



COPING in Schools

Children of Prisoners, Interventions and Mitigations to Strengthen Mental Health

COPING What is it?

The COPING project was a child-centred research study conducted in four European countries: the UK, Germany, Romania and Sweden from 2010-12. The project aimed to identify children with imprisoned parents, their needs, their resilience, and their vulnerability to mental health problems. The project carried out over 1000 interviews with children aged 7-17 with an imprisoned parent, and parents/carers across the four countries. Smaller groups of children and parents took part in longer, more in-depth interviews to explore in greater detail the impact of parental imprisonment and the support services available to the family. Consultations were also held with other stakeholders within each country including prison staff, non-governmental organisations (NGOs), social workers, care-givers and imprisoned parents. Healthcare and community based services already in existence were also identified and put into a database.

COPING Recommendations

A number of recommendations were made based on COPING's research findings. They cover the following five topics:

1. Child-friendly Criminal Justice Systems
2. Maintaining Contact with the Parent in Prison
3. Advice and Support to Parents, Care Givers and Children
4. The Role of the School
5. Public Awareness and Policy Recognition

The 'Role of the School' brought together recommendations about how to strengthen the ability of schools, not only to help children cope emotionally with parental imprisonment, but also to prevent bullying and stigmatisation.

COPING workshops explored the practical challenges and difficulties faced by schools and the policy changes necessary for schools to participate more fully in the lives of children of prisoners.

COPING The Role of My School

The COPING Project, alongside findings from earlier research, has identified schools as being well placed to provide support to children with a parent in prison (SCIE 2008; Morgan et al 2011). There

are numerous ways in which schools can prepare themselves to take on this role. Having empathy for children in this position and being aware of the challenges they face is crucial.

Children of imprisoned parents may face particular issues as a result of their parent's imprisonment. They are likely to:

- be at significantly greater risk of suffering mental health difficulties
- take on additional responsibilities including acting as young carers while their parent is in prison
- face bullying and stigmatisation where the fact of parental imprisonment becomes public knowledge
- find the transition from junior to secondary school more challenging following the arrest and imprisonment of a parent
- experience negative effects on performance at school, at least in the short term.

Children value trusting and caring relationships with teachers, being able to receive sensitive and confidential support, and staff understanding what it is like to be a child coping with a parent in prison (Morgan et al 2011). Indeed, favourable school experiences have also been found to reduce the effects of stressful home environments (Rutter, 1979; Werner, 1990; Werner & Smith 1982 in Masten et al 1990).

Since schools are the one institution that almost all children regularly attend they are, in theory, ideally positioned to offer this support. Schools can also play an important role in protecting children from stigma or bullying and in supporting them academically, for example through homework clubs or tutoring.

Identifying children affected by parental imprisonment

However, COPING found that these potential contributions were not always realised because:

- schools are often unaware of the existence of children of prisoners, their experiences, life changes and needs.
- information about the parent's imprisonment is not shared with professionals, notably teachers.
- parents are reluctant to inform the school because they fear that disclosure will automatically prompt scrutiny from outside agencies.

It is important that information about the parent's imprisonment is shared with teachers, primarily because these professionals:

- can help parents/carers gain insight into the child's behaviour, especially if it is problematic.
- assist in supporting the child.
- tackle bullying behaviour to improve overall outcomes.

Schools need to be sympathetic and show an awareness of the needs of children of prisoners in order to encourage parents to have the confidence to share this information. This is particularly key with regards school absences, with teachers and school staff ideally placed to urge parents to be honest about absences due to prison visits; discourage the insistence on secrecy by highlighting the detrimental impact on children; and reassure parents that disclosure will not automatically prompt scrutiny from outside agencies.

Training

Consultations with schools and social workers highlighted a desire for greater familiarity with the experiences of children of prisoners, such as prison visiting procedures, to enable them better to provide support. These stakeholders also indicated that they would welcome guidance on how to engage children in conversation around the subject of imprisonment, suitable topics for discussion and appropriate terminology. Children of prisoners can feel very isolated because they do not want to tell others about their situation or having done so, face bullying. There is real benefit in providing support and events specifically for children of prisoners to enable them to engage with peers in positive activities without having to hide their parent's imprisonment.

Raising Awareness, Reducing Stigma

Teachers and other staff can help tackle stigma surrounding parental imprisonment by raising awareness of this issue in schools and by promoting a positive, non-discriminatory environment. A range of resources and educational tools have been produced by NGOs, including fact sheets and training about the impact of sentences on families, which may assist. There is also a telephone helpline for prisoners' families, covering England and Wales, which professionals are encouraged to contact to seek advice and information (Offenders' Families Helpline 0808 808 2003).

Support Needs

The kind of help needed by children of prisoners is mirrored by the support needs of other children suffering from significant loss or trauma e.g. children experiencing parental divorce, bereavement or domestic violence. Around half of the children of prisoners interviewed by COPING in the UK needed some level of emotional support from school, or other agencies, and half of this group suffered more serious anxiety or trauma which resulted in a need for more specialised counselling.

For many children it was clear that support from a trusted teacher or other member of school staff was appropriate and sufficient to meet their emotional needs. Children with aggressive behaviour are likely to be helped when they know that there is some understanding for their situation. COPING found several examples of schools whose responses to these children were less sympathetic, including excluding them from mainstream education. There was also evidence that the behaviour of children of prisoners (particularly boys), including school attendance, was more likely to be adversely impacted at the point of transition to secondary school.

General strategies likely to help these children include:

- sympathetic responses to parents and children
- facilitating children being able to visit their imprisoned parent (particularly in the stages immediately following their arrest)
- ensuring consistent, firm and sensitive responses to the needs of these children.
- schools carefully exploring what resources are at their disposal, including counseling options

COPING revealed that counselling support for children has been developed further in Sweden and Germany than in the UK. In the UK responses by schools need to be closely aligned with support from the Schools Psychological Service in each local authority.

COPING Recommendations

The recommendations below outline the progress that needs to be made in recognising and responding to the needs of children of prisoners in the UK.

Recommendation UK9: Realise the potential of schools to provide emotional and educational support to children of prisoners and minimise the risk of bullying and stigmatisation.

Recommendation UK9.1

Schools should be encouraged to identify pupils who are children of prisoners, be aware of their needs and offer them appropriate support. Progress towards this to be achieved by:

- *The development of training for teachers, in partnership with the voluntary sector and in conjunction with the Schools Psychological Service that raises their awareness of the emotional and educational support needs of children of prisoners and provides a steer on how best to identify, engage with and respond to their needs.*
- *The inclusion of children of prisoners by local authorities in the UK as a core vulnerable group in their strategic plans.*
- *The reduction of stigma surrounding parental imprisonment through the promotion of a positive school environment.*

Recommendation UK9.2

Schools in the UK should:

- *Refer children who experience severe anxiety or trauma resulting from parental imprisonment to trained counselors.*
- *Respond sensitively but firmly where children of prisoners, most likely to be boys, respond aggressively at school.*
- *Seek to avoid any unnecessary disruption to the education of children of prisoners when responding to their emotional support needs (e.g. by not excluding them from school).*

COPING Briefings by POPS are based on Hirschfield, A. (2012) Development of Recommendations Final Report: COPING Consortium, December 2012.

More about POPS

The **COPING** consortium consisted of 10 member organisations comprising of two from each country and two 'umbrella' (pan-European/International) organisations. Each country group consisted of a research institution and an NGO working with prisoners and their families. In the UK the University of Huddersfield partnered with POPS (Partners of Prisoners and Families Support Group).

POPS was established in 1988 by family members experiencing the stigma and distress of supporting a relative through a custodial sentence. Since that time our remit has broadened as we have identified and responded to the needs of families. Today we provide support services at all stages of the criminal justice system, from the arrest of a loved one through to the first steps towards resettlement. We continue to be guided by need, involving users at every stage to direct service development and delivery. Based in Manchester, our work has expanded over time to include the national Offenders' Families Helpline and multiple projects across the North-West. We have Family Support Workers attached to a variety of prison, probation and youth offending initiatives as well as running ten prison visitor centres, all with the aim of empowering families through the provision of timely information and targeted support.

To find out more about POPS visit www.partnersofprisoners.co.uk. Alternatively to find out more about the COPING project visit www.coping-project.eu.