

The Role of Schools in Supporting Families Affected by Imprisonment

By Sarah Roberts

in brief

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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.

(Quaker United Nations Office, Collateral Convicts: Children of incarcerated parents, 2012: 51)

Background

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 three 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?

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Research

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 listening to children speak about their experiences of parental imprisonment, I began to realise that their stories fell into one of two general categories. This is best conveyed in the following 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

"When there's a parent reaching out, most teachers are happy to engage with that parent regardless of the circumstances."
PB&J staff member, United States



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 and 200,000 children in England and Wales who every year experience the imprisonment of a parent. 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.



During my time in Australia and the United States, I visited charities and NGOs which offer wide-ranging support to schools as they engage with imprisoned parents and their children. This includes teacher training, in-school counselling and support groups, teacher contact with imprisoned parents (e.g. telephone, written correspondence and video-conferencing), in-prison homework clubs, school curriculum input, information and advocacy support for carers, as well as information for children affected.

"I like being able to speak with my son's teacher and be able to help with his education." Imprisoned mother, Australia

My research highlighted the considerable role that the voluntary sector plays in terms of advocacy and mediation with what are often extremely vulnerable families. 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 organisations I visited, feeling that their input aided the school's support of the young person rather than added to their workload.

“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 school group facilitator, Australia



Key Findings

Among a wealth of material and examples of practice, the key findings from my research emerged as follows:

- Children affected by imprisonment are extremely vulnerable and in need of specific attention and support.
- The trauma of a parent’s arrest, compounded by a sense of shame, makes it very difficult for children to learn and may cause them to disengage from school and other systems of support.
- Schools often do not know which children are affected by imprisonment. There is no formal process of information sharing, and families affected are often reluctant to tell the school.
- If children are recognised and supported, they are more likely to succeed and fulfil their potential at school and beyond.
- Specific interventions such as group work, mentoring and counselling can reassure children affected that they are not alone and can provide essential coping strategies.
- Teachers can be instrumental in helping children see beyond their immediate circumstances and can also help them navigate their way through challenging situations with their sense of self intact.

- Schools can be a place of support, and a gateway to other agencies, for the carers of children affected by imprisonment.
- A parent in prison can still play an important role in supporting their child’s education. Children do better at school when significant adults in their lives are involved in their education.
- Prisoners are less likely to re-offend if they have a meaningful relationship with their children and in order for any relationship with a child to be truly meaningful it must include his or her school life.

“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), United States



Summary 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. 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. 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; a lack of integrated service delivery quite simply puts children’s futures in jeopardy.

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



Summary and proposals for development ...cont

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:

- 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. Personal & Social Education, 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.

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.



For the full report 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. We work to mitigate the effects of imprisonment on children and families - and consequently to reduce the likelihood of reoffending - through support and information for families and for the people who work with them.



Support and Information
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voicing the needs
of families affected
by imprisonment