

# Telling the children

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# Telling the children

## Caring for children on your own

Parents often need support and guidance to make decisions with and for their children. For parents who are bringing up children alone, the pressures are doubled and they are greater still if you are a parent trying to bring up a child while your partner is in prison. One of the most difficult things to address when someone is imprisoned is what to tell the children, but it is important that you talk to your child about what is happening.

Each child is different and you will know the individual personalities in your family. What works for one child may not be a good idea for another, and it is always important that you take decisions that suit the needs of the individual child.

The parent left to cope with the children is likely to experience a lot of stress. You are likely to feel lonely and isolated with nobody to turn to. You may feel overburdened with responsibility, anxious about money and worried about visiting the prison. Such worries make it very hard to give the children the time and attention they need. Just as the adults have to cope with many changes, children also have a lot of adjustments and a whole new range of feelings to manage when a parent goes into prison.

Adults play a big part in helping children recognise their feelings (for example explaining to them that a tight feeling in the tummy could be anger or anxiety).

## What to tell the children

When we asked prisoners' relatives to identify the most important issues they had to face, they said, 'the children and what to tell them'.

As parents, we may often hide the truth from our children. When they are small we may encourage them to believe in fairies and in Father Christmas – it's only later they learn where the presents come from. When relatives pass away we may reassure our children that they are safe in heaven. Some adoptive parents find it hard to tell their children that they were adopted, instead of born, into the family. In other words, we can often tell our children what we think will protect them and make them happy.

How to tell the children that their parent is in prison and what that actually means, is much tougher. Your children are bound to ask questions that you will have to deal with, and it is usually better to tell them the truth, explaining it in a way that they will relate to.

It is of course any parent's right to decide how and when to tell the children, but remember that there is no guaranteed way to protect children from finding out about what has happened in some other way. The key question perhaps to ask yourself is not, 'Shall I tell the children?' but 'When and what shall I tell the children?' The most important thing is that you choose a time when you can give the children all of your attention and when you won't be disturbed, to answer their questions and, where necessary, to comfort them.



## What if your partner committed a crime against you?

If your partner committed a crime against you, particularly if it was of a violent or sexual nature, you may not want to talk about it with your child or children, or want to visit. However, your children will undoubtedly be asking where their father is and if they can see him, so you will need to think about what to tell them. You may want to say something along the lines of ‘people can do bad things, but it does not make them a bad person’, or ‘sometimes people lose their tempers. They can’t control it, although they should, but they can still love you’.

Of course if you don’t want to keep in touch with your partner that’s absolutely fine, but your child may still be able to visit – other people such as a friend, relative, or social worker could take them.

## What if you just say nothing?

*“They were so young and I just couldn’t tell them what was happening.”*

It can be very tempting to believe that a child is too young to understand, or is not aware of what is going on. Some parents believe it’s best not to say anything. But even very small children will be able to sense tension or upset at home.

Children who don’t know where their parent is can get confused, as they often sense that something has happened which they don’t understand. They may think that they cannot ask questions and then imagine things, which will worry them more.

An explanation that a young child can understand may relieve at least some of the anxiety. Lack of information, on the other hand, may make children insecure and afraid. There is also the risk they will find out some other way.

## Making up a story

Though some parents keep up the pretence that a parent is working away for a while it is difficult to maintain this for long, especially when you want to take the children with you on a visit. A small child may accept that the prison is a hospital or a factory, or even a hotel – but the older they grow the more difficult this fiction will be to maintain. Other children may tell your child the truth anyway. It will be more hurtful coming from them than it would from you, because you will not be there to support your child and explain the situation and help them come to terms with it.

A woman prisoner said that at first she was so ashamed of being in prison that she decided not to tell her young daughter:

*“At first I tried to pretend this was college I was at. But one day my daughter said she wanted the TV on during the visit and I said we weren’t allowed. So she said, “Can’t you ask the officers?” I’d always called them teachers and she looked really ashamed of letting it out and I realised she knew this was a prison. I was amazed how she’d picked it up – she’s only five!”*

Another mother whose husband is in prison said:

*“When I first visited Robert with Shane, I used to tell Shane that prison was ‘Daddy’s work’ because it was easier, but I don’t think that lasted long. Now we’ve explained it briefly, but not in detail. We told him that the policeman said Dad was in a fight and somebody got hurt, so that’s why he’s in there. His best friend at school knows, but I don’t think many of the other kids know, and so far he’s not had any problems.”*

And another women recalled what she said to her children:

*“ When it was all on the news, I used to run in the room and shut off the TV before they could see anything. For ages I told them he was working away. It was only when the youngest girl wrote a letter to Father Christmas asking for him back that I felt I had to tell them the truth. The girls cried, I cried, but in the end it was all right.”*

*“ When their father was sentenced, I told the children he was sick and in hospital in part of the jail, because he couldn't stop drinking. I had to tell them he was in jail, in case their friends said something.”*

This last woman invented a good cover story, which might work for a time. But, it really is better if you, as their mother or father, can decide who tells what, when and how, in the best way possible to help the child feel safe, trusting and protected. And that means the decision should be made as soon as possible, even as soon as when your partner is arrested.

Most parents feel it is their responsibility and their right to tell their children eventually. The hardest thing is when, how and how much to tell.

### **Where to start?**

A useful starting point is to think about what a young child already knows. That Daddy or Mummy isn't at home? That Grandad is upset? That men in uniforms came to the house? That people stop talking when the child comes into a room? Or maybe they don't stop, and the child hears things he or she cannot quite understand, or understands all too well. Adults can be careless about what they say in the hearing of children, wrongly assuming that the children will not understand and it's all right to talk.



An older child may have guessed what has happened, or heard neighbours talking, or read the headlines in the papers, or seen something on the television news – or a friend may pass on the news. Older children will need to know some of the facts to be able to face their mates and be clear about how to cope with their friends' knowledge. Teenagers will certainly know, even if they pretend they don't – children also sometimes protect their parents!

## Telling and reassuring your child

Children who have witnessed the arrest need explanations and comfort to help them deal with this shocking experience. Even fairly grown-up children, well into their teens, may expect their parents to be all-powerful and strong against the world. It can be really shattering to discover that outside forces can split their family, and remove a parent to some unknown place. Their home and their community may suddenly feel unsafe for them.

The age of the children is of course important. You might consider saying something like this to a very young child, 'Your daddy has to be away for a long time and we'll miss him, but we'll visit him when he's away and he'll come back one day.' However, bear in mind that a child's understanding of time will be very different from yours.

A child of three or four is old enough to pick up information in playgroup or by overhearing adults talking, so it may be necessary for you to say a bit more and a bit more urgently. You could say, 'You know your daddy's away – did you know that the place where we're going to see him is called a prison? That means he can't come home for a long time, but we'll keep visiting him so he knows we still love him.'

Older children need much more information, and they will get it somehow. If you are the one to tell them, you have some control over the quality of that information and you can also have some influence

over its emotional impact. Most people prefer to hear painful news from someone they can trust.

## What could be the outcome?

Your children may ask you a lot of questions about prison, or they may just accept the information and not want to raise the matter again for a while. A child may feel sorry for the parent in prison, or critical and angry with their mother or father for going away. Some children may even be proud, some may be embarrassed and some may be ashamed. Some will be very upset and you may see changes in their behaviour, some of which may be difficult to deal with. This may happen while they come to terms with the information and with their parent's absence from home.

Relationships at home can actually be strengthened by this kind of trauma, as everyone tries to support everyone else. Once you have told your children, you may feel greatly relieved to know that they now know the truth and you no longer have to worry about someone else telling them.

Every child, every family, copes in a different way with the fact of imprisonment. It can be helpful to some adults and children to seek support from others in the same situation through prisoners' families support groups. Many families have also found support from youth and community workers, faith groups or other agencies in the community.

It may help you to talk with other parents who have discussed serious issues with their children, to see how they coped with the situation. If you visit a prison where there is a staffed Visitors' Centre or a staffed Children's Play Area there should be someone willing to talk with you there. If you are not sure who to talk to, the **Prisoners' Families Freephone Helpline 0808 808 2003** is also there for information and support.

## How will things change for the children?

How will the child feel about their dad or mum going away, maybe for some years? A child may experience a real sense of loss, missing the company of the parent who is in prison. This may be most acute when friends talk about doing things with dad or mum, or when the child is in trouble with the parent at home.

Whatever the length of sentence their parent is serving, try to give the child a sense of the future. Encourage them to count days to special events such as birthdays or the next visit. Older children may like to keep a diary whereas younger children may like to tick off the days on a calendar.



The loss of one parent is bound to change relationships with other family members. The parent at home has to take on more responsibility and may become at times, more tired and irritable than before. As a result, children may not get as much attention as when the other parent was at home, and may feel sad and alone.

Children may have a muddled collection of feelings about the parent who is in prison and may even think that in some way they are to blame. Children need to know that they are not to blame. They may feel guilty, angry, resentful, let down or ashamed. These feelings are likely to be stronger if the trial and sentence have been reported in the papers or on television.

It is important that they do not see the parent in prison as a bad person, even if they did something wrong. Many children may indeed regard the prisoner, especially their father, as a hero. They may even be proud that he is in prison, although they miss him.

## Children's Reactions

Some children may show few signs of being upset and appear to cope as if nothing has happened. Others may be so distressed that they seem to have different personalities. A lot depends on the child's age and the circumstances surrounding the arrest.

Some children go back to displaying behaviour they outgrew long ago. They may become clingy and demanding, crying endlessly, becoming unsettled at night and wetting the bed. All of these kinds of behaviour show they need attention and understanding. They may feel unloved and insecure. Although you may be feeling awful yourself, try to spend a little more time doing things together with your children, such as talking to them and reassuring them.

Here are some examples of how children reacted:

*“Susan was nearly three when the police came and took her dad away and she remembers that night. Since then she has become very clingy and tearful. She screams if anyone comes into the house and won't let her mum out of her sight. She had a very frightening experience at home, as well as having to cope with losing her dad. She may be worried that her mum will also go away, and whether she'll ever see dad at home again.*

*Sean, aged nine, was at home when his dad was arrested. He shut himself in his room and cried for hours. His behaviour changed and he became very withdrawn, not wanting to talk to anyone or play with his friends. He bursts into tears every time his dad is mentioned.*

*Ruby is four, and since her mum was taken away she is very restless at night and often disturbs her dad with nightmares. He sometimes takes her into his bed to try and settle her and*

*help them both get some sleep. He hopes that in the future she will become more settled again and he is trying to be reassuring to show he understands her feelings.*

*Justin was 13 when his father was sentenced to three years imprisonment. He coped reasonably well, visited prison regularly, and helped at home with the younger children. But when his dad was paroled recently, Justin was a changed boy. He resented his dad's presence in the family, was cheeky and rude and said he dreaded his dad coming home for good. Justin is finding it very hard to adjust to his dad being at home and the changes this will bring. He needs the chance to talk through his feelings and his fears.”*

Here are some common problems:

### **Bedwetting**

*“Since his dad's been away, John has wet the bed every night. He's nine years old. What can I do?”*

If a child has been dry at night for some years and then starts to wet the bed, it is helpful to try and find out the cause of his anxiety because this is probably the reason for the bedwetting. John may be worried about how his dad is coping in prison, or about difficulties at home that may have made it harder for John himself to cope, for example at school. His mum could try and talk to him about what is making him so anxious. When they both begin to understand the causes, bedwetting should become less of a problem.

## Temper tantrums

*“Sarah is three. She used to be such a contented child, but lately she always seems to fly into a tantrum if she doesn't get her own way. I don't know what to do with her.”*

Sarah may be reacting to some tension she feels in her mum since her dad was sent to prison. But in fact, it may be nothing to do with this. Young children often have tantrums if they don't get what they want. If the adults give in to them, they will soon learn that tantrums work. Adults need to remain calm and in control, even though they may feel very angry with a child in a tantrum. Don't be tempted to let a child's behaviour make you change your mind. If you have said 'No sweets today', keep to that, regardless of the tantrum.

Sarah's mum should speak calmly to Sarah and let her know she realises she's angry. Sometimes holding a young child firmly in your arms helps to calm her. If you are in a crowded place, try to remove the child to a quieter area until the temper passes.

Remember that a child in a tantrum is a child who has lost control and one who needs adults to be able to regain control. Shouting at and smacking the child don't work and they may just make the tantrum last longer.

## Jealousy

*“Mark is very jealous of his new baby brother who arrived soon after my husband went into prison. Mark demands constant attention from me. He was toilet-trained before the baby arrived, but lately he's had several accidents. I'm finding it hard to cope, especially with all the prison visits and so on. I think I might put him in a playgroup every morning so I have a break to be with the baby.”*

Jealousy like Mark's is very common in small children when a new baby arrives, and it is harder for a lone parent to cope with, without the day-to-day support of a partner. Mark may think for example, that the baby takes up too much of his mum's time. He needs to be shown that he is still very important and that he could be involved in helping his mum care for the baby.

Special time together while the baby is asleep may help, and gradually Mark should be able to adjust. Once he's accepted the baby, he will be able to settle into playgroup better. If he is sent to playgroup before this happens, he may feel he is being rejected in favour of the baby.

Jealousy can happen at any stage between brothers and sisters or between children and their parents, though tensions in a family may be more acute if one parent is in prison. A child may be jealous of his parents' relationship with a partner or a friend. He may resent what he sees as a parent's close relationship with a brother or sister. If parents are aware of possible jealousies, they may be able to discuss them before they get out of hand.



## Depression

*“Philip is 12, and lately – since his mum went to prison – he seems to have lost interest in everything. He doesn't even want to go anywhere. I think he's seriously depressed.”*

Some children act out their feelings and unhappiness by becoming aggressive and destructive. Others bottle up their feelings and withdraw from everyday activities they used to enjoy.

Philip may feel very low and may have the idea that since he 'lost' his mum when she went into prison, he has also now lost his dad's attention and affection. His dad is probably so taken up with trying to

keep the family together and run the house that he hasn't had time to sit down and talk to his son or do other activities together. Talking together or doing a favourite activity together to help start communication may help to clear the air and reassure Philip.

## Anger

*“Jake is 8. He seems to have so much anger against his dad, the police and even his teachers.”*

It is important that children have the opportunity to express and discuss their angry feelings. Jake sounds as if he is angry against figures of authority, like the police who he probably regards as taking his father away, and the teachers who are trying to control his behaviour. He is also angry against his dad, maybe for letting himself get into this situation, and then leaving Jake at home without a father.

Jake's mum should try to accept his angry feelings and help him use them constructively. Angry children can often cause adults to be angry too.

## Refusing to go to school

*“Cathy is 10 years old and she's always been a nervous child, but her behaviour since her dad was arrested is really worrying me. She's become almost silent at home and she's refused to go to school for the last few days. She doesn't want to leave her room or see her friends.”*

When a child like Cathy refuses to go to school, it is often because something stressful has happened in the family that has caused a great deal of anxiety. Maybe Cathy feels she just can't face people at the moment. She may think they are all talking about her, or that

they know more than she does about what's going on. Her home and her own room offer her some security at present, and she may have real fears about leaving them to go to school. Cathy needs help to express her worries before she can face the outside world again.

Other children may refuse to go to school because of anxiety in school itself, such as difficulties with work, not getting on with the teacher, or being bullied. As with Cathy, it's important to find the real cause and try to face it. This may involve seeing the teacher or head teacher so you can all work together to get the child to return to school. It is helpful to be understanding but firm, as your child needs to return to school as soon as possible. The longer children remain out of school the more difficult it will be to get them to go back.

It is also worth remembering that teachers can make allowances for any child working under strain at home. Therefore, it may be worth making teachers aware of the situation, particularly where it affects teenage children taking exams at the time (though do ensure that you have the young person's permission). Since many exams work on continuous assessment, it is important that a prisoner's child doesn't suffer unduly.

### Tips to remember

- **Praise, encouragement and affection** are important to children of all ages, whatever their family circumstances. Showing interest in what your children do at home or at school will encourage them. Praise will help them feel more confident.
- **Routine** is important to children, particularly if one parent going to prison has disrupted the family. Routine helps children feel secure if they have some idea of what to expect from day to day.
- **Be consistent**, agree some reasonable rules for behaviour and keep to them. Children can bully, persuade, whine or plead to get their own way. They may be testing you and if you are having a bad day, are worried about your partner in prison or about money, you may

be tempted to give in. You may also try to compensate for the absence of their other parent. Don't give in. Let them know you mean what you say, firmly but gently.

- **Take time together.** Children enjoy individual time with a parent. One expert in children's behaviour recommended that however many children you have, you should be able to find five minutes each day to spend alone with one of them.
- **Communicate.** Children usually say more if they feel they are being listened to. Encourage family chat and discussion to help you understand one another's feelings. This is particularly important if there is a special circumstance such as one parent being absent.
- **Discipline.** Discipline does not mean being harsh: it simply means teaching children how to behave. The best way to do this is by setting an example by the way you behave yourself, and by having clear rules about behaviour which children can understand. Sometimes they will test you to your limits, often on days when you feel least able to cope.

With small children, try to distract them before the misbehaviour becomes extreme. Later when the child is calmer, explain why some behaviour is dangerous or unacceptable.

Older children should respond if you link any unacceptable behaviour to some logical consequence. For example if a young person was messing about and broke a window, having to pay for a replacement is an appropriate and logical consequence.

Do not make threats or promises unless you are intending to carry them out. Tempting as they may be, shouting and smacking are not successful, as they tend to make children agitated and angry, and cause resentment between parent and child. Remember however, that from the child's perspective, negative attention is better than none whatsoever.

There are no easy answers but do please remember that these examples of behaviour can also be just very usual child behaviour and

might not have anything to do with having a parent in prison.

Many mothers and fathers left at home have talked about some of the particular problems they have experienced in their families and have asked for guidance. For further information and support you can talk to your local health visitor (you can find out how to do this through your local GP surgery) or you can call these freephone helplines;

- Childline 0800 1111
- Parentline Plus 0808 800 2222
- Lone Parent Helpline 0800 018 5026  
(or 0800 0191 277 if the first number does not work)
- Gingerbread 0800 018 4318
- Prisoners' Families Helpline 0808 808 2003
- Relateline 0845 130 4010

## How will the children's role in the family change?

Children are often expected to take on new roles and responsibilities. Even a young child may feel they are expected to care for younger brothers and sisters now that mum or dad are no longer around.

They may even feel they have to be the man of the family, or the mother if she has been sent to prison. This can be a very heavy burden for a young child.

Parents left at home may feel lonely and need someone to confide in, and may turn to the children for support and take them into their confidence. This may mean parents expecting more adult behaviour than children are capable of.



## How can you prepare your children for a visit?

Children have to learn to cope with a new type of relationship with the parent in prison, including visiting mum or dad. It is bound to be a strange and sometimes frightening experience. It may help a little if you can visit first and then on the next visit you will be able to give them some preparation. But in most parents' experience, prison visits are stressful and exhausting, especially with small children.

From the children's point of view, they may look forward to the visit but may then be disappointed because of the restrictions imposed when they get there. They may resent not doing any of the things they used to enjoy with mum or dad at home.

Giving the children the opportunity to play, particularly during a prison visit, can be highly beneficial as a vehicle for coping with difficult situations. Many visitors' centres and some prisons provide play facilities. However, it is best to call the visitors' centre to check first so that the child's expectations are not inappropriately heightened.

Older children may find the visit distressing if they know that dad or mum is going to be in prison for a long time and that visits, though stressful, may be the only way of keeping in touch.

With all these issues in mind, you may wonder about the value of taking your children with you on a visit. Here are some possible benefits to consider:

- **Visits help children maintain their relationship with their mother or father in prison**
- **The parent in prison will be able to keep in touch with their child growing up**

- **Actually seeing mum or dad in prison may help children cope better: they will know that despite the difficult circumstances, the ‘missing’ parent is alive and well and is the same person as before who still loves them.**

Although you may accept these benefits, there are bound to be stresses before, during and after the visit. But it is important to remember that it is quite usual in these difficult circumstances for children to play up in some way, and that all parents share these problems. Prison conditions can make a visit quite distressing and children under stress often behave in ways that may be out of character for them:

Before the visit: *“They get so excited I can’t manage them!”*  
Children may be physically sick; they may be irritable, over excited or quiet and withdrawn.

During the visit: *“They get bored and run about.”* They may be restless, argumentative and attention-seeking.

After the visit: *“They cry to stay with their dad.”* They may be sad and tearful, unsettled and moody on the journey home, and this is very hard for you, because you will be feeling emotional yourself.



Children are likely to be very anxious, especially on a first visit. They are going into a strange, hostile and frightening environment and they will be seeing their dad or mum in an abnormal situation, where they cannot do any of the things they normally do with a parent. Their behaviour will often indicate their anxieties, worries and fears. A child will also sense any tension in, or between their parents, and may react in any number of ways that are not normal to them. If you have particularly sensitive issues to discuss with your partner then it may be appropriate to make alternative arrangements for your child during the visit.

## How can you prepare your children for a visit?

Children can often cope better if they know what to expect. So if your children are old enough, talk to them about what is likely to happen on the visit. If you have never visited a prison before you can call the **Prisoners' Families Helpline 0808 808 2003** for information.

You may find it helpful to make your children aware of what they might expect when they visit the prison. For example, being aware of the relatively short length of the visit and preparing them to say hello to their dad or mum so that they are ready to say goodbye when the visit ends. Explain that there will be lots of other families visiting as well.

If it is your first visit, ring the prison and ask what facilities there are for children. If you find there is a play area or a play project you can tell the children that there will be other children to play with and toys and books to enjoy. There will also be snacks and drinks to buy. Try to emphasise the positive aspects of the trip without making them over-excited.

You need to take account of your child's wishes when it comes to keeping in touch, whether it is by letters, telephone calls or visits. Your child can choose how much contact they have with their mother or father. They will need your support and encouragement in the choices they make.

## What's the best way to handle the journey home?

Encourage children to talk about their feelings openly – whether they feel sad, disappointed, angry etc.

Be aware that your child may be experiencing a new sense of loss, realising how much they are missing dad or mum.

Try to think and speak positively about the visit. Think of the benefits, though the experience may have unsettled the child.

As an adult, you too will experience a mixture of feelings. You will have good visits and less good visits. Share your feelings and your child will benefit – because they are likely to be having the same feelings as you.

It is important to have some visits alone with your partner so that you can maintain your own relationship. This in turn will help you manage better when the children are there.

For more detailed information about visits to a prison the Outsider booklet *'Keeping in touch'* published by APF should help you.

## **How will your child cope when your partner is paroled or released?**

Children may manage gradually to adjust to the change when a parent goes to prison. But then they have to adjust to further changes around the times of parole and release. If dad or mum has been away for a long time, the changes will be greater. Some children and young people may be very resentful of the parent's return home, especially if things have been going reasonably well in his or her absence.

If the child was very young when dad or mum went into prison, they may have no memory of that parent at home. The return may be like having to accept a complete stranger into the household. Even if you have maintained links by regular visits, your partner may now expect to return and naturally assume the role they had before, whereas the dynamics of the household may have completely changed over the time they have been away.

Children who have become used to relating to only one parent may be very unwilling to relate to this



new person who may seem like an intruder. They may also strongly resent the time their parents spend together and feel they are competing for attention, time and affection. These feelings of anger and jealousy may cause a lot of upset in the family, and it is very important that they are acknowledged and discussed openly between parents and children if the situation is to improve.

## **What might be the reaction of the community?**

Nearly all children have or need friends. Their first friends are usually their own brothers or sisters, the children next door or other children of their own age and background. In a child's first two years, play tends to be solitary, or in response to the attention of an older person. But after the third birthday, some interaction with other children has developed. By the age of four, many children will have a special friend, or group of friends, maybe someone they met at playgroup. By the age of five when most children start full time school, the set of friends may be school-based and not limited to the child's very intimate neighbourhood. And it is important to many children to share peer group values and behaviour. For many older children growing into their teens, certain clothes, shoes or things like mobile phones and going out may be the evidence (or the price) of acceptance by the group.

For many teenagers, their friends and their peer group are the setting which provides security and identity and a certain status in the neighbourhood or the school. It is the background against which they develop and test their individual sense of identity, and the group may at this time seem more important to them than their own family when it comes to determining values and a sense of personal worth.

Against this background, it is not hard to imagine the possible effect of having a parent sent to prison. Children and young people may feel very uncomfortable, or they may even be stigmatised, if family

circumstances make them feel or be seen as different from, or inferior to, the rest of the group.

Children need to feel accepted in their own personal communities: the school, their friendship group and their neighbourhood. Their communities may also include church, synagogue or mosque, youth groups, sports teams and so on.

The effect imprisonment has on the child's relationships in these groups will depend on the nature of the parent's offence and on the community ethos or set of values. The child of a sex offender may be cut off from his former peer group as no longer acceptable to them. However, some children, regardless of the nature of their parent's offence, may decide to withdraw from the peer group if they are unsure of how the group will react.

Some parents with imprisoned partners reported this kind of reaction:

*“ The kids lost out. They were made to feel different on the street by the other kids. ”*

*“ It has affected how they talk to friends. They feel isolated. ”*

*“ Since my husband was arrested, our Matthew, who's just turned seven, doesn't like to play on the street any more. His friends ask questions and make him feel bad. Matthew likes visiting his dad in prison and he likes meeting Paul, whose dad's in the same prison. They seem to have a lot in common. ”*

Matthew felt rejected by his peers in his own community, so he has found a new friend who understands his situation. In some communities however, going to prison is such a common event that there is little stigma attached to it:

*“The little girl my daughter plays with has a daddy in prison too. They’re always talking about it – “My daddy does this in prison”. “My daddy does that”.”*

*“It was just an everyday thing, especially where I live. They think their dad’s a hero because he’s in jail.”*

Whatever the relationship between the child, the child’s friends and the community, most children, including teenagers, will need extra support and reassurance from the important adults in their lives. This will be especially important if peer relations become damaged.

## **Are there any special problems when a child’s mother is sent to prison?**

A growing number of women are being sent to prison, and there is evidence from research carried out in Northern Ireland that the children of women prisoners tend to have a higher incidence of withdrawn behaviour, communication problems, difficulties at school and antisocial behaviour than others. The mothers often suffer serious trauma from the separation, and their behaviour in prison is affected by concerns about their children’s welfare, about what is happening at home. One imprisoned mother of four said:

*“The main problem is that so many of the women are mothers. Women are usually the backbone of the family and when they are gone their partners and their children are very much affected. They can do their bit [prison sentence] OK but when things are going wrong outside and they can’t be there to deal with it, that’s when they get very depressed. That’s why their moods change so dramatically. They might be OK one day, then the next day they might be in a stinking*

*mood. It just means that they've heard something has happened at home and their hands are tied.”*

A senior prison officer in a women's prison confirmed what this woman said:

*“There's a lot of women still running the home from inside prison. All men prisoners care about is their baccy (tobacco), their meals and whether they're top dog in the prison. But the women are still running the home and I've seen women in here write shopping lists every week to give their fellas when they come so they get the right food and things for the kids.”*

Many women prisoners are lone parents, and in a 1991 survey carried out in prisons in England and Wales only 23 per cent said their children were being cared for by the father, compared with 91 per cent of imprisoned fathers who said their children were being cared for by the mother or another female partner. So most women in prison have to rely on family and friends.

Another survey carried out by the Home Office in 1995 showed that only half of women prisoners had expected a custodial sentence, so had not made any child care arrangements. The suddenness and speed of the whole operation can cause great problems for the mother and her children. Bernadette has four children who were aged nine, eight, five and two when she was sent to prison:

*“It never occurred to me I'd go to prison. I'd left my two-year-old with my friend to come to court and the others were all at school. When I was sentenced I had no chance to make any arrangements for them. The judge knew I had little kids, but I was shipped straight to Holloway. You can't*

*even make a phone call to your kids. I never even kissed them goodbye because I thought I was coming back, and now they've been without me for six months. For three weeks my kids kept asking to see me, crying for me. My sister had to manage the four of them, and she's got five kids of her own.”*

Very often, if there are several children in a family, they are distributed around different family members for caring. This results in the child not only having to cope with the enforced separation from the mother, but also the added upheaval and separation from brothers and sisters.

### **APF's Children's Books**

Depending on the age of your children, you might find APF's accessible children's books helpful. We publish three books which aim to help children to explore their emotions by giving them a story they can relate to:

**Danny's Mum (£3)** – aimed at children up to 6 years. This is the story of Danny, whose mother is sent to prison. It covers his feelings of loss and confusion. Through talking to friends at school about his mum, Danny begins to look forward to her return. **Tommy's Dad (£3)** – aimed at 4-7 year olds. This book tells the story of a young boy and his sister, whose father is sent to prison. It explores their feelings of loss, anger and frustration at not being told what's going on, until their mother finally decides to take them to see their dad. **Finding Dad (£4.50)** – aimed at 8-11 year olds, tells the tale of 8-year old James who turns detective to find out the truth about his dad, who disappears with the police early one morning. An audio CD of Finding Dad is also available for £4.

If you are an APF member you will get an APF discount. To order a copy of the books please contact APF's offices. Details on the inside cover of this booklet.

## What happens when a pregnant woman is sent to prison?

Being pregnant or having a small baby has no effect on sentencing policy. If a woman is pregnant when she goes to prison, she is normally given the option of keeping her baby with her in a prison mother and baby unit. She will be able to keep the baby with her for nine months or 18 months, depending which prison she is sent to. She, may, however, prefer to send the baby out to be cared for by relatives.

One young mother in prison said:

*“I was heavily pregnant and everybody said they'd never send me to jail, but they did. I had Jake two weeks before I came into prison. I got two years for drugs offences, so I should be out just before his first birthday. When I first went into prison I lost him for a while because there were no places on any units, so my sister had to have him. But after three days I got into a mother and baby unit.”*

Women in the mother and baby units have to work in the main prison during the day, while their babies are cared for by trained nursery nurses. At night they can have their babies in cots in their rooms, and the room doors are not locked, as it is not permitted to lock a child in a cell at night. The mother and baby units are self-contained secure units within the prison.

One of the problems of rearing babies in a prison setting is that they would not normally get the same level of stimulation as even a very young baby would get in the community outside prison, when they would be taken out to the shops, to meet family and friends and their children, to go to the park in their buggies. It is up to the mothers, with support from qualified nursery staff, to supply extra stimulation in the form of toys and games, as well as talking and playing with their children. In some prisons, mothers may be allowed to take their babies out in the grounds.

## Supporting your children when they are sent to prison.

If you have grandchildren, you may be called upon to help out with child care. If your daughter has been sent to prison and is a lone parent, you may even find yourself as the main carer of your grandchildren. Even if the children's father lives with them, he may have a full-time job, so you might be asked to help during the day time, and with taking the children to visit their mother in prison.

This can be a very stressful time for grandparents. You may have reached the age when you were looking forward to a peaceful retirement after years of hard work bringing up your own children and earning your living. Now suddenly, as well as coping with the imprisonment of your own child, you find yourself in the role of primary carer once again.

Sometimes there seems to be no alternative, and without your support your grandchildren may have to be taken into the care of the local authority. You may feel you have to offer to care for them to avoid this outcome.

If you do make this decision, make sure that you ask for advice and help – you may be surprised how much



support is available if you seek it. The **Prisoners' Families Helpline 0808 808 2003** or **Parentline Plus 0808 800 2222** can help you with information and support.

Make sure that you retain some time for yourself, to pursue your own interests. You need to look after your own physical and mental well-being – otherwise you will be little help to your daughter or your grandchildren.

*“I am the parent of a young person in prison – I feel so ashamed, as if I've failed as a parent. But I'm really angry at him as well – he's let us all down.”*

Feeling this kind of guilt and anger is only natural, and it is bound to last for a while. But none of us is a perfect parent and we all make mistakes in bringing up our children. Remember, there are many other influences at work in society and however hard we may try to influence our children, they will have been influenced by their friends, peer group and have to make their own decisions about things like alcohol and drugs. You may feel angry because of the times you have urged your son or daughter to think about what they were doing – and now, just look where they've ended up!

Parents of young offenders frequently tell how they struggle to come to terms with the fact that they cannot just step in and make everything all right again for their child. Often if the young person is depressed or suffering difficulties, the parents feel desperate at being unable to help. Their child can feel the need to tell them all sorts of disturbing stories, which may be helpful to them, but can put an enormous strain on the parents.

Allow yourself to feel angry, and don't be afraid to say how you feel. But then try to look at ways in which you can deal with the situation as positively as possible. Just as you would with your child when they

were young, make it clear that though you hate the offence committed, you still love the person. They are still your child, whatever has happened, and you will continue to give your support so that you can move on beyond what currently seems like a terrible and shameful situation.

Visits, phone conversations and letters provide an opportunity to establish a positive, supportive relationship with your son or daughter. This woman's teenage son was jailed for a violent offence committed while under the influence of drugs and alcohol:

*“I gave him an absolute ear-bashing when I visited him that first time. I told him he deserved everything they could throw at him, after what he'd done. But then he asked me to help him, and I said I would. After a few weeks in the prison, he started doing really well in the education classes, and I felt we'd got back the son we had lost.”*

Many young offenders' institutions (YOIs) are now beginning to involve the families of the young people much more in the way that the prison sentence is carried out. Research has shown that prisoners who remain in close touch with their families are up to six times less likely to reoffend on release than prisoners who lose that contact. Ask the prison what are the ways you can support your son or daughter while in the prison.





