Children with Family Members in Prison

Children and young people with a parent or family member in prison are at risk of poor outcomes including poverty, stigma, isolation and poor mental health.

An estimated 312,000 children every year have a parent sent to prison.

10,000 children visit public prisons every week.
*The National Information Centre on Children of Offenders (NICCO)*

Despite the numbers, there is no formal record of who these children are and whether they are receiving support, often meaning that they are hidden and struggling alone.

Children with parents in prison have at least double the risk of mental health problems in comparison to their peers and three times the risk of antisocial behaviour. The parent, not the child has committed the crime, yet the lives of many families are dominated by the effect of imprisonment, and they have no choice but to live with the consequences.

What is the impact on children and young people?

It’s important to find out what might they have seen, heard and / or been told?

- To protect children, adults may choose to lie to them, saying that their family member is ‘working away’ or “on holiday”.
- They may isolate themselves due to embarrassment or become isolated and judged by others for an offence they did not commit.
- They may lose regular contact or any contact with a person who held a significant role in their life.
- The family income may be affected when a parent or family member is sent to prison.

This may mean the child / young person experiences:

- poor physical and mental health;
- financial difficulties and poverty;
- anger and confusion about being lied to;
- fears for the person in prison, especially if the prison is a long way from home;
- frightening experiences of visiting prison;
- lack of support networks, bullying;
- significant trauma if they witnessed the arrest or the criminal activity that led to it;
- fear of being stigmatised by the ‘prisoner’ label;
- feelings of significant loss or rejection;
- absence from education.

How can we support them?

Children and young people with a family member in prison should be recognised as a group with unique needs. To support those affected, we must find out what they have been told and understand the issues they face.

- Discuss the child’s or young person’s needs with them and their carers. Find out how things have changed for them. Focus on their needs, not the offence.
- Maintain a non-judgmental attitude.
- Create safe spaces where children and young people feel confident to speak about their feelings and know where they can get support.
- Allow space and time for the child or young person to deal with their emotions.
- Let the child or young person know they are not alone and that it is not their fault.
- Consider involving children and young people in peer support groups.
- Check in regularly as needs may change.

Take Action – If you know a child is affected by family imprisonment, speak to your DSL and follow your procedures.

https://safeguarding.network/prison confidence in safeguarding