

**With thanks to  
The Equitable Charitable Trust**



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# INVISIBLE CHILDREN

**A Teachers Guide to  
Working With  
Children Whose  
Parents are in Prison**



# INTRODUCTION

**When a child's parent is sent to prison, the child's life is turned upside down ...**

*The children of prisoners however, are largely invisible both within and outside schools.*

Schools often only find out a child has lost a parent to custody through the local paper, from other parents, or through general gossip. They may find out from the child or carer themselves, or from investigating sudden unexplained absences, (when the child is visiting court or the prisoner, supporting other family members or having difficulty coping at school). There is currently no requirement on any agency or person to let the school know that they are caring for a child of a prisoner.

When a teacher does become aware it is often difficult to know what, if anything, to do and how to support the child. The following pages are a starting point aimed at helping the child, the teacher and the parent.

## **How Many Children Are Involved?**

It is estimated that in 1997 the mothers and fathers of more than 125,000 children were sent to prison (Save The Children Fund).

Nobody is sure exactly how many children now have a parent in prison but the prison population has increased by around 2,000 since 1997 and it continues to rise.

## **RISK FACTORS ASSOCIATED WITH OFFENDING**

**The average age when offending starts is 13½ for boys and 14 for girls. Significant risk factors include school attendance and/or disaffection with school, lack of parental supervision, having delinquent friends and having a parent in prison. (Home Office Youth Crime Statistics 1998/99).**

# USEFUL ORGANISATIONS

## **Ormiston Children & Families Trust**

333 Flexistowe Road,  
Ipswich, Suffolk. IP3 9DU  
Tel: 01473 724517

## **Federation of Prisoners' Families Support Groups (FPFSG)**

c/o SCF, Cambridge House,  
Cambridge Grove, London. W6 0LE  
Tel: 020 8741 4578  
Fax: 020 8741 4505

## **Parentline**

Endway House, The Endway  
Hadleigh, Essex. SS7 2AN  
Tel: 01702 554782

*Helpline for parents and carers of children offering support, guidance and counselling services.*

## **Assisted Prison Visits Unit**

P O Box 2152  
Birmingham. B15 1SD  
Tel: 0121 628 2979

*APVU deals with claims for travelling expenses for people visiting relatives in prison.*

## **Prisoners' Wives and Families Society**

254 Caledonian Road  
Islington, London. N1 0NG  
Tel: 020 7278 3981

*PWFS is a self-help voluntary organisation offering support to prisoners' families.*

## **Childline**

Freepost 1111, London. N1 0BR  
Tel: 0800 111111  
(free helpline for children)  
Tel: 020 7239 1000  
(office)

### **“My Dad’s in Prison - What About Me?”**

A poster-style sheet for children and young people to express their feelings about their parent’s imprisonment.

(Also “My Mum’s in Prison - What About Me?”)  
(Ormiston Trust - See next page for the address).

### **“My Special Book: I’m Going to Visit My Dad in Prison”**

A booklet for younger children to fill in with drawings and words when preparing to visit their parent. It encourages the child to think about the journey, the prison and what they might like to say to their parent.

(Also “My Special Book: I’m Going to Visit My Mum in Prison”)  
(Ormiston Trust)

### **“What Shall I Tell The Children”**

A leaflet for adults talking to children about their parent’s imprisonment

(Ormiston Trust)

### **“Visiting Prison With Your Child”**

A leaflet for adults about preparing a child to visit their parent in prison.

(Ormiston Trust)

### **“Dad’s in Prison”**

A hardback book with pictures for children by Sandra Cain and Margaret Speed.

Price £8.00 published by A & C Black London.  
ISBN 0-7136-5094-X

Families find it difficult to talk about the loss of a parent to imprisonment. In some cases children can be told a whole range of reasons why their parent is away. Popular ones include:

- “Working on an oil rig”
- “Gone to look after a relative abroad”
- “In hospital”
- “On a training course”
- “On holiday”

As time passes it often becomes more difficult to raise the issue and the deception can continue.

## Effects on the Child of the Loss of a Parent to Imprisonment

**The impact on the child can be devastating. The child may experience feelings of loss, shame, isolation, lower self-esteem, anxiety, anger and frustration. They may particularly fear that other family members may be taken away too. The child may also be struggling with feelings of guilt and relief if their relationship with the parent was difficult to begin with.**

**There may be major life changes to the child as a consequence of the parent’s imprisonment, ie, moving house, taking on more responsibility for the family including care of other children, loss of contact with other family and friends and financial hardship.**

## Behavioural Problems

The child may manifest problems in the form of hostility towards figures of authority, aggressive behaviour, withdrawal, refusing to go to school, bed-wetting, nightmares, temper tantrums, lack of concentration, moodiness and failing school performance.

The child may exhibit more acute problems at certain times depending on what is happening to the parent, ie at the time of the arrest, court appearances, prison visits, home visits prior to release and the release itself.

### HOW SHOULD THE TEACHER RESPOND?

How should teachers respond when a child discloses that a member of their family has been imprisoned?

- Provide privacy to talk.
- Listen carefully - allow them to “tell their story”.
- Acknowledge what is said.
- Reassure them that you believe them.
- Agree actions with the child.
- Do not undervalue the trauma of their experiences.
- Acknowledge the child’s rights - respect confidentiality.
- Where appropriate seek advice from LEA Support Services.
- Take account of child protection issues and work with relevant services.

### What do Children of Prisoners Want From Teachers?

Children say they may want support from teachers:

- To talk to in confidence.
- To respect their privacy if they don’t want to talk about it.
- To be there for them.
- To help protect them from gossip, teasing and bullying when they ask for help.
- To give them extra help with school work when they need it.

## TEACHING OPPORTUNITIES

The Personal Social Health Education (PSHE) or Religious Education classes can become a forum for raising sensitive issues around crime and the consequences of crime on family and victims.

Activities such as circle time can provide opportunities. It may be helpful to bring in outside speakers to make a presentation to the class. Listening schemes, mentor schemes and peer group support can be useful. Contact numbers of external organisations and support groups can be made available to pupils.

Art and drama may also provide opportunities to explore the issues.

### FURTHER INFORMATION

Much of the content of this leaflet has been derived from the following publication.

**“Working With Children of Prisoners”**  
A resource for teachers by Save The Children

ISBN 1 1 899 120 65 3  
£7.50

Tel: 020 7703 5400  
[www.scfuk.org.uk](http://www.scfuk.org.uk)

This publication is highly recommended. It contains more detailed information about all issues contained in this leaflet.