



In brief...

In their own words: listening to the experts by experience

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Key Points

- Hearing directly from young people with experience of parental imprisonment can have a powerful impact on conference delegates and can change the perceptions of policy makers. Youth participation should therefore be a key element of conference programmes that address parental imprisonment.
- With the right support, speaking publicly about their experience can increase the confidence of young people affected by imprisonment and help them feel they are being listened to and making a difference. Group facilitators have a key role to play in ensuring children feel safe and supported.
- Building relationships of trust between youth delegates, and with group facilitators, is key to ensuring children feel well supported.
- Language need not be a barrier for young people from different countries when talking about their experiences.
- Pre-conference preparation is essential to ensure young people feel safe, confident and supported throughout.

Background

Children of Prisoners Europe (COPE), the only pan-European network for children with imprisoned parents, is committed to involving children with experience of parental imprisonment in being agents of change and ensuring their voices are heard. This is underpinned by the 2018 Council of Europe recommendations, which state that children with imprisoned parents must be treated with respect for their rights under the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC). The 2019 COPE conference in Krakow, "Bridging the gap: Boosting the visibility, voices and cross-sectoral support of children who have a parent in prison", included a pre-conference youth workshop and a conference presentation from youths. Twelve young people, from five European countries, attended the workshop, ranging in age from 9 to 19. Seven of the young people spoke in the conference session. This briefing summarises the workshop and conference session and highlights the learning from this initiative. Most importantly, it gives voice to an extraordinary group of young people - an estimated 2.1 million children across Europe - who have something important to say in shaping reform for this often-overlooked group.

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Overview of workshop session

a) Session 1: Getting to know each other (60 minutes)

Given the diverse nature of the group, both in age and nationality, and limitations of time, creating a positive and open atmosphere from the start was crucial. Participants, facilitators, representatives of the organisations accompanying the young people, and translators all sat in a circle, participating together in activities, which created an ethos of support and commonality. The purpose of the youth forum was made clear: to share coping strategies with other young people with experience of a parent in prison, and to prepare a 30-minute presentation for the COPE conference. Simple introductions encouraged everyone to speak without having to reveal anything personal. This was followed by some 'getting to know you' activities, all unrelated to having a parent in prison, designed to help participants get to know, and feel comfortable with, one another.

The purpose of this opening session was to forge relationships between the young people through fun activities that did not require them to divulge any personal information about their imprisoned parent. The young people responded well to this and by the end of the session were interacting more naturally with one another, despite the linguistic challenges. Participants were then invited to create a group agreement and decided on: taking turns; being respectful of other people's words and stories; taking breaks; and being kind. A short refreshments break allowed them to continue getting to know each other in a more informal way.

b) Session 2: Having a parent in prison (90 minutes)

By this stage, the young people felt relaxed with one another, setting a positive tone for the next session which comprised activities focused explicitly on having a parent in prison:

i) "We're all in this together" – participants were invited to say, "My name is ..., and my mum/dad is/was in prison" by way of establishing their common experience. This was helpful, as it highlighted that having a parent in prison is not something to feel ashamed of; for one or two, it was the first time they had shared this information openly.

ii) Emotional 'check-in' – participants were issued with green, amber, and red cards and were asked to hold up the card(s) that matched their feelings. They were then invited to share, e.g. "I chose green because I'm excited to be here, and red because I miss my dad."

iii) Complete the sentence – a set of cards (white for those with prison-related statements, and green for non-prison-related) were placed on the floor. Participants were invited to pick up a card, read it out and complete the sentence. This gave them a choice about whether to focus on a prison-related topic or something completely different. Prison-related responses included:

- a. Prison staff can help me by... "giving me good information"; "being friendly".
- b. Prison visits would be better if... "families could have a private room"; "the visits were longer".
- c. The thing that helps me most with having a parent in prison is... "thinking of the happy times I've had with them... and doing something that takes your mind off it"; "not thinking about what [my parent] has done".
- d. The thing I would most like to change about prison is... "the stigma that children will follow in their parents' footsteps".
- e. Having a parent in prison is hard because... "you don't trust that parent"; "it makes it really hard with friends"; "other people might not understand".
- f. If I could speak to a judge at the court, I would say... "when will [my parent] be home?"; "will they get proper support and help when they are released?"
- g. Teachers can help me with having a parent in prison by... "NOT always asking if I am ok"; "agreeing with me a signal for a day when I don't want to talk about it"; "warning me if school topics might be upsetting".
- h. Police can help me by... "not expecting me to do something bad"; "not arresting someone in the house in front of children".

iv) Agree / disagree – statements were read out, and participants stood along a line, according to how strongly they agreed or disagreed. Participants were then invited to share why they chose to stand where they did. Most of the statements revealed a range of opinions. Additional comments to the statements (in bold) included:

a. It is helpful to know other young people with a parent in prison

- "It's nice being in a small group, rather than in a huge group."
- "It can also make it harder, especially if someone else's parent gets out before yours, or if someone is seeing their dad regularly and you can't see yours".

b. It's easy to talk to a teacher about a parent in prison (NB: no one agreed with this)

- "Teachers don't have the right training."
- "They might judge you."
- "It's not good to talk to teachers because they don't understand what you're going through."
- "It's hard if they treat you differently, and if they keep asking you if you are ok, and that can stress you out more."

c. Prison visits are fun

- "I don't like the officers."
- "In the visits, my parents talk about money a lot, and it's difficult for me to have time to talk to my dad."
- "When it comes to the end of the visit it's sad because ... they don't come home."

d. Prison can help some people

- "It can help some people because they can reflect but at the same time there can be bad things happening in prison..."
- "Sometimes prison is not the answer - they might need help for what is going on in their minds."

e. It's better when you are told your parent is 'away' rather than knowing the truth that they are in prison – "It depends on the offence."

- "Sometimes the truth causes issues."
- "You should have a choice as to how much you want to know."
- "It's better if you tell [children] [their parent] is in prison because then you can talk about it, and if they don't tell you and then you find out you might lose your trust in family. If you keep secrets ... they are always going to find out."

f. I should be able to see my parent in prison whenever I want

- "It's not always good to visit."
- "It's good to be able to say no to a visit."
- "... It's the child's need just to see if the parent is alive, and it doesn't matter if the parent doesn't want that, ... it's the parent's obligation to support the child."

g. Children should be allowed to speak to the judge before he / she makes a decision about sending their parent to prison

- "This could put children in a very difficult position."
- "Children should influence what the contact with their parent will be."
- "Children should be part of sentence planning."

v) What I really want to say to you – in this activity, participants chose an object from the centre of the room that represented a professional in their lives and then said whatever they wanted to that person. Responses included:

a. To a teacher:

- "I was sad."
- "Can I leave when I feel down?"
- "Can I talk to you?"

b. To a judge:

- "When is my dad going to come out?"
- "How often can I see him?"
- "Can you tell me some details?"

c. To a prison officer:

- "Do you need to be so mean?"
- "Why do you lock people up?"
- "Don't think you're better than me."

d. To the police:

- "Do you have to be so violent?"
- "Why do you have this job?"
- "Thank you for doing your job."

e. To my parent in prison:

- "Why did you make that choice?"
- "Will you ever change?"
- "I know you aren't the person they believe you are."
- "How do you feel about us?"

f. Someone from a charity that supports children affected by imprisonment:

- "Would you come with us to the prison if we were scared?"
- "Thank you!"
- "Can you please help my dad?"

g. Social worker:

- "Am I safe?"
- "Do you think I should see my dad?"

h. Health professional:

- "Do you think if I talk to you, I'll be able to deal with it better?"
- "You shouldn't have believed that I was ok."
- "If I was feeling down, how would you help me?"

By the end of session two, all of the young people had contributed to some degree to the activities and had been able to express their views related to their own experience of parental imprisonment. The young people listened to one another and had the confidence to disagree whilst remaining respectful of each other's views.

c) Session 3: preparation for the conference (30 minutes)

Guided by the facilitators, the young people agreed a format for the presentation at the conference:

- 1. Introductions** – saying their name, where they are from, one interesting fact about themselves, and who in their family is / was in prison.
- 2. Agree / disagree** – re-enacting this activity using a selection of the responses noted in session 2iv.
- 3. Complete the sentence** – reading out a response from the activity noted in session 2iii.
- 4. Hopes for the future** – the young people wanted to end their session on a positive note about their hopes and dreams for the future and an affirmation of the work of conference delegates in supporting them. Their hopes included:
 - “That when my father is out, he will change his decisions and be better in life.”
 - “That we won’t need a child up here ever again to tell you guys what we need.”
 - “That politicians and governments give support to children. It’s not a trend. It’s always existed and it will always exist.”
 - “That people will [...] treat us like everyone else.”
 - “You give us hope because you want to make a change.”

Conference session

The conference session lasted around 30 minutes and was very positively received by delegates who reported that it was powerful and meaningful. The young people benefited from a preparation session during the morning of the conference, as this gave them time to practice what they would say. Notable in the conference session was the fact that all the young people who participated felt safe and supported; they had prepared what they would say and knew the format of the session. This meant they were able to convey their views confidently and without any element of surprise. The feedback from delegates was overwhelmingly positive; the confidence and eloquence of the young people was noted and appreciated, as was their bravery in sharing their stories and their insights into what needs to change.

Conclusion

Although COPE’s first youth forum involved a relatively small number of young people, its impact was profound. The young people said it helped them to feel confident about speaking publicly, and conference delegates reported that it was helpful hearing directly from those with lived experience. Despite the limited time and the language barriers, it was a very meaningful experience for all involved. In conclusion, well-planned and supported youth representation should be a central element of conferences regarding children with imprisoned parents.

References

<https://childrenofprisoners.eu/campaign-2019/>

Council of Europe (2018) Recommendation CM/Rec(2018)5 of the Committee of Ministers to member States concerning children with imprisoned parents [online], available from: https://search.coe.int/cm/Pages/result_details.aspx?ObjectId=09000016807b3175

<https://childrenofprisoners.eu/events/>

Families Outside is the only national charity that works solely to support the families of people affected by imprisonment in Scotland. Our purpose is to improve outcomes for children and families affected by imprisonment so they can live lives free from stigma and disadvantage.

For information and support:

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