

Working with prisoners' families

Every year around 310,000 children experience the imprisonment of a parent in the UK¹, which is more than the number of children affected by divorce. Prisoners' partners, children and other family members often feel lonely, stigmatised and unsure where to turn for help, support, advice and information². Health Visitors (HVs) can play a key role in supporting prisoners' families, and in helping family members access useful services and sources of advice.

A very high proportion of families experiencing the imprisonment of one or more family members are already living with high levels of deprivation and disadvantage³. Sometimes the imprisonment of a family member can be welcomed, as it removes a violent or abusive person from the home, but more often imprisonment is a stressful and traumatic time for prisoners' partners and children. HVs should recognise that families in this situation often have to cope with a wide range of challenges, sometimes having to cope on their own for the first time. The COVID-19 pandemic had a significant impact on prisoners and their families, especially on children.

- Prisoners' family members are often ashamed of their situation, and may be scared of actual or threatened victimisation, hostility and blame. HVs should not assume that family members knew about, supported or condoned their family member's offending, and should not let their own views about the nature of the crime affect how they respond to family members.
- The imprisonment of parents and siblings can have a serious impact on children in the family. Depending on their age, and what they have been told, they may feel shocked, scared, or not understand where their family member has gone. Children can develop emotional and behavioural problems, such as bed-wetting, eating disorders and anxiety, and can also display aggression and anger at school⁴. HVs can support children and also encourage parents to talk to pre-school or nursery staff about what is going on at home, helping parents to access support groups and online resources to enable children to understand and cope with the situation. For example, Sussex Prisoners' Families has put together a useful online booklet for families and children to read together to help children understand what life in prison is like for their family member, with photographs, which can help children feel less anxious about their family member's wellbeing⁵.
- Prison visits, telephone and video calls are often very important to prisoners and their family members. In-person visits may involve family members travelling long distances and having to cope with unfamiliar prison security arrangements and restrictions. HVs can help families by recognising that appointments with families will usually be seen as far less important than a prison visit, and these may be sources of both joy and stress. Prisoners have limited access to telephones, and many prisoners have infrequent access to video calls (often referred to as 'Purple Visits'). If the imprisoned family member calls while the HV is in the house, talking to the prisoner will usually take priority.

[More information on page 2](#)

For additional resources see www.ihv.org.uk

The information in this resource was updated on 28/03/2023.

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- It is usually female relatives and friends who take responsibility for keeping in touch with prisoners, regardless of whether the prisoner is male or female. Female relatives and friends are often the primary caregiver for prisoners' children⁶, and they are affected by having to cope with increased responsibilities and burdens. This can lead to increased levels of physical and mental illness, especially depression and anxiety, and can be made worse if the female relative is also worrying about whether their family member is safe and well in prison, or about their release or parole situation. Support groups, such as those listed in the 'Further Information' section understand these challenges and difficulties, especially for female relatives, and can provide very valuable peer support throughout the sentence and afterwards.
- Increasing numbers of grandparents have children living with them because their parent has been imprisoned, especially where it is the mother. Grandparents can help with contact where parents have split up. The COVID-19 pandemic further compounded loss and bereavement for multiple family members, including both in prison and outside.

Prisoners and their family members may also be living with the long-term consequences of COVID-19, including chronic illness and disability.

- The impact of a prison sentence on a family does not end as soon as the prisoner is released. For many families, the return of a prisoner causes unexpected new stresses, especially where family members have become accustomed to making decisions and running the family on their own, and the prisoner expects to come back to a family where everything is the same as it was before their sentence. In cases of sexual or violent crimes, there may be new restrictions on residence and contact with children, and these can be difficult to cope with and manage. HVs can help prepare family members for the challenges that may arise after the absent prisoner has returned and reassure family members that there are support groups and online resources to help families cope. The most important thing that HVs can do is reassure family members that it is normal, and usual, to find a prisoner's return difficult. HVs may also need to liaise with the police and probation staff.

Good practice points for health visitors

- HVs should not assume that family members knew about, supported or condoned their family member's offending, and should not let their own views about the nature of the crime affect how they respond to family members.
- HVs should avoid asking family members too many questions about the nature of the offence and, if the court case and sentence have received high profile publicity, the HV should not refer to it.
- Signposting family members to support groups such as that provided by groups listed in the 'Further Information' section can be one of the most valuable things a HV can do.
- The time following a family member's release and return home can create new challenges for the family. PACT has created a 'Pact Packet' resource available on their website, with a version for both the person in prison and also one for other family members - although this was created in response to prisoner release during COVID-19, it is a really useful resource to help families plan for release and their family member's return home.
- HVs can encourage parents/carers to talk to pre-school and nursery staff about what is going on at home, and help parents/carers to access support groups and online resources to help children to understand and cope with the situation.
- HVs should consider working with other professionals to support the family and explore relevant support. HVs may also need to liaise with the police and probation staff.
- The most important thing that HVs can do is reassure family members that it is normal, and usual, to find a prisoner's return difficult.
- HVs need to remain focused on ensuring the best outcome for the child or children involved.
- Ensure access to professional supervision for managing to support such families

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Institute of Health Visiting c/o Royal Society for Public Health, John Snow House, 59 Mansell St, London E1 8AN.

Email: info@ihv.org.uk Phone: 020 7265 7352 Registered Charity: 1149745

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Further information:

- **Children Heard and Seen:** <https://bit.ly/3NgeXKk>
- **Families Outside (a charity supporting families affected by imprisonment in Scotland):** <https://bit.ly/38t0mwz>
- **Offenders' Families Helpline:**
Call 0808 808 2003 (Freephone)
9am-8pm Mon-Fri and 10am-3pm Sat/Sun.
Email: info@offendersfamilieshelpline.org
- **PACT:** <https://bit.ly/3LqJS5k>
- **Time-Matters UK - Support for children aged 5-18:** <https://bit.ly/3sFol8M>
- **Clinks** - has published a comprehensive evidence review on supporting families of people in prison and on probation.
See: <https://bit.ly/3Eiqrvl>

References

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3. McCarthy, D. & Adams, M. (2019) *Can Family-Prisoner Relationships Ever Improve During Incarceration? Examining the Primary Caregivers of Incarcerated Young Men*. *The British Journal of Criminology*, 59 (2) pp. 378–395
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This GPP was original authored by Helen Codd, Professor of Law & Social Justice at the University of Central Lancashire, and Alice Mills, Senior Lecturer in Criminology at the University of Auckland, New Zealand. Updated by Helen Codd in 2022.