How can Schools Support Children with a Parent in Prison?

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Abstract

Children who experience the imprisonment of a parent or close relative are more likely to have poorer outcomes including lower school attainment and an increased risk of truancy, school exclusion and socio-emotional difficulties. This paper reports on a research project, undertaken in 2011, into support provision in schools for children who experience parental imprisonment. Through the analysis of data collected by interviewing a range of representatives of schools including head-teachers, stakeholders, parents and children in one local authority in the South West of England we explore the different realities of experiencing the imprisonment of a parent or close relative. Consequently, we offer a critique of the support provision currently available and make a number of suggestions as to how schools might support this group of potentially 'vulnerable' children. This includes raising awareness of this group of children through the use of resources, posters and training; a focus on the individual needs of the children; an exploration of the type of support needed and when it should be available and a discussion around prison visits and how schools can enable children to maintain contact with their imprisoned parent. A key aspect of the research findings was to challenge the route of a one size fits all mentality and to offer sensitive, appropriate and bespoke service provision to each child and family experiencing the imprisonment of a parent or close relative.

Key words: Schools, Support, Children, Pastoral, Prison

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Introduction

Approximately 200,000 children have a parent in prison in England and Wales (Williams et al 2012). Children who experience parental imprisonment are more likely to have poorer outcomes including increased mental health difficulties, lower educational attainment, increased risk of truancy and school exclusion and a higher likelihood of engaging in antisocial or criminal behaviour (Scharff-Smith & Gampell 2011; King 2003; Murray et al 2009; Robertson 2007). Furthermore, imprisonment of a parent can lead to an increase in household poverty, stigmatisation and bullying as well as feelings of guilt, worry and loss in the child (Action for Prisoners' Families 2003; Nesmith & Ruhland 2008). As a result, children who experience parental imprisonment often constitute a vulnerable group of children who have complex interwoven needs (Losel et al 2012).

When we examine the policy and practice context, however, it is evident that children of prisoners are not consistently recognised as a group of children who may be in need (Glover 2009). Whilst some local authorities have highlighted this group of children in their Children and Young People's Plans as needing particular support, this is not the case across the board. As a result, support for children who experience parental imprisonment is sketchy and children of prisoners often constitute a 'hidden group' of children (Shaw 1992). This lack of visibility of children of prisoners may be for a number of reasons including the stigmatised nature of imprisonment which can result in some families being afraid to come forward for support because they fear they will be seen as guilty by association. Moreover, this may be exacerbated by a focus in policy on criminal justice as opposed to welfare needs (Scharff-Smith & Gampell 2011). For example, at policy level, children of prisoners often receive attention for two reasons. First, they receive attention because of the important role that

family life has in reducing parental reoffending (SCIE 2008). Second, they receive attention because of concerns about the child's own possible future antisocial behaviour; for example 65% of boys who have an imprisoned parent are estimated to go on to offend (SCIE 2008; DCSF 2007). As a result, a focus on criminal justice may result in the general welfare of children of prisoners being overlooked and those children who may not be causing immediate concerns may be left to quietly get on with it (Morgan et al in press). This is beginning to change with more of a focus on the general needs of this group of children and how they can best be supported as a 'distinct' group of potentially vulnerable children (Scharff-Smith & Gampell 2011).

Schools have been identified as having a key role in supporting children who experience parental imprisonment (United Nations 2011; SCIE 2008; Ramsden 1998) and recent research has indicated that good relationships with teachers can act as a protective factor for children who experience parental imprisonment (Losel 2012). School have an important role to play for two reasons: firstly, nearly all children attend school and thus schools offer 'a major opportunity to support children of incarcerated parents and to help meet their needs' (Robertson 2011: 51). Secondly, parental imprisonment has been shown to have a direct impact on children's academic attainment as well as socio-emotional development often leading to changes in behaviour which may escalate to school exclusion or truancy (SCIE 2008). Appropriate, sensitive and bespoke pastoral care at school level, therefore, is important not only in terms of providing support to children who are normally highly stigmatised but also in contributing to improving outcomes for a group of children who have been identified as being at risk of a number of poor outcomes.

However, recent research has indicated that children of prisoners all too often constitute a hidden population of children in schools too (Morgan et al in press). Consequently parental imprisonment is frequently overlooked in the search for possible causes of any changes in a child's behaviour or educational attainment. The recent finding that children of prisoners constitute a forgotten population of children in schools is surprising considering that this was also found to be the case in 1998 (Ramsden 1998); thus questions must be asked, as to why no change?

Examining the limited research that exists on how schools can support children with a parent in prison identifies the importance of having a school policy, the development of individual care plans (International Association of Youth and Family Judges and Magistrates 2006) and the availability of appropriate training on the issue (United Nations 2011; Ramsden 1998). In this paper we build on our previous work (Morgan et al in press) and highlight ways in which schools can support children with a parent in prison by utilising data from our study into support provision in schools for children of prisoners.

Methods

Our research took place in one local authority in the South West of England in 2011 and used a mixed methods approach including questionnaires and semi-structured in-depth interviews (Cohen et al 2007). A mixed methods approach was chosen as it offered an opportunity for a greater number of schools to take part in the research through the use of a questionnaire and yet at the same time it offered depth through the use of semi-structured interviews. Questionnaires were sent to seventy-five schools in the local authority with a covering letter

explaining the purpose of the research. The questionnaires could be completed online or returned in a free-post envelope and were anonymous. Information was collected about the type of school which returned questionnaires and this can be seen in table 1 below.

Table 1: Questionnaire Return and Type of School

Type of school and questionnaire return	Frequency/Percentage
Primary School	10 (53%)
Secondary School	7 (37%)
Special School	1 (5%)
Pupil Referral Unit	1 (5%)
Independent School (all)	0

The questionnaires were designed to give us information about support provision in schools for children of prisoners, how schools could support this group of children and how existing support could be strengthened. Questions were asked about the experience of the school in supporting children of prisoners, factors which impacted on this support, examples of support which had been offered, the type of training that had been undertaken, how training could be improved, the resources available to the school (for example: books, leaflets and videos) and how support could be strengthened. A total of nineteen questionnaires were returned with the majority having been completed by either the Head Teacher or Deputy (n=12). Other members of staff who completed the questionnaires were Parent Support Advisors (n=3), Head of Teaching and Learning (n=1), Teachers (n=2) and Head of Health and Safeguarding (n=1). It is important to note that the majority of schools who took part in the research would not necessarily have knowledge of all the children within the school that had a parent in prison as most did not keep such detailed records and many of the families would not inform the school.

In order to explore the themes from the questionnaires in more depth semi-structured interviews were carried out with a number of stakeholders including probation, educational psychologists, educational welfare officers and the voluntary sector (N=11) as well as mothers (N=6) and children (N=6). In addition, a further 10 head-teachers were also individually interviewed and a discussion was held with school nurses. The children, who took part in the interviews, were aged 8-13 years old; 3 boys and 3 girls. All interviews, with the exception of the interviews with the children and three of the mothers, were audio-taped and fully transcribed.

Schools and stakeholders were recruited into the study by contacting all schools in the local authority by phone and then by letter. Reminder letters to return the questionnaire were sent to schools a further two times. Stakeholders were recruited into the study using a snowball technique and were contacted again by phone and then by follow-up letter. Families were recruited into the study through the use of a poster which was displayed in the visitor centre of three prisons as well as by being informed about the project by a local voluntary group who offered support to families of prisoners. Families were asked to contact the researchers themselves if they wanted to take part in the research. The interviews with mothers and children were undertaken by the authors who had extensive experience of working with ‘vulnerable’ children and families. Ethical approval was sought from the University School of Education Ethics Committee and all participants were informed of the voluntary confidential nature of the research. Informed consent, to take part in the research, was gained from all participants including children.

Findings and Discussion

The interviews and questionnaires (where open questions in the questionnaires were analysed as text) were analysed using thematic data analysis (Silverman 2006). Data was read and re-read by the individual researchers and then, in collaboration, themes were agreed; this was to ensure that rigor was maintained (Bryman 2007). Four main areas were identified as to how schools could more effectively support children who experience parental imprisonment.

Raise awareness of this group of children

What was apparent from our interviews was that, in order to effectively support children who experience parental imprisonment, it was important for a whole school approach to be taken and for schools to actively raise awareness amongst staff of this group of 'hidden' or 'forgotten' children (Morgan et al in press; Ramsden 1998). Many of the school representatives who took part in our research did not know whether they had any children with parents in prison in their school and were unaware of the needs of this group of children as a distinct group of children.

> 'I feel a bit embarrassed now that it's not something I've ever considered ……..it's not something that's particularly crossed my mind' (Head-Teacher 1)

So how might schools raise awareness of this group of children and the effects that imprisonment can have on children and families? The research literature identifies the importance of developing a school policy which outlines how children with a parent in prison will be supported (SCIE 2008). The policy should be readily available to parents and all staff and explicitly state the types of support that will be available and the confidential nature

of the support offered. The Common Assessment Framework could also be used to support this group of children (West Midlands Children and Families of Offenders Pathfinder 2009) and multi-agency meetings arranged if necessary. A key person within the school with specific responsibility for this group of children should also be identified (Morgan et al in press) who would be available for children and families to speak to as well as encouraging their colleagues to remain sensitively aware to the possibility of children exhibiting a range of behaviours (not always negative) as a consequence of having a parent in prison. Gloucestershire County Council discusses the role of the lead person in more depth and also has an example school policy which could be used as a template.

The development of a visible and easily accessible library of appropriate resources on the subject for parents, staff and children would also raise awareness of the needs of this group of children. Very often we found in our discussions with schools representatives that very little or no information was available in schools about this group of children and when resources were available they were not 'to hand' and not on view.

> 'I do not have any information to hand as it is not something we deal with' (Head-Teacher 3).

This is problematic, contributing to the hidden 'secret' nature of imprisonment making it more likely that children and parents feel that they must 'not tell anyone'. The use of posters or leaflets on noticeboards would, therefore, go some way to raising awareness and highlight to parents and children that the school has an understanding of the issues around parental imprisonment. This is important, as the stigmatised nature of imprisonment, often means that many families and children need to be reassured that they will be listened to sympathetically

and confidentially. Furthermore, resources such as books and DVD's are readily available from organisations such as Ormiston Children and Families Trust and Action for Prisoners Families but again these resources need to be visible and accessible to all. However, it must be borne in mind that this needs to be done sensitively so that school awareness making does not contribute to increased stigma or bullying. Involving parents and children as well as stakeholders from support groups such as Action for Prisoner Families in awareness raising may go some way to overcoming this issue.

A further way for schools to raise awareness of this group of children is to ensure that up to date training on the effects of parental imprisonment on children and how this group of children can be supported is accessed by staff. Moreover, an understanding of the prison regime and the support needs of children is important as staff may be asked for advice by children and their carers. School staff repeatedly told us that more information and training was needed and this has also been highlighted by the United Nations (2011).

> 'Some understanding of what these children go ….they say 'I'm going to see dad tomorrow and you think oh that's nice but I have no understanding of actually what the environment they're going into is like' (Head-Teacher 8).

Training should focus on areas such as:

- the impact on children of parental imprisonment,
- the importance of staying in contact,
- how children can be supported by staff,
- an overview of resources available,
- how to raise awareness without contributing to bullying or increased stigma,

- the process that children go through when they visit a prison
- the impact visiting their parent may have on their subsequent behaviour.

However, although many practitioners informed us that more training was needed, there is training available and more needs to be done, at local authority level, therefore, to highlight that this training exists to schools and practitioners. For example, 'Hidden Sentence' training for school based practitioners is currently being offered by Action for Prisoners Families and can be accessed on-line.

Raising awareness of this group of children within the school, through training and other means, may also go some way to making it easier for parents or children themselves to inform the school about the imprisonment of their partner or parent especially if this is done in a culture of trust and support. Knowing which families may be experiencing parental imprisonment is often difficult if families, do not inform the school as there is little information collected by statutory services about children who have a parent in prison (SCIE 2008; Ramsden 1998). Furthermore, even where agencies are aware this information may not routinely be shared with schools as practitioners are often worried about breaking confidentiality (Morgan et al in press).

Focus on the child and her/his needs

Imprisonment affects children in a number of ways and it is important to focus on the individual needs of the child (Ramsden 1998). Not all children, for example, will find parental imprisonment traumatic and some may be relieved that a parent is no longer there especially in cases of violent offenders (Scharff-Smith & Gampell 2011). A child's reaction

may depend on a number of factors including their age, how often it has happened before, the support they have at home, how imprisonment is viewed in their community or by their friends and the nature of the offence (Scharff-Smith & Gampell 2011). It is also important to consider and challenge our own attitudes to offending behaviour and imprisonment to ensure that we work in a non-judgemental way recognising that the child's parent is still their parent regardless of what they have been convicted of. Negative public discourses and moral panics around criminal behaviour, imprisonment and criminal justice may, without us even realising it, influence our attitudes and the way we work with children and families.

'well they shouldn't have done the crime then.. should they?' (School Nurse).

The response above was a reply to a question on how imprisonment can impact on children and we can see how concerns with the criminal justice system and the parent sometimes over-shadow the welfare needs of the child. This examination of attitudes also extends to how we may view children who experience parental imprisonment, for example, viewing them as victims who need protecting or as possible future offenders themselves. Furthermore, it is important to reflect on how our expectations of children of prisoners may impact on them and research has indicated that in some cases teachers had lower expectations of this group of children (Dallaire et al 2010). What was evident from our own research was that many of the children who experienced parental imprisonment were actively involved in offering support to others including their remaining parent and recognition, therefore, of the considerable competence of this group of children is needed.

> 'She won an award at school for perseverance and special effort - school saw she was doing a lot extra to support me and keep on with her school work. It made her feel good to get the award' (Mum talking about Child aged 10).

Notions of child competence, that a child in this situation may rise to the challenge and be strong and capable, do not normally feature in discourses around children of prisoners and services are thus predicated upon a limited, narrowly defined view of children as vulnerable (Tisdall et al, 2006). However, many rise to the many challenges that they face admirably and not only support their remaining parent but also their siblings. Nevertheless, there is a fine line to tread and acknowledging the competence of this group of children must also be balanced with the child's right to privacy. Our research showed that on occasions children were 'outed' by well-intentioned teachers who asked them about their parent in front of their school-friends. This led to the children being forced into telling their friends about their situation causing more stress and anxiety.

> 'The teacher said when he called my name in register - is your dad home yet – he said it in front of the whole class ……..I felt pressurised into telling everyone where my dad was' (Child aged 9).

Ramsden (1998) also discusses how children worried about whether their teachers would maintain confidentiality and it is important to acknowledge the tensions that exist between a child's right to privacy and confidentiality and at the same time their right to support which can often mean the sharing of information.

Practitioners, therefore, need to be sensitive to the child's needs, offer appropriate support in the right environment, give space and opportunity for children to confide their worries whilst acknowledging their views (Evans 2009; Ramsden 1998). Listening to children and parents and having an understanding of some of the challenges they face is crucial and was identified as key by many of the children in our research.

> 'If the teacher knew about children having a dad in prison – what it feels like and how to talk to us' (Child aged 8).

Furthermore, developing an ethos of collaboration including working in partnership with families who have experienced a relative's imprisonment will identify how support in schools can be strengthened, how school policies can be devised and how schools can better enable parents and children to inform schools about their situation (DCSF 2007).

Sensitive teaching staff who view the children in their care as competent social actors should be able to create a culture of empathy where children feel able to talk about their lives and what is happening to them in ways that enable them to seek help, affirmation, reassurance and praise where needed and appropriate. A Rogerian model of person centred interaction (1951) and/or motivational interviewing techniques (Gance-Cleveland, 2007) are both useful tools for working with this group of children.

What support and when?

It was apparent from our research that existing resources could be utilised to support the children of prisoners. For example, the pastoral support system, in-school counselling, and in-school (or across a number of schools) support groups and mentoring schemes within schools could be used (and in some cases were used) to support this group of children. Having a mentor who a child could talk to about issues which arose and who was available before and after visits to their parent in prison was seen as being of benefit by many in our research. As was appropriate use of the curriculum, for example Citizenship, where the subject of imprisonment and why people offend could be explored sensitively. This may go some way to reducing stereotypes as well as reduce stigma and bullying.

Using problem based learning principles (Hmelo-Silver, 2004) can also enhance the understanding of whole groups as to what children with a parent in prison might be experiencing and how they might be supported by peers. In a separate piece of work, the authors have been involved with a theatre group examining the experiences of children with a parent in prison where the act of engagement has proved to be a powerful learning tool for children who were not aware of the situation. Furthermore, using motivational interviewing to explore what is happening and what choices the child has to manage the situation for themselves can be helpful; as can simply offering a non-judgmental listening ear that affirms the child's efforts to cope with everything that is going on around them and within them. Very often the child does not want intervention, they just want someone to listen and to feel that they have been heard.

Working in partnership with outside agencies is also important as is having an understanding of local services which work with children who experience the imprisonment of a parent or close relative so that families can be directed to appropriate external support systems. This information would need to be kept up to date as frequently these services are offered by charitable organisations that may lose their funding especially in the light of the current economic crisis. Roberts (2011) discusses how schools (or groups of schools) can work in partnership with local organisations to offer school based programmes to support this group of children. She described one programme for children of prisoners which run over 12 weeks for one hour a week; the children discussed areas which were of importance to them such as how to tell their friends that their parent was in prison.

What was also apparent was that awareness needed to be raised in schools that support needed to be available to the child at the time of the arrest, the trial, the imprisonment and the release of the family member. The period of imprisonment was not always the most stressful or uncertain time for children and often the period before the imprisonment and the release period caused more stress (Morgan et al in press).

> ‘Counselling at the time a father goes into prison and upon his release as these times are a crucial change in family dynamics’ (Stakeholder).

Working in partnership with parents is crucial and many parents spoke in glowing terms about the support that their schools had provided and how staff had understood. However, in

some cases parents felt that they were not always kept informed of how their child was coping at school and would have welcomed reassurance.

> ‘School support, she started off looking after X, then all of a sudden it kind of drifted away. …. I’m hoping she’s still looking after them in school, that she’s still keeping an eye on them in school. But I don’t know whether she is or not’ (Mother).

Whilst, parental imprisonment may impact on children in a number of ways and may differ according to the age of the child, it is important that support is available at all stages of the child’s journey through the school system from nursery to secondary school. However, it is important to bear in mind that younger children may be more likely to confide in teachers than older children (Ramsden 1998). Furthermore, the transition from primary school to secondary school also needs to be given special consideration and research has indicated that children of prisoners may find this period difficult losing the support that they previously relied on (Morgan et al in press).

Support around prison visits and staying in contact

Children have a right to stay in touch with their imprisoned parent as long as it is in their best interests (United Nations, 2011). Furthermore, research has indicated that maintaining contact between imprisoned parents and their children may lessen attachment difficulties and increase the likelihood of a more positive resettlement experience (Losel et al 2012). For many children, however, maintaining contact with their imprisoned parent is difficult to

achieve as prison visits are often during school hours and prisoners are often housed far away from their families. As a result, children may be taken out of school to visit their parent in prison and this can lead to the child notching up a number of unapproved absences and can lead to a potential breakdown in relationships between the resident carer/parent and the school.

> 'they keep saying they want to keep the kids and dads involved all the time together but it's not very good. I have taken the children out of school and let them go half a day……I even got phoned up for that……the visits are 2-4pm so it's got to be through school time'.

In light of this, it is crucial that schools work with children and parents to enable children to have approved absences to visit their parent/relative in prison (United Nations 2011; International Association of Youth and Family Judges and Magistrates 2006). Furthermore, sensitivity is needed around prison visits as children may have a number of reactions to visiting their parent and then returning home leaving them behind. An understanding of the prison visiting regime which the children would have experienced when they visit including being searched and the use of sniffer dogs would be helpful for all teaching and non-teaching staff. Again, the provision of a mentor who could discuss with the child how they are feeling before and after the visit would also be beneficial and Ramsden (1998) highlights how teachers could potentially explore how the child is feeling through a piece of work.

It was identified by many participants that schools could also offer assistance to children to enable them to keep in contact with their imprisoned parents as part of a pastoral support system. This support could be around letter writing and creating drawings for their parent as well as keeping the imprisoned parent informed about their child's schooling. Imprisoned parents have a statutory right to receive copies of information sent out about their child and the child may also want to show their parent some of their schoolwork and this should be facilitated as best as possible. However, it is important that staff do not assume that this is always the case by focussing on the child's needs through a discussion with the remaining parent/carer and the child to identify any potential issues or problems.

Conclusion

There are numerous ways in which schools can support children who experience the imprisonment of a parent or close relative. The suggestions made in this paper are not exhaustive but are based upon research undertaken with schools, stakeholders, parents and children who have shared with us their experiences and perspectives. What was apparent from our research was that all of the schools who took part emphasised the important role they had to play in supporting this group of children but often felt that they did not know enough about the existence of these children or their needs to be able to effectively support them. This resulted in children of prisoners often being left unsupported and invisible in schools; a finding which replicates what was found in 1998 by Ramsden. Questions, therefore, need to be asked why this is still the case and why children of prisoners are not seen as a priority. Whilst, individual work at school level and practitioner level is crucial this is not enough on its own and local authorities need to support grass roots endeavours and strategically identify this group of children in their Children and Young People's Plans

(CYPPs) as needing extra support. By doing so, the visibility of this group will be raised amongst schools and practitioners along-with knowledge of the training and information which is available. Increasing knowledge and having a space to reflect on parental imprisonment and the impact on children may go some way to ensuring that we work in a non-judgemental way with children and families who experience the imprisonment of a family member. We hope, therefore, that our suggestions may act as a catalyst resulting in the inclusion of children of prisoners in Local Authority CYPPs but also at the same time enabling a whole school approach to facilitate innovative non-judgemental school-level support for a group of children who are often 'vulnerable' but who are at the same time often 'forgotten about'.

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