



Guidelines for Working with Children who have a 'Family' Member in Prison

January 2009

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The current situation

The term 'family' is not restricted to biological family members. It may be a parent or person with an influential role for children i.e. siblings, close family friend, step-parents etc.

The information and advice given in this document uses as its base five key sources:-

1. Working with Children of Prisoners' Resource book' (1998), Save the Children.
2. Working with Children and Families of Prisoners' (2007), Ormiston.
3. 'Policy for the Education of Children with a Parent or Close Relative in Prison' (2002), Gloucestershire County Council.
4. 'Guidelines for Working with Children who have a Family Member in Prison' (date not published), Slough Borough Council.
5. 'Children of Offenders Review' (2007), Department for Children, Schools and Families & Ministry of Justice.

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Introduction

It is estimated that, in 1997, the mothers and fathers of more than 125,000 children were sent to prison (Save the Children Fund Year, 1998). These children have done nothing wrong themselves, so they are invisible in the school system and staff may only find out through the local paper, from other parents or through general gossip.

However, evidence suggests that these children are seriously disadvantaged in that they are likely to have problems at home and school that mean they fail to reach their full educational potential.

For many of these children the impact of their parents' imprisonment can be wide ranging. When they have to move home suddenly, they are losing the security of their known environment and friendships or they may have to go into care if both parents are unavailable to care for them. There may be a significant drop in their family incomes if the imprisoned parent was the main breadwinner. Children may have additional responsibilities for other family members and have to cope with additional domestic burdens which could both impact on schoolwork. Some parents decide not to explain to their children where the other parent has gone, but they still share in the loss of that parent and the domestic turmoil. The child may be very aware and upset by the change in the remaining parent who is likely to be under stress and may be more short-tempered or less emotionally available for the children. All these factors are likely to affect the child's presentation at school in some way whether through their behaviour, their ability to concentrate or their peer relationships and the more aware school staff can be of the issues involved for the child, the more chances that child has of continuing to achieve and thrive at school.

These guidelines have been developed to highlight the key issues for those children with a 'family' member in prison and the impact of this experience on their school life, so that staff can be better informed and therefore sensitive to the individual needs of this group of children. A caring and understanding staff group can help to provide the stability and continuity children in this situation really need.

Aims of the Guidelines

- To provide information and guidance for those working with children who have a 'family' member in prison.
- To raise awareness and understanding of the needs of children with a 'family' member in prison.
- To promote social inclusion and equal opportunities.
- To develop a consistent approach and good practice across Oxfordshire Local Authority.

Every Child Matters & The Children Act 2004

The Children Act 2004 provided the legislation to put in place the strategy for improving children's lives described in the Government Plan, Every Child Matters – Change for Children (2003). For local authorities to build their services around the needs of children and young people they have had to change from discrete education and social services departments to children's services' authorities led by a Director of Children's Services. Every Child Matters calls for improvement in opportunities and outcomes for children through services which:

- Ensure all children can be healthy, stay safe, enjoy and achieve, make a positive contribution and achieve economic well-being.
- Provide more opportunities for all and narrow the gaps in provision.
- Support parents, carers and families.
- Deliver a shift to prevention, early identification and intervention.
- Are integrated and personalised.

Barriers to Achievement in the Every Child Matters Outcomes for Children of Prisoners

Everyone working with children and young people should be aware of the barriers which may prevent children of prisoners attaining good outcomes as set out in Every Child Matters. Ormiston (2007) suggested the following list of barriers which, while not exhaustive, do reflect the experiences of many children with a 'family' member in prison.

1. Barriers to being healthy

- If a parent receives a prison sentence, they are immediately removed from family life. This results not only in feelings of separation and loss but often a dramatic change of relationships within the family.
- The child may be losing their childhood through taking on care responsibilities at home.
- The child's carer may experience isolation, stress or health difficulties and, as a result, the child's needs may not be fully met.
- The child may experience the loss of friends and familiar surroundings through moving house, changing schools.
- The child may lack opportunities for play or may choose to avoid others by staying indoors rather than playing outside.
- Fear and anxiety increases the likelihood of mental health problems and stress-related illness.
- Visiting prison can be very stressful and physically exhausting especially for children.
- Children can feel alone and need support to recognise and rationalise their own feelings.
- There are issues of self-esteem for the whole family. Low self-esteem or belief can potentially affect the way family members look after themselves.

2. Barriers to staying safe

- Being bullied and becoming a bully are significant issues for children of school age.
- The embarrassment factor or stigma leads some parents to decide not to inform school, leaving children vulnerable and isolated.
- Families can experience unwelcome attention from the media and the local community.
- An increased level of stress may mean potential lack of supervision of children as the parents/carers have to adjust to changed circumstances.
- In some communities/families, crime is seen as a normal part of everyday life which may present a risk to children.
- Families and their associates may be involved with drug or alcohol abuse or experience issues such as domestic violence.

2. Barriers to enjoying and achieving

- The stigma of imprisonment as the family often has to deal with negative reactions.
- The worry and anxiety which prevents children's relaxation/ recreation.
- Regressive behaviour which makes school difficult for the child at any age.
- The family income may drop resulting in changes in diet, housing, holidays and opportunities for recreation.

3. Barriers to making a positive contribution

- Lack of self-esteem and confidence – children can become withdrawn and avoid situations where they will be the centre of attention.
- Stigma by association – children may be excluded from group activities, hobbies, or friendship groups because of their parents/carers crime.
- A lack of understanding about changes in children's behaviours might bring a negative response rather than encouragement and support that a child may need.

4. Barriers to achieving economic well-being

- Carers may experience reduced income.
- The cost of transport for families visiting prison and/or getting access to local services.
- A drop in income causes extra stress, problems with accommodation, debt and meeting the cost of visits.

Confidentiality

Guidelines on the sharing of confidential information should be laid down in existing school policies. Only those who need to know should be told and all information received and passed on should be treated as confidential. This is essentially in order to avoid gossip and rumour spreading around the school as well as to ensure that the child and family are not exposed to the wider community. There are particular issues surrounding confidentiality for a prisoner's child that may need to be taken into account by the school.

- Prisoner's children and their carers consistently stress that confidentiality is the key issue for them to avoid stigma and discrimination.
- The communication and relationship between home and school is vital in order to effectively discuss what has been shared with the children and what the parent/carer is comfortable sharing with the school.
- Within the Criminal Justice Systems, some people's names and addresses are saleable commodities and prisoner's families are vulnerable to intimidation, threats and pressures from inside as well as outside prison.
- Some prisoner's children will be the subject of Child Protection Measures made by a court which stipulate that the child should not be named.

However, confidentiality in school can never be absolute but on a need to know basis. The systems and policies that your school has in place for dealing with Child Protection issues can be usefully drawn on with the children of prisoners. One approach is to inform all relevant staff that a child may be experiencing difficulties at school owing to changed family circumstances. This may also include informing outside agencies, with parental permission. It may be helpful to state that the parent is no longer at home, however, staff do not necessarily need to know that the parent is in prison. This is a question of professional judgement according to the individual needs of the child, carer, teachers and school. In some situations, only key staff who are actually there to help improve the situation such as the Pastoral Head or Head of Year, need to know the specific circumstances of the child. However, informing some or all permanent staff but excluding supply teachers and support staff, may deprive some members of the school of useful information. This may lead to resentment if they find out through other means. Again, this is a matter of professional judgement.

School Records

- Be careful about what is committed to writing and in what context.
- Be non-judgemental, record only facts that all potential readers need to know.
- Some concerns may be better conveyed orally than recorded, which may risk labelling the child.
- Computerised records are over accessed except in cases such as the At Risk Register where access is restricted.
- The parent in prison has a statutory right to receive copies of all information sent out about their child.

Confiding

For a young child, the teacher is often the most important person in their life outside home and children will often confide sensitive, personal details about their family life to the class teacher.

Older pupils have a very different relationship with school and the many staff who teach them. They are less likely to confide in a teacher spontaneously. If they wish to raise sensitive issues with a member of staff they are more likely to know who they want to talk to. This person may not be their class teacher. Alternatively, a class teacher can spend time and effort referring a student to another staff member or available service such as counselling, only for the student to fail to attend or return to talk to them. If a pupil raises issues concerning imprisonment of a 'family' member, the following responses are helpful:-

- Allow the pupil to express him or herself, listen carefully, acknowledge what is said, provide reassurance, and agree an action with the child. Deciding whether to encourage the child to talk further in the presence of other pupils in the classroom or whether to offer support in a different context is a matter of individual judgement. Judgements will vary according primarily to the need of the child, the responsibility to the pupil and the school environment. The teacher's own experience and preference should also be taken into consideration. As with carers, it is important for teachers to make themselves available and give children opportunities to talk alone with them or out of hearing of other pupils and staff.

Who to Inform – Need to Know

If a child does confide in a teacher, it is important to acknowledge their situation and be clear with them about who needs to be told in order to support them. The teacher should try to negotiate and agree with the child what steps may need to be taken. The following factors will contribute to any decision-making process.

- The child's individual needs.
- The existing relationship between teacher and child.
- The carer's wishes (where appropriate).
- School policy.

Role of a Designated Teacher or Member of Staff

It may be helpful to have a designated teacher or member of staff who is the named person for those children who are in the Looked After System or Child Protection. There may be issues that overlap. The designated person should have received training in dealing with sensitive issues and liaising with other agencies. [The designated member of staff would benefit from having access to supervision and debriefing support.](#) The level of input and support given to a child may be determined by whether or not a family chooses to tell the school that someone is in prison. The designated person would:

- Liaise with other relevant staff on a need to know basis.
- Liaise with the family and/or other agencies as appropriate to establish the needs of the child.
- Keep the Head teacher fully informed.
- Monitor the academic progress of the child and arrange additional support if needed.
- Act as an advocate for the child.
- Ensure that children new to the school have a smooth and welcoming induction.
- Ensure that the child has a member of staff they can talk to.
- Attend any relevant training.
- Act as an advisor for other staff and governors on issues relevant to the education of the children.
- Keep appropriate, up to date records (see Confidentiality section).

This role may also be applicable within other agencies working with families and children of prisoners for example a named person could be identified within a children centre.

Awareness of School Staff – The Emotional Impact

Children often internalise these feelings with the resultant loss of self-esteem and associated anxiety and depression.

Manifestations can include:-

- Bedwetting
- Nightmares
- Temper tantrums
- Aggressive behaviour
- Withdrawal
- Refusing to go to school

These changes may begin or become more apparent in relation to any one of a number of stages relating to imprisonment such as:-

- The arrest of a 'family' member
- Finding out about the imprisonment of a 'family' member
- A visit to a 'family' member in prison
- Special events involving their 'family' member in prison, for example their birthday, mother's day or father's day
- A home visit by a 'family' member from prison
- The release of a 'family' member from prison.

In particular, teachers report that changes in behaviour and performance become more acute around the time of a prison visit. Teachers report observing the following changes in pupils with a 'family' member in prison.

- Moodiness
- Aggressiveness

- Chattering
- Bullying
- Difficulty with peers
- Appearing upset
- Appearing withdrawn
- Showing a lack of concentration
- Showing a lack of interest in work
- Antagonism towards authority figures

However, for some children the removal of a 'family' member to prison may be beneficial and both behaviour and performance in the classroom may indeed improve.

Additional Fears and Anxiety

As well as the feelings of grief and loss experienced by a bereaved child, children of prisoners may have additional anxieties. They may fear that:-

- The other parent might also be taken away.
- Other people will find out.
- They will be bullied.

Children, who are not visiting the 'family' member in prison and have no access to accurate information about prison, can feel very anxious about what is happening to their imprisoned 'family' member and base their ideas of prison on what they have seen or heard in films or on TV. Agencies working with children and families affected by imprisonment recommend that adults tell children what is happening at the earliest possible stage. However, whether to tell a child when and how is the concern of the family. Common explanations given to children include, he's working away on an oil rig or joined the army, she's in hospital or on holiday, they've gone home to visit the extended family overseas, he's at college.

Occasionally children from the same family are told different things for example the eldest is told the truth, the younger child a lie and the youngest nothing at all. Children including the very young can sense tension and are aware of changes. Lack of information generally causes anxiety and fear. What is imagined may cause more worry than the whole truth would. Children who know what has happened may be reluctant to talk about the imprisonment even inside their own families. They may have been told not to mention it to anyone or might feel too ashamed to talk about it. Talking about it may even have been met with adverse responses.

Classroom Management

For any child experiencing difficulty in his or her home life a teacher in the classroom offers a stable, secure and consistent environment. A classroom which operates positive behaviour expectations and a heightened awareness of the class' emotional wellbeing will enable all pupils to feel valued and safe.

Maintaining the usual classroom routines is helpful although the teachers should also be sensitive to events likely to have a significant effect on a pupil's ability to cope. It is important not only for the child concerned but for other pupils that the teacher is seen to be fair.

Teachers will need to make individual assessments as to whether educational tasks and classroom organisation should be adapted to cater for the specific needs of such a pupil, for example, in the case of a disruptive pupil, imposing discipline without offering some kind of support, may simply result in a further deterioration in behaviour. This does not mean making too many allowances but trying to understand the causes, being sensitive to the situation when seeking practical solutions.

Children in the Same Family

All children, including those with the same family have different needs. There may be a number of children for a family affected by imprisonment who attend the same school. In the case of twins or step-brothers and sisters, they may even be in the same class. In such circumstances it is important not to assume that the children's needs are the same. An individual approach needs to be taken for each child. The presence of siblings may also mean that an older child has increased care responsibility to home. This may affect punctuality, attendance and the ability to deliver homework on time.

Basic Principles

It is clear that each situation is individualised, therefore, there is no one right response or approach to a child affected by imprisonment. However, the following have been identified as useful guiding principles:-

- See the child as an individual with individual needs.
- Be non-judgemental. The child has not committed a crime.
- Avoid treating the child as a victim or being over protective.
- Acknowledge the child's own preferences.
- Don't ask about the crime.

Impact on the child - The Emotional Impact

As with bereavement, a prisoner's child will have lost someone very close to them and they experience a range of similar emotions and reactions.

- Shock – Shock can take the form of a physical pain or numbness but more often manifests in apathy and withdrawal, uncharacteristically calm or angry. Children may become quiet and compliant and be seen to be coping well and giving no trouble.

- Denial – Denial can last for hours, weeks or even longer. No loss is acknowledged so the child is protecting him or herself. This distortion of the truth can create more complications for the future.
- Mixed emotions – Children may feel they are ‘different’ because of the unexpected waves of strong emotions that surge through them over which they sometimes feel little control. They can often feel the urge to keep going over what has happened trying to find reasons.
- Anger – At the person who has let them down, family members for not stopping the chain of events, the police, the courts, school for not understanding and directionless anger.
- Depression – Emptiness, the pain of loss, the feelings of lack of self-worth and loss of confidence.
- Guilt – As they assume responsibility for contributing to the behaviours which led to the imprisonment of their ‘family’ member.
- Anxiety about the changes in new responsibilities that are taking place and the loneliness and isolation they may experience.

All these feelings may be felt by a bereaved child but the school is usually informed of a death and the child can be supported. The prisoner’s child may experience similar emotional turmoil but in a situation which can also bring stigma, shame and secrecy.

Information and Guidance for Prison Visits and Attendance Issues

- Un-convicted male prisoners (on remand) are entitled to at least three visits a week. Once convicted they are entitled to a minimum of two visits per month, with additional visits earned through good behaviour. There is always great pressure on visiting facilities at weekends. This means that some visits will be booked for weekdays resulting in absence from school. Convicted prisoners may be located a considerable distance from home.
- Making bookings for visits is often very difficult, particularly if there are language problems, a child may have to stay at home to support this process for example making phone calls.
- Most prisons do not allow visitors to take personal possessions in with them. Children’s drawings and school reports can be sent in by post but collages and models will not be allowed even if posted.
- Children are searched entering prisons including a rub down search and they have to pass a dog trained to detect drugs. This may be frightening for some children.

- Visits usually last between 30 minutes and two hours. Sitting across a table in the prison visiting room for the duration of a visit can be difficult for all involved.
- Teachers report that the performance and behaviour of children of prisoners frequently become more erratic around the time of a prison visit.
- Time off for children to visit a prison can be a difficult request for parents to make. Staff need to be sensitive and take care not to allow pressure of school attendance issues to compromise a relationship of trust.
- Prison visits should be recorded as authorised absence.
- When a pupil has previously shown few attendance problems, suddenly begins to miss school or a pattern of regular absences begin, it is possible that the child is at court or prison visiting, the child is supporting a parent or sibling, school has become difficult for emotional reasons.
- The school may wish to involve the Education Social Worker or the related organisations in order to organise support for pupils who are having difficulties with school attendance.
- A sympathetic approach is appropriate, but care should be taken to ensure that pupils do not become disadvantaged twice; at home through the loss of the family member and a school through the loss of education. Every effort should be made to enable the child to achieve at school and if school is missed, action taken to prevent any loss of opportunity.
- The Assisted Prison Visit Unit deals with claims for travel expenses for people visiting relatives in prison.
- Many prisons have extensive websites providing detailed information about visiting a prison, including virtual tours, contact details for the Family Liaison Service and information regarding Special Family Visits.

Release

All adult prisoners released from sentences of 12 months or more are placed under the supervision of a Probation Officer for at least a short time after release. Any major concerns about the readjustment process after release may be referred to the local probation office by the school or the Youth Offending Service for up to 18 year olds. However, if the school has any doubts about the safety of the child, the child protection procedure as set out by the Local Safeguarding Board should be implemented. If there are any doubts, the Local Authority named person should be a source of support.

Useful Contacts:

[All are a source of supportive materials; leaflets; additional and specific contact details; training available and resources]

- Action for Prisoners' Families
www.prisoners'families.org.uk
- Citizens Advice Bureau
www.adviceguide.org.uk
- HM Prison Service
www.hmprisonservice.gov.uk
- KIDS VIP
0207 582 2679
annettabennet@aol.com
- Ormiston Children and Families Trust
01473 724517
www.ormiston.org
- Prisoners' Families and Friends
www.prisonersfamiliesandfriends.org.uk
0808 808 3444
- Prisoners' Families Helpline
www.prisonersfamilieshelpline.org.uk
0808 808 2003
- SCIE Guidance
www.scie.org.uk
- Thames Valley Partnership: Family Matters
01844 202001
admin@thamesvalleypartnership.org.uk
- The Save the Children Fund
www.savethechildren.org.uk
0207 703 5400

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'Working with Children & Families of Prisoners' Ormiston (2007)

'Working with Children of Prisoners: A Resource for Teachers' (1998), Save the Children Fund