

# Working with children with a parent in prison

Messages for practice from two Barnardo's pilot services

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Believe in children  
Barnardo's



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# Executive summary

This report reviews the practice learning from two pilot services for the children and families of prisoners that Barnardo's ran in 2010-2011. The services were based in Bristol and Devon and were known as ECHO (Empowering the Children of Offenders).

The services were innovative in that they were community-based rather than 'point of contact' services (for example, services working with parents and children when they visit the prison).

The approach of the services was to 'engage children of offenders to reduce the isolation, financial hardship and stigma attached to having a parent in the criminal justice system and to increase their social emotional and mental wellbeing'.

In-depth interviewing took place with eight mothers, the fathers of whose children were in prison. In addition, five key staff from the services were interviewed. Three children from different families talked with the interviewers.

The main practice messages identified by the these interviews were:

- A response that can combine practical assistance (around visiting, benefits etc.) with work around relationships and children's understanding of imprisonment is particularly valued.
- There is a need wherever possible for a prompt (that is, at the point of imprisonment) response to the family affected by imprisonment.
- Talking directly to children about prison and its impact is crucial.
- Parents often need help and support to talk to their children about imprisonment.
- Parents at home may struggle with separating their own needs from their children's in terms of relationships with the imprisoned parent.
- Not all crimes are the same in terms of the impact of parental imprisonment. Sex and serious violent crimes add to the complexity of the work with the children of prisoners.
- Workers with children of prisoners need to engage with wider family networks – particularly grandparents.
- It will often be necessary to liaise very closely with schools to support the child affected by parental imprisonment.

The issues identified above need, however, to be put in the context of wider questions that affect practice towards this group of children and their parents. Four of these which are particularly important are:

- Identification: the importance of developing systems for identifying children who are affected by parental imprisonment. This, however, is a more complicated issue than at first may be apparent. There is evidence that some children in particular may be very wary of people in authority, such as teachers, having information on the prison status of a parent.
- Assessment: at the current time, we do not have clarity about which children may need support around having a parent in prison.
- A children's rights perspective: identifying the rights of children affected by imprisonment is a key task for strategists and practitioners.
- Preventive work and thresholds: one of the issues identified in the ECHO services was that the children of prisoners often don't come above the thresholds for children's social care services and because of this, no preventive work takes place.

# Introduction

The challenges faced by the 200,000 children in the UK (Williams, 2012) who are in any one year affected by parental imprisonment are beginning to be recognised. But although there is now a developing recognition of the situation and needs of this very vulnerable group, there is only relatively limited published practice knowledge about working with them.

This is particularly the case in terms of community-based practice. The majority of services for the children and families of prisoners are what could be referred to as 'point of contact' services, that is, they focus on the point of contact between the prisoner and the family – most significantly visiting at the prison.

Point of contact services are of course crucial for the child's welfare, and their immediate experiences of prisons. But typically they do not engage with the whole child – the child who returns to the family, community or school and for whom parental imprisonment can be a continuing distress and represent ongoing difficulties. Furthermore, 'point of contact' services cannot support or meet the needs of those children who do not, or are not able to visit the imprisoned parent.



# The child's world: the impact of parental imprisonment

Responding to the whole child is particularly crucial in the case of children of prisoners. A review of the research literature shows that imprisonment has an impact on the child's internal world (thoughts and feelings), an impact on the family world of the child and an impact on the child in the outside world (at school, in the neighbourhood, with peers etc.)

Obviously, not all children affected by imprisonment will face the same difficulties and challenges. Also, children of different ages and developmental stages will be affected in different ways. But very briefly, some of the impacts of parental imprisonment identified by research and practice are listed below.

## The child's internal world

- Sadness at separation from the parent (Gill, 2009).
- Fear of what is happening to the parent in prison (violence, loneliness, deprivation) (Gill, 2009).
- The stressful nature of visiting. Long journeys, the short period of the visit and the emotional impact on the child of leaving the parent in prison (Robertson, 2007).
- Making sense of the complex set of contradictions that children in this position often experience – that is, that the parent they love is regarded negatively by other people, and furthermore that their parent has done a 'bad thing'.
- Not being able to comprehend the timescale of imprisonment.
- Children of prisoners are twice as likely to experience mental health difficulties as their peers (Lewis et al., 2008).

## The family world of the child

- Increased family stress/pressures (Boswell and Wedge, 2002).
- Deterioration of family resources (child poverty). See for instance Smith et al. (2007).
- Possible tensions with the wider family.

- Family transience (as result of housing difficulties, 'making a fresh start' etc.) or new care arrangements. This is particularly the case where the mother is imprisoned (see Robertson, 2007).
- Possible family isolation as a result of stigma in the community or the family withdrawing for fear of stigma.

## The child in the outside world

- Children's difficulties may manifest themselves in deterioration in behaviour and performance in school (see Morgan et al., 2013). They are three times as likely to be involved in antisocial behaviour (Lewis et al., 2008).
- Possible rejection, bullying etc. from peers and in the neighbourhood (Gill, 2010).
- Having to negotiate stigma (who to tell, not knowing whether it is safe to tell friends, what can be talked about at school etc.) (Gill, 2010).

The strength of a community-based approach is that it can address these different aspects of the child's experience. And a crucial point for practice about the way in which imprisonment impacts on the different worlds of the child is that these are interrelated. Sadness and family disarray can, for instance, impact on school behaviour and achievement. Equally, stigmatization in the local neighbourhood can impact on the pressures actually within the family.

Also of course, there is a strong likelihood that parental imprisonment is only one aspect of the challenges that a child faces. There can often be a close link between parental imprisonment and other family difficulties (mental health issues, substance abuse, domestic violence etc.; see for example, Prison Reform Trust, 2012) and neighbourhood disadvantages (stressful neighbour relations, deteriorated environment, frightening antisocial behaviour etc.).

# ECHO: innovative community-based services

This report is based on two pilot services for the children and families of prisoners that Barnardo's ran in 2010-11. These services were known as ECHO (Empowering the Children of Offenders), running in Bristol from April 2009 to September 2011, and then in Devon from January 2010 to August 2011.

Central to the pilot services was the aim to understand as much as possible about the needs of children in this situation and to base our work on what children and parents tell us. Consistent with this, two pieces of community research were carried out at the beginning of each of the services, in which we consulted with 30 families (this included talking to 22 children and young people from these families) (Gill, 2009, 2010).

The ECHO Devon service had three project workers covering the three unitary authorities

of Plymouth, Torbay and Devon. The Bristol pilot had two project workers for the majority of the time it was in operation.

The philosophy of ECHO was summed up by the Devon project in the following way:

*Barnardo's ECHO is a community-based project to help children with a parent or carer in the criminal justice system ... Our aim is to engage children of offenders to reduce the isolation, financial hardship, and stigma attached to having a parent in the criminal justice system and to increase their social emotional and mental wellbeing.*

*The key difference with ECHO is our outreach capability and an holistic approach to helping a child in need.*



# Purpose of report

The purpose of the report is not to provide an evaluation of the ECHO services. Rather, it is:

- to hear the experiences of staff who were directly involved in the service
- to hear the experiences of parents and children who used the service, and in particular what aspects they found beneficial
- to develop messages from practice based on the above that can inform other such community-based services or support more mainstream children's services to effectively address the needs of these children.

We do not claim that the families that the ECHO services worked with are completely representative of families affected by imprisonment. They were families who

acknowledged that parental imprisonment was having an impact and to an extent were engaged with the challenges in terms of their children's lives. They were also likely to be having some contact with the parent in prison.

There may be many more families – perhaps a majority – who do not have such engagement. One study, for instance, found that only half the women who had lived with their children or been in contact prior to imprisonment had received a visit from them since going to prison (Caddle and Crisp, 1997).

However, we do believe that the practice learning points from ECHO are relevant for a wide range of services that come into contact with the children of prisoners.



# The ECHO services: data and outcomes

## Family (service user) data

The Bristol ECHO service worked with 65 families and directly with 120 children and young people; the Devon ECHO service worked with 53 families and directly with 91 children and young people.

The children whom the services worked with were from across the age range.

| Age of children | Number of children: Bristol | Number of children: Devon |
|-----------------|-----------------------------|---------------------------|
| 0-1             | 12                          | 2                         |
| 2-3             | 21                          | 11                        |
| 4-5             | 16                          | 12                        |
| 6-7             | 12                          | 12                        |
| 8-9             | 16                          | 14                        |
| 10-11           | 13                          | 9                         |
| 12-13           | 11                          | 11                        |
| 14-15           | 11                          | 10                        |
| 16-17           | 5                           | 6                         |
| 18-19           | 3                           | 4                         |
| <b>Totals</b>   | <b>120</b>                  | <b>91</b>                 |

Both services worked predominantly with white service users, although the Bristol service worked with at least 12 service users self-defined as mixed white/black African.

In the large majority of cases, the father was the family member in prison. However, four families working with the Bristol service and four of the Devon families had a mother in prison.

## Quantifiable outcomes

As stated above, this report is not an evaluation of ECHO. However, in terms of generic outcomes used by family support services within Barnardo's, the services appear to have had a significant impact on the lives of the parents and children with whom they came into contact:

- In a significant number of the families, improvements were identified in their access to information on housing, health, benefit rights and support needs.
- There was also information about significant improvements in relationships within the family at home. In addition, there was evidence that for some children, there was an improvement in emotional wellbeing.
- Behavioural improvements and improvements in attendance at school were also noted for a number of children.

## Talking with staff and service users

We talked with five staff delivering the ECHO services in either Bristol or Devon.

We also talked with three families involved with the Bristol ECHO service and five families involved with the Devon service. All of the families were affected by the father's imprisonment or anticipated imprisonment. In three of these cases, however, the mother whom we interviewed had also herself previously been in prison.

We also had the opportunity to talk to four children from three of the ECHO families. We have used some of their words in the report.

# Key themes emerging

## Key themes emerging

Below, we list some key themes to come out of our interviewing. We combine the views of parents and ECHO staff to produce a narrative account. We have also combined the information from the Devon and Bristol services to aid case anonymity.

## The timing of the intervention

### Importance of support at the point of imprisonment

Staff and parents indicated that it was crucial that services should be available at the point when a parent first went into prison. Also, in at least one case, the ECHO service had been involved with the family in anticipation of the father going into prison, and this support was highly valued by the mother.

The time around imprisonment is a period when there can be massive upheaval and practical challenges for the family (knowing where the parent has been sent, finding out about visiting, changes in income and benefits etc.). But the first hours and days were also highly significant in terms of the child's emotional experience.

A parent described the initial impact of imprisonment in the following way:

*'Horrendous, horrendous ... from the beginning ... Horrendous, it was just like their whole world had been blown apart. And everything they knew, was undone.'*

A mother of a six-year-old boy described the initial period of the father's imprisonment in the following way:

*'My son, who's incredibly close to his father was literally for the first two weeks – I mean I think he was in shock. He was having night terrors, nightmares. I would wake up at three o'clock in the morning and he would be in the loo, just rocking and saying 'I want my daddy, I want my daddy, I want my daddy' ... I had to make decisions very, very quickly under a huge amount of pressure.'*

### Need for early intervention around how imprisonment is talked about

In addition to the need of some of the families for practical help at the point of imprisonment, staff also talked about the need in some families for fairly immediate support about the way imprisonment was being handled and talked about to children. For instance, one worker said:

*'The police just turned up and dad disappeared and that was that. Mum's response to this ... was that she kind of created a culture in the house where it was a taboo subject. They didn't talk about it and she refused to discuss the subject with her children or anyone ... On speaking with him [13-year-old boy], he said 'I don't know what happened – all I knew about the crime was from the newspaper, mum wouldn't talk to me about it, no one has asked me what I wanted to do, no one has asked me if I want to see my dad, no one has done anything'.'*

The worker was able to work with and support the mother in talking about the imprisonment and facilitate the son's contact with his father.

### Dealing with the direct impact on children of arrest, and the initial period of imprisonment

Another key reason for early intervention is that the process leading up to the imprisonment – particularly the arrest – may have been traumatic for the children, and support may be necessary as soon as possible.

The ECHO interventions sometimes took the form of addressing the immediate impact of the arrest. One worker, for instance, talked about a nine-year-old being at home when his father was taken away handcuffed. Since that time, the boy had become very upset whenever he heard police sirens. Some of the worker's focus was on the boy's fear of sirens. It emerged that when he heard them he was worried that they were coming to arrest his mother and take her away from him.

Another worker described the immediate impact of the arrest on a seven-year-old. The children were present at the arrest and

## Key themes emerging

one of the officers allegedly said ‘your daddy’s been selling drugs and he’s going away for a long time’. Since that time the seven-year-old had been soiling badly, and addressing this was one of the focal points of the work.

### Parental management

In addition to the need to work with families on the immediate emotional impact of imprisonment, the initial period could be a crucial time for parental management. One of the workers described how in one family, when the father had gone to prison, the mother could no longer demonstrate control. The 13-year-old boy had no bedtime and took to leaving the house but not going to school. The worker felt that intervention in the early days when the father was in prison might have left the mother with more skills in putting limits on the son’s behaviour before the situation further deteriorated.

A key message therefore, appears to be one of early intervention as close as possible to the period of turmoil of the parent going into prison. This early intervention, as we have shown, is important at different levels. A mother summed this up when she said:

‘I would like a system whereby the minute somebody is arrested and they go off to prison, then in the next couple of days you receive a visitor. Someone will come in to talk to your family about the prison system, about what’s likely to happen. Some kind of liaison person who can explain to you how you arrange visitation, who can actually signpost you on to other services. Is anybody doing that?’

## Ongoing direct work with children

### Talking with the child

The necessity for continuing direct work with children was talked about by staff and parents. It was also a message from the limited number of interviews we did with children involved with the service. For instance, an eight-year-old told us, ‘He helped me, a lot. A lot of doing lots of nice things with us, to take my mind off of it’. And a nine-year-old told us, ‘It gave me someone

to chat to other than my mum, so he helped me quite a lot’.

The pressures on the child in this situation were recognised by all the staff. As one of the workers said, ‘they are desperately clinging on to wanting mum or dad not to be a bad person’.

But this pressure on the children was often accompanied by not wanting to talk about it to the parent at home, and the ECHO service was valuable in this context. A parent told us:

‘[nine-year-old son] wouldn’t talk to me. He would not talk to me about anything, really. Neither would ... [eight-year-old son]. I did think ... [ECHO worker] helped, because they had someone else to talk to other than me. I mean, I would try to talk to him and he wouldn’t respond. ‘I’m fine, it’s ok’ ... So yeah, that’s how .... [worker] did help them, talking to the children.’

### Children’s understanding of having a parent in prison

Often the workers appeared to be directly addressing issues of the self-concept of the child now that a parent was in prison. Here, a parent talks about the ECHO work with her son:

‘I noticed a massive change in .... [14-year-old son] and his confidence and everything ... [ECHO worker] gave him a lot of self-confidence, which for some reason I struggled to do myself. And I think just having that male figure around, helped ... He’s improving, his school work’s improving. It’s taken a while. He just changed, he just seemed different, he related to me better as well.’

Another parent talked about the role of the worker in continuing to talk to her son about what it means to have a parent in prison:

‘Like, no matter how much I explained it, that he did something wrong and it’s like a boot camp ... [son] didn’t understand it, he was like ‘well, he chose to make that decision and it’s his fault and he should’ve thought about his kids’. And coming from a little boy, it’s so shocking, but it’s the truth ... it helped having a male, someone male, around him as well.’

She went on to say:

'The benefits was, having the kids have someone else to talk to other than me. Taking some of the stress off me, and like, basically dealing with it. That's what it basically was isn't it. There was only me on my own, and then someone actually started talking to them.'

Some of the interviews referred to the parents' understanding of the potentially conflicted position their children were in within the family and the way the ECHO worker could address this. This could be particularly the case with complex and changing families and where a new partner was involved:

'I think ... [son] is very conscious that he doesn't want to upset me, and that he doesn't want to upset ... [new partner]. And he thinks he expects me to hear him say 'I hate Daddy, I don't want to see Daddy', whereas ... [the ECHO worker] was able to talk from a completely different perspective and say to ... [son], 'nobody expects you to hate your Daddy ... and if you'd like to see your Daddy you can.'

### **Talking to children about the complexities of the criminal justice system**

Finally, the interviews indicated the importance of someone to give information to the child about what was happening to the parent in the criminal justice system:

'Someone to explain what's going on. And seeing how she's older, someone to explain a bit of the process, you know. He wasn't in prison sentenced, he was on remand.'

## **Supporting the parent at home**

### **Supporting the parent in talking to the children**

The parents at home themselves often wanted support in how to talk to their children about imprisonment. This needs to be put into the context of their own often very unsettled emotions. For instance, two of the parents talked about how they felt when their very young children talked about wanting to kill themselves. And there was also a great deal of

poignancy in the descriptions they gave of their children's perspectives on what happens in prison. One parent, for instance, said that when her son spoke to his father on the phone, he asked him 'do you wear rags?'

There was much evidence in the interviews about how parents wanted advice from ECHO about talking to their children. A parent told us:

'I ain't got the answers for the half of it, how can I answer something if I ain't got answers myself?'

And another parent said:

'I think it is about equipping parents to be able to guide their child through stressful times. And actually a worker could come in and give a child twice a week, some really good support, but if you've got the parent who's all over the place, screaming, crying, shouting, that child is always going to pick up on that.'

And a worker told us:

'that's one of the biggest things parents need help with when they come to ECHO - 'How do I tell ... [child] his dad's been arrested?' How much to tell them and how.'

The ECHO approach was to advocate honesty consistent with the understanding of the child. The worker quoted above also emphasized that where appropriate, the message to children should be that although the imprisoned parent had done something wrong, it did not necessarily mean that they were a 'bad person'. Workers and parents talked about working together to decide what to tell the child:

'It was actually ... [ECHO worker] who helped me come up with what we were going to say to them. When ... [partner] got sent to prison I didn't know what to tell the children or how to word it so they wouldn't get hurt by it. I didn't want to tell them everything, but I didn't want to lie to them because later on in life I didn't want them to think that if I didn't tell them about that then there might be other stuff I didn't tell them about.'

## Key themes emerging

Another issue in terms of talking to children was how to explain the uncertainty of a situation to the children. This mother is describing a situation where there was doubt about whether the father was going to go to prison.

'Yeah. This is something that ... [the worker] kind of, supported me with, preparing ... [son] for what might happen ... You know children always want answers: 'Why is this happening mummy? Why can't I see Daddy? Why is Daddy angry? Why is Daddy going to see the judge?'

Whether the information comes from the worker or the parent, depending on age and development, the child will need information and reassurance on a number of key issues. Amongst the most important will be:

- what is happening to the parent in prison; where are they, what is prison like?
- how long will they be in prison?
- will it be possible to see them or talk to them on the phone in prison; how often will they be able to see them?
- how should the child handle talking with friends?
- will the school know?

## More general support for the parent at home

### Someone for the parent to talk to about themselves

The parents appeared to value support with other issues around having their partner or ex-partner in prison:

'So it was good to talk to someone, cos otherwise I wouldn't be talking to no one. Cos I don't do shrinks really. So, um it was good to talk to someone ... But he, yeah, he did help. He did help. I think it was important that someone was there, cos otherwise I probably would have gone mental by now.'

'One of the most useful things to come out of ECHO for me, I mean I don't know, I just felt that ... [ECHO worker] really understood what I was going through. It wasn't really that he

was able to offer anything in particular, but he was able to listen and sometimes give his opinion and reassure me about something I wasn't sure about.'

### A key dilemma

One very important aspect of this was that parents appeared to value the approach of the workers in addressing one of the key dilemmas of their situation. This dilemma is that although they may have a whole range of emotions towards the imprisoned partner or ex-partner – distrust, anger, resentment, fear – some of the parents realized that there was a need to separate this from the needs of the child.

The mothers talked about the impact on their children as being very different from the impact on them:

'Cos obviously I'm not with him, so it doesn't affect me at all really. It affects me the impact it has on her.'

'He is their dad and if I stop the kids from seeing him, no matter what he's done then I will end up looking like the bad one. When they're older I don't want them turning round and asking me why I stopped them seeing their dad. I won't stop him seeing the children, but it will be on my conditions. As long as I know the children are safe then it's OK. I don't want them turning round when they're older saying 'why won't you let me see him?'

This parent went on to say:

'It was just things like [the ECHO worker] telling me that ... [son] was going to lash out at me because I'm the one that's here for him, that ... [partner] isn't around and so he will try to test me to see if I'm going to leave him. He was able to tell me ... son's way of seeing things so I could kind of be in ... [his] shoes. So then when he was hitting me and things, I knew why he was doing it and what he was trying to do. So instead of shouting at him then, it was more about hugging him and telling him I knew why he was upset but that I'm not going anywhere.'

The mother in particular was therefore in a position where she often supported and ‘stage managed’ the relationship between the child and her estranged partner. This stage management could involve taking the child on visits even if she had no desire to see the ex-partner, or getting others to take the children in for visiting.

Alluding to this central dilemma, a mother of a ten-year-old told us:

‘I mean, that’s his Dad, at the end of the day. I mean, later in life if I keep it from him in the long run and that, I don’t want him thinking ‘oh no, it is all your fault.’

### Practical issues

Often the workers were called upon to make links with the prison where the parent was held. This contact with the prison appeared particularly valued by the parent at home. Parents told us:

‘When you first go there – all I got was a letter with a set of instructions about how to get to ... prison. I mean there wasn’t anything, whereas ... [ECHO worker] gave me family information and answered any questions we had about the prison – about taking the children up, whether there was anything to explain to the children about going there like why they were going to be searched and things like that.’

‘Yeah she was very good ... because she found out all about the family visits for me and everything, all the information and that.’

‘She will give you information [if] you don’t have it, about prisons, about visits, because she’s involved with this. And actually she has tried to help me with ... [name of prison], about the visits, about family visit. You know, because she goes to many prisons, she knows the problems, she knows.’

‘Him going to see ...[ex-partner] and sorting things out took a lot of pressure off me as well – it meant we weren’t arguing down the phone at each other – we could actually have a civil conversation, without passing that on to the kids.’

‘The most useful thing that ... [worker] did for me was the prison stuff. The liaison about ... [son’s] visits ... he knew how the prison system worked and all that stuff.’

### Importance of grandparents

Both the ECHO services worked with families where the role of grandparents was crucial. There were a number of cases where ECHO staff worked directly with grandparents to make it possible for them to continue caring for their grandchildren when (typically) the mother had gone into prison. Some situations involved the grandparents directly looking after children if parental imprisonment had had such an impact that care arrangements had broken down.

One of the workers described a situation of a six-year-old boy. His father had been sent to prison and the boy had gone to live with his grandmother, with whom he had always been close. Eventually the grandmother moved into the family home to look after the boy.

Often the support was primarily practical. For instance, in one case, the worker was involved in a range of practical matters, including getting a grant for a bed for the child, redirecting child benefit to the grandparents and organising financial support for visits to the prison. The worker also supported the grandparents to attend the local children’s centre.

Another staff member described working with a grandparent who was caring for three children, aged 14, 10 and nine, and was unable to arrange for these children to visit their mother in prison.

Other situations involved the child being looked after by the husband or partner of a woman in prison but the grandparents giving direct support. A worker told us:

‘Grandparents are indispensable. You get situations where they say ‘that’s my grandchild and nothing is going to happen to them if I can help it’. I have a case where dad has custody of

## Key themes emerging

the child, mum is in prison and the dad can't cope. Although he's well-meaning his skills are practically non-existent.'

But grandparental care is often far from straightforward. One worker, for instance, described the double challenge of grandparents in this situation. They are having to cope with their own emotions around having a son or daughter in prison and also they may feel ill-prepared to care for a child. They may also be experiencing the stigma associated with a family imprisonment and perhaps towards themselves for being the parents of someone who goes to prison. For instance, one worker talked about the negative reaction a grandparent experienced if she took the child to the local children's centre.

Also of course, the grandparents themselves may be facing a number of other challenges that may possibly impact on their ability to step in to care for children where a parent has gone into prison. They may, for instance, themselves be lone parents and living on very low incomes.

## The implications of sexual and violent crimes

Although many children and families affected by imprisonment will experience the same difficulties and disadvantages, the characteristics of the offence can add increased complexity, confusion and stigma.

Both the ECHO services worked with families where the father had committed sexual offences, and this was the situation for at least two of the families we talked to. One of the parents interviewed highlighted the added complexity of the issues in this situation when she said:

'Dad didn't go off to prison because he robbed a bank, this was a crime committed against a child and there is also another child involved.'

Another said:

'It's not the same as if he'd gone inside for fraud or something. No, no it's nothing like it. Nothing like it.'

Sexual offences of the father abusing an older child in the family or abusing children living locally have particular implications for the child of the prisoner. For safeguarding reasons, the imprisonment of the father is typically accompanied by restrictions on the child seeing him. The child in these circumstances is therefore likely to be experiencing a double loss, where even visiting the parent in prison is not possible.

This may leave children in this situation not only dealing with loss but also not comprehending the nature of the crime or understanding why contact has been terminated with the father. The pressure on the remaining parent about what to tell the child in these situations can be very extreme. This pressure may be compounded by neighbourhood stigma as a result of publicity about the crime and possibly the breakdown of wider family relationships.

One of the workers, describing a family he had worked with where the crime was sexual abuse, identified the contradictions of this kind of situation for the child:

'The real difficulty the boy had emotionally was that he understood the nature of what his dad had done, but he was in this catch-22 situation where he wanted to be supportive of his mum and sisters but he still loved his dad.'

Another worker said:

'There was a case where stepdad had sexually abused his stepdaughter but he also had a child with the mum, so this little boy was calling the man dad. The girl who was abused was about 14 or 15. So mum had this dilemma because now he's asking for dad. She was torn between the little boy's need for his dad and her horror at what he had done to her daughter.'

One of the parents we talked with who was in this situation described the value of the ECHO worker trying to help her decide what to tell the child:

'For example, he worked with other families, and I was really struggling with whether I had done the right thing in not telling .... [son] what

his father had done, and he was able to say that there is no right decision ... That is an absolute lifeline when you're a mum in that situation. Just that sort of knowledge. Also I suppose the idea that one isn't alone.'

## Working with schools

The ECHO workers spent much time liaising with schools and spending time in schools carrying out direct work with children and supporting teachers who found themselves unsure as to how to respond to a pupil's parental imprisonment. One of the workers, for instance, was regularly going into schools to do one-to-one work with children where a parent was in prison.

The services were also working in an 'influencing' capacity to get key messages and approaches across in schools about supporting the children of prisoners.

The schools with which the services were in contact differed widely in their knowledge, sensitivities and strategies in relation to the children of prisoners. Some had relatively full realisation of the issues surrounding these children. For instance one school referred four children to the ECHO service in a short space of time. Others seemed to have little understanding. One of the workers told us

'I have a case with a 14-year-old and his mum is in custody and has been going in and out and all that and he lives with dad and adores him and respects him for the job he's done and the way he's coped but he desperately wants the nurturing and softness that he would get from his mum. He is acting up in class. They are totally missing it all – they just see a boy who is badly behaved.'

And others were keen to work with ECHO but had not hitherto acknowledged that they might have children in this situation in school.

One worker described engaging with a school which for the first time was recognising the needs of a five-year-old with a parent in prison. The worker was able to help the school in thinking through the complexities of the case and the reactions of the child.

The worker felt that this gave the school the confidence to deal with the situation.

A statement by a nine-year-old boy who was interviewed summed up perhaps one relatively common issue in relation to schools with which the services came into contact:

'I think, um, Dad not being around, meant that, got me more, I had more anger ... So it got me angry inside ... And I had lash outs at school.'

This same child talked about the impact of the imprisonment on how the school reacted to him:

'Um, teachers, they were like, I don't really think my teacher tried to help that much. He used to like, when my Dad was in prison, it felt like he went more strict.'

Also of course, the school was the arena in which the issue of 'who to tell' put demands on the children. An eight-year-old boy told us:

'Mum said it was a big secret and don't tell your friends. Because they ain't your family.'

And one of the parents talked about the school being out of its depth in dealing with parental imprisonment:

'The child protection officer was very, very good actually. From the school. She was very good. However, I really don't think they knew how to handle it. I really don't think they knew what to say, what to do, what to provide ... It's still a very taboo subject isn't it. And people are uncomfortable about talking about it.'

The message from ECHO was that the schools that they were in contact with were very varied in their dealings with the challenges of parental imprisonment, and that in many schools, there was still a great deal of work to be done.

# Overview: perspectives on community-based practice with children and families affected by imprisonment

Although we now have a considerable amount of research information about the impact of imprisonment on children and families, we know far less about 'what works' with this very vulnerable group.

The main practice messages identified by our ECHO practice are:

- A response that can combine practical assistance (around visiting benefits etc.) with more work around feelings and relationships is particularly valued.
- There is a need wherever possible for a prompt (that is, at the point of imprisonment) response to the family affected by imprisonment.
- Talking directly to children about prison and its impact is crucial.
- Parents often need help and support to talk to their children about imprisonment.
- Parents at home may struggle with separating their own needs from their children's in terms of the relationships with the imprisoned parent.
- Not all crimes are the same in terms of the impact of parental imprisonment. Sex and serious violent crimes add many layers of complexity to the work with the children of prisoners.
- Workers with children of prisoners need to engage with wider family networks – particularly grandparents.
- It will often be necessary to liaise closely with schools to support the child affected by parental imprisonment.

A key message – perhaps the key message – to emerge from our interviewing was the importance of talking directly with children about imprisonment and its impact on their world. There is a danger that services with this group of families focus on more general issues of family support. The danger is that imprisonment acts as a trigger for family support but not necessarily for having the confidence to talk directly with children about what it means to have a mother or father in prison.



# Wider questions of practice development

The issues and successes identified above need, however, to be put in the context of wider questions that affect practice towards this group of children and their parents. Five of these are particularly important.

## Identification

We are still at a very early stage nationally in terms of developing systems for identifying who these children are. There is no system routinely in place either within the court system or the prison system for identifying which children have a parent in prison. So although we have the estimate that 200,000 are affected by parental imprisonment in any one year, we do not at a local level have information about who or where they are. Although with the very high numbers involved, it is likely that all communities have children and families in them affected by imprisonment.

This, however, is a more complicated issue than at first may be apparent. There is evidence that children in particular may be very wary of people in authority, such as teachers, having information on the prison status of a parent. For instance at a recent workshop at the *Silent Children* conference attended by eight children with a parent in prison, all the children were against their teachers knowing that they had a parent in prison. The reasons they gave for this were that:

- teachers would tell others: 'it would be all around the staff room'
- teachers might 'blurt it out in class' and seriously harm the child with his or her age mates
- teachers might assume that all the difficulties the child has are the result of the parental imprisonment
- teachers might have lower expectations of a child.

## Assessment

At the moment, we do not have clarity about which children may need support around having a parent in prison. It is unrealistic to think that all of the 200,000 children affected

by parental imprisonment should be receiving a 'service' in the way that the Echo families received a service.

One way of looking at this is to develop a perspective whereby the rights of all children affected by parental imprisonment are identified and acknowledged, but within this, it is recognised that a smaller number will need specialist intervention.

Within this, further work should be done on assessment tools that recognize which children are particularly affected, how this relates to other issues in their lives, and what might be the most effective approach and timing of an early intervention approach.

Part of this work should be identifying resilience factors in the lives of children in this position. On the basis of the ECHO experience, such factors may include: someone in the child's immediate world in whom the child is able to confide and who is able to talk directly about imprisonment; networks of support in the child's wider family and professionals who have contact with the child (particularly teachers); and understanding the impact of imprisonment and having the confidence to talk about it.

## A children's rights perspective

Identifying the rights of children affected by imprisonment is a key task for strategists and practitioners. Such rights may include: the right to contact with an imprisoned parent in a supportive and congenial setting; the right to age-appropriate information about where the parent is and their circumstances; and the right that professionals coming into contact with the child (such as in schools) should have received training and/or information concerning the impact of parental imprisonment and how to talk with children in this situation.

## Preventive work and thresholds

Our practice work indicated many benefits of interventions as near as possible to the time when the parent went into prison. This was

true of practical issues such as helping with visiting arrangements or sorting out benefits. But it was also true of the family's immediate response to the changed circumstances of a parent being in prison and the child's early understanding of what was happening.

This of course raises the question about early intervention in the context of the thresholds of severity warranting intervention. One of the issues identified in the ECHO services was that the children of prisoners often don't come above the thresholds for children's social care services and therefore are not getting a service. Because they don't come above the thresholds, no preventative work takes place.

The current financial/resource position means that local authorities are doing less early intervention work and certainly have little scope for early intervention work with such a large group of children and families. For instance, the Family and Parenting Institute (2012) found that 'non-social work' and universal services were being withdrawn and councils were increasingly refocusing limited resources on targeted interventions.

Our practice work indicates that this is a real dilemma for embedding effective work with this vulnerable group into more mainstream services.

### **The need for a wider family-focused approach in a range of services**

Addressing the needs of children and families affected by imprisonment is not just a question of children's services developing their understanding and work in this area.

To effectively work with the challenges, offender management services need to work towards embedding a family focus in all the work they do. Also, prisons themselves have a key role to play and a necessity to be more family focused. Such a family focus is not just about good visiting facilities. It also means effective ways of keeping in touch with families, effective advice, information and support for parents in prison and effective preparation for their release back to the family.

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