

NICCO: Assisting prisons to support children of offenders



‘Visiting prison is scary but I want to see my dad’

39%

Prisoners who receive visits from their families are 39% less likely to reoffend.

Find out how to support offenders’ children and their families

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Who are we?

The National Information Centre on Children of Offenders – NICCO (formerly i-HOP) is a service that supports professionals to work effectively with offenders' children and families. NICCO collates and promotes examples of services, interventions, resources, policy and research around this vulnerable group.

Barnardo's was originally commissioned by the **Department for Education** in 2013 to develop this service as an online information hub with a focus on England (www.nicco.org.uk). The service is targeted at all professionals who come into contact with offenders' children and their families, from various sectors including education, health and social care as well as the criminal justice system.

** May, C., Sharma, N. and Stewart, D., Factors linked to reoffending: a one-year follow-up of prisoners who took part in the Resettlement Surveys 2001, 2003 and 2004, Ministry of Justice, London, 2008*

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“We was there when he got locked up”

7 year old girl

It is estimated that there are **200,000 children a year** that experience the imprisonment of a parent. Research increasingly shows the impact that parental imprisonment can have on these children – **poorer outcomes, stigma, isolation, health and financial difficulties**. Currently there is no routine identification of who these children are and therefore no way of ensuring their needs are met.

Children of offenders and prisons

“When we get to see him we get to huggle him... We have to wait and then he comes out. He has to sit on the red seat. He’s not allowed to get up.”

7 year old girl

Maintaining family ties whilst a prisoner serves a sentence is important both for children and families and the prisoner:

- **Re-offending:** The Ministry of Justice reported that those prisoners who had visits from their families in custody are 39% less likely to re-offend than those who do not receive family visits. This study also reported that family support improves a prisoner’s employment chances and reduces homelessness after release.¹
- **Inter-generational offending:** Research shows that 65% of boys whose father went to prison before they were 10 went on to offend themselves.² The children of prisoners face specific challenges and have varying needs – it is important for this to be recognised in order to improve outcomes.

“It would have been nice if the staff could have taken a picture of him with his baby.” Mother

Prisons are well placed to offer support, advice and information to parents serving custodial sentences, about the practicalities and importance of maintaining family ties. Parenting programmes offered in prisons are usually popular and well received, and as well as developing essential parenting skills and parents’ bonds with their children, have also been known to contribute to prisoner stability.³ Just under 10,000 children visit public prisons each week in England and Wales.⁴ Family days provide the appropriate environment and time for significant parent-child interaction. Findings from a 2013 large-scale European study looking at the vulnerabilities and resilience of children



of prisoners, recommended that parents should be encouraged to fulfil their role as parent far as possible whilst in prison.⁵ Imprisoned parents could be involved in their children’s homework, for example.⁶

How can NICCO support prisons?

“When we leave, we cry a bit.” 11 year old boy

Children and families has long featured in prison work, as a reducing re-offending pathway. Recently the importance of families was recognised in NOMS’ 2014 Commissioning intentions, with an emphasis on prisons working with local authorities to support offenders’ families.⁷ Furthermore children and families have been highlighted in the Transforming Rehabilitation evidence around reducing re-offending, with a focus on family visits and home leave.⁸

In this context of recognising the importance of offenders’ families, prisons have a clear role to play.

“I’ve took them to [the prison] every time because I think it’s lovely there, plus those child-centred visits – they’re brilliant.” Mother

NICCO is a national one stop information and advice service for all professionals working with children and families of offenders. It brings together information that can **assist prison staff** to support offenders and their children and families with maintaining relationships:

- **resources** for offenders about maintaining family ties whilst in prison
- **guidelines and toolkits** for developing whole-prison practice and effective family days

- details of **programmes for offenders** that can be delivered in prisons
- **resources and services** for families of offenders
- details of local multi-agency **training for frontline staff** regarding the impact of imprisonment on families
- **examples of existing practice** in prisons that promote family relationships
- **research, evidence based practice, and evaluations** to inform the development or commissioning of children and families work

NICCO recognises that prison staff work in a busy environment with multiple demands on their time. NICCO puts all the resources in one place, so help and information is there when it's needed.

Examples of existing practice

HMP Wolds Family Learning Programme includes a weekly visit in a relaxed environment for fathers and their children, allowing them to bond and interact, in their capacity as parents. Both the parent in prison and the parent outside learn about parenting skills, and complete tasks to receive an OCN certificate.⁹

Pact have produced an accessible book written by prisoners and their families called **Daddy's working away- A guide to being a good Dad in prison**. The book offers practical and realistic advice about maintaining relationships with children and is available for prisons or prisoners to buy.

Note:

Children's and parents' quotes are taken from interviews with children and families in a Barnardo's report: Owen Gill, *Every night you cry: Case studies of 15 Bristol families with a father in prison*, Barnardo's, 2009

References:

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- 9 Ofsted, *Good practice resource – Inclusive family learning in a prison setting: HMP Wolds*, April 2011

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