

**Relative Importance -
Supporting Children, Supporting
Offenders, Building Families**

*The Support Needs of Offenders
and their Families*

Dr Sam Wright
31st March 2011



Introduction

In November 2009, Revolving Doors Agency commissioned Thames Valley Partnership to research:

- The difficulties facing families of offenders and their unmet support needs; and
- Potential methods for helping to address the complex needs of these vulnerable families.

Background

Approximately 160,000 children have a parent in prison each year (2½ times the no. children in care)

- These children are three times more likely to have mental health problems or to engage in antisocial behaviour than their peers;
- Nearly two thirds of boys who have a parent in prison will go on to commit some kind of crime themselves.

Potential benefits of supporting families

Reducing re-offending

Children and families play a crucial role in supporting an offender to reduce re-offending

Preventing children from starting to offend

The stressed and fragmented nature of family relationships can result in inter-generational transmission of offending. Offenders' families need early intervention support to reduce social exclusion and the risk of future offending.

Thames Valley Partnership case studies

Four case studies to cast light on the hidden support needs that exist within offenders' families, highlighting:

1. How an individual's imprisonment impacts upon their family.
2. The pre-existing support needs of these families and how they are exacerbated by the criminal justice system.

Case Study 1: Julia and her son Anthony

When Anthony was first arrested it was traumatic. It was like 'Oh my God!' and we were first introduced to the whole system. It was quite daunting at first. What next? And there were big [time] gaps in between everything as well: from being assessed and being referred to Youth Offending Service. That was even worse because you were waiting for the letter to come through. That was awful.

Julia and her son Anthony

We didn't get any information whatsoever ... The Youth Offending Service is definitely more hands on and involves the parents and the family. They will tell you what is going on to a certain extent but again they are held back. Probation just don't tell you anything. He was a really seriously vulnerable young person with mental health issues, he was not mentally his right age, and I think we should have been involved, but you know you are left out of the loop big time.

Julia and her son Anthony

My Dad just didn't want anything to do with him at all. My partner didn't want anything to do with him at all and I think it was quite strange because they are the two main male figures in his life. It made it harder for him as well.

Case Study 2: Angela

They just raided us in the early hours of the morning. Nathan was in bed at the time. ... I was eight and a half months pregnant, didn't know what was going on. We had armed police, there were sniffer dogs in the house and they just searched the whole house. ... Nick was arrested and taken away.

Angela

I hated having to explain everything to every person I spoke to. I had to keep saying 'My partner has been arrested and has been taken to prison.' With a week before Christmas and three weeks before I was due to give birth. ... It was an all round difficult situation. I was heavily pregnant. I had to get the house organised for the baby coming along and things like that. It was an absolute nightmare to be perfectly honest.

Angela

I had an emergency caesarean, so I couldn't do an awful lot. Luckily for me I have got some fantastic friends and neighbours. And they were doing meals on wheels and coming round and doing my Hoovering. They were brilliant. The first six months was very difficult.

My eldest was absolutely devastated ... We had problems with his school. ... but it wasn't him misbehaving to start off with - it was other children picking on him and saying things about what was going on. Because it was all in the local papers everybody knew about it. As soon as it happened I went up to his primary school and told them everything. They were fantastic, they were really good. They had a liaison lady that used to speak to him because he wouldn't speak to me at the time about it - which I could understand - he told them that he didn't want to upset me

His attitude just completely changed. He wouldn't listen to me, but then on the other hand he was very clingy towards me. He didn't want to go to school because he didn't want to come home and nobody be there. I don't know where he thought I was going to go, but then again you don't know how a child's mind is working in that situation. ... That was when all the court case was going ahead – it kept being cancelled and re-scheduled then cancelled again ... Nathan was just really confused. There was a slim chance that Nick would come home when he was sentenced. But it was just the suspense.

Horrible, horrible, horrible. It wasn't too bad with Nathan because he was that little bit older. But with Tegan when you have to take their coats off and then you have them searched. ... We were told they [check babies' nappies]. ... Which is why I wasn't going to go in in the first place - because I wasn't having my baby son put through that. I didn't want to do that. ... it is a big shock to the system. The first visit was just unbelievable. We didn't know what we were doing or where we had to go.

[Nathan] He found it really, really difficult. I mean he hated Nick to start off with, didn't want anything to do with him. He wouldn't see him or anything.

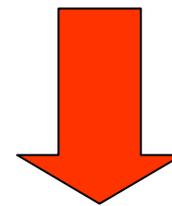
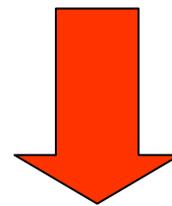
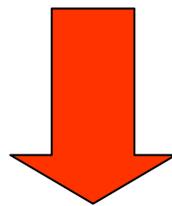
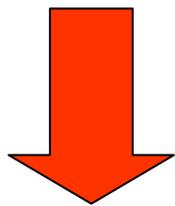
For the first few days he wouldn't go anywhere near Nick. He used to scream. I used to take him to go visit him once a week but when you are in those surroundings, in a prison visits hall, you can't bond – it is totally different to being at home.

Angela

I don't want to be one of those statistics where the parents and grandparents don't talk.

The existence of support

- Variable provision, significant delivery gaps
- Little collaboration or shared learning
- Lack of joined-up working between the resettlement and Every Child Matters agendas
- No strategic coordination to drive this area of social policy forward



Inequality of access to support for families

How to develop effective support?

- Systematic identification of families and their support needs
- The provision of family support packages at time of sentencing – to all children/young people, throughout the whole year
- Sufficient resources for joint working between Social Services, CAMHS and voluntary services - to support families and protect children

- Continuous, systematic rollout of training across all sectors, prioritising Headteachers, SENCOs and Home-School Link Workers.
- Policy development to link the resettlement and Every Child Matters agendas
- Building the evidence base through detailed impact assessment



Summary

Family circumstances – whether providing the informal support and security that facilitate desistance from offending, or causing the chaos, stress and trauma that foster further offending behaviour – need examining as part of any strategy to address both re-offending and child welfare.

