

# Working with Children and Families of Prisoners

Sharon Evans

Chartered Educational  
Psychologist



# The Facts

- It is estimated that 170, 000 children every year are affected by the imprisonment of a relative, primarily a parent.
- This is around two and half times the number of children in care and over six times the number of children who have Child Protection Plans.
- 7% of children will see a parent imprisoned during the their school years.
- 25% of men in Young Offender Institutes are, or are shortly to become fathers.

# The Facts continued...

- 30% of children of prisoners suffer significant mental health problems compared with 10% in the general population.
- Boys are twice as likely to become convicted offenders if their father had a criminal conviction.
- 43% of prisoners lose touch with their families during sentence.
- Each year living arrangements of 18,000 children are affected by the imprisonment of a mother, with only 5% remaining in their own home during sentence.

SCIE Resource Guide 11 (April, 2008)  
Action for Prisoners Families (2008)

# Invisible Children

- When a significant member of a child's or young person's family is sent to prison, that child's life is turned upside down....
- These children have done nothing wrong themselves, they are **invisible** inside and outside the school system.
- Currently there is no requirement on any agency/person to let the school know that they are caring for the child of a prisoner.

# UN Convention on Rights of the Child

- Important articles within the framework:
  - Article 2: protection from discrimination or punishment because of their parents' families' status or activity.
  - Article 3: everything affecting children requires to be in the child's best interest.
  - Article 5: respect for the responsibilities and rights of parents to provide appropriate direction and guidance.
  - Article 9: safeguards the right of a child separated from their parents to maintain contact with their parents.
  - Article 12: children have a right to express an opinion and to have that opinion taken into account in matters affecting them.

# Aims of the Guidelines

- To provide **information and guidance** for those working with children who have a 'family' member in prison.
- To **raise awareness** and **understanding** of the needs of children with a 'family' member in prison.
- To promote **social inclusion** and **equal opportunities**.
- To develop a **consistent approach** and good practice across Oxfordshire Local Authority.

# Every Child Matters Agenda: A Change for Children (2003)

- ECM calls for improvements in opportunities and outcomes for children and young people through services which:
  - Ensure all children can be healthy, stay safe, enjoy and achieve, make a positive contribution and achieve economic well-being.
  - Provide more opportunities for all, and narrow the gaps in provision.
  - Support parents, carers and families.
  - Deliver a shift to prevention, early identification and intervention.
  - Are integrated and personalised.

# Barriers to Achievement in the ECM Outcomes for Children of Prisoners

- **Being Healthy:**
  - Children of prisoners have about three times the risk of mental health problems compared to their peers.
  - Fear and anxiety increases the likelihood of mental health problems and stress-related illness.
  - Visiting prisons can be stressful and physically exhausting for children.
  - Children can feel alone and need support to recognise and rationalise their own feelings.
  - There may be issues of self-esteem for the whole family.

# Barriers to the ECM Outcomes...

- **Stay Safe:**

- The embarrassment factor or stigma leads some parents to decide not to inform school, leaving the children vulnerable and isolated.
- Being bullied and becoming a bully.
- Unwelcome attention from media, the local community or associates involved with drug or alcohol abuse.
- Crime may be viewed as a normal part of everyday life which may present a risk to children.

# Barriers to the ECM Outcomes...

- **Enjoy and Achieve:**
  - Regressive behaviour which makes school difficult for the child or young person.
  - The worry and anxiety which prevents children's relaxation/recreation.
  - Cognitively and emotionally preoccupied, often leading to limited engagement within their learning environment.
  - Non-Attendance, restricting opportunity to learn and achieve.

# Barriers to the ECM Outcomes...

- **Making a Positive Contribution**
  - Children of prisoners have three times the risk of anti-social/delinquent behaviour compared to their peers.
  - Lack of self-esteem and confidence, children can become withdrawn and avoidant. Socially isolated from their peer group.
  - A lack of understanding about changes in a child's behaviour might bring negative response rather than encouragement and support.

# Barriers to the ECM Outcomes

- **Achieving Economic Well-Being:**
  - Imprisonment can have a negative financial impact on families, leaving families vulnerable to financial instability, poverty, debt and potential housing disruption.
  - The cost of transport for families visiting prison and/or getting access to local services.

Ormiston (2007)

# The Emotional Impact

- **Shock:** Can take the form of physical pain or numbness but more often manifests in apathy and withdrawal, uncharacteristically calm or angry.
- **Denial:** This can last for hours, weeks or longer. No loss is acknowledged so the child is protecting themselves.
- **Mixed Emotions:** Children may feel they are 'different' because of the unexpected waves of strong emotions that surge through them over which they sometimes feel little control.

# The Emotional Impact

- **Anger:** At the person whom they perceive has let them down, family members for not stopping the chain of events, the police, the courts, school for not understanding.
- **Depression:** Emptiness, the pain of loss, the feelings of lack of self-worth and loss of confidence.
- **Guilt:** As they assume responsibility for contributing to the behaviours which led to the imprisonment of the 'family' member.
- **Anxiety:** About the changes in new responsibilities that are taking place and the loneliness and isolation they may experience.

# 'The Journey'

- There are a number of stages which may impact on the child/young person:
  1. Pre-arrest activities
  2. The arrest
  3. Court
  4. Finding out about the imprisonment
  5. Visiting the prison
  6. Special events
  7. Home visit
  8. Release

# Factors affecting the child/young person

- The age of the child at the time of imprisonment.
- The length of the parent's sentence.
- The disruption and change to home life.
- Availability of family support.
- Nature of the parent's crime.
- Witnessing the arrest.
- Lack of information or discrepancies in information provided.
- Any previous experience of the imprisonment of a parent.
- Distance away from home that parent/family member is held.
- Poverty as a result of imprisonment.

# 'The Voice'

When he got arrested is caused loads of fights in the family. I missed him but I was ashamed and didn't want to tell people.

I just kept thinking why doesn't anybody ask me what it is like for me?

Dad won't be able to come home when he is released because he is a bad influence on the family. He's got to prove himself to be a good dad.

I'm his son, he tells me that I'm the one that makes him hang on. I feel that I'm keeping the family together

No-one knows at school. It made me work harder because my mum has asked me to try and do my best. I want my mum to be proud of me.

It makes me feel horrible, like I have done something too. They watch you and make you feel guilty just for being there. It is scary being searched. We didn't even talk when I saw him, I couldn't think of anything.

# Homeward Bound DVD Action for Prisoners' Families

- Connor's Story – The Effects of Imprisonment on Children.
- Connor Visits Dad in Prison.
- Connor Talking About the Future.

# Role of a Designated Member of Staff

- Named person within the school and/or setting.
- Designated person should have received training in dealing with sensitive issues and liaising with other agencies.
- Designated person would benefit from access to supervision and debriefing.
- Act as the advocate for the child.
- Liaise with the family and/or other agencies as appropriate to establish the needs of the child.

# School Records

- Be careful about what is committed to writing and in what context.
- Be non-judgemental, record only facts that all potential readers need to know.
- Some concerns may be better conveyed verbally than recorded, which may risk labelling the child.
- Computerised records are over accessed except in cases such as the Child Protection Plans where access is restricted.
- The parent in prison has a statutory right to receive copies of all information sent out about their child.

# Confidentiality

- Guidelines on the sharing of confidential information should be laid down in existing school policies.
- Only those who need to know should be told and all information received and passed on should be treated as confidential.
- Confidentiality in school can never be absolute but on a need to know basis.
- The systems and policies that your school has in place for dealing with Child Protection issues can be usefully drawn on with the children of prisoners.

# Basic Principles of Good Practice

- See the child as an individual with individual needs.
- Be non-judgemental. The child has not committed a crime.
- Avoid treating the child as a victim or being over protective.
- Acknowledge the child's own preferences.
- Don't ask about the crime.

# Additional Advice within the Guidelines

- Attendance Issues
- Prison Visits as an Experience
- Linking with Probation and the Youth Offending Services
- Resource materials available for 'invisible' cohort
- Useful contacts
- References

# Thoughts/Reflections...

- Copies are available of the Guidelines
- References are included in the Guidelines
- Contact Details are provided in the Guidelines

Thank you for listening 😊