

Support and Information for children affected by imprisonment

in brief

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Key points

- Every year in the UK, more children experience a parent's imprisonment than a parent's divorce.
- Prisoners' children suffer from many problems as a result of the imprisonment – problems which are significant and enduring.
- Talking to children and young people about imprisonment is not easy and is a significant source of stress for parents and carers.
- A number of resources are increasingly available to help explain imprisonment to children and to give children and young people the information they need.
- Examples of good practice internationally can help reduce the damage imprisonment causes to children and their families.

The impact of imprisonment

Every year in the UK, more children experience a parent's imprisonment than a parent's divorce. In Scotland, imprisonment affects an estimated 16,500 children annually.

Children of prisoners suffer from mental health problems up to three times the rate of other children. They are also at greater risk of substance misuse and of imprisonment themselves in later life. They are likely to have multiple care arrangements when a parent goes to prison, especially where a mother is imprisoned. They suffer from stigma, fear of disclosure, low self-esteem, and problems in school as well as increases in aggressive responses, health problems, and regressive behaviour. The impact on children is significant and enduring, equivalent to reactions of children whose parents have died.

Professor Kathleen Marshall, Scotland's Commissioner for Children and Young People, comments that children who have a parent taken to prison should receive information about where the parent is, unless this is against the child's interests. Her overriding concern is the need to take children's interests into account, consistent with the guidance under Article 3.1 of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, and indeed that this should take priority for any decision that affects them. The UN Committee on the Rights of the Child highlighted prisoners' children as a group in need of special attention.

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The need for information

For most young people, the only support and information they receive about the imprisonment is from their mother. Many parents choose not to tell children about the imprisonment of a family member, especially prior to sentence. Part of the problem with this is that children often realise what is happening themselves or hear about it from another source before they have the opportunity to understand about it or to ask questions. Parents and carers often try to protect children from the truth, but if the matter is reported in the press, the chances are very good that children will hear of it.

Younger children may not understand rules such as why prisoners cannot get up and play with them during visits while other people can, why prisoners may not be able to accept things their children have made for them, or why the prisoner can't come home with them:

“It’s very hard for him on visits though because she’s at that age where she’s just really found her feet and she wants to run around a lot. She wants Shaun to play catch and chase with her and he’s not allowed to move off his seat, it’s horrid, Claire gets upset. He’s not even

allowed to have any of the baby’s drawings and things, they have a play area there at the prison but he’s not allowed to go and see what she’s doing there, she does her little paintings for him and he can’t take them from her. To her it must be like her Daddy doesn’t want her drawings.”

Overall, children with a family member in prison need good care, emotional support, contact with the family member (where this is in the child’s interest), and an explanation of what is happening. Information on how to explain a family member’s imprisonment is an important priority for parents and carers. However, talking to children is difficult, especially about topics such as why the person is in prison, where they are, information about the offence, why daddy can’t put them to bed or why they can’t see mum every day, why daddy may not be allowed to see them, why prisons have different rules, and why daddy or mummy has to sit all the time during visits. This places additional strain on partners of prisoners who already suffer a number of negative impacts themselves.



What can help?

For these reasons, Families Outside has developed resources specifically for children and young people to help them understand what is happening when a family member is sent to prison. Feedback from the Scottish Prisoners’ Families Helpline and from teenagers with a family member in prison further emphasised the need for such a resource, as quotes from the DVD, *It’s No Holiday*, suggest:

“My big sister was there and there was obviously the police, my dad was sort of arguing and that so you could tell there was something going on... obviously we were really upset and we were just like what’s going on? And we never knew what was going to happen.”

“They said he was just going away on a wee holiday for a couple of month, that was basically it... like I knew he was in jail and all that, but they tried to sugar it all up for me, cos I was just a kid basically....”



Publications

A small number of books have been written specifically for children of imprisoned parents. These include publications from:

- Action for Prisoners’ Families (*Tommy’s Dad; Danny’s Mum; Finding Dad; Who’s Guilty?*) and the Ormiston Trust (*My Mum’s in Prison*) in England;
- Barnardo’s in Northern Ireland (*It’s a Tough Time for Everyone*);
- Humanitas in the Netherlands (translated into English); and
- Family and Corrections Network in North America (internet-based library)

Information for carers about how to discuss imprisonment with children is also available, such as from:

- Families Outside in Scotland;
- the Ormiston Trust (*What Shall I Tell the Children?*), Young Voice (*Parenting Under Pressure*), and Care for the Family (*'Daddy's Working Away'*) in England;
- New Zealand Prisoners' Aid and Rehabilitation Society; and
- Canadian Families and Corrections Network.

More general information is also available. Children 1st publishes a book called *The Huge Bag of Worries*, which encourages children to talk to someone about their problems. In England, the Lord Chancellor's Department published three leaflets aimed at children of parents in the midst of separation or divorce.

The need for targeted information

Feedback from families has shown that information is most helpful when it relates specifically to them – in other words to the correct age group in a way they can understand. Families Outside has just published its own resources for children and young people, drawing upon good practice from publications internationally while creating a version directly relevant and recognisable to people in Scotland. These resources include:

- a book for children up to age 11, entitled *Honest? Emma's story*, which includes notes for parents and carers;
- a book for young people age 12 and over entitled *What's the story? Jenny's Journey*, which includes definitions and findings from research alongside the narrative; and
- a children's area on the Families Outside web site to coincide with material from the books.

Additional ways to support children and young people

Publications offer an important means of supporting children and young people, but they are not the only means. Two projects from Action for Prisoners' Families specifically supported young people with a family member in prison. *Starting Where They Are* funded training on the needs of prisoners' families for YMCA staff already working as Pastoral Care Workers in schools. Use of existing staff from the YMCA avoided stigma and preserved confidentiality. The second project, the Young People's Support Service, consisted of a room within the Visitors' Centre at HMP Durham specifically for younger visitors. This allowed young people to self-refer to the service and enabled links with peers in similar circumstances and with support staff inside the prison. The support worker was also able to escort visitors into the prison who were too young to visit on their own.

A number of innovative projects in the United States offer support and therapy to prisoners' children. One programme in Oregon assigns an advocate to a child upon a parent's arrest. Support for parents then follows upon incarceration, including mandatory parenting classes and preparation for release.

In Scotland, the Lighthouse Foundation in Kilmarnock provides a children's worker for families affected by substance misuse as well as a qualified children's counsellor. Support includes a weekly girls' club as well as activities, parties, and holidays for a wider group. Children in need of more specialist support can be referred to the counsellor, who works with the entire family.

The Life/Time project in the Lothian & Borders Community Justice Authority offers a different type of support, namely through raising awareness in secondary schools of the impact of involvement in the criminal justice system generally. Coordinated by the Scottish Prison Service, Life/Time is a joint initiative between the SPS, police, fire service, the Scottish Court Service, the Red Cross, and Families Outside.

Earlier research has recommended conjugal and family visits as well as nursery and family units, parenting education, family counselling, and home leaves as a means of recognising and promoting the welfare of children affected by a parent's imprisonment. Private Family Visits will be discussed in more detail in a forthcoming publication from Families Outside.





Ways ahead for supporting children

The impact of a relative's imprisonment on children has serious and long-term implications. While some support is available, this is not comprehensive enough to combat the risk of current and future problems for these children, including future criminality.

Information is one way of reducing the impact of a family member's imprisonment and is an important priority for families. Mandatory Family Impact Statements at the point of custody would be another way of raising awareness of the impact of decisions on children. Such statements extend beyond what is currently available in Scotland through Social Enquiry Reports, especially if Statements were used in both remand and sentencing decisions.

The Scottish Government is involved in a series of initiatives under the programme, *Getting it right for every child* (GIRFEC). This programme promotes a shared approach with the aim of improving outcomes for all children and young people. The 2008 guide states that, for children, young people and their families, Getting it right for every child means:

- They will feel confident about the help they are getting;
- They understand what is happening and why;
- They have been listened to carefully and their wishes have been heard and understood;
- They are appropriately involved in discussions and decisions that affect them;
- They can rely on appropriate help being available as soon as possible; and
- They will have experienced a more streamlined and coordinated response from practitioners.

Children with a family member in prison are especially vulnerable and are therefore in particular need of such outcomes.



For additional information and references, please contact Families Outside.

Families Outside is the only national charity in Scotland that works solely to support the families of people involved in the criminal justice system. The core of our work is the Scottish Prisoners' Families Helpline, which receives almost 2,000 calls every year from families and the professionals who work with them.

We take an active role in supporting the work of locally-based service providers through information and advocacy and spend much of our time raising the profile of this issue through participation in a range of policy and development groups. We deliver training and undertake research and development independently and in partnership with other agencies. We work closely with the Scottish Prison Service, Scottish Government, Community Justice Authorities, and other statutory and voluntary bodies to achieve positive change for families affected by imprisonment.

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voicing the needs
of families affected
by imprisonment