, give an account of the programmes I visited, and conclude with a set of proposals for further development work in this field. I begin by presenting two scenarios:

*Savannah is 15 years old and lives with her mother and younger brother. Her father is serving a 10-year sentence and has been in prison since Savannah was 11. She and her brother were at home when the police came to arrest their dad, and they watched as he was handcuffed and taken away. Ashamed and afraid of stigmatisation, Savannah's mother told her children not to talk to anyone about what had happened and, above all, they were not to mention it at school. Traumatized from witnessing the arrest, and full of anxiety about what would happen to her dad, Savannah changed from being a girl who performed well and was happy at school, to someone who was either withdrawn and quiet, or on occasion prone to angry outbursts. Over time her grades slipped, she rarely completed homework and her attendance became patchy. A concerned teacher tried to engage Savannah about this change in behaviour, but she was reluctant to open up. When she moved to high school the bullying started; whispers at first, followed by blatant comments: "Stay away from her, her dad's in jail." The day that one of her teachers announced across the classroom, "You're going to end up just like your father" was the last time Savannah attended school. She has a deep mistrust of authority and has disengaged from any formal system of support, putting her at high risk of harmful behaviour patterns, future unemployment and ultimately of entering the criminal justice system herself.*

*Kendon is 14 and, like Savannah, he also has a parent in prison: his mother is 3 years into an 8-year sentence. Kendon lives with his grandmother and 3 younger siblings and they too were at home when their mother was arrested. Unlike Savannah, however, Kendon's grandmother felt able to contact the school the next day, explaining what had happened and informing them that she was now caring for the children. Every member of staff at Kendon's school, teaching and non-teaching, has undergone specific training on supporting children affected by imprisonment, and there is information available for pupils and carers on how to access relevant agencies. Kendon's Guidance Counsellor meets regularly with him to check how he is doing, especially after visits to his mother (which if they fall on a school day are authorised absences), and he is monitored through the school's support group. Kendon accesses the school counselling service and has recently been invited to take part in an in-school support group with 7 other children facing similar issues. The Guidance Counsellor sends copies of Kendon's school reports to his mother via the prison and is able to call her once a term to discuss his progress, which means that when Kendon visits his mother they can talk meaningfully about his schooling. Kendon has also experienced stigma and shame, but the school has actively tried to reduce this by ensuring that issues around crime and prison are addressed through the curriculum and by dealing with bullying incidents head-on. He enjoys school, is performing well and hopes to go to college next year.*

Savannah and Kendon are a combination of the stories of several children I met across Australia and the United States and they could each be any one of the estimated 27,000 children in Scotland (Scottish Government Justice Analytical Services, 2012) and 200,000 in England and Wales (Action for Prisoners' Families, 2012) who every year experience the imprisonment of a parent<sup>1</sup>. Their stories demonstrate the key role that schools have in supporting children affected by imprisonment; it is through the school system that children are tracked and monitored and it is within this community that stigma and trauma might be exacerbated, as in Savannah's case, or reduced as with Kendon, thus helping children affected to succeed and fulfil their potential. A report by Scotland's Commissioner for Children and Young people (Marshall, 2008) acknowledges that the role of schools in supporting children affected by imprisonment has received little attention and is significantly under-researched and under-funded. In addition, it is made clear in a report by the Social Care Institute for Excellence (Lewis, Bates & Murray, 2008) that, while there are examples of good practice with schools playing an active role in supporting families affected by imprisonment, this is patchy at best, and the absence of a 'systematic and cohesive multi-agency approach' means that these children are more likely to withdraw and disengage, therefore putting themselves at risk of school exclusion and anti-social behaviour (Murray & Farrington, 2005).

"My daughter was 15 when her brother got incarcerated. She was always a good student but when he went in she started acting out... it was really hard. I eventually told the Guidance Counsellor and he was going to get her some counselling and onto a good support programme but it was too late; I couldn't cope any more, I had one foot in the grave and I sent her to live with her father. She's 18 now and about to have a baby. I wish I had told the school earlier." Mother, New York

Children affected by imprisonment experience a range of emotions similar to those associated with bereavement: loss, shock, sadness, loneliness, anger and fear, for example. But whereas with the death of a child's family member, in which case schools are often well equipped and

"Stigma and feelings of isolation associated with being the family of a prisoner, of being contaminated in some way by the deeds of the offender, is central to many of the difficulties that children and families face. This may also be compounded by community perceptions that prisoner parents are intrinsically bad parents. Inmate mothers are not only seen to offend against society, but also against their role as mothers." (Cunningham, 2001:36-7)

resourced to put support in place, and empathy and help are readily on offer, imprisonment can be perceived as 'unacceptable' within communities (including schools), leading to what Doka (1989) refers to as a sense of disenfranchised grief; that is, the grief "that persons

experience when they incur a loss that is not or cannot be openly acknowledged, publicly mourned, or socially supported" (p4). This can be psychologically damaging for children, turning what is already a difficult situation into something that they feel must not be talked about, or worse, that they are somehow guilty by association. Children who are traumatised

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<sup>1</sup> These figures are estimates because as yet there is no formal process within the UK to record the children of prisoners.

cannot learn to their full potential, and it is this trauma, in addition to a sense of shame and stigma, which makes children of prisoners extremely vulnerable and in need of specific attention.<sup>2</sup> Experiencing problems at school is much cited as an issue for children of prisoners (Loucks, 2004; Murray and Farrington, 2005; Woldoff & Washington, 2008), and it is essential that teachers understand the reason for lack of engagement or acting-out behaviour if they are to offer appropriate support. Furthermore, if children are not told the truth about a parent's prison sentence or, as in Savannah's case, feel that they have to 'keep it secret' from friends and teachers, this can exacerbate an already devastating and difficult situation (De Masi & Bohn, 2010).

A study by Pugh & Lansky (2011) demonstrated that families affected by imprisonment are often reluctant to access support from outside agencies. This may be due to shame and stigma, a lack of knowledge of what support is available, or in some cases, a mistrust of statutory services. Schools, however, should be communities where families already have an established relationship with members of staff who can provide information and support in how to access other agencies. In this way, schools can be a gateway to further support and are less 'threatening' for families than contacting social services directly, for example.

**"Schools can be a hub for agency support" Social Worker, Perth Australia**

It is important to note here that families, and indeed children, affected by imprisonment are entitled to confidentiality, and careful consideration should therefore be given to the passing on of information to schools, especially if this is done without families' knowledge and permission. As previously stated, these are families who, as well as experiencing grief and shock, also fear further stigmatisation, and it is understandable that they often avoid telling the school directly, particularly if they are unsure how that information might be used. Carers and imprisoned parents may have had very negative experiences of school themselves, many of them experiencing failure and shame (Bracken, 2011), and it is extremely important that

**"Most parents in prison don't see schools as a place of hope."**

**Susannah Burke, CEO PB&J**

families are able to trust the school before divulging such sensitive information. A school community must therefore first and foremost be concerned with ensuring that all staff members are trained and have an understanding of the trauma and stigma experienced by these children so that they can support families in an appropriate and helpful way and so that carers have a fundamental trust in the school which enables them to share the information in the first place.

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<sup>2</sup> Kaufman (1992) describes shame as "the most disturbing experience individuals ever have about themselves; no other emotion feels more deeply disturbing because it is in the moment of shame that the self feels wounded from within." Cited in MacLulich (2012), p60.

It is important for children who have experienced the trauma of parental imprisonment to be able to talk about their experiences with a trusted adult (Snyder-Joy & Carlo, 1998) and teachers can offer a unique role in this, supporting them in their sense of grief and loss as

“You know, we’re not the only ones doing the hard time – our families are doing time too.” Male prisoner

well as reassuring children affected that they need not feel ashamed. One of the key findings in a recent study by Loureiro (2010) was that children of prisoners do not have enough support and often do not

speak about what they have experienced with anyone at all, which may explain why these children are more likely to experience mental health problems than other children (Murray & Farrington, 2008). Parke and Clark-Stewart (2002) suggest that in-school support groups for children affected by imprisonment can be beneficial in terms of emotional support, and that group work of this kind can allay children’s fears that they are the only ones affected (Karp, 2007; Kahn, 1994), thus helping them to open up and talk about their feelings.

Increasingly it is recognised that schools have a duty of care to children that extends far beyond their academic performance. In Scotland, *Getting it right for every child* (GIRFEC, 2008) recognises that children and young people need full and integrated support in overcoming difficulties, whether temporary or, as often in the case of parental imprisonment, more complex and longer-term. GIRFEC is underpinned by a set of values and principles which take a ‘whole child approach’; that is ‘recognising that what is going on in one part of a child or young person’s life can affect many other areas of his or her life.’ This is particularly true in the case of children affected by imprisonment given that in addition to the actual separation from a parent there may also be a change of care-giver, a move of address and a change of school. Moreover, within Scotland’s Curriculum for Excellence, which aims to enable children and young people to become successful learners, confident individuals, responsible citizens and effective contributors, it is recognised

“When there’s a parent reaching out, most teachers are happy to engage with that parent regardless of the circumstances.” PB&J staff member

that strong home / school links are crucial to children attending regularly and reaching their potential.<sup>3</sup> Children do better at school and are more likely to reach their potential when parents and school staff cooperate and work closely in partnership with one another.

Schools also have a vital role to play in terms of breaking the cycle of intergenerational crime. A number of studies suggest that children of offenders are more likely to end up in the criminal justice system as adults (Johnston 1995; Kandel *et al.* 1998; Butterfield 1999) or be involved in anti-social behaviour (Murray & Farrington, 2008). What is crucial for teachers to understand, however, is that this does not mean that an offender is more likely to give birth

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<sup>3</sup> See *Building the Curriculum 3: a framework for learning and teaching*, p17 [www.scotland.gov.uk](http://www.scotland.gov.uk).

to another offender, as if somehow crime is an infection that can be passed on; rather it is that ‘disenfranchised grief’, compounded by trauma and stigma, can lead to disengagement from the school system and a mistrust of authority, which in turn increases the potential to be involved in at-risk behaviour. In other words, it is not the imprisonment of the parent in and of itself, but the response to the imprisonment (social isolation and a sense of shame in addition to trauma) that increases the risk factor.

Several of the children of prisoners with whom I spoke told me that if they could say one thing to their teachers it would be: “Don’t assume that I will end up in prison like my mum or dad.”

“I get angry when people call us ‘children at risk’; I see us as children of promise.” Daughter of long-term prisoner

Hearing that they are significantly more likely to enter the criminal justice system<sup>4</sup> can be devastating for children; they can feel that the script of their life has been written for them and they quickly lose motivation to remain engaged in their education, particularly if this attitude is conveyed by the very people who are teaching them.

Dallaire, Ciccone and Wilson (2010) revealed that teachers showed greater negative bias towards mothers who were absent from their children due to imprisonment than for any other reason, underpinning the need for training and greater understanding of these issues within school communities. As was evident from Kendon’s story at the beginning of this report, teachers can be instrumental in helping children see beyond their immediate circumstances and can also help them navigate their way through challenging circumstances with their sense of self intact.

In addition to supporting children and carers affected by imprisonment, schools are also able to play their part in reducing recidivism. A parent in prison is still a parent (see Bernstein,

“I would love copies of my daughter’s academic achievements or of her pictures... even if I had contact with the school counsellor so I could make sure she’s ok, that she’s getting counselling. I have no contact with her mother so that makes it hard.”  
Male prisoner, New York

2005) and can play an important role in supporting their child’s education, even from behind bars. Meaningful family ties are known to be a key factor in reducing re-offending (Tolan, Guerra & Kendal, 1995; Loucks, 2004; Ministry of Justice and Department for Children, Schools and Families, 2010) and in order for any relationship with a child

to be truly meaningful it must include his or her school life. Children’s endeavours in school are so much a part of who they are, and who they might be in future. School is where friendships are formed, hobbies and interests developed, strengths identified and encouraged and future plans discussed. In short, a relationship to a child or young person that has no connection to his or her schooling is far from meaningful.

Involving an imprisoned parent in his or her child’s education need not be a burdensome task for schools. It is not unusual nowadays for schools to send out multiple copies of school reports (in cases of separated or divorced parents, for example), and this could easily be

<sup>4</sup> In the US it is often quoted that children with a parent in prison are six times more likely to enter the criminal justice system, though this remains un-evidenced (Murray, 2005).



extended to a parent in prison. Newsletters, school photographs and examples of good work can all help the parent in prison to connect meaningfully with their child's life at school and can in turn help increase the parent's overall sense of wellbeing and motivation as well as help to improve their own literacy skills. We know that healthy attachment relationships are important in the social and emotional development of children (Bowlby, 1973), and Chief Medical Officer for Scotland, Sir Harry Burns, takes this even further in maintaining that functioning family relationships and healthy attachments are instrumental in improving society's physical and mental health outcomes. The research shows that even temporary separation between a parent and child can be damaging (Lee & Kreisher, 2002). What is important to recognise with the children of prisoners is that this kind of separation from a parent is particularly traumatic, often leading to a mistrust of authority and feelings of anger that can make engaging in education challenging. If schools can help foster the parent / child relationship, thereby strengthening family ties, this can go a long way to restoring a child's trust in authorities as well as reinforcing their belief that their parent can still have an important input into their life. Moreover, a relationship which continues and develops during imprisonment is far more likely to be sustained post-release, giving the imprisoned parent a powerful incentive to re-engage positively in society (Holt & Miller 1972; Hairston 1991).

"I'm still their dad, you know." Male prisoner, New Mexico

"My dad's been in prison twice now, each time for 3 years. In my old school I told this one teacher, Mr S about it because I trusted him. He was pretty cool. He asked me about my dad, things like do I see him, how was I feeling, that kind of thing. It was really helpful to me. There's another teacher in my school, Mr B, - he was always negative, putting me down. He didn't like me and when he found out my dad was in prison he took advantage of that. He'd say, 'you won't be anything. You're going to end up just like your dad.' I think it's better if teachers know because then they can help me if I'm (like) having a bad day or something. I think it'd be good if teachers got a kind of lesson on how kids like me feel, and what it's like for us." Khodi (14)

## Overview of Programmes

During my time in Australia and the United States I visited a wide range of charities and NGOs.<sup>5</sup> I also spoke with teachers, judges, government officials, carers, imprisoned parents and their children. All of the organisations I comment on here have a remit reaching far beyond their involvement with schools, but for the purposes of this report I focus solely on this particular aspect of their work. What follows is a reflection on the good practice that I experienced and heard about with interventions grouped thematically, rather than a chronological account of my Travelling Fellowship by location.

### 1. Teacher Training

In every discussion with each of the organisations I visited, staff training was identified as the single most important thing that schools can do in relation to children affected by imprisonment and that it is this training that should underpin every other intervention and programme. Without adequate training and awareness of the main issues, teachers may inadvertently add to a child's distress through casual comments, or worse, openly and directly undermine his or her potential. And it is not just teachers: administrative and support staff all have their role to play in creating a non-judgemental and caring community for children and young people.

“I went to a school with a grandmother to help her enrol the children in a school in her area. Her daughter had been arrested and the school secretary was so rude, saying things like ‘those people’ and ‘I know the type’. If there is no training for teachers and school staff then these kinds of judgmental attitudes take hold. The biggest thing for kids and families is not to feel judged.” PB&J staff member

The Osborne Association based in New York has developed a training programme which is delivered to teachers and other staff working with children and young people (social workers, psychologists etc.). It aims to:

- Give an understanding of the impact of parental imprisonment on children and how this affects their education;
- Help staff to talk sensitively with children about the issue;
- Provide staff with tools to navigate the criminal justice system so that they can communicate with and involve imprisoned parents in their children's education; and
- Inform staff about available resources.

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<sup>5</sup> A full list is given in Appendix 2, with links to further information for each organisation.

The training provides participants with facts and statistics as well as an overview of the criminal justice system and allows them to enter into the stories of children affected by imprisonment through discussion of a set of case studies. In an evaluation of a course run in October 2009, 100% of the 41 participants said that it was helpful to their work, and a significant number (17%) said that they felt the course should be longer and part of a wider training series. 85% of participants felt that they had a better understanding of the criminal justice system and how this affects parents in prison as well as their children. These are encouraging statistics and indicate the importance of such training and the need for this to be embedded within general teacher training so that every member of staff is informed.

“(The training) made us aware that we can and should involve parents in their children’s education, even if they are incarcerated.”

Participant on an Osborne Association training course

Ann Adelist-Estrin, Director of the National Resource Center on Children and Families of the Incarcerated based in Pennsylvania, recognises that different layers of training are needed for

“If we train teachers we can help so many more children.” Tanya Krupat, The Osborne Association

school staff. Ideally there would be an overview of the general issues for all staff, followed by information relevant to classroom teachers, and lastly specific training offered to members of staff who deal with the pastoral care of children in the school, particularly those who are primarily responsible for home / school liaison and interaction with partner agencies. Ann offers a full day of training to school staff which aims to increase awareness and enhance skills, and within this has developed The Baker’s Dozen<sup>6</sup>, a list of 13 things that schools and teachers can do to support children with parents in prison. This advice ranges from the very practical:

- ***Display and provide*** materials and articles about children of the incarcerated on bulletin boards and in parent newsletters for *all* families

to an awareness of the importance of emotional intelligence:

- ***Know*** yourself and your staff: the feelings, experiences and attitudes of school staff influence the way children of incarcerated parents feel about themselves.

VACRO, based in Melbourne, Australia, has developed a new training course which invites agencies, including those working in schools, to attend half or full day training sessions looking at families and the criminal justice system. The training aims to equip staff with:

- knowledge of the Victorian Adult Criminal Justice System;
- an understanding of the impacts of this system on the families;
- ways in which to identify and engage these families;

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<sup>6</sup> See [www.fcnetwork.org](http://www.fcnetwork.org) for details of the full Baker’s Dozen and other useful resources for working with children affected by imprisonment.

- strategies for assisting these families to navigate the justice system; and
- an awareness of the resources available in this area of work.

At present VACRO has specific funding for this, enabling staff to deliver training to teachers at no cost to the school or education authority. It is uncertain, however, how this will continue, and it may be that schools are asked to pay for training in future.

For PB&J in Albuquerque, New Mexico, recent funding cuts have meant that the provision of teaching training is no longer possible. Previously able to provide training on the effects of imprisonment on a child, firstly to school counsellors and then to all teachers, PB&J staff found that, with increased knowledge of the issues came a greater understanding from teachers of what lay behind children’s behaviour, thus enabling them to better support those children.

“We wanted to affect a larger population so we went into schools. Too many children are cast by the crime of their parent: ‘this is the kid of that rapist’ and ‘that kid’s dad is a murderer.’ There is therefore an internal conflict for children: Is the die cast for me? How am I like him? What can I like about her?’ Schools should be informed of what kids are going through. It is now law in New Mexico that the question is asked, ‘is there a child who will be affected by this arrest?’ If the answer is yes, and that child is at school at the time of arrest, then the school must be informed. This is only helpful, however, if schools know what to do with that information and how best to support that child. It all comes back to training.” Angie Vachio (founder of PB&J)

SHINE for Kids in Australia is currently looking into the provision of a training course as a way of generating income, recognising that schools often have budgets set aside for professional development and that teachers are now required to undertake a certain number of hours of on-going training and development. This is an encouraging way forward and could address a significant funding issue within this field. I was equally encouraged to hear, in the state of New York, of a documentary, *The Mothers of Bedford*, which tells the moving stories of several women in maximum-security Bedford Hills Correctional Facility. This was recently screened as part of a training day for school principals, with the issue of supporting the children of prisoners within the school system specifically addressed.

“Schools need to be more supportive of families and understanding of what they are going through. There was a day when teachers just taught what they taught but we’re in a different world now. It is so important for teachers to have an understanding of the issues of incarceration.” Judge, New Mexico

## 2. Specific Educational Support

One of the most impressive programmes I visited was the SHINE for Kids Education Programme in Bathurst, New South Wales, Australia. Part of the SHINE for Kids Breaking the Cycle initiative, the Education Programme seeks to help reduce recidivism as well as address the problem of intergenerational offending through:

- improving engagement with education and learning;
- enhancing academic performance;
- building confidence and self-esteem;
- establishing bonds between families and schools; and
- assisting pupils with homework and assignments.

The SHINE for Kids Education Support Worker is linked with 5 primary schools that have a high concentration of children affected by imprisonment.<sup>7</sup> In addition to supporting children’s literacy and numeracy skills through one to one or small group work in school, the education support worker also monitors school attendance and ensures that information is passed on to the school with permission from the carer. She works hard to build relationships with teachers as well as partner agencies and is invited to regular case conferences at the school. The SHINE for Kids Education Programme

“It’s about building the bridge between families and schools so that kids get a fairer go at school, so they’re not always on suspension. Teachers really like speaking to us because we have all that knowledge, and it helps them to understand the kids better.” Trish Carr, SHINE for Kids Education Support Worker

is an excellent example of specific and designated support for families affected by imprisonment. Not only does it mean that academic skills are supported but so too is the relationship between home and school which, as previously discussed, is such an important factor in children’s learning. Education support workers can mediate between the two, acting as advocates for the children and helping reduce stigma and anxiety. They can also liaise with other agency workers and have a key role in case conferences and planning meetings, providing invaluable support for children and families.

**Feedback from teachers:**

“It’s fabulous; I couldn’t do my job without it!”

“We wouldn’t know what was going on without Trish passing the information on.”

“Without SHINE for Kids these kids would get lost in the system.”

**Feedback from head teachers:**

“The students really benefit from it and look forward to it.”

“She doesn’t put pressure on the school but rather lifts some of the pressure from us.”

“As far as families go, they are overwhelmingly happy about the programme.”

<sup>7</sup> See Appendix 1 for my blog article, Breaking the Cycle, which describes my visit to one of these primary schools.

### 3. In-School Counselling / Mentoring

In recognising that children who experience stigma and trauma cannot learn to their full potential, VACRO offers in-school counselling specifically to children affected by imprisonment. Referrals come either from the school if a child has been identified by staff, or in some cases has self-identified, or directly from the family who then gives permission for the school to be informed. VACRO's Children's Counsellor liaises with outside carers and also tries to meet every parent in prison at least once if appropriate. School welfare officers (responsible for the pastoral care of pupils in Australian schools) arrange rooms and timings and are the main point of contact for the counsellor within the school. In cases where families prefer that the school is not informed, counselling takes place in the VACRO offices. The Children's Counsellor can also act as an advocate in informing the school prior to counselling, or at a later stage once a relationship of trust has developed. In addition, counselling is offered to carers who are looking after a child with a parent in prison, thus helping to support healthy family dynamics.

Mentoring is widely recognised as helpful for vulnerable children, providing them with an adult role model outside the family unit. This can be particularly relevant for children with a parent in prison. SHINE for Kids has an extensive mentoring programme for the children of

**“If schools could be the referrers (for mentoring), it would make things so much better. The teachers really know the kids and have all that contact with the families.” SHINE for Kids Project Worker**

prisoners and provides intensive training and ongoing support to mentors, mentees and their carers. Most referrals for mentoring come directly from family contact with

SHINE for Kids, but staff I spoke to felt that schools could have an important role in identifying children who would benefit and in being proactive in referring children to the mentoring programme. This of course underlines once again the need for staff awareness of which children are affected as well as their need for sensitivity, compassion and concern. Hour Children, New York, runs the Hour Friend in Deed mentoring programme for children aged 4 to 18, and presentations to schools about the scheme have led to referrals coming from teachers.

### 4. In-School Support Groups

Several organisations I visited ran (or had done in the past) in-school support groups specifically for children affected by imprisonment. In every case these groups took place in areas known to have a higher number of families affected, and they were run at the cost of the charity and not the school.

**“One dad came to the school on his release to thank staff for running the group for his son, saying ‘It was the first time he had ever asked me about prison, and it was the most honest conversation we’d had.’”  
SHINE for Kids staff member**

SHINE for Kids runs school groups over an 8-week period, and there is normally an average of 10 children in a group. These can be mixed year groups but within the lower or upper ends

“The first question we ask is, ‘who feels like they are the only one with a mum or dad in prison?’ and everyone puts their hand up. When we say: ‘now look around and see. You’re not the only one’ - that’s really powerful for children.”  
SHINE for Kids group facilitator

of the school rather than mixed across all age groups. Right from the first session it is made clear to children that everyone in the group has been affected by imprisonment. This is seen as one of the main strengths of the programme; assuring children that they are not the only ones affected and therefore helping to reduce stigma. SHINE for Kids invites a member of school staff (usually the school counsellor or welfare officer)

to assist with group work, which is identified as another key strength as children are able to identify support within the school and to build a rapport with the counsellor. Topics are age-appropriate and include developing resilience and coping skills, identifying strengths and building confidence. Older children might also work on anger management and look at issues around depression and healthy ways of managing stress. Group attendance is very good, and sessions are highly interactive and creative, giving children a chance to participate and respond in a variety of ways including through drama, art and poetry. A group trip rounds off the sessions, and this is seen as a further strength: giving children who often miss out on excursions a chance to have fun with each other, but equally importantly, with other adults who have become positive role models. In order for children to participate, consent from a guardian is required, and where possible home visits are made prior to the group starting which SHINE staff reported can also provide an opportunity to encourage carers to seek further support for themselves or for the children.

“We’ve found schools to be very receptive, but they have limited resources themselves so are desperate for help.” PB&J staff member

Similarly PB&J runs KidPACT groups, currently in middle and elementary schools (roughly the first nine years of school), with up to 15 children for 1 hour a week over 12 weeks. Centred around snacks and art, each week there is a topic (for example how to tell your friends that your mom / dad is in prison). PB&J staff report that in this way it becomes a support group for children in which they can talk to each other and express their frustration

“We want to ‘normalise’ kids’ experiences – they’ve been told not to talk about it. A lot of them have behaviour issues, are at risk of dropping out, at risk of becoming victims or perpetrators of violence, at risk of getting into gangs. The KidPACT group serves three main purposes – 1) it says, ‘it’s ok that you have a parent who’s incarcerated’, 2) it helps them to talk about it and 3) it builds self-esteem. Children are accepted and it’s a safe space for them to develop life skills.” PB&J staff worker

and anger. Unlike SHINE for Kids there is no teacher present, although there are two PB&J workers to facilitate one-to-one work if necessary. Starting in the South Valley district of Albuquerque, funding was

given to pilot KidPACT in schools with the lowest test scores. PB&J staff reported that, once this provision became known more widely, other school principals called requesting similar services.

PB&J group facilitators call schools at the beginning of the school year and send out referral forms to school counsellors as they tend to know the children best, particularly those whose behaviour suggests that something is wrong, though it is recognised that there are others who might not act out but are affected. As with SHINE for Kids, carers must sign a consent form prior to participation in KidPACT. It can also be a way of referring children to other services such as early intervention programmes. At the end of a KidPACT programme, qualitative feedback is gathered from school counsellors, children, teachers and carers. Reports are overwhelmingly positive, with the most important thing for children being the realisation that they are not alone in being affected by imprisonment.

With 7 groups running at the time I visited PB&J, staff there expressed serious concern about the continuation of KidPACT due to severe funding cuts. This is something that the Pennsylvania Prison Society has also faced. Their SKIP<sup>8</sup> programme is a 12-week support group for children age 8 to 12. Unfortunately in recent years there has been no consistent funding to run groups despite excellent feedback from children, carers and teachers.

Run over 12 weeks, SKIP aims to provide:

- a safe place to discuss feelings with other children;
- activities designed to build self-esteem as well as positive relationships with other children;
- a better understanding of the prison system and ways to deal with a parent's imprisonment;
- an understanding that people in prison have made mistakes and are neither heroes, nor victims; and
- information and referrals to caregivers about other agency support where necessary.

**“We had difficulty getting school counsellors involved at first then once they were involved we had more requests than we could cope with.” Pennsylvania Prison Society staff member**

**“My daughter is much more open now. She plays with other children and isn't such a loner.”  
Mother of SKIP participant**

**“I learned to believe in myself. I learned that just because you cannot see your parent (that) doesn't mean they don't love you.” SKIP programme participant**

SKIP programmes end with a celebration which also includes family members. During my time with them, it was clear that staff at the Pennsylvania Prison Society felt that the

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<sup>8</sup> Support for Kids with Incarcerated Parents



inconsistent funding situation for SKIP programmes was disadvantaging children affected by imprisonment.

Community Works based in San Francisco, California, developed the ROOTS programmes within local high schools. A credited elective run alongside the standard curriculum, ROOTS aims to educate and support young people affected by imprisonment through creative expression and critical thinking. ROOTS participants learn to engage with issues of social justice and develop the resources to become agents of change in their own communities. An intense programme incorporating in- and after-school activities, a social justice and arts curriculum as well as case management coordinated by a range of professionals (both in and out of school), ROOTS is very expensive to run and as such its impact, although excellent for individual group participants, is limited; ROOTS is currently only on offer in one San Francisco high school. More sustainable is Project WHAT!, also run by Community Works, which helps children affected by imprisonment become advocates for change by developing the skills to give presentations to teachers, judges, social workers etc. Participants discover a support network, are able to process their own story and potentially affect change in government policy and sentencing laws. It is a paid programme (\$25 to speak at a teacher training event, for example) and therefore gives employment experience as well as an opportunity to develop essential job-related skills.

In each of the above programmes, identifying the appropriate children was acknowledged as a challenge. In most cases it was the school that identified the children after the charity had contacted the relevant member of staff with the offer of a specific group or programme. This underpins the need for schools to be communities of compassion where young people can seek help safe in the knowledge that they will not be judged or further stigmatised and where carers feel able to share sensitive information. In one school I visited in San Francisco<sup>9</sup>, children are given an opportunity every term to sign up anonymously to any support groups that might be helpful (around themes such as family break-up, bereavement, stress, eating disorders, etc.), and teachers there were considering adding imprisonment to that list. This is one way of creating opportunities for children to identify themselves, though as previously discussed it requires staff training to ensure an understanding of the issues involved.

“You can’t force people affected to talk about incarceration. It’s about creating opportunities for families to come forward.” Ann Adelista-Estrin

## 5. Parent / Teacher Contact

Engaging an imprisoned parent in his or her child’s education can be done through telephone calls, video conferencing, sending copies of school reports and, where possible, face to face meetings. As discussed earlier, contact between the imprisoned parent and the school helps

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<sup>9</sup> A.P. Giannini Middle School

the child / parent relationship and can go a long way towards reducing stigma for children as well as increasing motivation for the parent to engage in in-prison parenting classes, thus decreasing the likelihood of reoffending.

Melbourne City Mission runs the Family Support Service, helping women in custody to make and maintain contact with agencies involved with their children, including schools. Providing

“When a kid comes on a visit and their mom says, ‘I spoke to your teacher last week’ that means such a lot to the kid. At least this way the mom has a little bit of a role in terms of being a participant and the kids think, ‘my mom really cares’. The kids really thrive on that and it motivates them to do better.”  
Social Worker, New York

support, advocacy, education and training, MCM staff work in conjunction with social workers to help women in prison establish contact with their children’s teachers. MCM reports that the majority of imprisoned women are keen to be in touch with their children’s schools but that they often don’t know how to go about this. MCM staff can play a mediation role between the imprisoned parent and

the school. This can help to break down barriers and establish trust and understanding. In their experience, once schools have an understanding of the situation, they are more than happy to cooperate in sending copies of reports and arranging parent / teacher interviews by phone. The first point of contact with the school is usually the principal (head teacher), but on an ongoing basis it is the role of the welfare officer to connect with MCM and the imprisoned parent. This underpins the benefit of each child having a named person within the school when it comes to support structures, particularly in the secondary school context. There is also an important link with carers, as they must give their consent before the school can be contacted. MCM finds that this in itself can lead to useful mediation work between carers and imprisoned parents. MCM staff noted that not all carers are positive about encouraging this kind of contact, and there can be resistance stemming from a breakdown in relationship with the imprisoned mother, resentment about the fact that they as carers are in effect bringing up someone else’s children, or a general mistrust of the schools and a fear of how information about the mother’s imprisonment might be used. MCM finds that working with carers and advocating on behalf of the women in prison can help establish a healthier working relationship, which in turn benefits the children they are all trying to support.

“John (husband) was always the educational one, the smarter one, who helped them with homework. A report from the school (to their dad) would’ve been good for the boys. I think my son wouldn’t be in now if his dad had been involved in his schooling. I wasn’t coping on my own at home. If my boys had had someone at school to talk to about their dad being in prison, it would’ve been really good. My John was only in a few months, and it really affected my boys. Imagine he’d been in a lot longer?” Mother, Hakea Prison, Perth, WA

In addition to sending out school reports directly to mothers in prison, MCM also encourages ongoing contact with the teachers of their children (once a term if possible) in the form of telephone calls. Support is given to mothers prior to the calls to help build confidence and to help them engage appropriately in asking relevant questions. Mothers are accompanied by an MCM worker during the call, which is on speakerphone so that intervention or support is easily on hand if necessary. These calls build confidence and self-esteem, often lacking in the

women. Crucially they also help establish relationships that can be continued post-release. MCM also encourages welfare officers to come to the prison where possible, either for a general parent / teacher meeting or for case plan meetings. In the case of the latter, if a representative from the school cannot be there in person, then efforts will be made for them to have telephone input to the meeting. This coordinated approach is appreciated by prison and school staff alike, and the role of MCM in taking the initiative is welcomed.

The Community Works ‘One Family’ programme also works with parents and care-givers on how to communicate with schools. One Family is a comprehensive parent education and contact visiting programme which aims to provide meaningful and consistent opportunities

“I write to my son’s teacher about his education and how he is doing. I never would have known how to do that before I took PIO (Parenting Inside Out). I didn’t know how to be my children’s champion and advocate.”  
Parenting Inside Out participant

for children to remain connected to their imprisoned parent throughout the sentence. The One Family Parenting Inside Out programme recognises that imprisoned parents and the carers of their children often need help and support in establishing positive contact with schools. The programme therefore offers advice on how to make phone calls to teachers as well

as support in writing letters to request information or copies of school reports.

For PB&J, this need for support for imprisoned parents in making contact with their children’s teachers stemmed from a programme which used therapeutic phone calls to help build relationships with parents and their children. PB&J staff soon realised that this could be extended to include teachers and that this additional contact would also benefit the children. Coaching is given to teachers and parents prior to making calls and again speakerphone is used in helping parents assume more and more of the parental role whilst also experiencing support where needed.

“Parents need support and coaching in how to speak to teachers – you can’t just expect parents to step up to it just because there’s a phone call opportunity; they need help. Parents in prison doubt their ability to be able to communicate with teachers.”  
Susannah Burke, CEO PB&J

“I’ve spoken to my daughter’s Principal just once since I’ve been in here. He said he would help if he could. It’s good to know that when you fall a little bit from grace, there’s someone there to support you.” Male Prisoner

PB&J workers find that teachers are more than willing to participate in scheduled phone calls, particularly if a parent has read a school report and has questions about it. An added benefit of this service is that it gives teachers an opportunity to see the human being beyond the prisoner and, as a result, preconceptions are challenged and judgements diminished as teachers engage with just another parent interested in their child.

Establishing and maintaining contact between imprisoned parents and the teachers of their children relies heavily on the support of the justice system in terms of ensuring that prisoners receive phone calls and copies of reports and that they are able to participate in additional visits. In the United States I came across one programme in a maximum security facility where there is so much concern about the relationship with the justice department and the

possibility of losing permission to run the programme that I was asked to report it anonymously. This programme works with mothers who have children aged 8 to 17 and

“A mother can only get approval once a month to receive a call from the school, and there’s a really small window of opportunity to do that during the day as they are not allowed to miss their programmes. I always confirm the day before, but there are so many factors that make it challenging - the woman might be late; the teacher then can’t wait as they only have cover for a certain time etc. It’s hard when there feels like there’s a lack of support from Corrections. One Correctional Officer said to me, ‘the women are inmates first and mothers second.’” Anonymous

coordinates prison visits for children as well as linking imprisoned mothers with their children’s teachers through phone calls. Carers are involved too and have to sign a consent form before the school can be contacted, which is seen as a key part of the service. Staff told me that most of the time school guidance counsellors (the main point of contact for outside agencies in American schools) don’t know of the imprisonment prior to being contacted but are very appreciative about information being passed on and feel that it is helpful in supporting children and carers. The programme relies on volunteer advocates who make the calls with each mother as well as providing training and reassurance.

What is clear from all of the organisations I spoke to about phone contact between prisoners and teachers is that training and support are essential in ensuring that this is beneficial. If contact to teachers and schools can be linked to in-prison parenting classes, this might give a natural context for such work, though this should not prevent parents from having this kind of contact if, for example, places in parenting classes are limited.

An extension of phone calls to teachers is the use of video conferencing, which PB&J introduced in several Albuquerque schools, though sadly due to funding cuts this is currently unavailable. PB&J staff told me that video conferencing was beneficial to both parents and teachers, providing a unique opportunity for relationships to be fostered, though the need for training was highlighted. Aware of the benefits of this service, the Osborne Association is looking at extending its TeleVisiting service to teachers. Currently available to children for whom visiting their imprisoned parent is difficult due to transport costs and long distances, TeleVisting is set up in such a way that parent and child feel as if they are in the same room. During my time with the Osborne Association I was able to experience firsthand the impact of this on children, and they were overwhelmingly positive about this form of interaction, though it cannot of course replace face to face contact<sup>10</sup>. Extending TeleVisits to teachers would be an excellent way of engaging the imprisoned parent in his or her child’s education, allowing them to enquire about their children’s progress, celebrate success and share concerns.

Voices of imprisoned mothers who have regular contact with school:

“I like, no I love, the connection I have with the schools... this has opened a door for me and the school.”

“I like being able to speak with my son’s teacher and be able to help with his education.”

“I feel connected.”

<sup>10</sup> See Appendix 1 for my blog article, Virtually There, which gives an account of a TeleVisiting session.

There are many creative ways of encouraging parents in prison to engage with schools. In Western Australia Neerigen Brook Primary School has developed the Justice School Link

**Feedback from the Neerigen Brook Justice School Link Program:**

“The points helped with uniform a lot. When our daughter was struggling for lunches, the points paid for lunches and for their swimming excursion. The kids loved it because they knew it was coming from Dad.” Mother whose husband is in prison

“Very helpful – their dad now feels more involved with the school.” Prison staff worker

Program which offers points to parents in prison for participating in educational or rehabilitation programmes as well as for engaging positively with their children (writing letters, reading schools reports etc.). These points can then be transferred into Monopoly™ money to be used for things like school excursions, uniform and school equipment. Children at school can also earn points (reaching targets, good behaviour and attendance etc.) thus giving the parent and child an opportunity to work together. Although I was unable to visit Neerigen Brook Primary School due to school holidays, I spoke to the principal and it

was clear how effective these types of initiatives can be in encouraging positive engagement between parent, carer and child as well as between imprisoned parents and the school. A further benefit is that it requires good liaison between prison staff and the school and gives a sense to families that agencies are working together to support them.

## **6. In-Prison Homework Clubs**

Supporting homework is an excellent way of parents engaging in their children’s education, and for the parent in prison this can still be possible despite obvious challenges. As part of its Parenting Inside Out programme, Community Works offers the opportunity for children and parents in prison to do homework

“Doing homework with mum – these are things that other parents take for granted. Video links could help parents (in prison) and children do homework together. What you need are proactive teachers, those willing to go that extra mile.”  
Meg Shepherd, SHINE for Kids

together on a weekly basis. There is not always good consistency in terms of attendance, and it relies on carers being proactive in encouraging children to bring work to the prison, but it is something that is very much appreciated by parents in prison. Having teachers who are supportive and engaged in homework clubs is also helpful, though again this can be a challenge mainly due to time constraints rather than a lack of will and understanding.

## **7. School Curriculum Input**

Addressing issues of crime and punishment through the school curriculum can be helpful in breaking down barriers and challenging stereotypes if it is done sensitively and non-judgementally. It can give children courage to speak to a teacher about their own situation or help them to have a greater understanding of what their friends might be experiencing. Outcare, based in Perth, Western Australia, runs Keeping Kids Out Of Crime, an early intervention programme which involves former prisoners giving talks and presentations at

schools, highlighting to young people the importance of talking about issues they face and emphasising to teachers the role they have in supporting vulnerable young people. Keeping Kids Out Of Crime aims to reduce bullying through addressing topics such as self-respect,

“It’s about a hand-up, rather than a hand-out.” Sam Mesiti, Outcare

respect for others and respect for the community. Outcare’s emphasis is on life skills and work readiness, which underpins their work in schools.

Other organisations I visited acknowledged the need for schools to include issues around imprisonment in the curriculum, and the Osborne Association has produced a fact sheet for teachers which includes practical advice on how to do this sensitively, for example not using terms such as ‘offender’, and ‘convict’ and helping children to understand that a person’s crime does not put them beyond redemption. Challenging judgemental attitudes can go a long way to helping children of prisoners feel that they can talk about their experience without being condemned by the crime of their parent.

Father to his son: “What do you have to do for homework?”

Boy: “Vocabulary.”

Father: “What’s the first word?”

Boy: “Prison.”

Father: “Prison is a bad place where bad people go who do bad things.”

Boy: “Where do good people go who do bad things?”

(Quoted by Sister Elaine Roulet at the beginning of Jenifer McShane’s documentary *Mothers of Bedford*)

## 8. Providing Information and Advocacy Support to Carers

As previously mentioned, families affected by imprisonment are less likely to access available support and can sometimes be reluctant to engage with institutions such as schools. With this in mind, Outcare ensures that information about the school system is available to carers in all of its prison-based family support centres. This means that not only are leaflets and information booklets about school available, but support centre staff also encourage carers to have positive engagement with schools and offer help and support to do this if necessary.

For Ann Edenfield Sweet, founder of Wings Ministry in Albuquerque, New Mexico, educational stability is so important that she includes schools regularly in the Wings for L.I.F.E<sup>11</sup> programme. Wings for L.I.F.E is a support group for families affected by imprisonment and centres around meal-time discussions on various topics. In the case of

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<sup>11</sup> Life-skills Imparted to Families through Education

education, teachers attend and explain the education system to carers and newly released prisoners<sup>12</sup>, encouraging them to build a relationship with the school. Eating together is a real strength of this programme and helps to break down barriers and preconceptions.

Several of the organisations I visited consider advocacy to be one of the most important services for carers. PB&J offers to walk carers through the process of changing schools, and a worker will attend school meetings with carers if necessary. One grandmother whose story I heard had had such a negative encounter with a school secretary that she would only attend a further meeting at the school with support from PB&J. Embedded in the ImPACT<sup>13</sup> programme is a case management approach, involving all the relevant agencies and creating a ‘memorandum of understanding’ between prisons, schools and NGOs.

“Advocacy is important - when schools mark children as ‘unexcused absence’ but it’s because they were visiting a parent in prison, I go and meet with the school counsellor and explain the situation. I would also get work if a kid needed help with tutoring. It’s about case management.” SHINE for Kids

Hour Children, based in New York, also uses a case management style of support. Case managers facilitate contact between the family and the school, and this can help schools have a greater understanding of the issues as well as giving carers the confidence to engage with teachers and principals. In addition, a case management approach can help determine if it is not in the best interests of children to have ongoing contact with a parent.<sup>14</sup> SHINE for Kids is so established in the community that staff routinely receive copies of behaviour plans and are invited to go to meetings and case conferences at the school. A case management approach gives credibility to voluntary sector organisations and makes it easier for them to mediate between all the relevant stakeholders.

“One kid I work with is so at ease at school now about his dad being in prison that when I drop him back after a visit and his friends ask him where he’s been, he just says it: ‘I’ve been to visit my dad in jail.’ That school let us use their facilities for a mini Olympics for kids with parents in prison and their mentors.” Rob Palmer, SHINE for Kids

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<sup>12</sup> Ann Edenfield Sweet uses the term ‘returning citizen’ for people released from prison.

<sup>13</sup> Importance of Parents and Children Together

<sup>14</sup> In cases of an offence against the child, for example

## 9. Providing Information to Children Affected

In addition to talking about imprisonment generally in the curriculum there is also a need for specific information for children affected. Having this available in schools can help them access it easily and without shame or embarrassment. An excellent example of a resource guide is one written by a group of teenagers in San Francisco who have all been affected by imprisonment themselves. Part of the Project WHAT! programme, the teenagers have compiled a comprehensive guide for children of prisoners based around questions they themselves struggled with and also include their own stories.<sup>15</sup> Most of the organisations I visited had booklets or information guides and leaflets for children, and getting these into schools alongside information on a wide range of topics affecting young people helps de-stigmatise imprisonment and might encourage children to seek further help.

“When B first went in I told my boys, ‘don’t tell the school; just say that dad’s gone away.’ I think I just had so much to deal with I couldn’t cope with the school knowing. Then J’s behaviour really went downhill; he was getting into trouble and the school got in touch and asked if anything had changed. I then told them at that point and they were great, really understanding and supportive. And for J – he didn’t have to carry it on his own shoulders any more. It was definitely better that the school knew. If my husband had copies of the kids school reports, that’d be good; B wants to be more involved in their education.”

Mother, Sydney, Australia

The San Francisco Partnership for Incarcerated Parents (SFPIP) has developed *A Bill of Rights for Children of Incarcerated Parents*:

1. I have the right to be kept safe and informed at the time of my parent's arrest.
2. I have the right to be heard when decisions are made about me.
3. I have the right to be considered when decisions are made about my parent.
4. I have the right to be well cared for in my parent's absence.
5. I have the right to speak with, see, and touch my parent.
6. I have the right to support as I struggle with my parent's incarceration.
7. I have the right not to be judged, blamed, or labelled because I have an incarcerated parent.
8. I have the right to a lifelong relationship with my parent.

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<sup>15</sup> This guide was sent out to schools across California, and I was encouraged to see it in a San Francisco Middle School among other resources in the school’s wellness centre.



## Conclusion and proposals for development:

In conclusion, children of prisoners are an overlooked and much neglected group; innocent victims who, if not recognised and supported, remain highly vulnerable and at risk. As we have seen, schools have a significant role to play in supporting these children and their care-givers, as well as contributing to the rehabilitation of their imprisoned parents. What is clear, however, is that it cannot fall on the shoulders of teachers and schools alone to address this.

“These are invisible children – no one has any sense that they exist.”  
Social Worker

Collaboration is needed between the departments of education and justice and my Travelling Fellowship highlighted the considerable role that the voluntary sector plays in terms of advocacy and mediation with what are often extremely vulnerable families. What was interesting to note during my time in Australia and the United States was that, just as in the UK, examples of schools identifying and actively supporting children affected by imprisonment, and initiating contact with their imprisoned parents, are few and far between. However all the teachers I had contact with were more than willing to play their part with the support of the charities and NGOs I visited and they all spoke highly of those organisations, feeling that their input aided the school’s support of the young person rather than added to their workload.

“You have to be sure that there are whole systems involved, and schools are a really important system.” Susannah Burke, CEO PB&J

The worlds of education and criminal justice operate as two separate entities, but when it comes to the children of prisoners, the need for a coordinated approach is evident. In working together, so much more can be achieved and a far greater impact on society will be made, including an increase in public safety, lower rates of recidivism, greater family stability, significant progress towards breaking the cycle of intergenerational offending as well as, of course, an increase in the overall wellbeing, and therefore educational outcomes, of individual children. With adequate training and support from voluntary sector organisations advocating on behalf of families affected, as well as cooperation from the criminal justice system, schools can achieve the many excellent practices evident in the projects I visited.

The findings from this report suggest that in-depth development work could usefully be conducted as a matter of urgency so that schools can:

- ensure that all staff are aware and trained in how to deal with issues around imprisonment;
- be a community that is aware and supportive of children affected by imprisonment – a ‘safe space’ where children and their carers can share what is going on;
- actively build positive relationships with families affected by imprisonment and help carers to access additional forms of support;

- provide information for children and families affected (posters, leaflets, helpline numbers);
- liaise with partner agencies (sharing information appropriately and sensitively whilst bearing in mind the family's right to confidentiality);
- keep the parent in prison informed (copies of school reports, newsletters, phone calls, visits if possible etc.) in liaison with outside carers and prison staff (e.g. Family Contact Officers);
- actively seek to reduce bullying by incorporating issues around prison, crime, blame and punishment into the curriculum (e.g. PSE, Modern Studies, Citizenship);
- authorise visits to prison on school days and offer support to children following these visits;
- encourage ongoing contact (copies of work, pictures, photos from trips etc.) between the child and the parent in prison;
- provide work for in-prison homework groups where available; and
- consider in-school support groups in areas where there are concentrated numbers of affected families.

### **Further recommendations**

Because the children of prisoners are so vulnerable and because schools play such an integral role in supporting them and their families, programmes such as the ones outlined here should be sustainably funded and imbedded into both the education and criminal justice systems. It should not be a case of charities and NGOs scrabbling for funding; a lack of coordinated service delivery quite simply puts children's futures in jeopardy. Furthermore most of the organisations I visited acknowledged that evaluating the impact of their programmes remains a challenge, largely due to funding but also because of time pressures and the prioritising of service delivery. What is needed, therefore, is an independent evaluation of interventions in order to show the impact, in terms of preventative spend, on reducing intergenerational crime and recidivism. Government departments should therefore:

**"I wish I'd told the school sooner."  
Imprisoned mother, Rikers Island**

- consider the development of a specific post looking at implementing strategies which support families affected by imprisonment through the school system; and
- provide funding for research into the short- and long-term effects of specific programmes.

## Appendix 1: Blog Articles from my Travelling Fellowship<sup>16</sup>

### Shining from the inside out

I had woken up at 5:30am for the drive from Sydney to Canberra so was still sleepy and a bit groggy on arrival at the Alexander Maconochie Centre, a new Canberra prison built upon the principals of restorative justice. SHINE for Kids is based in the prison, and I had been invited to join them for one of their Child / Parent Activity Days. Held throughout the year in the holidays (so that children don't have to miss school), what's unique about these days is that they are specifically for the prisoners and their children - other family members and carers don't attend - giving them a stretch of four hours together where they can play and interact in a more 'normal' environment.

On this particular Monday there were 15 children in the waiting area, ranging in age from 1 to 12, most with their mothers, some with grandparents. As the children were handed over to SHINE staff and volunteers, there were tears and anxious looks as we then made our way through security, past a (thankfully very placid) sniffer dog. I was handed a sleeping baby, and a SHINE member of staff a crying toddler, and we struggled not only to take off (one-handed!) our own necklaces, belts, shoes and other items that would set off alarms, but also to help the other children do the same. Next came the iris-scanner and, again, negotiating everyone through was no easy task.

As we stood in a holding area waiting to meet the seven fathers who had signed up for today's programme, my mind raced with questions: Is this too traumatic for the children? Is it fair on them? Do they want to even be here? And what about the fathers – is it really worth all this effort?

The baby I was holding woke up just as the doors opened, and she stretched her arms out to her dad as her two older sisters clambered all over him, each one desperate for the first cuddle. I looked round the room at similar reunions taking place and felt my questions fading as I took in the scene before me. The SHINE staff had been in earlier and had set up the room in such a way that there were several play areas (with a wide range of good and interesting toys for all ages), and each little family unit had gathered in one of these areas. There was a craft table at the far end for face-painting and drawing, and the room backed onto a grassed courtyard with a slide and climbing frame, as well as plenty of room for a game of cricket.

Snacks were provided as fathers and children began playing, talking and just enjoying being with one another. The SHINE staff had an amazing ability to be there and yet not there at the same time – encouraging parents and children into play activities if necessary and then stepping back, allowing the relationships to develop naturally. Watching these fathers undertaking everyday parenting tasks (giving a bottle, wiping a messy face, playing a ballgame) was one of the moving sights I have experienced. For four hours, I realised, these were not prisoners; they were dads spending time with their children. And for the children, other than the two prison officers in uniform (who also watched on from a respectful distance), there was very little to remind them that they were in a prison.

Lunch was a BBQ of sausages and chicken cooked by the two oldest boys and their dad, and again I was struck by what a unique opportunity this was for that family. As they cooked they chatted, laughed and teased one another - the father able to teach his sons a skill, and the boys seeing their dad as someone with so much to give. As we ate out in the sunshine I again felt moved as it dawned on me that eating together is such a vital ingredient in family life and just wouldn't be possible without programmes like this.

All of the fathers I spoke to were extremely grateful for the opportunity to participate in the Child / Parent Activity Day. They appreciated the longer period of time with their children, the fact that they could build a relationship with them on their own, and just enjoyed doing the things that parents do. Prison officers too could see the difference it made – prisoners were calmer after such extended contact with their children, and the reduction in reoffending that comes from strong family links is well documented.

And the children? They just loved every minute of it – cuddles and stories, playing hide and seek, building towers, bowling dad out in cricket – there was a buzz of family fun throughout the day. As we made our way back through security, the children seemed different to me – relaxed, happy and at ease. I listened as one boy said to his brother, "Wasn't that the best time we've had with dad? I hope we get to do it again soon!" And as he spoke he shone - from the inside out.

<sup>16</sup> All of the blogs are available from the Families Outside website: [www.familiesoutside.org.uk](http://www.familiesoutside.org.uk)

## Breaking the Cycle

Bradley and his sister Chloe\* were in good spirits this week and worked well with Trish, a SHINE for Kids Education Support Worker. This was in contrast to last week's session in which both children were slow to settle, reluctant to learn and agitated. Because their father is in prison, Bradley and Chloe receive weekly one to one support through the SHINE for Kids Education Programme. This aims to:

- improve engagement with education and learning;
- enhance academic performance;
- build confidence and self esteem;
- establish bonds between families and schools; and
- assist with homework and assignments.

Part of the Shine for Kids Breaking the Cycle initiative (which also includes the Mentoring Programme and the Carers Group), the Education Programme seeks to help reduce recidivism in prisoners as well as address the problem of intergenerational offending. It is a sad fact that children with a parent in prison are up to five times more likely to enter the justice system later in life, and early interventions such as these can be life changing for children like Chloe and Bradley.

Trish knows these children well, and when she commented at the end of last week's sessions that she was worried about them, Bradley revealed the source of their anxiety: their mother (who is expecting a baby in 7 weeks' time) had told them that they were about to be made homeless. Mum was in a panic and didn't know where to turn for help, and the children were understandably worried and frightened.

Following this conversation, Trish made some phone calls, firstly to a housing agency who arranged an emergency appointment for mum, then to mum herself to reassure her that there was help at hand, and finally (with permission) to the school to ensure that teachers were aware of the situation.

A week later, life is very different for this family: alternative accommodation is being arranged, the children are performing better at school and seem happier, and mum is relieved that she does not have to carry the burden alone. And all because someone cared enough to notice and to ask - and then to act.

The SHINE for Kids Education Programme is an excellent example of specific and designated support for families affected by imprisonment. Not only does it mean that literacy and numeracy skills are supported but so too the relationship between home and school, which is such an important factor in children's learning. Education Support Workers can mediate between the two, acting as an advocate for the children and helping reduce the stigma and anxiety so often felt.

With the best will in the world teachers do not always have the time to follow up on the underlying causes of poor behaviour and in many cases they may not even know that imprisonment is an issue in a child's life. For families affected, telling the school can be difficult and many avoid this out of fear and shame. Having someone like Trish to listen, support and mediate can make all the difference. As Chloe and Bradley left yesterday's session and headed back to class, smiling and full of pride in their achievements, it felt to me that for these children part of the cycle was already being broken.

\* Names have been changed

### Jesus on the Inside

I met Jesus in prison today. He is serving a two year sentence in Bernalillo County Metropolitan Detention Center, one of the largest correctional facilities in the US. Jesus has three children: two of high school age who know that he is in jail, and one pre-schooler from another relationship who has been told that 'daddy is working away', though she may well have picked up bits and pieces of information and probably knows more than her parents think she does.

I've been invited to join Jesus and his fellow inmates for an Inside Out Dad parenting class run by PB&J (Peanut Butter & Jelly), a non-profit organisation supporting children and families affected by imprisonment here in Albuquerque, New Mexico. Today's topic is the role of spirituality in family relationships, so of course I am particularly interested to hear what Jesus has to say on this.

The group is voluntary and meets for two and a half hours twice weekly over a period of ten weeks. This session's group comprises ten men, all parents and all clad from head to toe in bright orange suits. They meet in a small, windowless room, the only 'decor' a wall-mounted whiteboard from which the men can take notes. But today there is no note taking because the discussion just keeps on flowing.

I am both moved and amazed at the depth of conversation taking place as each one shares his story. "I'm in a position right now where all I have is to put my faith in God because, you know, when it comes to my kids my hands are tied", a large, tattooed man says. Another continues, "Being here for me is about soul searching, finding myself, being thankful for all the good things in my life... I'm learning to be at peace with myself."

Each one speaks of transformation during his time in prison, and each of them expresses concern and anxiety about being released: "In here it's easy, it's when I get out – that's when my faith and spirituality will be tested." And someone else adds: "I'm glad I'm in here for a while. I want to get drug free and I can do that in here. But how do I tell my bros and family on the outside that I don't want to get into all that again?"

At this point the men offer advice, support and encouragement, and for good reason: recidivism rates here are high, and a lot of these men have been in and out of prison several times. This is their first parenting programme, however, and studies show that meaningful family ties can help to significantly reduce re-offending. As well as this type of group work, PB&J offers one to one support to each of the participants, helping them to prepare for release by having the necessary supports in place. This includes contacting schools and building up relationships with their children's teachers.

PB&J has also developed video technology in prisons and in schools so that parents in prison can meet teachers and be engaged in their children's education. At present only on offer in a limited number of schools due to funding, it is something that really appeals to Jesus: "I would love to have copies of my daughters' academic achievements", he tells me, "and if I had contact with the school counsellor, it would help to make sure that they are ok and getting the support they need. I'm still their dad, you know."

As the class draws to an end, I can't decide if I feel despair or hope. Programmes like Inside Out Dad are excellent, but the challenges of life on the outside are great, and I wonder how many of these men will manage to stay out of the criminal justice system. I am interrupted in my thoughts by Jesus as he summarises today's session: "God is love", he says, "and if you have love that's the main thing." Probably best to let Jesus have the last word.

## Welcome Back

Edward is 28, has been in and out of prison 6 times in his life and has recently been released after serving a 5 year sentence. I am unsure of the exact details of his crime, but I do know that a gun was involved. And he's offering me a lift. There's no other way I will make my next meeting (on the other side of Albuquerque) if I say no to Edward's offer, but I have only spent a couple of hours with him as part of a post-release anger management programme, and he has talked a lot about his anger during the session.

For some reason I hear myself saying yes to his kind offer, and as I get into his truck I push away the voice on my shoulder warning me not taking lifts from strangers, far less a known criminal. Having worked with teenagers for several years, I know that a car journey often provides a great way of engaging people in telling their story. You don't have to make eye contact, and there's a strange kind of freedom in being strapped into a small space together.

So I ask Edward about his life, and as he starts talking, right back at childhood, I find myself relaxing and feeling glad that our journey will take a good 30 minutes. His father was a violent man who was in and out of prison, and Edward never knew how his dad would react from one day to the next; whether he would be on the receiving end of a "well done, son" slap on the back or, more often, a punch in the face. Edward also watched his mother being beaten, and the home was a tense, unsafe environment to grow up in.

When Edward was 18 his dad committed suicide, probably as the result of an undiagnosed, and certainly untreated, mental health problem which had underpinned his violent and unpredictable behaviour. This for Edward was a turning point. Feeling a strange mix of relief and grief, the pain of all that he had experienced led him to get involved in a local gang. "My homies were like the family I never had" he tells me, referring to his fellow gang members. And unfortunately for Edward, this group of homies was into drugs.

Here follows a familiar story: Edward dropped out of school ("I wasn't a good student, and no one really missed me"), and started committing crimes in order to feed his drug habit. He served his first prison sentence at 18. In between periods of imprisonment, Edward met a girl, fell in love and fathered two children who are now 6 and 8. Despite adoring his children, he couldn't kick his drug habit nor the criminal behaviour (itself a kind of addiction according to Edward), and this eventually led to him serving the sentence which he has just completed.

The whole time we are talking, Edward has a song which he wrote while in prison playing on a continuous loop through his iPod. It's about his dad's suicide and then Edward's own life. He has called it *Gone*, and it expresses regret about all that has happened and offers an apology to his children and a promise that things will be different from now on. Listening to his story and hearing about how the in-prison PB&J parenting programme provided an opportunity to rebuild a relationship with his son and daughter, I feel optimistic for Edward. He knows that he has a long way still to go, but he has also learned that he can be a good father to his children.

As we arrive at my destination, Edward tells me about a new school programme that he has been invited to participate in. After a period of training he will be able to visit local schools and tell his story, encouraging young people to seek help rather than getting into drugs and crime. Edward is clearly excited, and I can't help wondering if this initiative had been around when he was at school whether his own story might have taken a whole different turn. We say our goodbyes, and I realise that I haven't had a lift from an ex-criminal but rather from a returning citizen. Welcome back, Edward.

## Virtually There

There's a flurry of pink darting down the corridor as Shania (9) and Shanika\* (11), sisters as indistinguishable as their names, rush to see who can get to mom first. Their mother is serving a five year sentence in Albion Correctional Facility, about 9 hours' drive away, but the girls have only travelled 45 minutes on the subway today. That's because they are "TeleVisiting" – interacting with and chatting to mom using video conferencing technology which connects the prison in the north east of the country to the Osborne Association's Brooklyn office.

Offering a wide range of services, the Osborne Association supports families affected by imprisonment throughout the State of New York. TeleVisits are available to individuals who complete an in-prison parenting programme: there's a dedicated member of staff whose role it is to make sure that mothers (and soon to be extended to fathers) are ready for such visits, as well as a help sheet written by mothers in prison to advise those new to TeleVisiting on what to expect and how best to interact with children of different ages. While an older child might sit and talk, younger ones get fidgety quickly, so both rooms are equipped with the same toys and books to facilitate interactive play.

Even the layout of the rooms is similar: from the brightly coloured sofa and cushions to the children's drawings on the wall, it is all set up to feel like mother and child are in the same room. And with a large screen projecting a good quality picture and decent sound, they virtually are.

Shania and Shanika each spend twenty minutes alone with mom, and at the end of the session they all talk together for around ten minutes. There's a prison worker in the room with their mother and an Osborne member of staff with the girls, but neither of these adults is seen on screen, and they would only intervene if necessary, to give a mother an idea for a game or to cajole a reluctant toddler, for example. For Shania and Shankia there is no need for any such guidance, as they are both happy to chat away with mom.

I ask each of them what they talk about. "School", they tell me. "I'm learning about Brazil", Shania goes on to say, "and I'm going to tell mom that it's the largest country in South America. I tell her about my friends too." Shanika adds, "It's not the same as being with her and touching her, but at least we can talk." She then giggles as she tells me, "Mom got a new hair cut the last time we did a Televisit, and we could see what it looks like."

TeleVisiting should of course never be a replacement for face to face meetings, but it is an excellent way of supplementing visits and facilitating contact when long distances make trips to prison difficult. For Shania and Shanika, these TeleVisits are essential. They last saw their mother in person over 2 years ago and may only be able to go to the prison once more before she is released, because the family simply cannot afford the cost of transportation and accommodation for that kind of journey. With TeleVisits they normally see their mother 2 to 3 times a month, which means they can develop and maintain a meaningful and positive relationship with her.

In New York State alone there are over 100,000 children just like Shania and Shanika with a parent in prison, and TeleVisiting is one way of helping them cope with their sense of loss and separation. Because of the stigma and trauma that often come with having a parent in prison, these children are vulnerable at school, and many need additional support to reach their academic potential. With this in mind, the Osborne Association is hoping that TeleVisiting might soon be extended to teachers so that incarcerated parents can meet their children's educators. I am curious to know what Shania and Shanika would make of this. "That'd be cool", Shanika responds, "and maybe then some teachers wouldn't be so hard on us." She quickly adds, "My teacher's really nice, but I know some who can be mean if they know you have a parent in prison."

Shanika's optimism is as infectious as her beaming smile, and I imagine a scene in which her mother can chat with her daughters' teachers about their progress; celebrating success and sharing concerns. It will take time and teacher training before this becomes routinely available, but I for one look forward to the day when teachers, parents in prison and their children can say "we're virtually there."

\* Names have been changed

## **Appendix 2: Chronological list of the organisations I visited and contacted:**

Outcare	<a href="http://www.outcare.com.au">www.outcare.com.au</a>
Hills Community Support Group	<a href="http://www.hcsg.com.au">www.hcsg.com.au</a>
VACRO	<a href="http://www.vacro.org.au">www.vacro.org.au</a>
The Bridge of Hope Foundation	<a href="http://www.bridgeofhopefoundation.org.au">www.bridgeofhopefoundation.org.au</a>
SHINE for Kids, Victoria	<a href="http://www.shineforkids.org.au">www.shineforkids.org.au</a>
Melbourne City Mission	<a href="http://www.melbournecitymission.org.au">www.melbournecitymission.org.au</a>
Office of Child Safety Commissioner, Victoria	<a href="http://www.kids.vic.gov.au">www.kids.vic.gov.au</a>
Corrections Victoria	<a href="http://www.justice.vic.gov.au">www.justice.vic.gov.au</a>
Department of Education and Early Childhood	<a href="http://www.education.vic.gov.au">www.education.vic.gov.au</a>
SHINE for Kids, New South Wales	<a href="http://www.shineforkids.org.au">www.shineforkids.org.au</a>
Community Works	<a href="http://www.communityworkswest.org">www.communityworkswest.org</a>
Sunset Youth Services	<a href="http://www.sunsetyouthservices.org">www.sunsetyouthservices.org</a>
PB&J Family Services	<a href="http://www.pbjfamilyservices.org">www.pbjfamilyservices.org</a>
State of New Mexico Children's Court Division	<a href="http://www.nmjustice.net">www.nmjustice.net</a>
Wings Ministry	<a href="http://www.wingsministry.org">www.wingsministry.org</a>
The Pennsylvania Prison Society	<a href="http://www.prisonssociety.org">www.prisonssociety.org</a>
Community Legal Services of Philadelphia	<a href="http://www.clsphila.org">www.clsphila.org</a>
National Resource Center on Children and Families of the Incarcerated	<a href="http://www.fcnetwork.org">www.fcnetwork.org</a>
The Osborne Association	<a href="http://www.osborneny.org">www.osborneny.org</a>
Hour Children	<a href="http://www.hourchildren.org">www.hourchildren.org</a>
Council of State Governments Justice Center	<a href="http://www.justicecenter.csg.org">www.justicecenter.csg.org</a>



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