



Working to Protect Children

Talking to children when a parent has been arrested or convicted with regard to child abuse material on the internet

General issues for parents to consider

- 1) It is important for children to have some understanding of what has occurred (because of the reasons given below). However, this should not be done in such a way as to alienate the child from the parent who may have offended
- 2) It is essential for the child's well-being that estranged parents continue to talk to and about each other with respect in front of their children. Any criticism of the other parent is inviting the child to take sides. Criticism of the other parent undermines the child's self-identity which is formed, in part, of their relationship with and their view of both parents
- 3) The child should not be made to feel responsible for the distress caused to parents by the offending, or to be subtly invited to take up a caring role in relation to a parent going through distress
- 4) In the absence of an explanation as to why significant changes have occurred in their family, children will try to make sense of it by guessing, 'filling in the gaps' and sometimes making wrong assumptions –for example they may feel they are part of the problem and feel rejected by a father who now sees them only occasionally
- 5) Children usually feel love for their parent even though the parent may have done something wrong. Different family members may well feel and respond differently and each needs to be able to express their own views and have them acknowledged, and not criticised
- 6) Children will probably, at some stage, want to know why Dad did what he did. It may help them to know that the adults are struggling to make sense of this also, as it is usually very complicated. It can be useful to tell the children that Dad may be getting (or have already got) some help, and is trying to work things out
- 7) Children will have numerous, often complex, feelings about their father's offending. They will need time to process the information. They may well feel angry about the impact the offences have/might have on their own and other's lives. They may be worried about friends finding out. They may be anxious about their father's future behaviour, and/or the possibility of him going to prison and being unable to cope. Children may feel unable to express/discuss these feelings with parents as they may worry about upsetting them further. They need to know that their parents understand this and, if possible, be directed towards another trusted adult they may be able to talk to and confide in
- 8) One of the greatest difficulties for a parent is the fear that the child might reject them or become fearful of them, if the child is told about the sexual offending. It is important to bear in mind, however, that the child is likely to find out at some point and it is better that they find out in a controlled way from a supportive adult than by other means. Children can often



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be angry if they feel significant information has been withheld from them, if they feel they had a right to know about it

- 9) Too much detail can be very disturbing for children. Keep the details to a minimum when young but let the child know it's OK to ask questions, although you may not be able to answer them all

Possible ways of conveying information about what has happened

It is important that both parents agree on the choice of words, if possible, arriving at a statement or account that is an accurate reflection of the truth, and with which each is comfortable. Both parents should stick with the agreed account

If the parent who has offended wants to tell the child, this should be done with the mother or another appropriate adult. It is too much to expect a child to respond to the disclosing adult who has sexually offended, without the presence of another supportive, trusted adult

The following is only a guide. Each set of parents knows their own child, and may prefer to come up with their own choice of words

- *Dad has had a problem looking at sexual stuff on the internet, some of which has involved young people and children. The police are involved and Dad has been/may be charged with an offence, and this is why Dad is no longer living with us. He is very sorry about all the trouble it has caused and has been getting/trying to get help, but until it is sorted out Dad/everybody/Social Services/I think it best that you don't see him alone/we see him together/other people are there when you see him. Dad has got support and we don't want you to worry*
- *Dad did something wrong. He's been looking or talking about rude things on the internet, sexual things, and some of those things were to do with children and are against the law, so the police are involved and are deciding what to do about it.*
- *Dad's got problems with his thinking about what's OK and what's not when it comes to sexual things. He's been looking at sexual stuff on the internet and some of it was to do with children, which is against the law*
- *Dad's been spending a lot of time on the internet and I/we have found out that some of that time was spent looking at sexual pictures of children. It's against the law to look at that kind of thing and Dad is in trouble for doing it*

If relevant, parents may want to include comments such as:

- a) *Dad still loves and cares for you*
- b) *Dad is very upset to have caused so much upset for all the family*
- c) *Dad is trying to get some help with his problem*
- d) *We really didn't want you to have to hear this but thought you had a right to know what was going on*



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- e) We don't know if Dad will go to prison. If he does he will be in a special part of the prison that will keep him safe*
- f) It is unlikely that Dad will go to prison (if this is the case)*
- g) The story might well not appear in the local press. If it does we will help you handle it*

Generally, there is little point in putting e, f and g in the child's mind, if they haven't been thinking of these possibilities. However, they may raise these issues, or be worried about them. It is also important to give the child the signals (in words and attitude) at the time of talking to them, and subsequently, that they are free to ask any questions, although you may not be able to answer them all.