

WORKSHOP

The Best Start in Life – The Role of Children’s Centres

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There is no statutory obligation/accountability on health, education, social care, probation etc. to share any information they have on children with a parent in custody – they do not have to pass on the information.

Currently Sure Start Children’s Centres have a statutory obligation to engage with children and families of prisoners.

Amongst their responsibilities they :

- Should be services available to families of offenders
- Should work with parents/grandparents/carers of children of offenders
- Display information on services/support available locally and nationally
- Establish good relationships with key agencies (i.e. probation)
- Work closely with the families on the release of the offenders where appropriate

The Sunshine Centre – putting this into practice

Sunshine Centre is a voluntary org. – set up 11 years ago largely as a result of community demand/need, and they work closely with a number of agencies in their support for parents and children of offenders.

The Every Child Matters policy drives their work. There is a real need for what they offer – research shows that amongst children with a parent in prison around 30% will suffer some sort of mental health problem. To summarise the ways in which they work:

1. The Centre gives time/space for children to talk about their feelings and any anxieties they might have with one of the centre key workers, either at the centre or at another location i.e. school.
2. The Centre caters for children 0-19 but their primary focus is in the 0-5 age range
3. They offer after school sessions – the chance to be with friends, have somewhere to go and the centre can help to arrange other activities through the IDSS.
4. Logistical help – planning a prison visit can be quite difficult especially when even filling in a form can be problematic. So they can assist with form filling,

- sorting out travel options, practical advice and help. Prison visits can be a logistical nightmare – if the prison is not local this can be a huge problem and if the parent in prison is the mother, visit planning can be an even bigger issue.
5. When a parent goes into prison family life can be totally disrupted. Sunshine Centre can assist by helping the family to establish a workable family routine – what needs to be adapted to suit their new constraints/commitments?
 6. In preparation for the return of the absent parent – this is often a difficult time – coping with challenge of change etc. Children are older and things have moved on so provisions have to be made for this if the return is to be successful.
 7. Liaison and assistance for the carer (often the grandparent) who is left looking after the child. Many of these are unfamiliar with the children's routine, their school requirements etc. so they Centre can help a lot in this area.
 8. Outreach workers from the centre help to forge links between the families and other supporting agencies.

Questions

How consistent is the role/activity of the children's centres in general?

Not at all – the provision of children's centres is patchy. For example Oxfordshire has good coverage as illustrated by a comprehensive leaflet listing sites. Bucks is more fragmented and Berks. has 6 separate authorities, so has varying approaches

Thames Valley Partnership is trying to use the Family Matters Programme case studies as examples of the effectiveness of multi-agency approach.

A key objective is to raise the profile of children with absent parents (whether this be due to prison, divorce etc).

We know there are pockets of deprivation even in affluent areas – many examples of families being 'lost'. Sure Start Centres were intended to be targeted to these areas, but there are still a lot of gaps. In the next phase the policy will be more direct – by 2010 it is hoped that all areas of deprivation will have a Children's Centre.

How are children referred to the Sunshine Centre?

There is an open door policy. In general referrals can come from anywhere in the community, from a school, neighbour etc. The Sunshine Centre try to keep paperwork to a minimum to keep the process simple – the centre is well known locally and there is a strong confidence in the Centre from the community.

Huntercombe YOI – many families are just not aware of support available – does an information book exist?

Where there is a visitor centre at the prison the aim is to get them to display generic and local information - so there is no pack as such – it is up to the centre to put up the relevant information for that particular locality and community.

Currently some information may be found on the local Council websites – so this is a good place to look but again it will vary depending on the area. A Childrens Services Directory is planned for 2008 however – and it is hoped that this will hold a lot of very useful contacts.

Graham Naylor – DVCA – Do the Centres know the families prior to the imprisonment/remand?

The Sunshine Centre estimate that they will previously have been engaged in some way with around 60-65% of such families – so yes a large proportion are already known by the Centre.

One of the main objectives of the TVP Family Matters programme is to improve the links/connections between prisons and their local Childrens Centres. Many prisons know nothing about the Centres in their area (or that there is even a Centre!)

An example of how this can work was seen recently in the Isle of White where TVP undertook training at Camphill, Parkhurst and Albany prisons. TVP invited along a key representative from the local Childrens Centre and having made the initial introduction the centre is now already liaising with the prisons to put on a series of events on certain days.

Citizens Advice

The Sunshine Centre also refers families to the local Citizens Advice team available on Thursday mornings at the Centre (although they also have a legal person at the Centre who can give advice/information on many issues)

Links with Youth Teams.

The Centre has good links with the local Youth Offending Team – a rep. from the YOT sits on the Sunshine Centre panel. They also have links with the Youth Service as well as with voluntary youth workers and some church volunteers.