

# Parenting Matters for prisoners and their families

Believe in  
children



Barnardo's  
Northern Ireland

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Informing prison work practice through evidence:  
an overview of recent contributions



## Introduction

Parenting Matters is the long-running Barnardo's NI prison work programme. Originally incepted as a general parenting programme in 1993, Parenting Matters started supporting imprisoned fathers in 1996, in the then Maze prison. Since 2010 the service has been wholly dedicated to prison work.

In Northern Ireland, the Parenting Matters brand of prison work is unique in that its primary goal is to improve the lives of children by focusing on, developing and maintaining the links (where appropriate) between children, families and imprisoned parents (Butler et al., 2015).

Parenting Matters programmes typically cover the impact of imprisonment on a child, the child's developmental needs, parenting styles, positive communication with children, problem solving skills and discipline/behaviour management of children (Butler et al., 2015).

This briefing provides a rapid overview of four research studies and a handbook for schools. All five contributions relate to Parenting Matters work in Northern Ireland's prisons.

**Currently Parenting Matters delivers parenting programmes for parents, step parents and expectant parents in all three of Northern Ireland's prisons.**

- **Maghaberry Prison** near Lisburn holds approximately 1,000 men ranging from those on remand and serving short sentences, to those serving life sentences and separated paramilitary prisoners. Many of the prison population have learning difficulties, mental health issues, addiction problems and personality disorders.

Maghaberry is the only prison in Northern Ireland that can hold Category A prisoners<sup>1</sup>.

- **Magilligan Prison** in Limavady is a medium security prison that holds around 500 adult men from across Northern Ireland, serving sentences ranging between less than one year to life, most of whom have been transferred from Maghaberry Prison and are being prepared for release<sup>2</sup>.
- **Hydebank Wood College and Women's Prison** has a focus on education, learning and employment. Hydebank Wood College is Northern Ireland's main facility for holding young adults aged 18 to 21 years. The site is shared with female remand and sentenced prisoners in Ash House, a house block within the complex.

## Policy Context

**Northern Ireland Prison Service (NIPS) Family Strategy (2010) and accompanying Action Plan (2012)** largely emanated from Pathways 6 (Children and Families) of the NIPS Resettlement Strategy<sup>3</sup>. The Family Strategy aims to ensure: the provision of timely and accurate information; advice and support to families, including financial assistance with visits; family visits arrangements; and family programmes and services.

**Review of the Northern Ireland Prison Service (2011)** was undertaken as part of the Hillsborough Castle Agreement, which had led to the devolution of policing and justice powers

in Northern Ireland. The review, led by Dame Anne Owers, made 40 recommendations for change.

### **Strategic framework for reducing offending (2013)**

highlights the need to support and protect families of those involved in the criminal justice system and recognises that strong positive family ties can reduce offending and encourage desistance.

### **Supporting change: A strategic approach to desistance (2015)**

sets out an agreed understanding of desistance from crime and is supported by an action plan to embed desistance theory in justice policy and practice.

## Five contributions to research and practice output

### **1 Tackling the intergenerational cycle of offending, by promoting parent-child relationships (Malcomson, 2016)**

Over a four week period, Malcomson (2016) visited prisons in Belgium, the Netherlands, Italy and Croatia as well as three family focused organisations offering similar services to Parenting Matters (Relais Enfants Parents, Belgium; Exodus, the Netherlands; and Bambini Senza Sbarre, Italy). Malcomson's study visit carried out on behalf of Parenting Matters aimed to examine how to tackle the inter-generational cycle of offending and was made possible through a Winston Churchill Fellowship.

### **Belgium - Relais Enfants Parents (REP)**

is a family focused organisation based in Brussels that works in 11 French speaking Belgian prisons. REP works with parents from sentencing to release with no restriction on the type of conviction, offering individual and group parenting support and access to a 'collective visit'. The collective visits are held every two weeks, usually on a Wednesday afternoon when Belgian schools are closed.

<sup>1</sup> CJINI (2016). Overview of initial findings of a report on an unannounced inspection of Maghaberry Prison January 2016

<sup>2</sup> CJINI (2015) Report on an unannounced inspection of Magilligan Prison 27 May-5 June 2014

<sup>3</sup> [www.justice-ni.gov.uk/sites/default/files/publications/doj/nips-family-strategy-2012-revision.pdf](http://www.justice-ni.gov.uk/sites/default/files/publications/doj/nips-family-strategy-2012-revision.pdf)

**The Netherlands - Exodus** is a large organisation providing care and support to prisoners and their families in the Netherlands. Exodus works in 26 prisons, providing parenting support through individual and group programmes. Exodus programmes include Vrij Verantwoord Vaderschap (VJV) programme (or Responsible Fatherhood), Het Ouders, Kinderen en Detentieproject (OKD or the Parents, Children and Detention Project) and Exodushaus (accommodation for females as an alternative to prison).

**Italy - Bambini Senza Sbarre (Bambini)** has worked in Italian prisons since 2002 and aims to support children and families during visiting times. The majority of their work takes place in the visitor's waiting room of prisons, in a space known as the Yellow Space. It is

here Bambini staff and volunteers offer a friendly face and environment for families and children to allow them to feel comfortable and secure within a prison setting. The Yellow Space in each prison is adapted to the prison environment and the needs of the visitors.

Malcomson (2016) notes that for many children of prisoners, the prison visit room can be the one place where the whole family is together, but also where children can learn to like this environment and what it offers. Whilst acknowledging this can be a major predisposing factor to the intergenerational cycle of offending, Malcomson (2016) is adamant that support for families and children in visiting spaces and the provision of child-centred visits is an integral part of maintaining positive family relationships.

#### Conclusions:

- Family focused training should be widely available for all prison staff to raise awareness of the impact of parental imprisonment.
- As far as possible, prison staff who have received family focused training should remain in a position which allows them to build close links with external providers to provide a continuity of service to families and children.
- There should be more extensive use of child-centred visits in prison, to promote parent-child relationships, including visits which cater for the imprisoned parent and children only.
- Parents availing of child-centred visits should have access to support that helps them make the most of their opportunity in a way that meets their child's needs.
- Further collaboration with colleagues in other services is needed to develop and enhance resources and interventions available to families affected by parental imprisonment to address the extensive range of issues which affect them.

## 2 Fathers in Prison: the experience of parenting an infant from prison an IPA study (Smith, 2016)

This research aimed to challenge and explore societal expectations and assumptions about fatherhood through the eyes of fathers who are physically separated from their baby. In partnership with Barnardo's NI and Northern Ireland Prison Service (NIPS), Smith (2016) explored the experiences of six fathers who were parenting their infants from prison (at the time of interview the infants were aged between 17 and 24 months). All six fathers were in an adult male prison in Northern Ireland and had engaged with Barnardo's NI Parenting Matters service.

#### Method:

Using an Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) approach, Smith (2016) gained a detailed understanding of each father's individual journey and their collective experiences of being parents. Each father was interviewed for about 45 minutes on question topics that were guided by the literature but open to flexibility.

IPA is an interpretative approach, requiring the researcher to make sense of the participant's world. The process of interpretation involves both the participant trying to make sense of their own experience and the researcher attempting to make sense of the participant's interpretation.

Analysis involved a process of listening to the audio recordings several times and reading/re-reading the interview transcripts, until the researcher was familiar with the data. For each transcript, the researcher made initial notes about the text. Three master themes were identified and quotes are used extensively to provide insights into being a father of a young child in prison:

- **Hidden fathering – worrying within the walls** Fathers offered rich descriptions of the worry, emotional pain and loss they had experienced during their time in prison. '*...I never thought I had them feelings before but the only time I cry in here is whenever I've got to leave him...*'
- **Negotiating fatherhood identity** Prison presents with an opportunity to reflect on past, present and future representations of their identity as a father. '*...I've never actually, never really been round kids at all apart from him in here*'.
- **A turning point** Prison affords fathers time to reflect on their lives, which acts as a catalyst for change. '*...I work in the jail Monday to Friday then I look forward to my visit. I actually count how many visits I have left (pause) 'til I'm home... ...I've got 92 visits so I have*'.

Throughout, Smith (2016) draws upon other parenting situations and experiences to locate what it is like for fathers to parent an infant from prison. Considerations include:

- psychological pain – the unpleasant feeling precipitated by loss or trauma
- a father’s attachment to the infant’s mother is believed to predict his attachment to the infant
- ambiguous loss – unresolved grief with no opportunity for closure, a type of loss that is characterised by physical absence and psychological presence
- issues of role displacement and a perception that they are not involved in their child’s life
- similarities but differences between non-resident fathers and incarcerated fathers.

**Conclusions:**

Parenting an infant from prison is emotionally and practically challenging for fathers. However, aside from the psychological pain that fathers experience, prison can also represent a catalyst for change, leading to psychological growth.

**Families Matter Programme**

In 2012, building on over 15 years of prison work experience, Barnardo’s NI in partnership with NIPS jointly developed Families Matter. This 17-week residential programme was aimed at fathers, stepfathers and fathers to be, who were detained in Maghaberry Prison. Participant fathers who met the programme’s inclusion criteria were located to landing three in the prison’s new Quoile House building to undertake a schedule of classes and family oriented activities. Evaluations were carried out on the programme when it was known as ‘Being a Dad’ (McCrudden et al., 2014) and later when known as Families Matter (Butler et al., 2015). Currently, Families Matter operates as a 26-week residential programme.

**3 Stealing the Smile from My Child’s Face: a preliminary evaluation of the “Being a Dad” programme in a Northern Ireland Prison (McCrudden et al., 2014)**

**The programme:**

A 17-week residential programme for imprisoned fathers, offering activities focused on family life and family relationships. At the time of the McCrudden et al. (2014) evaluation the programme was known as ‘Being a Dad’. It was later renamed Families Matter.

**The study:**

In their preliminary evaluation, McCrudden et al. (2014) collected quantitative and qualitative data to investigate fathers’ views of the programme. Of the 24 fathers who were identified as meeting the study’s inclusion criteria, 18 completed the before and after six-item questionnaire, which was designed specifically to evaluate the programme. Using a Likert scale ranging from one to five, fathers were asked to rate their understanding of their:

- child’s behaviour
- understanding of their child’s age and stage of development
- ability to communicate with their child
- understanding of how being in prison impacted on their child(ren)
- awareness of their own parenting style
- confidence as a parent.

**Findings:**

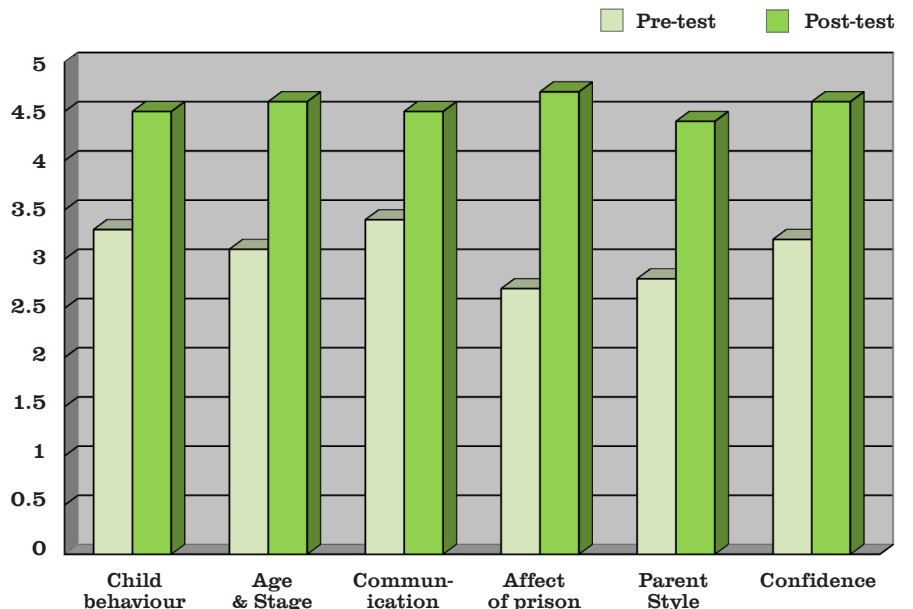
The study found that fathers self-reported an enhanced understanding of all six outcomes. Figure 1 below summarises how fathers assessed each of the components before and after the programme.

For the focus group, 13 of the 18 participant fathers who reported above also contributed to the qualitative exercise, providing insights into their experience of the programme. They explained how they had greater confidence in their abilities as parents and how their relationships with their children’s mothers and the staff in the prison had improved. However, they expressed concern about their post programme needs and the potential limited opportunities that families might face in attempting to continue to maintain positive relations during the remainder of the father’s imprisonment.

**Limitations:**

The findings were based solely on fathers’ self-reported changes in their understanding, behaviour and interactions with their family before and after completing the programme, but did not include families and staff perspectives.

**Figure 1: Fathers assessment of each of the components of the “Being a Dad” programme before and after the programme (n= 18)**



#### 4 Strengthening family relations? Review of the Families Matter Programme at Maghaberry Prison (Butler et al., 2015)

Butler et al. (2015) carried out an expansive review for the Families Matter programme, which involved examining the views of fathers, family members and individuals involved in the management and delivery of the programme. The review aimed to:

- Examine the rationale, design and implementation of the Families Matter programme.
- Assess if programme participation can reduce some of the negative effects of imprisonment for fathers, their partners/caregivers and children.
- Examine if the Families Matter programme can help improve relationships between fathers and their families during imprisonment.
- Assess if programme participation affects order and control within the prison and quality of life and psychological well-being for fathers.
- Develop a preliminary ‘theory of action’ linking programme components and activities to short term changes at the prison, father and family level as well as potential longer term outcomes.

##### Participants:

Of the 17 fathers who met the study’s inclusion criteria, 11 were completing the programme for the first time, five for the second time and two for the third time. Table 1 sets out the timetable for the activities, to be delivered by Barnardo’s NI, NIPS, Belfast Met and the Public Health Agency.

##### Method:

A combination of observations and interviews were undertaken

to examine the design, content, delivery and potential benefits of participating in the Families Matter programme for fathers, families and the prison environment. One cohort of fathers was followed through the programme and observed for ten days. This data was used to develop the preliminary ‘theory of action’ and to understand how the programme operated in practice. Between November 2014 and March 2015, 42 interviews were carried out with fathers (18), family members (7) and individuals involved in delivering and managing the programme (17).

##### Conclusions:

Whilst accepting the study had some limitations, the findings confirm many of the effects of parental imprisonment referred to by the authors in their literature review. They note the mechanisms by which participation in the programme reduced negative effects including: the increased frequency and quality of contact between fathers and their families; culture of peer support on the programme; alleviation of anxieties and worries about the safety of fathers; the enhancement of fathers parenting skillset and providing opportunities for fathers to demonstrate these enhanced skills; and improving fathers well-being and ability to cope with imprisonment which in turn helped to improve communication between fathers and families. Butler et al. (2015) detail 14 examples of good practice and 12 suggestions for future development of the Families Matter programme.

#### 5 Children affected by the imprisonment of a family member: a handbook for schools developing good practice (Barnardo’s NI, 2015)

In recognition of the vital role that schools play in addressing the needs of children affected by imprisonment, Barnardo’s NI produced a handbook to help implement supportive policies and practices. While primarily aimed at schools, the handbook could also be useful for agencies in justice, health and social care.

##### Section one sets out the aims of the handbook, which are to produce:

- Information about some of the potential main impacts of imprisonment on children, particularly as they affect children at school.
- Information about specific effects on children at different stages of what has been referred to as the ‘offender journey’.
- A framework for the Education Authority (EA) (and other relevant agencies), schools and school staff addressing the needs of children with a family member in prison.
- To highlight and share examples of good practice and wherever possible to use the words of children and families affected by imprisonment.

Table 1: Timetable for Families Matter programme during the research

Group	Time	Monday	Tuesday	Wednesday	Thursday	Friday
1	AM	Maths/Gym	Parenting class	Stress management	Sport nutrition	Fingerprint learning class
	PM	Maths	Parenting class 1-2-1		Gym	Library
2	AM	Maths/Gym	Cooking class		Parenting class	Physical activity for children
	PM	Maths	English	Cooking class	Parenting class 1-2-1	
3	AM	Maths/Gym	English	Parenting class		Cooking class/ Library
	PM	Maths	Leather craft	Parenting class 1-2-1	Gym	Fingerprint learning class

**Section two deals with the potential impact of a parent or other family member's imprisonment by focusing on how children are affected in terms of:**

- emotional well-being of the child
- impact on the child/young person's family and the 'knock on' effects directly for the child
- the child in the community/ neighbourhood
- impact at school
- long-term effects.

The quotes below provide a sense of the material contained within the handbook and the difficult journeys faced by families.

Changes in behaviour: *'[My child's] schooling dropped severely. His behaviour changed pretty drastically. He was aggressive and loud and boisterous and things like that. Ok, yeah so you expect from a normal child but there was a sort of anger in this.'* (Father in a NI prison describing his son; Convery et al., 2011).

A fear of 'who knows' and not being sure of the reaction of others: *'If all my friends...if I told them and they were still my friends.'* (Ten-year-old boy asked what would

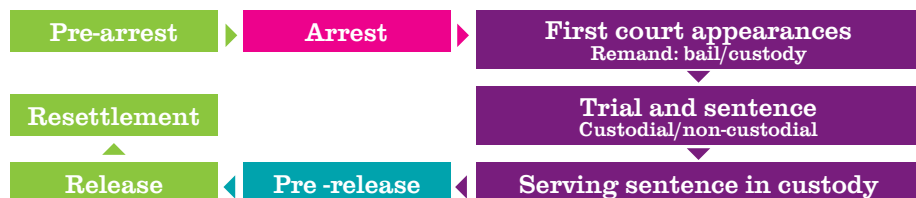
make life at school easier while his dad was in prison; Gill, 2010).

The child may have been told by their family not to tell anybody in school. This may create tension and uncertainty: *'Haven't told the school. Told the children not to say anything'*. (Mother; Gill, 2009).

**Section three highlights the impact on children at different stages of the 'offender journey'.** The arrest, trial, court proceedings and potential imprisonment of a parent can be a long and distressing time for the parent, the child and their families. By being aware of the different stages in the 'offender journey' (see Figure 2), schools are better positioned to understand and support the different effects on children and families at each stage.

**Section four highlights strategies and good practice.** Case examples are used throughout to support suggestions for strategies and practical guidelines that EA and other relevant agencies, schools and school staff could use. These guidelines are summarised as checklists and aim to foster best practice in supportive environments for children affected by imprisonment.

**Figure 2: The Offender Journey** (Adapted from Barnardo's NI, 2015)



## Recommendations

Drawing on this overview of research, outreach and practice primarily relating to Barnardo's NI Parenting Matters service, and for the purpose of informing prison work and prisoner resettlement policy to help improve the lives of children affected by parental imprisonment, the following recommendations are suggested for consideration:

- The NI Executive should formally recognise its obligation and duty of care to the needs and wellbeing of children affected by parental and family imprisonment. In light of the Children's Service's Co-operation Act, all Departments (and primarily the Departments of Justice and Education, as the two departments with lead responsibility for prisons and children respectively)

should work together to ensure these children are supported in a meaningful way.

- The Department of Justice and NI Prison Service should improve data collection to quantify the number of children affected by parental imprisonment, to inform and develop support provision.
- Family focused training should be provided to all prison staff, including information on connecting families to support in the community and the importance of child-centred visits.
- Resettlement plans should promote and enable family stability to support desistance through the provision of post-release family support.
- Further funded study is recommended to capture the long-term effectiveness of prison family work.

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