

**GUIDANCE FOR WORKING WITH CHILDREN
WITH A FAMILY MEMBER IN PRISON**

SEPTEMBER 2013

1. Background

An estimated 160,000 children in the UK have a parent in prison. This is more than twice the number of children in care and over six times the number of children subject to a child protection plan. A lack of recording means that this number may be even higher while sentencing reforms (in the Criminal Justice Act 2003) have increased the use of custody and the length of prison sentences. There is a strong association between parental imprisonment and adverse outcomes for children. The children of prisoners are about three times more at risk than their peers of committing antisocial behaviour and more than twice as likely to have mental health problems during their life. Sixty-five per cent of boys with a convicted parent go on to offend. These children undoubtedly constitute a group 'at risk'.

The aim of this guidance is to increase local understanding and knowledge of this often hidden group and to:-

- Provide information and guidance for those working with children who have a 'family' member in prison
- Raise awareness and understanding of the needs of children with a 'family'
- Member in prison, promoting effective early help and improving outcomes for children and young people
- Support a consistent approach and good practice across Bolton

2. Signs and Indicators

There is no concrete set of signs and indicators that will indicate a child has a family member in prison. Often services will become aware of a change in the child's circumstances as a result:-

- Direct disclosures from the child or other adult carer
- Their own observations and questioning e.g. change of carer collecting child, querying changes in the child's behaviour with the carer, changes in the child's behaviour, stories and drawings etc

More often than not these changes may begin or become more apparent in relation to any one of a number of stages relating to imprisonment such as:-

- The arrest of a 'family' member
- Finding out about the imprisonment of a 'family' member
- A visit to a 'family' member in prison
- Special events involving their 'family' member in prison, for example their birthday, mother's day or father's day
- A home visit by a 'family' member from prison
- The release of a 'family' member from prison

Some indicators to consider include:-

- Bedwetting
- Nightmares
- Temper tantrums
- Aggressive behaviour
- Withdrawal
- Refusing to go to school or prolonged of absence or patterns in absence
- Moodiness
- Aggressiveness
- Chattering
- Bullying
- Difficulty with peers
- Appearing upset
- Appearing withdrawn
- Showing a lack of concentration
- Showing a lack of interest in work
- Antagonism towards authority figures

The key point for any worker who observes such changes in a child or is concerned about their presentation is to:-

- Ask the child directly (where age appropriate) if there is anything worrying them – this provides a child with the opportunity to speak freely
- Where it is not possible to seek the child's view directly, share your observations with the main carer and ask if anything has changed recently in the child's life

3. Impact on the Child

Research conducted by Barnardo's in 2009 identified a number of themes relevant to children and young people:-

- An invisible group - There is no standard collection of information about who these children are, where they are, who is looking after them, what their needs are and what support they receive
- Experience stigma - Parental imprisonment can lead to a child experiencing stigma, bullying and isolation. Others might have to try and keep it a secret

- Experience disadvantage - A family member in prison increases the likelihood of the child experiencing poverty as their family may become vulnerable to financial instability, debt and housing disruption
- Have adverse outcomes - Parental imprisonment might cause a range of adverse outcomes, including aggressive behaviour, depression, anxiety, sleeping problems, eating problems, running away, truancy, poor school grades, and delinquency
- Are more likely to offend themselves - Sixty-five per cent of boys with a convicted parent go on to offend

Everyone working with children and young people should be aware of the barriers which may prevent children of prisoners attaining good outcomes. Ormiston (2007) suggested the following impacts which, while not exhaustive, do reflect the experiences of many children with a 'family' member in prison and should be considered as part of any assessment.

- Impact on being healthy
 - If a parent receives a prison sentence, they are immediately removed from family life. This results not only in feelings of separation and loss but often a dramatic change of relationships within the family
 - The child may be losing their childhood through taking on care responsibilities at home
 - The child's carer may experience isolation, stress or health difficulties and, as a result, the child's needs may not be fully met
 - The child may experience the loss of friend's and familiar surroundings through moving house, changing schools
 - The child may lack opportunities for play or may choose to avoid others by staying indoors rather than playing outside
 - Fear and anxiety increases the likelihood of mental health problems and stress-related illness
 - Visiting prison can be very stressful and physically exhausting especially for children
 - Children can feel alone and need support to recognise and rationalise their own feelings
 - There are issues of self-esteem for the whole family. Low self-esteem or belief can potentially affect the way family members look after themselves
- Impact on staying safe
 - Being bullied and becoming a bully are significant issues for children of school age

- The embarrassment factor or stigma leads some parents to decide not to inform school, leaving children vulnerable and isolated
 - Families can experience unwelcome attention from the media and the local community
 - An increased level of stress may mean potential lack of supervision of children as the parents/carers have to adjust to changed circumstances
 - In some communities/families, crime is seen as a normal part of everyday life which may present a risk to children
 - Families and their associates may be involved with drug or alcohol abuse or experience issues such as domestic violence
- Impact on enjoying and achieving
 - The stigma of imprisonment as the family often has to deal with negative reactions
 - The worry and anxiety which prevents children's relaxation/recreation
 - Regressive behaviour which makes school difficult for the child at any age
 - The family income may drop resulting in changes in diet, housing, holidays and opportunities for recreation
- Impact on making a positive contribution
 - Lack of self-esteem and confidence – children can become withdrawn and avoid situations where they will be the centre of attention.
 - Stigma by association – children may be excluded from group activities, hobbies, or friendship groups because of their parents/carers crime.
 - A lack of understanding about changes in children's behaviours might bring a negative response rather than encouragement and support that a child may need

- Impact on achieving economic well-being
 - Carers may experience reduced income
 - The cost of transport for families visiting prison and/or getting access to local services
 - A drop in income causes extra stress, problems with accommodation, debt and meeting the cost of visits

As well as the feelings of grief and loss experienced by a child may have additional anxieties. They may fear that:-

- The other parent might also be taken away
- Other people will find out
- They will be bullied

Children, who are not visiting the 'family' member in prison and have no access to accurate information about prison, can feel very anxious about what is happening to their imprisoned 'family' member and base their ideas of prison on what they have seen or heard in films or on TV. Agencies working with children and families affected by imprisonment recommend that adults tell children what is happening at the earliest possible stage. However, whether to tell a child when and how is the concern of the family. Common explanations given to children include, he's working away on an oil rig or joined the army, she's in hospital or on holiday, they've gone home to visit the extended family overseas, he's at college.

Occasionally children from the same family are told different things for example the eldest is told the truth, the younger child a lie and the youngest nothing at all. Children including the very young can sense tension and are aware of changes. Lack of information generally causes anxiety and fear. What is imagined may cause more worry than the whole truth would. Children who know what has happened may be reluctant to talk about the imprisonment even inside their own families. They may have been told not to mention it to anyone or might feel too ashamed to talk about it. Talking about it may even have been met with adverse responses.

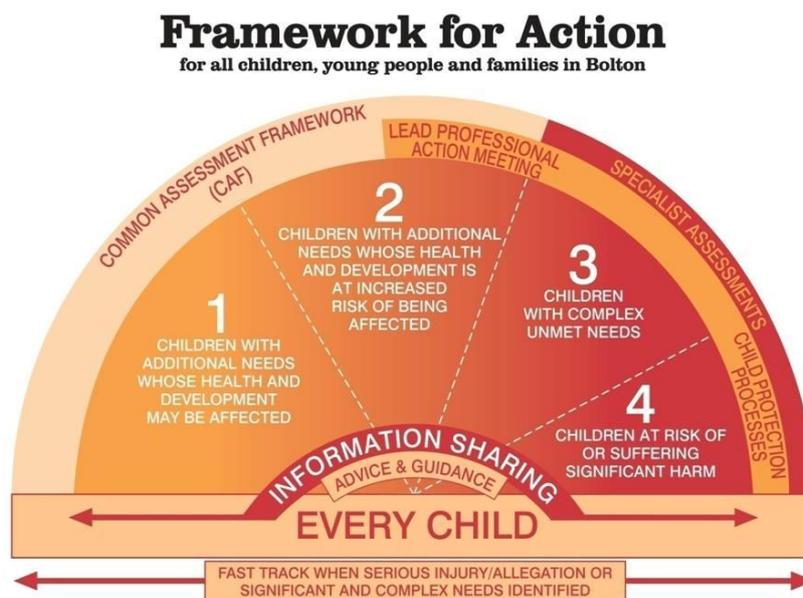
As with bereavement, a child will have lost someone very close to them and they experience a range of similar emotions and reactions.

- Shock – Shock can take the form of a physical pain or numbness but more often manifests in apathy and withdrawal, uncharacteristically calm or angry. Children may become quiet and compliant and be seen to be coping well and giving no trouble
- Denial – Denial can last for hours, weeks or even longer. No loss is acknowledged so the child is protecting him or herself. This distortion of the truth can create more complications for the future
- 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. They can often feel the urge to keep going over what has happened trying to find reasons

- Anger – At the person who has let them down, family members for not stopping the chain of events, the police, the courts, school for not understanding and directionless anger
- 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 their ‘family’ member.
- Anxiety - about the changes in new responsibilities that are taking place and the loneliness and isolation they may experience

4. Assessment, Action and Practice Messages

Where you have identified that a child has a family member who is in prison early help and the offer of support is essential. Workers should use this guidance in conjunction with the processes identified in Bolton’s Framework for Action to identify the level of need for the child as a result of their family member’s imprisonment. Worker intervention could range from a single agency response to meet the child and family needs through to the need to protect children from significant harm.



Key points to consider with any assessment include:-

- A response that can combine practical assistance (around prison visiting, financial advice etc.) with work around feelings and relationships is particularly valued
- A prompt (that is, at the point of imprisonment) response to the family affected by imprisonment
- Talking directly to children about prison, what’s happened and its impact on them is crucial

- Help and support for parents/carers 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 a range of agencies to support the child affected by parental imprisonment
- Arrangements and suitability of the child attending prison visits; Appendix 1 provides more detail on this
- Sharing Information – it is important to remember that this is a sensitive area for children and their family; any information shared about the family's circumstances in relation to a family member in prison should be done in most cases with the child and family's consent and in a proportionate way

Information and Guidance for Prison Visits

Below are some factors to consider for children visiting a prison setting:-

- Un-convicted prisoners (on remand) are entitled to at least three visits a week. Once convicted they are entitled to a minimum of two visits per month, with additional visits earned through good behaviour. There is always great pressure on visiting facilities at weekends. This means that some visits will be booked for weekdays resulting in absence from school; convicted prisoners may be located a considerable distance from home
- Making bookings for visits is often very difficult, particularly if there are language problems, a child may have to stay at home to support this process for example making phone calls thus impacting on school attendance
- Most prisons do not allow visitors to take personal possessions in with them; children's drawings and school reports can be sent in by post but collages and models will not be allowed even if posted
- Children are searched entering prisons including a rub down search and they have to pass a dog trained to detect drugs; this may be frightening for some children
- Visits usually last between 30 minutes and two hours - sitting across a table in the prison visiting room for the duration of a visit can be difficult for all involved, particularly for children as movement in the visiting area is limited
- The performance and behaviour of children of prisoners frequently become more erratic around the time of a prison visit; time off for children to visit a prison can be a difficult request for parents to make and prison visits should be recorded as authorised absence
- The Assisted Prison Visit Unit deals with claims for travel expenses for people visiting relatives in prison
- Many prisons have extensive websites providing detailed information about visiting a prison, including virtual tours, contact details for the Family Liaison Service and information regarding Special Family Visits families should be encouraged to use these as a method of preparing children for visits