When a parent goes to prison

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The Prison Development Work of Barnardo’s Parenting Matters Project

Barnardo’s
Northern Ireland
BELIEVE IN CHILDREN
As prison populations around the world expand, increasing numbers of children are affected by parental imprisonment (Murray & Farrington, 2006). However, as the work of Barnardo’s Parenting Matters Project illustrates, with support imprisonment can provide an opportunity for prisoners to re-think their roles and responsibilities as parents.

This briefing report outlines the work of Barnardo’s Parenting Matters’ Prison Development Work and is based on the findings of an evaluation conducted in 2005. This evaluation (Barnardo’s, 2005) explored the impact of the Parenting Matters Project on participant’s capacity to parent and the contribution parenting work makes to the resettlement process for prisoners.

The Parenting Matters Project

The Barnardo’s Parenting Matters Project has been working with fathers in prison in Northern Ireland since 1996 and now delivers parenting programmes in all three prison establishments in Northern Ireland. Participating in the project are, male prisoners, female prisoners and young offenders. This work has been funded by both the Probation Board for N. Ireland and the N. Ireland Prison Service.

The programmes delivered by Parenting Matters aim to help parents cope with the practical and emotive issues of being a parent in prison. Programmes guide parents through the key stages of childhood and adolescence, assist parents to listen and respond to their children and importantly, prepare participants to cope with parenting on release.

Policy context

The importance of recognising and acknowledging the needs of prisoners and their children is reflected in policy commitments from the Probation Board for Northern Ireland in their corporate plan (2002–2005), the Northern Ireland Prison Service Resettlement Strategy (2004) and in the Children’s Services Plans of all Northern Ireland Health and Social Service Boards. Despite the recognition given by these agencies, there is no statutory agency in Northern Ireland with specific responsibility for children of imprisoned parents.

An interagency group entitled ‘The Interagency Children of Prisoners Group’ was formed in 2000. The group aims to raise awareness of the needs of families of prisoners and has members from both the Statutory and Voluntary sectors. A further strategic group for ‘The Children and Families of those in Custody’ set up in 2006 also seeks to work collaboratively at senior management level, across the range of agencies which are providing support to families of prisoners.

Prisons in Northern Ireland

The Parenting Matters Project delivers parenting programmes to prisoners in all three custodial institutions in Northern Ireland.

Maghaberry Prison in Lisburn is a high security prison which holds male long term prisoners, unconvicted, separated prisoners and male immigration detainees at the facility in Belfast. It has capacity for 745 prisoners in single cell accommodation.

Magilligan Prison in Limavady is a medium to low security prison housing shorter term prisoners and low security accommodation for selected prisoners nearing the end of their release. It has capacity for 452 prisoners in single cell accommodation.

Hydebank Wood in Belfast is a Young Offenders Centre and Prison. It accommodates young male offenders aged between 17 and 21 years and all female prisoners. It has capacity for 306 prisoners in single cell accommodation.

Resettlement process

Resettlement is where prisoners and their families receive assistance and support from the Prison and Probation Services and also from voluntary agencies to help them prepare for life after prison. This can include advice and support with issues such as education, training, housing, problems with drugs and alcohol, state benefits and preparation for release. The objective is to help prisoners return to normal life, gain employment and a home and prevent re-offending.


‘The aim is to ensure that time spent in custody is used to the best effect with a view to reducing re-offending on release, and to assist prisoners to lead law abiding lives when they return to the community. Family ties are important sources of support and maintaining these links contributes to social rehabilitation.’

Research literature also points to the importance of maintaining positive links between prisoners and their families, if this is successful they may be less likely to re-offend after release (Hudson, 2006).

Findings from the recent evaluation point to the positive role of the Parenting Matters Project in addressing parenting issues and the integral part this plays in the resettlement process for prisoners. Feedback also highlights the unique role the project plays in supporting parents in prison through their custodial experiences, while facilitating their future involvement in family life after release.

Although the prison environment is often destructive to family relationships, it can also provide a window of opportunity for change. National and international research indicates parents in prison are often motivated to use this period to reflect on their relationships with their child and to improve their capacity to parent.

(Healy et al, 2000)
The parent in prison

Parents in prison often lack awareness as to how their imprisonment impacts on their family. They may suffer from a sense of inadequacy as a parent or feel frustrated with the limited opportunities to maintain contact. Many lack the knowledge or ability to make the most of opportunities that are available to them, such as writing, visits or phone-calls.

The time spent in prison can provide an opportunity for parents to assess their situation and take account of their responsibilities for their child and family. The availability of parenting programmes offers benefits to both child and parent. Parents can access support and information about skills needed to develop and sustain relationships with their child, such as play skills, the importance of listening and communicating and the different stages of child development. The importance of staying in touch is emphasised through the use of phone calls, letters, visits, especially child-centred visits and the book and tape club. This helps the child by encouraging a meaningful relationship with their parent during the period of imprisonment.

Feedback from male participant

‘I really enjoyed taking part and found it really useful. I think when I’m out I will be able to understand my child and also my family a lot better. I have also learned to listen to others which is really good and I feel I can be a better person for that.’

Prison development work and Parenting Matters Programmes

The Parenting Matters Project delivers five distinct programmes in Prisons; Staying in Touch, Being a Parent in Prison, Preparing for Release, Partners Together and Talking to Your Child About Tough Issues. The prisoners are informed about the programmes through the Prison induction process with the help of the family support officers employed by the prison service, but also informally through posters, leaflets and ‘word of mouth’.

Programme delivery

The project operates a system of co-facilitation which engages both Barnardo’s staff and Prison Officers in the delivery and development of the programmes. Barnardo’s Parenting Matters project trains facilitators using an accredited programme which Prison Officers participate in on a voluntary basis. A total of ten Prison Officers have now completed the programme. This unique partnership approach enables both Barnardo’s and Prison staff to share their skills, knowledge and information to inform programme content and support participants. Within the evaluation, this partnership was frequently highlighted as a particular strength of the parenting work.

Children of Prisoners – Concerns for the child

Having a parent in prison can be a very difficult time for children with long-term negative impacts. They may experience a range of emotions such as fear, guilt, confusion or shame and research highlights the following issues as being of particular concern.

Stigma and fear of stigma from being associated with having a close family member in prison can create anxiety and stress. Children often experience fear bullying or exclusion because of their situation. They may also worry about who will take care of them, how their parent is coping in prison, moving house, what if anything they should tell their friends and what the future holds for them.

Emotional, social and behavioural reactions can include (King, 2002: 56)

- Hyperactivity
- Becoming quiet and withdrawn
- ‘Acting up’, with caregivers as a result of parent’s absence
- Shyness with parents during visits
- Depression

Financial pressures – characteristics common to prisoner ‘lone’ families such as debt and low income status, create financial strains that place the family under even greater pressure as they cope with the re-adjustment of a parent in prison. Financial pressures may affect previous commitments to children’s activities and daily routine such as pocket money, clubs or treats.

Research (Hudson, 2006) also shows that the impact of imprisonment on children can be worse when it is their mother who is imprisoned.

It is vital that the needs of children are addressed for the duration of their parent’s imprisonment to reduce the impact both in the short and long term. Whilst it is important not to assume that children of prisoners will become involved in future criminal activity, trends in criminal statistics tend to indicate that children of prisoners are more likely to be incarcerated in adulthood than other children (Van Wormer & Bartollass, 2000). This finding, coupled with research showing that positive family relationships can help reduce prisoners re-offending, highlights the importance of working with parents within the prison system to break this cycle and help prevent future offending behaviour by prisoners or their children.
Programme content

Staying in touch workshop
This half-day workshop is now part of the Induction Programme for all prisoners who are fathers in Maghaberry Prison. It is also delivered in Hydebank Wood several times a year. The programme encourages prisoners to consider the impact of imprisonment on their children and promotes the positive contribution that ‘staying in touch’ can have for their parent-child relationship. The content focuses on children’s experiences of having a parent in prison, the impact on and experience of visits from a child’s perspective and the value of maintaining communication between parent and child while in prison. A user-friendly booklet on this subject is also available to all prisoners.

Participants feedback
‘I’m glad this class was brought to my attention as I didn’t know what to say to my kids about being in prison.’
‘I think everyone in prison who has children should consider this course, before I started I thought I’d been a good enough father. It showed me that I wasn’t as good as I could be…’

Being a dad or mum in prison programmes
This programme usually takes place one day a week over a four week period and involves eight half day sessions. The programme contributes to the development of more sustained and positive parent-child relationships while in prison, it increases prisoner’s awareness about issues affecting their children and helps develop practical skills that enhance participant confidence in their parenting role.

Participants feedback
‘I learned to listen more to my children, when visiting or on the phone.’
‘It opened my eyes to being a parent and that there is a lot more issues than being called “dad”.’

Preparing for release programme
This programme was successfully piloted in Magilligan Prison in 2005 and is now delivered in both Magilligan and Maghaberry on a regular basis. The programme plays a significant role in the Prison resettlement process that prisoners engage in when preparing to return home. The programme offers space to discuss the expectations, key issues and practicalities involved in release. The evaluation highlights that this programme was particularly helpful in promoting consideration of other family member’s needs and a fuller understanding of the range of issues involved in returning to and re-entering family life. It also provided an opportunity for prisoners to share concerns and anxieties they had about returning home, such as feeling like a stranger at home or failure to gain employment.

Participants feedback
‘I am more open to getting help now.’
‘I’m never coming back in here again, I’ve wasted so much time.’

Partners Together
Provides an opportunity for prisoners and their partners to come together in a group context to discuss parenting issues.

Talking to your child about tough issues
This programme (developed by Ed Sipler, Health Development Specialist in Alcohol and Drugs) is currently delivered in Magilligan and Maghaberry and focuses on helping parents discuss difficult or challenging issues with their child. Four sessions cover a range of issues relating to drugs and alcohol and aims to help fathers contribute to building their child’s resilience. The programme compliments other initiatives provided within Prisons regarding substance misuse.

Prison development work with young male offenders
Two programmes are delivered with young male offenders, ‘Staying in Touch’ and the ‘Pre-School Programme’. Again participation is voluntary and many young men attend through a motivation for their child to have a more positive childhood than they themselves have experienced. Young men reported benefits such as improved communication with their child, greater understanding of their child’s needs and feelings and increased awareness of how their imprisonment impacts on their child/family.

This work is successfully continuing and compliments the introduction of Child Centred visits to Hydebank.

The project also now facilitates a community based support group for the parents of young offenders.
Work with partners / family members outside of the prison system

Parenting Matters is now building on their work with the partners of prisoners. In the community partners can be referred from agencies, such as NIACRO, to participate in a parent support programme. This aims to meet the group’s parenting needs but also to provide an opportunity to meet other parents in a similar situation. More recently the project has developed ‘Partners Together’, a programme which enables prisoners and their partners to work on family issues together and which compliments the work of the Preparing for Release programme. This has been delivered in Magilligan and will shortly be delivered in Maghaberry also.

Prison development work with female prisoners

The mother in prison

Female prisoners in Northern Ireland are currently housed within the Northern Ireland Young Offenders Centre in Hydebank Wood on the outskirts of Belfast.

Given the distinctive emotional and practical role a mother has in a child's life, the experience of a mother in prison is usually qualitatively different to that of a father in prison. Unlike fathers in prison, whose child is usually living at home with its mother (the prisoner’s partner or ex-partner), when a mother goes to prison, the inevitable separation from the child will often result in the relocation of the child to other family members or Social Services care. In addition to this, research (cited in HM Inspectorate of Prisons, 2005) highlights that two in three women prisoners have mental health problems, at least half report being victims of domestic violence and 37% have tried to kill themselves. Nine out of ten women are convicted of non-violent offences, and two-thirds of women in prison are mothers.

Inevitably therefore, maintaining relationships between the mother and child is fraught with difficulty and the impact on the child can have far reaching consequences. At the outset of this work the female Development Worker employed by Parenting Matters adopted a gentle approach with the women and through time established a trusting and positive relationship. The worker acted as a listener, advocate and adviser for the female prisoners and this helped inform the development of a programme to meet their needs.

In the early stages it was clear that the women were not ready to participate in parenting work and instead a personal development programme ‘Making the Most of Yourself’ was created to help them look at their own needs. This programme focused on personal development issues such as self-esteem and took place over a two week period across eight sessions. The programme evaluation highlights the positive experiences which were created through the friendly, open sessions. Both participants and Prison Staff emphasised the importance of the confidence building and positive learning experience provided by the programme.

The skills taught in this programme have laid a good foundation for future work with the female prisoners and also helped Parenting Matters develop an induction pack for mothers in prison. This new pack called ‘Family Ties’ contains 3 booklets, one for the mother in prison, one for the carer at home and one for the child. The Prison Development Worker works with each new mother admitted to prison and goes through the pack on a one-to-one basis. This not only provides mothers with useful information and sources of support but also provides an opportunity for them to raise any concerns they have about their children.

Parenting programmes – benefits from participation

Prisoners participating in Parenting Matters Programmes highlight the supportive group culture fostered by the programmes as important to their success. Other benefits identified by programme evaluation include:

- positive engagement with the Prison Service Resettlement process
- development of better relationships with children inside and outside the prison
- increased prisoner awareness of the impact of their imprisonment on their child / family
- the provision of support, ideas and knowledge to enable prisoners to maintain a meaningful relationship with their child
- basic positive parenting skills and an understanding of child development
- greater awareness by prisoners of the needs of children at various stages of their development
- fostering positive relationships between participating prisoners and Prison Officers involved in the programme
- positive group learning experience
- practical suggestions which can be put into immediate use

Parenting Matters programmes are now established as part of the overall Prison Service Resettlement process. Prison and Barnardo’s staff involved in programme delivery highlight the following contributions to resettlement:

- fosters positive engagement in education and personal development
- encourages prisoners to communicate with their children and families
- supports prisoners to build positive bonds with their family
- assists prisoners plan reintegration with their family after release.
Conclusion

Parenting programmes within the Prison system provide a unique opportunity to promote a range of parenting skills to parents unlikely to engage in parenting education in the outside world. It also provides a safe space for prisoners to reflect upon and rethink their role as a parent, it can assist and support them through the process of imprisonment, potential release and resettlement into family life. The opportunity for parents in prison to contribute to a different childhood for their own children may help break the potential cycle of inter-generational crime and increase their own motivation not to re-offend.

New areas of policy and practice development

Parenting Matters is currently involved in:

- Supporting the development of a multi-agency Family Strategy across the three Prisons
- Working closely with Social Services and Education to increase understanding of the needs of children of prisoners.
- Developing a resource pack for teachers and social workers to raise awareness of the needs of children of prisoners.

Policy and practice recommendations

- Development and resourcing of a family support strategy to meet the needs of families of imprisoned sex-offenders
- Sustained support provided to Parenting Matters to continue their delivery of parenting work in prisons
- Continued support for the training of prison officers to enable them to co-facilitate parenting programmes
- Needs assessment for female prisoners to ensure the appropriate and relevant delivery of programmes to mothers in prison
- Follow-up support for prisoners to assist in their transition between being a parent in prison and being a parent at home
- Development of initiatives for children and partner’s of prisoners to help them cope with a parent or partner being in prison
- More accessible financial assistance with transport for families who are under financial pressure and who struggle to afford travel and other costs associated with visiting
- Educational establishments to recognise the need for children to make visits to a parent who is in prison and to treat this in a sensitive manner
- Increased recognition and facilitation of the potential role a prisoner’s family can play during imprisonment by involving partners and children in the resettlement process and in initiatives such as Family Induction.

Resources developed by Parenting Matters to support prisoners, children and families

- Staying in Touch (A guide for dad’s in prison)
- Family Ties (Pack for women with a booklet each for the mother, the carer on the outside and the children)
- It’s a Tough Time for Everyone (Children’s Booklet available in comic format and DVD)
- Supporting a Child when a Parent is in Prison (for mothers with a partner in prison)

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References

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