

Children of Prisoners:

A guide for community health professionals

SUMMARY



This is a summary of the guide, which can be used by busy community health professionals and teams.

The guide is for all health professionals working in the community who come into contact with vulnerable families and need to recognise social risks (e.g. family and community disadvantages and difficulties) as well as physical ones.

Page numbers refer to pages in the main document.

Links between the Healthy Child Programme and parental imprisonment (p.24)

A number of themes running through the Healthy Child Programme are highly relevant to children affected by parental imprisonment, and demonstrate how the programme can improve support for these children.

Healthy Child theme	Relevance for children affected by parental imprisonment
Recognition of the importance of emotional wellbeing and mental health	Parental imprisonment can be associated with broken attachments, a sense of loss, anxiety and depression. There are often mental health impacts on the parent left at home, which may affect the children.
The importance of the father to the child, including importance of the non-resident father	Most children affected by parental imprisonment have a father in prison, and it is important that they are supported to maintain contact with their non-resident father, if they want to.
Services should be accessible and based in the community	Because parental imprisonment is often invisible and families do not talk about it, health professionals can play a key role in engaging families in this situation who do not self-identify.
Offering services to families facing difficulties, within the context of universal services	If staff within universal services are able to recognise and support these children, they and their families can access the help they need without going to a specialist service.
Importance of early years and parent-child attachments	Many children affected by parental imprisonment are very young, and parental imprisonment can break crucial early bonds and affect their attachment.
Early intervention	It is important to provide practical and emotional support to children and families early in the offender parent's journey through the criminal justice system.
Responding to local needs	A community's attitude toward imprisonment, the social diversity within the community, whether it is a rural or urban area and whether there are targeted services available can all affect how a family deals with imprisonment.
Emphasis on influencing the community (including the school community) for the benefit of the child	It is important to raise awareness of the impact of parental imprisonment at neighbourhood and/or school level. This can also reduce the stigma around parental offending, so children and families feel more able to seek help when they need it.

The big picture: numbers and characteristics of children with a parent in prison (p.13)

While children with a parent in prison are a largely 'hidden' group, approximately 200,000 children are estimated to experience parental imprisonment in any one year in England and Wales, and almost all communities will have children in this situation.

Three important characteristics of this large group of children can be suggested, based on overall data on the prison population:

- there are **far more children with a father than a mother in prison**
- there are also likely to be a **disproportionate number of black and minority ethnic (BME) children** with a parent in prison, as BME prisoners make up a disproportionate percentage of the prison population
- a large number of **children under five** will have a parent in prison.

The impact of parental imprisonment (p.14)

There are many ways in which parental imprisonment can affect a child. For many children there will be significant negative effects, which can add to the existing disadvantages and challenges the family is facing. Some of the main impacts of parental imprisonment are:

A sense of sadness and loss:

A child who loses a parent to imprisonment may experience many of the same feelings as a child whose parent has died, such as generalised anxiety disorder or separation anxiety disorder (persistent and excessive worry about losing major attachment figures, or about harm coming to them). However, they may not receive the same understanding or compassion from others that a bereaved child would.

Emotional and mental health difficulties:

These can include concerns about what is happening to the parent in prison (e.g. are they lonely or sad, or are they experiencing violence?) and can manifest in the form of anxiety, unwillingness or inability to express feelings, sleep difficulties, changes in behaviour and a negative self-concept. Also, children of prisoners are at an increased risk of experiencing mental health problems.

Impact on the child's family (and therefore on the child):

Imprisonment can lead to a break-up of family relations, changes in roles and responsibilities within the family, increased stress for the remaining parent, financial pressure, and even a change in accommodation as families may have to move.

Impact on the child's friends and social networks:

The stigma around parental imprisonment can have significant impact on a child's life, leading to isolation and vulnerability, or even forcing families to move to another area to 'make a fresh start'. The child may be frightened about 'who knows', and may be rejected by friends or experience bullying.

Impact on the child at school:

The child's behaviour, concentration and school work may deteriorate, and they may feel they cannot – or have been told not to – tell their teachers about what has happened, for fear of their reaction.

Intergenerational impact:

There is some evidence that children with a parent in prison are more likely to go on to offend themselves; a serious consequence for these children and for society as a whole.

Multiple deprivation:

Parental imprisonment rarely happens in a vacuum. A parent's involvement in the criminal justice system is often linked with multiple risk factors, including drug use, mental health difficulties, domestic violence and poverty.

Pregnant women and mothers in prison (p.22)

Maternal imprisonment is likely to have far-reaching implications for the mother and the child, as mothers are more likely to have primary responsibility for childcare. Fewer than one in ten children are cared for by their father when their mother is in prison.

The imprisonment of a mother raises particular issues for children and families:

- There are fewer prisons for women, and these are often a long way from where the family lives, making it difficult for pregnant women and mothers to maintain contact with partners and family – particularly their children.
- The child's living arrangements are likely to change when the mother goes into prison. Only five per cent of children remain in their own homes when a mother is sent to prison.
- Imprisonment may lead to the breakdown of support networks, including family support, for pregnant women and mothers.

Problems for a mother may continue on release: she may have missed important stages in her children's development, lack confidence in parenting or feel she is a stranger to her child. In addition to the stigma around imprisonment, she may be seen as having 'deserted' her children.

The impact of parental imprisonment on children under five (p.19)

A parent going into prison, and the resulting breaking of attachment and sense of security, can have a significant impact on very young children, who may experience:

- a traumatic breaking of a primary attachment, and the consequent insecurities
- changes to intimate caring contact (such as when a child is used to their father putting them to bed, then the father is suddenly not there)
- confusion about what has happened to the loved parent, as they are too young to understand the situation fully.

Children's experiences of the criminal justice system (p.21)

Children may be affected in different ways at different stages of their parent's journey through the criminal justice system, and it is important to recognise what they may face at each of these points.

Arrest:

From a child's perspective, their parent's arrest will appear sudden and startling. Some children may be present when the arrest takes place, and may be traumatised by the abrupt departure of the parent, particularly if the arrest involves a struggle or the family home being searched.

Trial and sentencing:

The trial can be a period of great uncertainty for the child, in addition to intense sadness, emotional upset and a sense of loss (particularly if the parent has been remanded in custody). Once the parent has been sentenced, there is likely to be uncertainty about where the parent will be, for how long, and whether the child can keep in touch with them.

The parent in prison:

Maintaining effective contact with the imprisoned parent is central to improving a child's experience of parental imprisonment. However, families may find that costs, distance and the visiting regime itself may prevent this.

The parent's release from prison:

Some children may be eagerly awaiting the return of the parent, and others may be more uncertain. Either way, changed family dynamics, financial pressures, restrictive licence conditions and other factors can make this a challenging time for the family.

Possibility of the parent returning to prison:

Many prisoners will reoffend and return to prison. The most recent evidence shows that 45.2 per cent of adults are reconvicted within one year of being released, and for children, this will not only mean further experience of the challenges outlined above, but a feeling of inevitability that their parent will be taken away from them again.

Developing good practice for children and families affected by imprisonment (p.28)

The guide explores principles of practice that will assist community health professionals to work with children and families where a parent is in prison. The principles are very much in line with the vision of the Healthy Child Programme (HCP), and they include:

- **engagement** with, and raising **awareness** of, families affected by parental imprisonment
- **acknowledging and addressing stigma** around imprisonment
- **early intervention** with children and families
- maintaining **confidentiality**

- incorporating parental imprisonment into **assessments** as a potential 'social risk'
- **understanding what is happening** in the family (such as impact of finances, relationships, family dynamics)
- providing immediate **practical advice** (such as how to find out where a parent is being held, and how to arrange visits)
- **talking about imprisonment with children** and being able to advise the parent at home about what to tell the children
- talking to **very young children** about what is happening
- building **resilience** in relation to parental imprisonment, and to the pressures and disadvantages that contribute to offending
- maintaining **continuity of support**, and recognising what children face as their parent moves through the criminal justice system
- linking in with **local strategies and initiatives** which may be particularly relevant for the child with a parent in prison, such as school policies around domestic violence or bullying
- **multi-agency working** and, if appropriate and families are aware, sharing with other agencies
- being aware of possible **safeguarding** implications of parental imprisonment.

Checklist: understanding how to support children of prisoners (p.38)

A checklist of ways in which community health professionals can assess their own understanding of the effects of parental imprisonment, and their ability to respond to children and families in this situation.

Appendices

Appendix 1 (p.49): Frequently asked questions

A list of FAQs presenting answers to questions families might ask, for instance how to find out where a partner is being held, or how to arrange and claim expenses for making visits.

Appendix 2 (p.53): Resources for children, parents and professionals

Lists of resources around parental imprisonment for children and young people, parents, and professionals.