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The hidden voices of children and young people with a parent in prison: What schools need to know about supporting these vulnerable pupils, *International Journal of Social Policy and Education*.

Lorna Brookes and Jo Frankham

ABSTRACT: This paper reports on a study with children and young people who have a parent in prison and identifies ways in which schools might better support these pupils. The paper is based on research and practice with 23 individuals from ten families. It first ‘sets the scene’ for these pupils’ lives by drawing on interviews with parents and carers. This helps to illuminate the context within which these children and young people are growing up. The paper then presents the views, and selected drawings, of the ten children and young people involved. The paper describes the forms of social isolation that families experience when a parent is sent to prison and the dilemmas and difficulties children and young people face at school. The recommendations focus on how individual teachers and schools might respond to the needs of this group.

Introduction:

It is likely that there is at least one child affected by parental imprisonment in every school in the UK. It is estimated that with 79,749 men and 3,869 women in prison in 2018 that there are approximately 312,000 children who are affected by the imprisonment of a parent (Kincaid et al, 2019). However, the UK government does not collect statistics on the children of prisoners and so the precise number of affected children remains unknown. Furthermore, offending parents are often reluctant to disclose (in court or in prison) that they have children, for fear that statutory services might take their children into care (Brookes, 2014). And parents/carers who are not in custody rarely disclose the imprisonment of another parent to school staff for fear of judgement and/or negative repercussions on their children (Raikes, 2014). In addition, there are no governmental (and few non-governmental) organisations set up to help prisoners’ children. As a consequence, Jardine (2018) describes these children as the “hidden or collateral victims of the criminal justice system” (114).

This article reports on a study that explored how families are affected by parental imprisonment and draws particular attention to children and young people’s urgent needs in school. As McKay describes: “. . . imprisonment inevitably interpolates, and even punishes, many individuals who have not been convicted of a crime . . . “ (2019). This article draws out the ways in which this ‘punishment’ is experienced by families and suggests how teachers, teacher educators, and agencies engaged in the support of children/families might respond. It is based on extended face-to face interviews with members of eighteen individuals from eight families. The ten children are aged between 8 and 16.

There is increasing recognition of the effect of adverse childhood experiences (ACEs) on a person’s physical/mental health and educational outcomes (e.g. Walkley and Cox, 2013; Bellis et al, 2014; Felitti et al, 1998), and the World Health Organisation are advocating for “increased investments to reduce childhood adversities, and to inform the design of prevention programmes” based on data about adverse childhood experiences (WHO, online

reference). Having a family member who is incarcerated is one of the WHO-designated ACEs; other ACEs include 'depressed household member' and 'parents separated or divorced' (Gjelsvik et al, 2014). As Cavanaugh (2016) describes: "It has been found that the more ACEs a child experiences . . . the higher the likelihood of experiencing negative outcomes" (41) and children with a parent in prison often fall into this group. The WHO (and other bodies) are increasingly advocating an approach to education that is 'Trauma Informed' (Chafouleas et al, 2016; Walkley and Cox, 2013). This is an approach which takes into account the "painful events in the child's life that may be triggering his or her behaviour" (Sunderland, 2019). Our recommendations, in the final section of this paper, amplify this call.

The primary researcher in this study leads a voluntary support group for children and partners of prisoners; only through her extended face-to-face work with parents, carers and children has it been possible to develop this account. Without that contact, many of these stories would continue to remain hidden. Her relationship with these families provides key insights into the forms of support that children would benefit from, with particular attention to the school setting. In addition to drawing on interview data with the families, this article includes images children and young people have produced as part of the study. As Mannay et al (2017: 685) describe in their study with 'looked-after' children, this allowed them to "engage with the research on their own terms" and, we believe, will allow readers to appreciate these "uniquely personal statements that have elements of both conscious and unconscious meaning in them" (Malchiodi, 1998: 1). All names have been changed in the account.

The 'whole-family' network.

It is important to recognise that the children and young people we describe here, are part of a network of people affected by the imprisonment of a parent or parents. The majority of research that has been done on the effects of imprisonment on families has: ". . . pointed to the negative effects that incarceration wreaks on family lives" (McCarthy and Adams, 2017: 378; Kahya and Ekinci, 2018; Gjelsvik et al, 2014). This paper draws first upon contributions from community-based non-offending parents and carers, as well as parents who have been to prison, in order to provide the context for children and young people's view which follow. As described above, children who are struggling at school are, very often, children who are being negatively affected by issues that do not originate in school, and are not learning based, and it is necessary to include an understanding from wider family networks in interventions with these children (Sunderland, 2019; Jones and Wainaina-Wozna, 2013; Frankham et al, 2007; Boscolo and Betrandò, 1996).

Brick walls and boxes: The social isolation of families with a member in prison

Parents in this study reported a number of difficulties associated with the initial period when a partner went to prison. Lack of knowledge about the prison system, and literally not knowing 'what to do' when a partner or parent is sent to prison was commonplace. A good deal of extreme frustration was expressed in relation to finding out even the most basic information, on occasions, including the location of the prison someone had been sent to. Other uncertainties included information on visiting rights, and visiting arrangements, rules

in relation to child/parent contact, and so on. Dawn was told that her children had been prohibited from visiting their Dad but was not given a reason, or any understanding of how to contest this decision. *"I tried to chase it and they would be like, yeah it's being dealt with, but it never was"*. Dawn was one of a number of parents who felt they repeatedly came up against *"brick walls"* in their struggle for information. She felt she was viewed by statutory workers as *"not important"* despite being the main carer of her children.

The struggle faced by parents/carers caused by poor access to information was an on-going concern for the families involved in this study. Even in cases where parents/carers welcomed the imprisonment of the offending parent, there was a great deal of frustration in terms of where or how the offending parent was, which in turn meant they were unable to update, reassure and comfort their children. For example, Louise explained that whilst *"It was a relief that he was away...it affected the children obviously...they were emotionally attached and missed having him around"*. In addition to poor accessibility to information around the criminal justice system, some non-offending parents/carers had been unaware of their partner's criminal activities. These parents/carers felt they had little control and influence over the situation, which provoked feelings of great resentment as they had to manage many of the effects of their partner's behaviour on their children.

Of course, parents also had to manage without their partner and this had material and emotional effects on every aspect of their lives including their income, housing, day to day management of the household, day to day care of the children and so on. It is sometimes, perhaps, forgotten that a parent who offends may also be a loving and devoted Mum or Dad and partner; as Goffman described, the stigma associated with one element of a person's life often *"spoils"* or spills over into perceptions of all other elements of a person's life. Grace explained: *"...he did everything with the kids didn't he...he was more of hands on Dad than I was hands on Mum...I was worried how I'd cope, so I needed support"*. Likewise, Marie, who was an ex-prisoner described how powerless she felt when she was in custody and her daughter went on her first residential trip with her school; *"...that was the worst...I didn't know what was going on... I was worried that she'd be crying and wanting to go home...And I weren't here"*. Desperate for updates she *"rang like four times a day to see if she was ok, but they wouldn't ring me back and tell me how she was or let her ring to speak to me"*.

Poor or non-existent relationships with wider family members was also evident in the findings. Four of the five ex-prisoners discussed difficult upbringings, e.g. *"I was brought up in care as a kid"* (Sharon); and *"I watched what drink did to my Dad when I was growing up"* (Paul), which corresponds with evidence that a high proportion of prisoners have suffered difficulties in their own childhood (Williams et al, 2012). Isolation and coping alone was also a common experience for parents outside prison. Access to support from wider family or social networks after a parent was imprisoned was often hard to come by. For some of the participating families, family support was limited or non-existent even prior to the offence. Louise said she had always *"coped alone"* because of poor relationships with the rest of her family; *"the boys don't go to the rest of my family, only me. I don't have a good relationship with my Mum"*. Denise said she'd never had any wider-family support; her parents had both died and others family members lived out of the area. *"It's always just been me and him (the father who went to prison) and the kids"*.

Even those parents/carers who did have family living close by said they tended to struggle alone, most of the time. *"They (the children's grandparents) weren't that good. They never really had the kids for me"* (Rose). Consequently, where parents had relied predominantly on one another to co-parent, the remaining parent/carer felt particularly vulnerable and isolated. Some parents/carers experienced an abrupt withdrawal of support from their family following their decision to stay in a relationship with the imprisoned parent. *"My Mum and Dad didn't approve of the relationship...so I had no-one"* (Sophie). Parents also reported that they sometimes avoided talking to friends because they felt embarrassed and ashamed; some said they had lost friends since the imprisonment of their partner.

Parents and carers also said they felt isolated because the general public does not sympathize with families like theirs and worse, feels justified in 'punishing' them in various ways. Denise said, *"They think, after what he's done, the family deserve the punishment. They're scum and we won't help scum"*. In the same way, Tanya spoke of the lack of compassion afforded to herself and her children since her husband's arrest. *"We haven't done it, me and the kids, we've just ended up in this situation, so they (the public) should be more sympathetic to what is happening to us...but they're not."* Prisoners' families often suffer from being harassed and ostracised by members of their community (Action for Prisoners Families, 2006). Harrowing accounts were given by parents/carers of being directly abused by people in the area in which they lived. Stories included glass bottles being thrown at the house, property damage and concoctions of foul smelling waste materials emptied on their home, verbal abuse on the bus, on the streets where they lived, and in or around the children's schools. These incidents, which were described as *"terrifying"* and *"cruel"* resulted in family members wanting *"to just hide away"*. Condry (2007, 2010) labels the kin of offenders 'secondary victims', and points out that relatives are quite typically held at least partly responsible for the criminal activity, because they are viewed as accomplices. Denise said she approached the police for help when she and her children had been attacked, but said, *"they didn't want to know"*. She felt she had *"been played...they said they would support me when they wanted me as a prosecution witness, but when he went down, they turned their back. I had been manipulated"*.

Media attention adds a further problematic dimension. Stories of being harassed and abused by the general public emerged from interviews in cases where the crime had been widely publicized. *"We've had it from all angles. People saying things to us in the street, people trying to provoke me. And I was fearful"* (Tanya). One of the former prisoners, expressing much guilt and remorse, spoke of how difficult it had been for his wife and children to carry on with their day-to-day lives because an account of his crime had been published in the local press. *"With our case it was all over the papers. They (his children and wife) were having to go to school, to the shops, walk out there where everybody knows"* (Anthony). Despite the trauma he suffered as a consequence of his imprisonment, this offending parent felt the isolation suffered by his family out in the community, was far worse.

As well as being shunned by others, families said they would purposely isolate themselves as a way in which to try and cope. Denise said, *"When it was so raw, the only way we could deal with it was by cutting ourselves off and sort of putting me and the kids in a box – that*

was the only way I could cope". Louise explained how 'being judged' had had a severely debilitating effect on her life. She recalled the community backlash she and her children had to endure as a result of her partner's crime. Referring to her experience like being "A prisoner myself at home" she said, "Once I got on (the bus) but I had to get back off again. I couldn't carry on.... And I'd had bottles thrown again at the door the night before". All in all, the participating families said there were very few people in their lives who were sympathetic to their struggles, and that suffering alone was to be expected.

Some participants said they had actively pursued formal avenues for talking therapies/counselling support. Denise described how her plea to access counselling for her son when his father went to prison was turned down because the psychologist viewed the child's grief as a 'normal' reaction to the separation. In Denise's view this was not only grossly unhelpful, but ridiculous, declaring: "Well a broken arm is a normal reaction to falling out of a tree, but that doesn't mean it doesn't need fixing!" Talking to a social worker about struggling with a child's behavior was unusual (as discussed further, below). However, when Natalie made an attempt to do this she said she ". . . felt victimized then by them (social services) because there were a lot of allegations being made and I, I just felt like I was hitting a brick wall. I felt they were looking at me, and judging me, rather than looking more in depth about why this (the children's worsening behaviour) was happening".

It is clear from the account, above, that families suffer a great deal of hardship and live, what has been termed, 'The Hidden Sentence' (Everitt, 2010). Paradoxically, however, it is at this point that statutory social support tends to be withdrawn (if it was in place before the parent was imprisoned). From a social worker standpoint, the imprisonment of the criminal parent can equate to a significant reduction in immediate risk to the children. Munro (2004) and Trevithick (2011) point to the growth in the bureaucratic demands made on social workers, with a focus on meeting performance indicators and targets. This inevitably limits time spent 'on the ground' with families; austerity measures also mean there have been cuts in respect of funding (JRF, 2015) with poorer communities hit most hard. Social workers are forced to focus their energies, then, on families with a 'risky' parent(s) living in the community, and whose children are considered as being imminently under threat of harm. The absence of support provided by Social Services, or the withdrawal of support when a parent is sent to prison, is one reason why the struggling families in this study felt so aggrieved. Yet the situation is somewhat of a double-edged sword; families emphasised their reluctance to have social workers in their lives (see below) but were equally frustrated by the lack of help provided through the statutory system.

There was an enormous amount of ill-feeling that the eight families voiced with regard to Social Services and Social Workers. Amongst the many negative descriptions recorded, the interviewees referred to social workers as 'corrupt' (Marie, Louise) 'terrible' (Paul) 'the baddies' (Kyle) 'snotty' (Orla) and workers who do 'absolutely nothing' (Denise). The experiences of the families in this study are not unique. The internet includes websites and blogs from mothers and fathers who offer damning views about social workers, and the phenomenon is an international one.¹ There is also a growing research base that shows it is

¹ 'Hate sites' are commonplace: 'Social Workers Exposed' and 'Name Shame Social Workers' are just two of many, set up specifically for families to complain about this statutory service. Popular, more generic, websites such as Facebook,

the norm for vulnerable families to resent involvement with social workers. Relatives caring for children of prisoners will typically avoid contact with the system as they fear the children will be taken away (Standing Committee on Social Issues 1997; Phillips & Bloom 1998; Shaw 1987), a view echoed by one of the parents in this study: *"I think that's always the risk that social services have...that's the first thing you think of, them being removed"* (Natalie).

A further series of problems and issues can arise when a prisoner is released. A social worker may re-engage with the family when an offending parent is released, if they consider there to be a potential risk to the children. However, the lack of useful engagement with the family during the imprisonment period means it is often difficult at this stage for a productive relationship to develop. Participants in the study emphasised that the post-release stage was much more stressful than they had initially anticipated, and they also resented and feared the 'suddenly present' social worker, with whom they were obliged to engage. Families complained that these workers knew little or nothing about them. Shane said: *"They all had their opinion on me, but had never taken the time to get to know me personally"*. Moreover, families have to contend with the added pressure of meeting the social workers' demands at this tremendously difficult time in their lives, which invariably involves much change and upheaval. This was strongly voiced by Paul. Reflecting on his experience of Social Services post release, he said, *"I was under so much pressure, I even thought about going back to prison"*.

The perspectives of children and young people

Cunningham (2001) points out that particular attention should be paid to children of prisoners, whose experience of isolation often goes unnoticed. This section includes images produced by some of the children/young people involved in the study, and extracts from interviews. In comparable research Brown (2001) quotes one young interviewee who stressed, *"Someone should ask me what it is like for me. Nobody had ever asked me what I think"*. We believe the pictures we include help to communicate, alongside the descriptions, what 'it is like' for some of the children involved in this study.

Netmums and Bebo also have pages and/or threads dedicated solely to enabling families to talk about how, in their view, social workers have had a negative impact on their lives (e.g. www.facebook.com/wehatesocialservices).



Louise described how “scared” she was when her Mum first went to prison *“Because I didn’t know where she’d gone and I hadn’t seen her for weeks. And I used to cry. I used to be scared. When my Nan told me . . . it was a bit of a relief because I knew where she was, but I was also very upset because she was away and I wouldn’t see her for three years and it upset me.”* Similarly, Kampfner (1995: 94) in a study that compared children with incarcerated mothers, with a control group, found many children of incarcerated mothers reported having no emotional support: *“They could not identify people...with whom they could talk about their mothers”*. Unfortunately, even when welfare services are involved with the son or daughter of a prisoner, the problems of stigma and secrecy can often mean that the specific trauma of having a parent in prison does not emerge (Cunningham, 2011).

Charlotte described her feelings when her Dad was sent to prison: *"It was devastating."* This was connected to a feeling of being "numb" *"because there was too many feelings to process. I felt like I needed to switch off because I mentally and physically couldn't take all the emotions."*

As described above, in relation to adults' experiences, children described a sense of powerlessness over what was happening to their parents. Steph: *"Was she all right? Would I see her; would I ever get to go and see her. Was I allowed to go on visits to see her? Was I allowed to even . . . you know . . . hug her . . ."* Sometimes, the uncertainties were exacerbated by their parents who perhaps hoped they were protecting their children. Marie: *"I thought he'd went to work (away) for a bit and I thought he would come back the next day, but then I realized he didn't, but then I thought he would come back the next week but then he didn't, so then I was like 'Where's he gone . . . ' I thought he would never come back. I was worried that I might never get to see him again. It was a long time until he told me that he was in prison."* Other feelings relating to powerlessness included Jody's feelings of being *"confused – why had he done what he'd done – and betrayed – he'd left."* Bailey also described feeling *"confused – I didn't understand why . . . my Dad isn't a bad person."*

Children were found to be afraid of saying the 'wrong thing' thing to social workers. Some evidence was gathered which demonstrated that children struggle to relax with social workers because they are acutely aware of a social worker's influence over the level of contact they might have, or not have, with their imprisoned parent. Denise remembered, with much sadness, how traumatic it was for her son, when a social worker asked him to 'talk'. *"He came and spoke to Malcolm...as soon as the social worker started talking my son burst into tears. It was the anticipation and the worry and in his mind he felt that he had to say the right thing to be able to get contact with his dad. He felt really under pressure and I felt so sorry for him"*. Other difficult emotions included feeling *"mad with the woman who accused him"* (Louise) while also having to cope with being *"separated from my baby sister"*, and *"rage – their sentencing did not fit the crime"* (Holly).

As described above, families have been attacked as a consequence of a parent going to prison; this affects all members of the family. This victimization sometimes extended to school, in those cases where people knew about a parent's imprisonment: *"Kids in my school started saying horrible stuff about my Mum"* (Orla). Children also described a form of self-induced isolation from society as a way in which to protect themselves. This shielding reaction was conceptualised by Orla as *"a bubble"* that she placed around herself. She drew a picture of herself near other children at school and in the drawing she is in a bubble, as she walks along.



This way, she said, her peers could not hear what she was thinking, or really see what was going on for her. She also said that sometimes she felt that she had to put herself 'in a bubble' to protect herself from bullying, but equally that *"bubbles pop easily"*, and so she always felt *"a bit worried"*. Her experience is in keeping with research by Meek (2007) who found that children with a sibling in prison were reluctant to disclose the information to teachers or peers for fear of being considered 'bad' like the prisoner(s) in their family, and they were worried about fellow pupils finding out.

Children worried about being judged and stigmatised. Orla said: *"you can't tell teachers because they'll think you are a bad kid just because your mum is in prison"* whilst Luke said his teacher had directly asked him what his Dad had done which made him feel *"upset"* and also that teachers were thinking *"my family is a bad one!"* Being judged at school was not just experienced by children. Parents too, recalled their discomfort. One grandmother carer, Maureen, demonstrated her need to explain that the offending parent was not her daughter: *"You can actually see them (teachers) going, oh God, her mother is in jail...I tend to remind them that her mother is not my daughter....because you do get judged"*. Louise reported *"feel[ing] that everyone's looking at me and they hear the word prison and they're glaring"*. Luke talked about feelings of guilt – regardless of other people's reactions – he described *"feeling as though I am the one to blame"*.

Bowlby (1973), who pioneered attachment theory, said that to be isolated from a primary caretaker is fraught with emotional difficulties. The organization 'Grandparents Plus in the UK' which offers support to Grandparent carers, warns that children of prisoners will often internalise their feelings, which can result in nightmares, tantrums and withdrawal from others. Kupersmidt and Patterson (1991) also found that peer rejection in childhood has been linked to withdrawal, depression and loneliness in school-aged children. Faith described how she had felt so low that she didn't want to go out of the house *"to talk to anyone, or go to school."*



Orla said that her learning mentor in primary school had been helpful and understanding, but she was still of the view that she didn't want teachers in her current school "knowing". In the main, the children in this study did not feel able to trust teachers to handle information about a parent in prison appropriately. Some children recalled first-hand experiences of the reactions of teachers who did know. Faith said that when teachers know you have a parent in prison, if you feel upset about anything at all, the teacher who knows will automatically presume that it must be in relation to this issue. With clear frustration, she said that when teachers make assumptions, it made her experience of having a mother in prison "worse". Although experiences of feeling isolated and separate from her peers came through strongly in her interview, she emphasized that being treated only in the context of being a child of a prisoner was also unhelpful: *"If I'm crying it's not always about my Mum being in prison. I can have other problems as well, just like anyone else!"*

In much the same way, Lewis railed against what he felt was the stupidity of adults who were always making connections where there were none to be made, stating: *"You could like, fall down and hurt your knee or something, and they'll think it's because of your Dad being away. It's stupid."* As well as being wary of discussing their parents' imprisonment with teachers, these children said they would keep the matter from other children at school. It was also the case that some children talked about how helpful it can be to talk about your parent in prison with someone who "understands" but at the same time *"You shouldn't always always always talk about it. Talk about it a little bit but not too much."* This gives something of the sense of the 'tightrope' that supportive adults have to

walk. An older girl talked about the benefits of knowing there was someone 'there' *"if you need to speak to someone, then, yeah, it's better to know someone is there if you need them."*

The participating children said they had either experienced pressure from their family to keep the parental imprisonment a secret, or they themselves had chosen not to share the information with their peers, in an effort to self-protect. One boy remembered that when he first learnt his Dad was in prison, he had been worried that if other children knew they would question him about it, which would upset him further. Aiden said: *"I was thinking...woah, my Dad's been naughty, you can't tell anybody...I wouldn't want kids at school asking loads of questions, it would upset me"*.



The issue was also described by Kyle who, when asked whether he would talk about his Dad being in prison to other children, replied *"No. Because, erm, they might pick on me or laugh at me"*. Similarly, Orla explained that she was fearful that if other children knew they might bully her: *"I haven't told no-one. Like none of my mates...because my Mum and my Nan and everyone just wanted to keep it a secret...if I told someone in school it would be passed around and I was scared of being skitted (teased or bullied). Things like that would have made me really upset."* At the same time, not feeling able to talk about what had happened made some children feel more isolated *"I felt like I was the only person going through it. I was worried because of what people were going to think of me"* (Steph). Some children keep information about the fact their parent is in prison secret from their friends, for years.

It is also the case that some of these children do not have anyone to talk to at home, or avoid talking at home in order to protect their parent or carer from further unhappiness. Some children described comparing their own family with other people's families; they felt *"jealous"* and *"envious when friends have both parents and they all live together"* (Steph). Faith, who had to move in with her grandparents following the imprisonment of her

mother, said, “I don’t talk to my Nan about anything...we don’t get on”. This further resonates with research by Meek (2007) who finds that many children will struggle to discuss their feelings at home as they are worried about causing tension or upset. Kyle described how he worried about his Dad after he had been released “He had a tag on his leg and there was one night when I thought, he had to be inside at 7 o’clock but he was home at 10 o’clock . . .” Other children talked about worries that they had for and about their parent who had been in prison. Orla: “How do they get back on their feet? Getting yourself a house, a job . . . all those things. It makes me worry because I’ve always wanted it to be me and my Mum, you know, like have a nice house and, you know, be in a safe place.”



Support for these vulnerable pupils

With no government-led support services, and minimal non-governmental organisations set up to help prisoners’ children, it is unsurprising that children affected by parental imprisonment suffer a multitude of hardships including bullying, shame, harassment from the wider community, negative media attention, and isolation (Kincaid et al, 2019). The recommendations that follow are designed to alleviate these negative outcomes and are informed by an understanding of the effects of trauma on children and young people. Government policy which contributes to the underlying inequalities in these children’s lives is, of course, a contributory factor, and prison will often exacerbate existing socio-economic disadvantage (Houchin, 2005). We would argue that “it is necessary to see the connectedness of individual hardships with wider and deeper societal structures of inequality” (Ryynanen and Nivala, 2019). However, here we concentrate on how individual teachers and schools might respond to these children and young people on a day-to-day basis.

1. Whole school policy and ethos in relation to children who are struggling:

In our view, the ethos of a school, led by a Headteacher, can communicate important messages via teachers to children and young people and their parents. Children and young people who do not want to talk about their parent in prison, or their feelings, can nevertheless be assisted via a supportive culture that includes teachers who are well-informed about the social circumstances of children of prisoners; these children are likely to be in all schools regardless of the school's area or reputation. This would help teachers understand that students' difficulties may well relate to hidden and unspoken realities in their lives, over which they have no control. We hope this article can contribute to this general ethos. We believe it is also the case that this sort of ethos can contribute to the sorts of relationships that are necessary for more active forms of support, detailed below.

2. Let children and families choose when and if they disclose.

The range of challenges that pupils with a parent in prison face means that they typically decide *not* to talk about this element of their lives at school. It is argued here that teachers need to understand more about why this is the case. We feel sure that many teachers (and other caring adults in school) are keen to provide assistance, but the issues these children and young people face require a particular approach. It has been argued in some quarters that teachers have a "right to know" if a child has a parent in prison; this has been raised with the first author a number of times when she has been carrying out work with teachers. We argue that this puts the onus in the wrong place. We believe it is a child or young person's right *not* to disclose where their absent parent is, if they do not wish to. A child's right to privacy is clearly stated in Article 16 of the UNCRC (Unicef, 1989).

Understandably, teachers can feel concerned about safeguarding and worry that without full information they cannot be confident they are keeping children safe. However, with the criminal parent in prison this should alleviate their concerns. In addition, if Social Services was concerned about a child's safety with the remaining parent/carer they would inform the school. The majority of parents/carers will be working hard to meet their children's needs and will be appreciative of teachers being sensitive and supportive to further enable their children to thrive.

We believe the onus should be on creating a culture in which children and families feel comfortable discussing the parental imprisonment with staff only when and if they are ready. The onus on teachers, and other caring adults, should be on attending to the context in which children or young people *might* choose to talk, but should feel no obligation to do so. An article in 'Headteacher Update' (a magazine for UK primary school teachers) highlights the views of one headteacher who stresses that for parents/carers to make a disclosure to school it is crucial for there to be a pre-existing positive relationship: "We need to demonstrate that the school is part of a network supporting them and their children and will not be judgmental" (Elisabeth Carney-Haworth, 2014).

There is also a need to attend to how teachers respond if a child or young person does choose to disclose information. Molly described how she told a teacher she trusted, first

thing in the morning, that her Dad was in prison. By the time morning break had finished, another teacher (who she hadn't told and didn't want to tell) approached her and said she knew about her Dad's imprisonment and wanted to offer support. Whilst this disclosure of information was clearly done with good intentions, Molly explained that she would never again speak to school staff who had violated her privacy without her permission. It is also important to note the number of children and young people who appreciate the kindness they've been shown by supportive adults but do not wish to be defined by their parent's imprisonment. This means paying attention to other needs, and also to putting the emphasis on listening to what children and young people say they want, or do not want.

3. Normalise but don't ask, or expose.

Teachers can help affected children avoid some of the stigma by talking about parental imprisonment as one of a number of possible family scenarios. Highlighting, in a general way, that parental imprisonment is common can help children realise they are not '*the only one*'. Seven per cent of children experience the imprisonment of a parent during their time at school. As with other stigmatised subjects (e.g. transsexuality) young people report the relief associated with hearing, in an everyday context, that such experiences are not uncommon. However, children also report that one of the worst things a teacher (or fellow pupil) can do is ask what their imprisoned parent did to result in their imprisonment. Often, they don't know themselves, and even when they do know, discussing the crime can be extremely upsetting.

A number of children expressed how difficult they found it when teachers, either intentionally or unintentionally, exposed their family situation to other pupils which they found both embarrassing and a breach of their right to privacy. One child explained why he hated school-based support sessions. This not only took him away from classes he enjoyed, but meant that other children asked intrusive questions about why he was having 'special support'. This child said he preferred to have support sessions outside school to avoid intrusive questioning, and that he just wanted to be treated like everyone else. Another child explained that if she got upset in class she wanted the teacher to be very subtle in offering support; if she needed to leave the room this should be as '*under the radar*' as possible. Another child, upon starting a new school, explained she was given a bravery award in assembly for coping so well with her father's imprisonment. This child had not agreed that the whole school should know where her father was, and this intervention massively stressed and shamed her further.

4. Work at being non-judgemental and focus on family rather than the offence

One of the biggest barriers to looking for or finding support in this study was the families' widespread experience of feeling judged. This was evident from their countless experiences of being subjected to negative judgements in relation to friends, family, people in their community, professional helpers, and particularly, by social workers. For those parents/carers who had social workers involved in their lives, social worker involvement was discussed as one of the most stressful aspects of caring for a child or children when a parent had been imprisoned. Parents/carers expressed much anger from being continually scrutinized by social workers who they said questioned their abilities as caregivers. Codd

(2008: 36) describes how prisoners' families are often treated as if they are criminal themselves: *"it is a rare family which escapes the mechanisms of family-blaming"*. Bethany described how one teacher said to her, when she was struggling with her attendance: *"You don't want to end up like your mother do you?"* Bethany had missed school because she often felt unwell and found it hard to cope with the constant comments, from teachers and children, about her absent mother.

The degree of influence an imprisoned parent has over their children is predominantly affected by the child's caregiver and what role they are prepared to take in maintaining the contact (Cunningham, 2011). Family members have been referred to as 'gate-keepers' of contact arrangements (Brown, 2001) and many put up metaphorical walls between the children and the parent 'inside'. In the case of those involved in this study, most parents actually made considerable efforts to enable their children to attend prison visits. This was sometimes facilitated by the support group the first author runs. Regular contact was experienced as mutually beneficial to both the imprisoned parents and their children in this study. Ex-prisoners spoke of their relief to see their children whilst in prison and how they were able to *"relax more"* (Terry) and *"get on with what needed to be done in prison"* (Matthew) which fits directly with evidence that visitation reduces stressors inherent in the prison environment, enhancing institutional adjustment among inmates (Tewksbury and Connor, 2012). In addition, all the children interviewed who had been on prison visits spoke of their visiting experiences in essentially positive terms, asserting, *"if you asked me, visit or no visit, I'd always say visit!"* (Molly). Such views are reflected in the wider literature. Better outcomes in school (Trice and Bewster, 2004), an improvement in happiness and behaviour (de Las Casas et al, 2011), and coping better in general (Jones and Wainaina-Wozna, 2013) have all been observed in children who maintain regular contact with an imprisoned parent, compared to those for whom contact is either limited or severed.

However, a particular issue for those parents/carers of this study, whose children fell under the gaze of professionals, were their battles regarding the contact arrangements between their children and the offending parent. Aungles (1994) describes how women find themselves in the role of the 'powerless negotiator'. The UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989) specifies that children have the right to have direct and frequent contact with parents from whom the child is separated (Article 9), including the right to be provided with information on the whereabouts of the absent member(s) of the family unless the provision of the information would be detrimental to the well-being of the child (Article 9.4). However, the Children's Rights Alliance for England (Children's Rights Alliance, 2013), a London-based pressure group set to monitor the UK government's commitment to upholding this convention have reported that 'The Convention on the Rights of the Child' has not yet become a living charter for children of imprisoned parents. This is directly observable in the findings of this study. Parents/carers found professionals, especially teachers and social workers, lacked specific knowledge relating to children and families of prisoners, and so instead made contact decisions that were based *"on their own personal biases"* (Denise). Rose said, *"I hated the way she (the school receptionist) looked at me...I dreaded asking to take the kids out of school to go and visit their Dad because she made me feel so small...so sometimes we didn't go"*. Murray and Farrington (2006) in a review of evidence-based programmes for children of prisoners proposed that an increase in

children's opportunities to maintain contact with their imprisoned parent is an intervention strategy that could protect children from the harmful effects of separation.

It is recommended, therefore, that schools support children by authorising absence for prison visits without penalizing the family. One school teacher told the primary researcher that she would allow the child to visit his parent in prison, only if his behavior improved at school. We argue that positive contact may well help the child to feel more settled and that their behavior will improve as a by-product. Using prison visits as an incentive directly contravenes the UNCRC as all children have a right to a relationship with their parents if in their best interest (article 9). Whilst all children have a right to a settled education (article 28) the children in this study reported being far more capable of learning in school when they had been able to see their parent who they often miss desperately.

5. Developing understanding, developing relationships

Participants from this study sometimes articulated feeling understood and accepted in terms of 'being known' by a supportive adult. As with other issues that concern young people (e.g. sexuality, mental health problems, difficulties at home) it is frequently the actions of a single supportive adult, working through a *relationship*, who makes a difference to that child or young person's life (Frankham, et al 2007). The approach taken by the lead author, when working as a practitioner-researcher with this group, begins with 'not knowing' and a desire to try to understand. This approach foregrounds the importance of professionals stepping back from being the holders of knowledge, and considering the client as expert. These children and young people are experts on their own experience, and we hope teachers might strive to understand and collaborate with them in a shared search for 'solutions'. Collaborative therapists were the first to specifically propose using 'not knowing' in therapeutic interventions (Monk and Gehart, 2003).

'Not knowing' is also one of a number of 'contextual components' described by Anderson (2005) which he set out as guidelines for practitioners adopting a collaborative stance. This non-hierarchical approach maintains that 'understanding is interpretative...there is no privileged standpoint for understanding' (Wachterhauser, 1986: 399). Emma said she was able to quickly engage with the people in the support group because her views were "*taken seriously*". To be taken seriously is perhaps the first step in feeling understood, an argument grounded in wider research. Anderson and Goolishian (1992: 30) said that collaborative practice is one in which the client's story is taken "*seriously*" and the therapist joins with the client in "a mutual exploration of the client's understanding and experience". 'Not knowing' strives for this sort of 'cultural curiosity' which might begin to be addressed through attentive listening; clients are the experts of their own experience and their views and feelings remain central throughout.

This study does not find singular challenges faced by families affected by parental imprisonment, nor does it find stand-alone solutions. Instead, findings suggest that the general ethos in a school, and careful attention to listening to what children and young people say, will be first steps to providing the sort of care they need. We feel sure that a greater number of schools can be "places where children are known and can, therefore,

receive the care and support they need. They can be communities of compassion that say to families, 'you are not alone in this. We can help you' (Roberts, 2014).

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