

An essential guide to... prisoner families

Children with parents in prison have a unique set of challenges to contend with, but the right sort of help targeted at prisoner families can have a positive impact on their futures. *Ruth Stokes* looks at some of the difficulties families face and what is being done to combat them



Parental imprisonment can have a significant and long-lasting impact on a child – and the number of children affected is considerable. There are no definitive, up-to-date figures, but a report titled *An Unfair Sentence*, published in January by the NSPCC and Barnardo's, suggests that about 200,000 children in England and Wales have a parent in prison at some point during a single year (based on 2009 statistics). In

Scotland, the estimate is between 20,000 and 27,000 (2012). In Northern Ireland, about 1,500 are affected on any given day (2010).

Children with parents in prison have at least double the risk of mental health problems compared to their peers, and three times the risk of anti-social or delinquent behaviour. 'Parental imprisonment can impact on a child's behaviour and development,' explains Lesley Dixon, practice development manager at Action for Prisoners' and Offenders' Families.

A range of initiatives are working to maintain and improve contact between prisoners and their families

'Many families' lives become dominated by the effect of imprisonment and they have to live with the consequences. Stigma, shame, guilt, isolation and financial, social and psychological problems are just some of the issues faced by all involved at different stages. The family might lose their home, and have to move from the community they know and which offers them support.'

The relationship between prisoners and their children also influences the likelihood of reoffending. ➤



Dumfries runs family play sessions, which give prisoners an opportunity to have better connections with their children

Ms Dixon says, 'Involving families with a parent in prison is a significant factor in reducing reoffending. Research has shown that the maintenance of family ties is an important factor in effective resettlement.'

She adds, 'Children of prisoners have a right to quality contact with a parent in prison and to be protected from discrimination and harm. Families should have the opportunity to be involved in progress of the offender's custodial sentence with access to information where appropriate.'

However, several prison-related and children's charities have pointed out that standard prison visits can be a distressing experience for children due to the tight security procedures – principally, to avoid drugs or mobile phones being smuggled in. A briefing paper from Barnardo's in late 2014 claimed that: 'Children and families often tell us about their negative experiences when visiting a family member in prison.'

'This is backed by research, which has shown that children can find visiting upsetting and frightening, and searches daunting – particularly the first few times they experience these.'

Some prisons now have family days as well as the standard visits, giving parents an opportunity to play and interact more freely, and with the aim of offering a more positive experience for all involved.

There are also a range of programmes that focus on the importance of maintaining contact. Family First's Daddy Newborn, for example, gives imprisoned dads opportunities to feed, bath and change the baby; Storybook Dads and Storybook Mums enable prisoners to record a story for their children to listen to as a way of strengthening the bond and making contact; and Family Man by Safe Ground uses drama, fiction, discussion, games and a written portfolio to help prisoners develop and maintain their family relationships. The Book Trust Stories Tour, meanwhile, recently took a six-month live literature show around prisons in an attempt to encourage parents to read with their children. Bristol City Council has also committed to having a champion for children affected by parental imprisonment in every school.

However, while the way children interact with imprisoned parents is

being addressed by some innovative schemes, prison procedures can still restrict what practitioners and charity workers take into prison and, hence, limit the way they work (see case studies).

Provision varies in both scope and quality from prison to prison (details are documented in HMP Prison Inspectors' reports), and some projects have been cut due to lack of funding. A number of mother-and-baby units have been closed and there are currently no female prisons in Wales.

More generally, Ms Dixon believes there is room for improvement in certain areas. She says, 'Families and children of people in prison should not be judged and should be seen as families first with particular needs, as this group serve their own hidden sentence. There is also a need for more awareness training for practitioners working with those affected by imprisonment.'

But she adds, 'There are many examples of good practice within the criminal justice system that could be replicated in other areas for the benefit of children and families.'

Those involved in the schemes also testify to the positive impact they can have, on both the prisoners and the children. Here, we profile some of the different approaches.

IN TUNE **Addiewell Prison,** **West Lothian**

Throughout 2014, Addiewell Prison focused on music as a way of bringing male offenders together with their families. The In Tune project was run jointly by prisoner family charity Families Outside and Vox Liminis, which uses the arts to bring about changes in the criminal justice system. The project is currently trying to secure funding to expand its reach.

The initiative involved workshops, each with four families participating over the course of eight sessions. The activities were led by professional musicians, who were themselves supported by Families Outside and Vox Liminis.

'The families would come for an hour and a half and play music together – around nursery rhymes and activity songs, encouraging family interaction and engagement through music,' says Sarah Roberts, child and family support manager at Families Outside. 'The funding was


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for children aged eight and below, but the project was really aimed at age one-and-a-half and up. Over 2014 we worked with 12 fathers in prison, 14 carers and 17 children.

'We were meeting in a space away from the visitor room and I think it made it feel like something special. I was struck by families' comments on that. We served tea, coffees and biscuits and it just felt that this was a space where they could build up a relationship with their own family. They also began to interact inter-family.

Over the eight weeks you could see quite a change, not only with how the children interacted with their fathers in prison but also the confidence they developed in interacting with other children and other children's parents. That was an unexpected outcome.

'The confidence of the dads also grew. Some were learning nursery rhymes for first time – and it takes a lot of confidence to do that in front of other people.

'It was lovely for the mums too. Often at beginning the musicians

Programmes run by Early Years Scotland teach fathers how they can affect their child's life chances

'Children can find visiting upsetting and frightening'

would play and let families chat and the dads and children would dance together; there was one time when a mother was moved to tears.

'I think music is really powerful. There is a danger that programmes become all about issues and being in prison and we wanted to transcend that and say to families it's about enjoying being together and experiencing together. Music allows all the transformation things like communication, trust and confidence to happen naturally.' ➤

VIRTUAL VISITS

HMP Grampian, Aberdeenshire

The Virtual Visits programme, run by charity Apex in partnership with the Scottish Prison Service (SPS), was set up to help tackle a problem of geographical separation. When the SPS was building a new prison to replace two prisons in Aberdeen city centre and Peterhead, the offenders had to be moved to prisons in Glasgow and Perth – but because most of their families were in Aberdeen this could mean a six- or seven-hour round trip.

'Virtual Visits meant families could come into our office and connect via video link to the prisoners,' explains Helen Chamier-Tripp, service development manager at



Apex. 'It was very much about helping the families out so they didn't have to make that journey, which was already very difficult. You can imagine a mother taking two or three young children on the bus down to Glasgow. It's a big undertaking. So the service was used really well by families in the Aberdeen area.'

The service is still in use now, although the building work is complete, since the new prison is still about one-and-

a-half hours from Aberdeen city centre, where most of the families live.

'It's continued to be well used and successful,' says Ms Chamier-Tripp. 'It's laid out in a way that's family friendly – we have a sofa and we've got toys and books for the children so when they come in they feel a bit more relaxed.

'That set-up is important. It's one of the things that gets commented on a lot. Because prison is not the most cheerful experience. The new prisons are better – it's not as daunting as it used to be – but it's still going in to a prison; it's still being searched and going through protocols. Although they have to provide identification when they come here, it's much more relaxed.

'The SPS was quite clear from the beginning that it couldn't be a 9am-5pm Monday to Friday service because that doesn't fit in with families. So we run from approximately 1pm-7pm, and there are visiting times at the weekend too.

'The service is beneficial for all parties. For children to see parents regularly is good for obvious reasons: you maintain that contact and relationship. If you're in prison for quite a while and your child is growing up, it's good to be able to see them on a regular basis. And the prisoner is taken to a separate area for the video, so there's no one else around them to hear what they're saying. They can maybe have better interactions and not feel restricted.'



MOTHER AND BABY SUPPORT UNIT HMP Styal, Cheshire

Action for Children has run the Mother and Baby Support Unit at HMP Styal for the past eight-and-a-half years, and last year won the Nursery World Working with Parents Award. The unit combines parenting support, targeted intervention and nursery provision for children up to 18 months old. It caters for nine mothers and ten babies.

‘We aim to address some of the underpinning issues of offending behaviour that impact on parenting,’ explains Karen Moorcroft, children’s services manager, prisons, at Action for Children. ‘Generally speaking, prisons are quite disempowering and restrictive, but the ethos we’ve set on the unit challenges this. We want mums to come in, be skilled up and go out feeling empowered to be good parents and make good life choices in the future.’

‘Each mother and baby has their own room, and it’s in a house so it’s not a cell. There are communal areas

downstairs – a kitchen, a dining room and a nursery. The mums look after the babies in their rooms and retain parental responsibility. It’s also self-catering – we want mums to think about healthy eating for the babies – so they’ll make meals on their own for themselves and their children throughout the day. They get the baby ready and put them in nursery, just as you would in the community, then go to work in prison or on offending behaviour programmes.

‘Our nursery staff provide Ofsted outstanding registered care and it fits all the same developmental and curriculum requirements as a community nursery. Because it’s quite a restricted environment, we have to be creative about how we do that. We look closely at individual needs. We might take them out of the prison, perhaps to a children’s centre, or to Sainsbury’s, so we expose them to everyday activities we take for granted.’

‘In the afternoon, the mothers join in with targeted intervention group work on the unit. There’s quite a menu of activities so it might be a

MORE INFORMATION

- Action for Prisoners’ and Offenders’ Families, www.prisonersfamilies.org.uk
- *An Unfair Sentence*, NSPCC and Barnardo’s, www.barnardos.org.uk/an-unfair-sentence.pdf
- Booktrust Stories Tour, www.nurseryworld.co.uk/nursery-world/news/1145825/prisons-stories-tour-wins-praise
- Daddy Newborn, www.thiswayout.org.uk/case-studies/families-and-children-services-daddy-newborn-and-toddler-programmes
- Early Years Scotland, www.sppa.org.uk
- Family Man, www.safeground.org.uk/programmes-services/family-man
- Families Outside, www.familiesoutside.org.uk/getting-tune
- HMP Styal Mother and Baby Support Unit NW Award, www.nurseryworld.co.uk/nursery-world/other/1147100/nursery-world-awards-14-initiatives-parents
- Storybook Dads and Storybook Mums, www.storybookdads.org.uk
- Virtual Visits, www.apexscotland.org.uk/virtual-visits-in-the-north-east

‘Involving families with a parent in prison is a significant factor in reducing reoffending’

parenting course, a baby massage session, or rhyme time.

‘It’s free flow through the unit. Its bright, it’s airy and it’s as normal as we can make it. The nursery becomes a playroom in the evening. We do bathtime routines, and bedtime routines. Staff support mums with safe sleep practices, basic care of babies for those first-time mums.

‘We know that key attachment is significant for a child, for both the short term and long term, and if we can facilitate that at this stage, that is a protective factor for emotional well-being of the child going forward.’

FAMILY PLAY SESSIONS HMP Dumfries, Low Moss and Grampian

Early Years Scotland (formerly the Scottish Pre-School Play Association) runs family play sessions alongside other programmes in three prisons – Dumfries, Low Moss and Grampian.

‘We have a member of staff who goes in and effectively plays and is a role model for prisoners,’ explains Early Years Scotland chief executive Jean Carwood-Edwards. ‘When Low Moss installed a play area, the prison staff found that most dads just stayed in their seats anyway, and when they were asked why they weren’t playing with the children they said, “What do you mean, playing with children?”’

‘So the staff realised there was a need for some kind of facilitation there – that the dads often hadn’t been played with when they were children and didn’t have a concept of playing with the children. We provide a qualified play practitioner who goes in and works with the dads, the partners and the child, with stories, play, interactions and physical affection. These things are promoted and encouraged in gentle way.

‘We know from our own evaluations that partners will now replicate some of the activities at home. And the dads build much stronger relationships with the children while they are inside. The dads learn to do baby massage, where they really bond with the babies, and they get very emotional and are keen to get more.

‘There’s also a fathers’ programme outside visiting hours where they learn about how they can impact the child’s life chances. So they get a bit of theory and then when the children come up they engage with them and feel more confident about playing with Lego or sand, or whatever it might be.’ ■