

# Left Behind

Don't judge me, encourage me

Course toolkit

Children often need to know that they've got someone outside of their family network to talk to. They tend to feel more comfortable talking about their thoughts and feelings with a professional, such as a teacher, as there's no fear of upsetting anybody close to them.

This toolkit is to help teachers and other professionals to support children who have a parent in prison. It'll give you some guidance about how to approach and talk about parental imprisonment with children, and give you some practical dos and don'ts.



There are no official records of prisoners' children kept by the courts, but it is estimated that around 200,000 children in England and Wales are impacted by parental imprisonment.

# How does it feel to have a parent in prison?

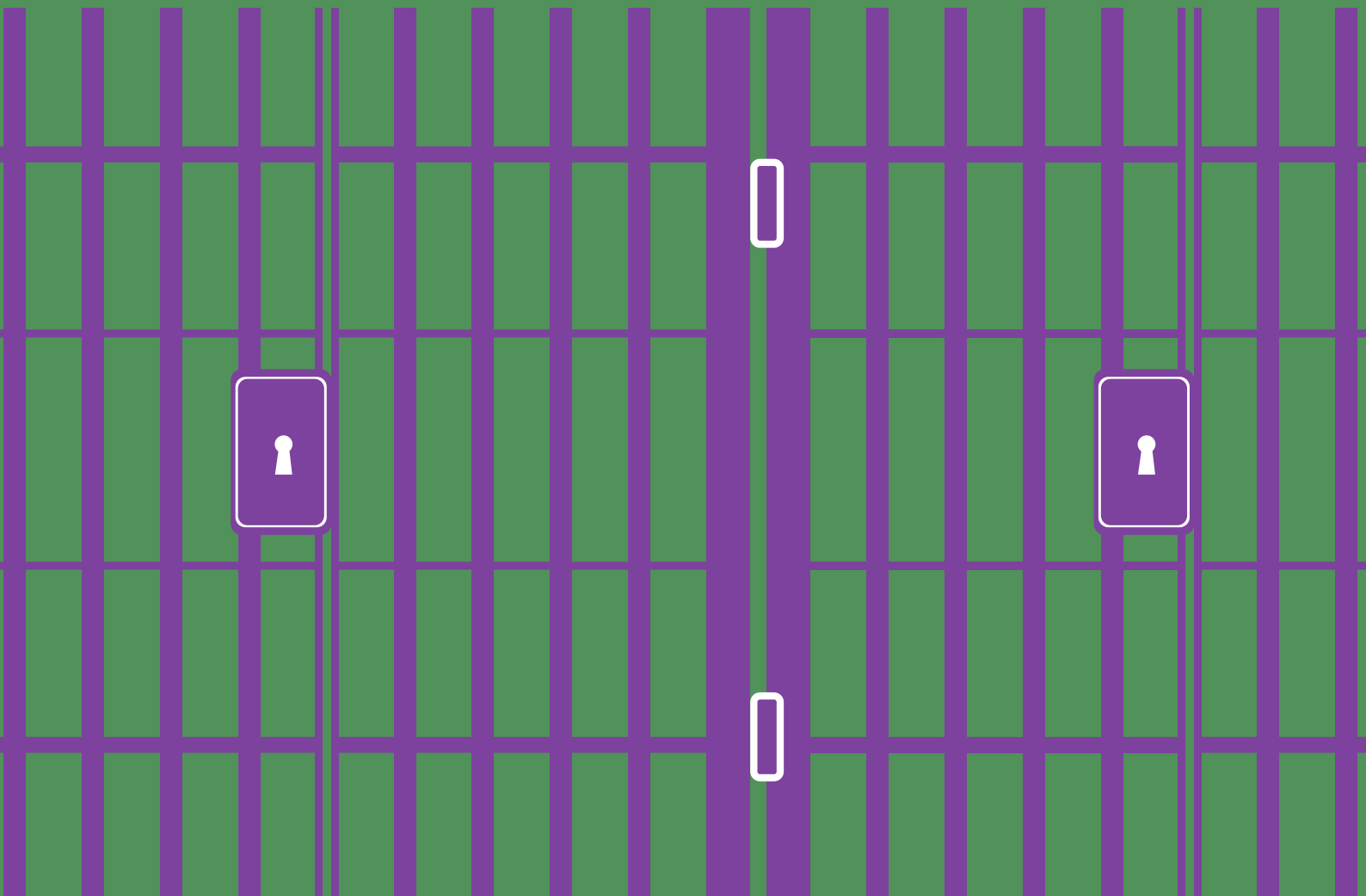
Some children can feel afraid of telling their teachers about family imprisonment, in case *they* are judged by their family members' crime. There is still a huge stigma around the subject, and this can lead to families feeling reluctant to reveal their situation to professionals.

This fear of being judged can leave children unable to discuss their situation, leaving them feeling:

- lonely
- embarrassed about their family
- confused
- sad
- ashamed
- angry

Children affected by parental imprisonment are less likely to reach their full potential at school and twice as likely to experience mental health difficulties and behavioural problems (Barnardo's, 2017).

It's really important to remember that these negative impacts don't only affect those children who have had a positive relationship with their parent before their parent was sent to prison. Research has shown that children still experience negative emotions and feelings of loss when the imprisoned parent has had an inconsistent involvement in their life.\*



\*(Condry, Kotova, & Minson, 2016)

# Key facts and figures



**50% of male prisoners  
have children under 18.**

**65% of boys with an  
offending father will go on  
to be offenders themselves.**

Children of prisoners participated in research conducted by the University of Cambridge, where they voiced feelings around their father's imprisonment. They shared feelings of anger, sadness, confusion and anxiety.

This research also highlighted the importance of regular contact (providing it is safe for this to happen) between the imprisoned parent and their family.

**33% of female prisoners  
are single parents.**

**66% of female prisoners  
have children under 18.**



By considering the characteristics of female prisoners, we're able to gain an understanding of children's lives before their mum was sent to prison.

46% of females in prison report having experienced domestic abuse prior to their conviction.

53% of females in prison reported suffering sexual, emotional or physical abuse as children, with 25% having been looked-after children.

The female prison population is five times' more likely than the general female population to experience mental health distress and 41% have attempted to commit suicide at some point in their life.

It's crucial that we don't just view imprisonment as a contained issue in a child's life. We need to consider the possibility that children may have experienced a troubled childhood even before their parent, and in some cases both parents, were imprisoned.

# What's it like to visit a parent in prison?

During 2013, in England and Wales, 506,694 children visited a parent or relative in prison\*.

For many children, the chance to visit their parent in prison and spend some quality time with them face-to-face is welcomed.

Studies have found that consistent contact with an imprisoned parent is vital for the maintenance of a child's resilience and preservation of their emotional wellbeing.

Here we'll give you an insight into what a prison visit's like for a child, which will hopefully help you to support children who maybe anxious about their first visit to a prison.

## Getting to the prison

For some children, the journey to the prison can be very long and tedious. Some families have to travel hundreds of miles for a visit.

\*(Barnardo's, 2014)



# Arriving at the prison

Prisons require visitors to arrive at the visitors' centre at least an hour before the visit begins, to process identification and book visitors in. The first time a child visits a prison, they have their photograph taken and children over the age of 10 have their fingerprints taken. Children over the age of 10 will then place their finger on the scanner each time they visit. Some prisons give a stamp on the back of the hand too.

## The search

All visitors to the prison get searched by the prison staff. They will usually try to make the search fun for children. They will pat people down and sometimes ask people to open their mouths or take off their shoes just to make sure they're not bringing anything into the prison that they shouldn't. This is just to keep everyone safe. There's usually a sniffer dog at the search too. These dogs are very friendly and never bark at anybody.

## Prison staff

Prison can feel a bit frightening for a child, with lots of locked doors and a lot of people in uniforms, but the prison staff are all there to help and are friendly.

# Noisy visit halls

Visit halls, where children will meet their parent, can get very busy. With a lot of people visiting their loved ones at once, it can get quite noisy!

# Play areas

Some prisons may have play areas inside the visit hall so children can spend some time at the table with their parent or relative and then go into the play area if they want to. Some prisons have family workers to play with in the play area and some visitors centres have toys and books for children to use while they are waiting to go to the visit hall.

# Family days

Many prisons offer family days. Family day visits are usually two hours long instead of one. They give the family a chance to spend quality time together playing games, doing activities, and having lunch - which helps to give a sense of normality. The prisoner can get up from the table and walk around the hall with their children, which would not be allowed at a normal visit. This time helps children to maintain their relationships with parents and loved ones in prison.

# Saying goodbye

Most prison visits are only one hour long and this time can go by very quickly. It can be upsetting saying goodbye at the end of the visit. It can be helpful for children to know when they will see their parent or relative again, or when they are likely to receive a phone call or letter.



## After the visit

Many children feel quite tired and stressed after a visit. This can be particularly difficult if they then have a long journey back home. Children can feel sad about leaving their parent or relative behind. They may need the adult accompanying them to give them time to talk about the visit and their feelings.

Some children can be upset following a visit, but this is a perfectly healthy way of expressing feelings!

# How can teachers support children before a visit?

You can offer support by asking how the child is feeling. Speak to the child in a private space, as they may not want other staff or children to know about their situation. Ask if they are excited about the visit. Is there anything they are worried about? Asking normal questions in a natural way will help to put the child at ease and help them to feel comfortable talking about their situation.

You could ask things like: do you have to travel far to the prison? Do you go in the car or on a bus or a train? Are there toys or games at the prison? Do you have anything nice to eat there?

# How can you support children after a visit?

Take an interest in how the visit went and don't shy away from the issue - this will only reinforce the shame some children feel about their parent's imprisonment. Ask how the child is. What went well and what did they enjoy about the visit? What parts of the visit didn't go so well or weren't particularly enjoyable?

You could also ask what the child thinks would make the experience better. This could give you an insight into what the child finds most difficult about visiting the prison.

# Dos and don'ts



Do ask how the child is and ask if there's anything you can do for them.



Don't ask the child what crimes their parent or loved one committed to be imprisoned.



Do ask if the child is excited about visiting their parent or loved one in prison. Be natural and ask normal questions! Have you missed them? Do you write to each other in between visits? What do you like about visiting?



Don't ask questions or discuss the imprisonment in front of the child's peers.



Do ask the child how they are after visiting the prison. Ask what went well and what didn't.



Don't discuss the imprisonment with other members of staff unless they need to know. Ensure that the family's confidentiality is respected.



Do take an interest in the child's situation. This will help the child feel less anxious about being judged.



Don't shy away from the issue if the child or a family member approaches you. This can reinforce the feelings of shame and could make the child or family member less likely to engage.



Do discuss the imprisonment with the child in a private space as they may not want other children or staff to know their situation.



Don't make the child feel different. Treat them as you did before you knew their parent was in prison - but be available to support them however they may need you to.

# Useful contacts

These organisations can provide further advice and support about how to support children with a parent in prison.

## PSS

0151 702 5556

[familyimpact@pss.org.uk](mailto:familyimpact@pss.org.uk)

## PACT

0808 808 3444

## Offenders' Families Helpline

0808 808 2003

## Family Lives

0808 200 2222