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Original Citation

Lockwood, Kelly and Raikes, Ben (2015) A difficult disclosure : the dilemmas faced by families affected by parental imprisonment regarding what information to share. In: *Experiencing imprisonment:: Research on the experience of living and working in carceral institutions*. Routledge, London, UK. ISBN 9781138790469

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13. A difficult disclosure : the dilemmas faced by families affected by parental imprisonment regarding what information to share

Kelly Lockwood and Ben Raikes

Introduction

Being or having a parent in prison typically brings about negative consequences for both the imprisoned parent and their children, including a sense of loss, fear, shame, anger, insecurity and embarrassment (Almund and Myers 2003; Lockwood 2013). With restricted choices and parenting opportunities, imprisoned parents and their families have to negotiate the boundaries between the inside and outside world when faced with the decision of what and how much to tell their children about their situation (Almund and Myers 2003).

Those working with families of prisoners advocate honesty in relation to parental imprisonment suggesting that it is important for children to be able to work through and make sense of their separation as a failure to do so may result in greater distress (Epstein 1985; Boss 1999 & 2009). Yet, owing to the associated shame and stigma many families choose to conceal imprisonment from their children, constructing elaborate and partial stories to account for their absence often resulting in what Boss (1999:2009) terms “ambiguous loss”. We know little of the familial stories that serve to disclose or conceal parental imprisonment and the opportunities and challenges that these stories present. This chapter brings together four different research projects, including a pan European study, relating to imprisoned parents and their children based in England and Wales, in which both authors were involved. This chapter will explore stories of disclosure and non-disclosure and will consider the impact of those stories and how and if they help or impede families’ ability to cope with and make sense of parental imprisonment.

Parents in prison and their children

Despite an increase in the prison population in England and Wales over the last three decades and consequent increase in the number of families disrupted through imprisonment (Prison Reform Trust 2012), the parental status of prisoners is not regularly or systematically collated. It is therefore difficult to ascertain how many parents are serving a prison sentence. Reported estimates suggest that around 32 per cent of the male prison population of England and Wales are the father to a dependent child under the age of 18 years (Clarke 2005). Whilst a 1997 census of all women in prison in England and Wales indicates that 61 per cent of women prisoners had dependent children prior to sentence (Caddle and Crisp 1997).

As with imprisoned parents, statistics relating to the children of prisoners are not routinely collated and there is no statutory body specifically responsible for systematically coordinating and evaluating their needs (Brooks-Gordon and Bainham 2004; HM Inspectorate of Prisons 2005; Prison Reform Trust 2006; Murray 2007; Sheehan and Flynn 2007; Jones and Wainaina-Wozna 2013). Estimates indicate that between 125,000 and 200,000 children a year are affected by parental imprisonment in England and Wales (Jones and Wainaina-Wozna 2013) with over 17,000 of those affected by maternal imprisonment (PACT 2011; Prison Reform Trust 2012). The Prison Reform Trust (2012) highlight that the number of children affected by having a parent in prison is higher than the number impacted by parental divorce, three times greater than the number of children in care, and five times higher than the number of children on the Child Protection Register.

Research suggests that children can experience the separation from their parent through imprisonment as a bereavement, but one which rarely generates the same level of

understanding as the death of a parent (Robertson 2007), often resulting in low levels of social support (Almund and Myers 2003). Equally, some commentators suggest that children find it harder to adjust to being separated from their parent through imprisonment than by divorce or death (Murray and Farrington 2005). The separation may remain ambiguous; children may not know the reasons behind their separation or when or even if they will see their parent again. Boss (1999; 2009) suggests that such indeterminate loss can be devastating. Children with parents in prison may experience a range of difficulties including mental health and behavioural problems, anxiety, anger, confusion and depression (Murray and Farrington 2005; Shami and Kockhal 2008; Turliuc et al 2012; Jones and Wainaina-Wozna 2013), reduced income, changes to home and school locations, diminished social support (Action for Prisoners 2003; Glover 2009) and separation from their siblings as their familiar family unit is broken up (Howard League 2012).

Jones and Wainaina-Wozna (2013) acknowledge that both imprisoned mothers and fathers are missed equally by their children. However, whilst it is important not to underestimate the impact of having a father in prison, the children of mothers in prison are often considered to be one of the highest risk groups of children in our society (Myers et al 1999). The children of mothers in prison often have less stable care arrangements, with an average of four carers throughout their mothers' sentence; whilst 90 per cent of the children with a father in prison are cared for by their mothers, only 9 per cent of children with a mother in prison are cared for by their fathers, with only 5 per cent able to remain in their own homes (Caddle and Crisp 1997; Corston 2007). Myers et al (1999) found that children of women in prison can be particularly susceptible to negative outcomes as their mother is likely be their main and only parental figure. For all these reasons Baroness Corston (2007:2) observed that the impact upon children of imprisoning their mothers “was nothing short of catastrophic”.

Organisations working with families of prisoners suggest that the impact of parental imprisonment can be mitigated by children being provided with open and honest explanations (Manby et al. 2014). However, owing to perceived stigma and shame, imprisonment is often concealed. Almund and Myers et al (2003:203) suggest that “incarceration may constitute a problem that is likely to elicit negative social sanctions from other people” and “when there is a stigma attached to a stressor or problem, people are less likely to disclose it”. The difficult issue of disclosure has to be addressed in any situation affecting a family where there is potential stigma. Jones (2009) notes the great lengths Caribbean mothers with HIV went to in order to conceal their diagnosis from their families and communities. Saunders (2003) also discusses the dilemmas faced by parents in deciding when to inform their child regarding their HIV/AIDS status. Saunders (2003) considers that disclosure is a process rather than a one off event and should be age appropriate based on their developmental stage. Reid and Walker (2003) also discuss secrecy in this context. They define secrecy as “a selective denial of uncomfortable truths” (2003:85), and go on to observe that secrecy has the effect of setting up and maintaining an unequal power imbalance in relationships.

There is a consensus amongst organisations supporting families affected by imprisonment that parents should provide children with an age appropriate truthful explanation about what has happened to the imprisoned parent (Manby et al. 2014) in order to “get things out in the open as soon as possible” (Families Outside 2012:5). Organisations advise that most children will accept the explanation that the Court has decided to send their parent to prison because they have done something wrong, particularly as children will often “know and understand more than they realise” (Families Outside 2012:5). The importance of children being able to trust that they have been told the truth is emphasised. Non disclosures are considered

hazardous as children may find out about their parent's imprisonment through other means, for example the internet or playground gossip (Almund and Myers 2003; Families Outside 2012).

Despite such advice many parents decide not to tell their children the truth about their imprisonment. The motivation for such secrecy can be to avoid the real or perceived social stigma associated with such a disclosure (Almund and Myers 2003). Family members are often well positioned to judge the child's ability to cope with such a disclosure and the unintended consequences such as being teased or tormented at school or in the community (Almund and Myers 2003). Manby et al. (2014) suggest that families in this situation will often come up with an agreed approach with regard to what they disclose about the imprisoned parent to the wider world. This will be on a continuum between total secrecy and total openness. Some families may maintain the secret of imprisonment in order to protect the child. However, as noted by Almud and Myers (2003:230) this "secrecy may establish a foundation on which isolation, shame, and loneliness are built". They go on to suggest that "children and adults alike fare better when they are embedded in an effective social network of people who are willing and able to offer support" and that "social support is positively related to self-esteem, school performance, health and emotional well-being". Where there is a lack of social support children may experience adjustment problems, aggressive behaviour, depression and school problems.

Method

Listening to the stories of imprisoned parents and their children

The aim of this study was to explore the stories of parents in prison and their children in relation to the disclosure or non-disclosure of parental imprisonment and how such stories

help or impede families to cope with and make sense of imprisonment. To achieve this we analysed existing empirical data from four different studies in which one or both authors were involved: a European Commission funded project, COPING (Children of Prisoners Interventions and Mitigations to Strengthen Mental Healthⁱ) which explored the impact of parental imprisonment upon children in the UK, Germany, Sweden and Romania, in which one of the authors was part of the research team; the ESRC funded doctoral research of one of the authors, exploring the narratives of mothers in two UK prisons; an evaluation of an overnight visiting facility at an open women's prison in England, conducted by both authors; and in addition to this, information has been drawn from a small scale pilot evaluation of the role grandparents play in caring for children of prisoners, comparing the UK, Uganda, Romania and Trinidad, in which both researchers were involved.

Adopting a narrative methodology this chapter draws on the assumption that “it is through narrativity that we come to know understand and make sense of the social world” (Somers 1994:606). Imprisonment calls for stories; in the immediacy and aftermath of an offence or sentence, stories are demanded. These stories are constructed at an individual, professional, organisational and societal level. Whilst many of these stories become available to us through the media, we know little of the private and intimate stories that are told within familial situations between the families impacted by imprisonment, the parent and their child, and the child and their outside world.

For this chapter we analysed the original transcripts of each study, choosing those that made reference to the issue of disclosure. Adopting a narrative approach we sought to combine and compare the qualitative studies. Data was originally pooled in narrative form under the heading of ‘disclosure’ or ‘non-disclosure’. The narratives were then examined to identify key

themes relating to disclosure.

***INSERT TABLE 13.1 NEAR HERE ***

Many existing studies exploring the impact of parental imprisonment tend to concentrate on the impact of a father in prison, with explorations of maternal imprisonment scarce (Myers et al 1999). Therefore, to address the imbalance in existing research we have placed emphasis on what we have learned from listening to the stories of both fathers and mothers in prison. Equally, available research rarely incorporates interviews with children (Murray and Farrington 2005). Drawing on data from the COPING Project and the evaluation of the overnight contact facility, both projects that placed an emphasis on hearing directly from children, we have also sought to highlight the views of children with a parent in prison.

Secrets and families ties

Both disclosures and non-disclosures of imprisonment were constructed as “in the best interests of the child’. Many participants suggested that “honesty was the best policy” and told stories of how they had been open about their circumstances with their children from the start. Owing to the associated shame, guilt and stigma (Boudin 1998) of being a parent in prison, some parents aimed to conceal their imprisonment from their children, constructing elaborate tales to account for their absence. However, more often, partial disclosures were told of, offering both parents and their children a story to live with and to live by. However, this sometimes caused further anxiety, fear and uncertainty for both parents and their children as partial disclosures often led to increased ambiguity. Parents also often told of reduced autonomy over disclosure; the age of the child, the child's access to information from other sources, including social media and friends and family members, often forced a disclosure.

When imprisonment could not be concealed parents tended to take ownership of the disclosure, framing it as responsible parenting.

Secrecy in the best interests of the child: fear, guilt, shame and stigma

In concealing imprisonment elaborate stories were often constructed. This was highlighted by Lisa as she told of the explanation provided to her young daughter in relation to her and her partner's absence after their imprisonment:

when I first came to prison my mum told her that her dad was making chairs for the Queen and I was making tables for the Queen.

For others the constructed stories drew on past events to create a more plausible story to live with in the present. Having previous long periods of hospitalisation owing to her mental health, Rose's children were told she was in hospital to account for her absence. Drawing on anticipated 'caring' roles associated with respectful womanhood (McRobbie 2002) Louise told her children she was away "looking after a friend". Similarly, Kelsey told of how she explained her mother's absence to her young brother, suggesting "I just continue saying that she's working or studying".

Non disclosures were multifaceted but were largely constructed as in "the best interests of the child". The primary motive for non-disclosure was often to protect the child[ren] from the anticipated consequences of revealing such information. Imprisoned mothers whose children were cared for by their grandparents during their sentence who participated in a focus group agreed that one of their key worries around disclosure was their children being concerned about their mother's safety whilst they were in prison. This was largely owing to the often

violent depictions of prison life in TV drama and film. To protect her child from these fears Donna explained how she told her children that Prison Officers were teachers who were there to help her. For others the rationale behind non-disclosure was to avoid the real or perceived social stigma that may follow such disclosure. This was highlighted by Fi who was worried about the potential social ramifications for her daughter of having a mother in prison:

that always worries me, the stereotyping, you know..., “oh Mum and Dad’s been in prison, what do you expect from that child”..., and if parents say “oh I don’t want my little girl playing with her because her parents have been in prison”.

The perception of such stigma was also acutely expressed by Andrew, a father interviewed for the COPING project. Andrew suggested; “as soon as you mention the word ‘prison’ everybody looks down on you and points a finger at you”. As noted by Almund and Myers et al. (2003) imprisonment typically evokes social stigma; therefore, to protect their children from the perceived scrutiny of others some parents told how they chose not to disclose their imprisonment to their children.

For others an acute sense of guilt, shame and fear of losing their children prevented disclosure. This was bluntly expressed by Pete who told of the reasons why he did not disclose he might go to prison:

I was drug dealing. You can’t say to your kids, “look I am selling drugs so there is a possibility that I could be going to jail”.

For Pete the perceived stigma attached to his particular offence and his children's response to it, was his greatest barrier to disclosure. Therefore, whilst non-disclosure may function to provide “a relative veneer of safety from others’ scrutiny” (Montgomery et al 2006:24), Pete's quote illustrates non disclosures can also often serve to protect the imprisoned parent from the scrutiny of their children and the fear of losing their children's trust and respect.

Non-disclosures were also often accompanied with a persistent fear of disclosure by others. This is illustrated by Lauren who expressed concern about her son finding out about her imprisonment by others:

it makes me feel funny, I still think is somebody going to slip up to him one day and say “oh you were born in prison”.

Parents who told of non-disclosures therefore also often told of existing in a state of continued fear and anxiety. This is echoed in the work of Jones (2009) exploring the stories of mothers with HIV. Jones (2009) notes that for these mothers, living with a continuous fear of disclosure often contributed to psychological trauma and other conditions, including depression, guilt and anxiety. For parents in prison, the raised anxieties of an enforced disclosure during and beyond sentence can impact on the adjustment to prison life, rehabilitation, release and reunification.

The impact of secrecy: young people's perspectives

In concealing imprisonment, parents lay claim to their identity as good parents, suggesting that they are protecting their children. However, in doing so both parent and child are often

prevented from confronting and processing the impact and consequences of their situation.

Almund and Myers (2003:229) suggest that children need to be able to communicate their feelings and thoughts about their parent's imprisonment "because a failure to do so can result in greater distress".

Whilst secrecy was often constructed as in the best interests of the child, the negative impact of secrecy upon the child was acutely described by Katie. Katie was nineteen years old when she was interviewed for the evaluation of the overnight stay facility. Her mother was serving a Life sentence and owing to imprisonment they had been separated for twelve years. Katie was told many different stories to account for her mother's absence:

"she's gone away,... trying to be an Air Stewardess", ... I'd get mixed things from different people, like some would say "oh she's off working away", some would say "she's been a bit naughty she's had to go away for a bit", just silly little things at that age I'd believe. And every Christmas they'd be like "oh yes maybe she'll be home this Christmas" and she never came, so I just kind of blocked it out.

As noted by Almund and Myers (2003) the non disclosure had established an unequal power relation in which Katie was denied access to information. Katie went on to describe how as a young child she could never understand why her mother could not come back home with her after prison visits, illustrating the hazards for children of not being given an adequate explanation:

I remember being really upset because I didn't understand what was going

on and why I was being taken away from her after like an hour or two, and I didn't understand ... every time I used to see her I used to think "well she's coming back now" and she never did. I wouldn't want to let go of her hand and sometimes the guard would just be like "you're going to have to go now", and it just broke my heart.

The stories told to Katie appeared inadequate for her to live with or by. Katie was left without a narrative to frame her story and therefore remained anxious, uncertain and questioning. Boss (1999:5) suggests that when there is ambiguity around a "loss" the impact can be devastating and tormenting "because it remains unclear and indeterminate". If children are not given proper explanations about the whereabouts of imprisoned family members they are likely to feel insecure regarding the strength of their family network and its ability to support them (Bocknek et al. 2008).

Swedish young people with a parent in prison who participated in the COPING Project were invited to present their priorities for policy makers. They framed their presentation around the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, arguing that Article 17, Access to Information (United Nations Human Rights 2015), often did not apply to them. They suggested that workers could be trained to support and advise parents in relation to the difficult task of informing children about parental imprisonment. They wanted to ensure that all children received age appropriate information and took a robust approach to this. They suggested that if parents still refused to give the information after they received this support, then the adviser should be empowered to give the information to the children, even against the wishes of their parents. This is an indicator of how important the issue of disclosure is to children with parents in prison.

Co-constructed stories: a story to live with

Even when a disclosure had not explicitly been made, children often knew more than their parents believed them to, or there was an unspoken understanding. Mark, a father interviewed during the COPING Project illustrated this with reference to his younger sister:

My little sister, she was only 8 when she come to see me in jail, and my dad said “Oh we will go and see Mark, he is working away” and she went “Dad, I am not stupid, I can read”.

Concealing imprisonment from children often requires a co-constructed narrative by the parents and those around them to maintain the secret (Lockwood 2013). Co-narrators often included family members, prison staff and occasionally the children themselves. Kelsey explained how both she and her mother worked “so hard to make it seem like she’s not there [in prison]” and how prison officers colluded with this narrative by working to cover up their uniforms on visits. Yet, Kelsey went on to tell how prison logos would still be visible around the building and this would “ruin it” as her brother recognised the logos and what they represented from television, and suggested “he’s not stupid”.

Fi also explained “we’ve never actually said the word ‘prison’”....but later went on to suggest “I think they probably know”. Similarly, Rose suggested “I do believe [son] knows where I am, but I think he chooses just to play along with ‘I’m in hospital’”. Whilst such stories serve a specific function and provide a story for each family to live with, the remaining uncertainty often led to ongoing anxiety and fear for both parent and children. Both imprisoned parents

and their children can experience the separation as a loss or bereavement. However, when non or partial disclosures are made uncertainty surrounds the separation. Ambiguity in loss (Boss 1999) causes confusion and distress which needs to be resolved to minimise the pain. In living with ambiguous stories, imprisoned parents told of being unable to talk honestly with their children about their situation which impeded their ability to support them through the separation. Fi recalled how her daughter:

will sometimes say, “you remember when you went away and we didn’t see you Mummy for ages”..., she’ll say “remember when you didn’t speak to us for a time” and I think “I’ve got to tell her that it wasn’t that I didn’t want to speak to her, I couldn’t”.

In not disclosing the circumstances of their absence, parents and carers were unable to talk with their children openly about the situation and answer their questions. This often left both carer and imprisoned parent with a constant sense of anxiety in relation to how they were coping with the absence. Uncertainty over their children's well-being has often been highlighted as impeding women's adjustment to prison and negatively impacting upon their own health and well-being throughout their sentence (Loper and Tuerk 2006; Enos 2002; Lockwood 2013). Therefore, facilitating better ways for parents in prison to communicate with their children throughout their sentence could serve to ease anxieties for parent and their children both during and beyond imprisonment. The provision of overnight contact allows for much more natural communication between imprisoned parent and child than is possible during the usual prison visits which lack privacy (Raikes and Lockwood 2011).

Honesty as the best policy: doing good parenting

Stories of disclosure were often constructed as responsible parenting and in the best interests of the child. Being 'truthful' with their children was central to being a good parent. For Lisa it was important that her daughter knew the truth about her imprisonment and her sentence served as a stark lesson about the consequences of addiction:

I'm glad that she's seeing what drugs have done to me, bringing me in and out of prison, ...it scares me, but she knows different, when she's with her friends now, she has told her best friends "my mum's in prison cos she had a drug addiction" ..., I mean she's only twelve years of age but she's been really grown up about it.

Being open and honest with her daughter, Lisa was able to construct a narrative of recovery, repair and personal growth, suggesting; "the good thing is [her] Mummy will be clean when she comes out, so really it done her good, and it has, cos if I hadn't of come to jail, I'd of probably been dead". In adopting this narrative, Lisa is able to construct a story for both herself and her daughter to live with that reinterprets the negative associations with imprisonment and resists other potentially demonising identities (Lockwood 2013).

Tom believed being honest was the "best decision we ever made". Tom contrasted this with another parent who had decided not to disclose their imprisonment to their child, describing how this lack of information impeded their child's ability to respond to other children at school that lasted beyond the parent's release from prison with comments being made such as:

"Your dad was in prison wasn't he" and they would go "no, no he wasn't, who told you that?" and they would go "Yeah they are, my mum said your

Dad's this and your Dad's that" whereas I think mine, after we told them, I think they did get questioned at school and they said "Yes, he is, he did something naughty so that's where the judge puts you", which is true. And then... the kids can't say anything back to them.

Many parents who were interviewed for the COPING Project felt strongly that honesty was the best way forward. Chris, a father caring for children while their mother was in prison captured this viewpoint:

Just be truthful with the children. Tell them how it was; what could happen; how it can be; and just be straight down the line with them. It's the only way.

He went on to warn of the consequences of not being truthful:

A few women chose not to tell their children where they are...to me that is something that could come and bite them on the bottom when they get home. The kids could look at them and say "Well, why have you have lied to me?".

Even when secrecy around imprisonment was maintained honesty was held in high regard. Rose's children were told she was in hospital, however, Rose maintained: "I think if he was to ask me I would tell him the truth, I don't want him to think that I lie to him".

Honesty in preparing children for the worst has often been identified as a significant strategy in doing good parenting (Elmberger et al. 2005). In preparing for the worst, disclosures of potential imprisonment were sometimes made prior to sentence. Matthew who was

interviewed for the COPING project was aware that he would be sent to prison as soon as he was arrested. He told of how he made use of his time on bail to go into his daughters' school and to talk to the teachers. Matthew suggested the teachers had thanked him for being so proactive and had reassured him they would keep an eye out for any signs of the impact of his prison sentence on his daughters. He went on to tell of how the Head teacher had arranged to send school reports into the prison for him to read and that this approach yielded great benefits for both him and his children. In telling his story of being open and honest Matthew is able to illustrate his ability to continue participating in good parenting despite his impending prison sentence.

Celia also told of how she had tried to prepare her son for her imminent imprisonment:

I had told my son by now what was happening, so I says to him "Mummy's going to Court, if she comes to collect you that means every thing's alright, you're going home but if you see [Uncle] coming to collect you that means Mummy's not coming home for now", and I'll never forget, I took him to school and I remember dropping him off there, "bye baby" hugging and kissing him in tears.

Both Celia and Matthew constructed their time on bail as imperative in their ability to prepare their children for the worst and put structures in place to support their children in their absence. By contrast some participants told of disclosures of parental imprisonment or the possibility of it that were poorly managed. Becky told COPING researchers that she only heard about her father's impending imprisonment when he was drunk and blurted it out by mistake. Other children who had not been told about the possibility of their parent going to

prison had a shock when the reality of their parent's absence hit them. Owing to her belief that she would not be sentenced to prison Louise had not prepared her children for the possibility. Louise recalled: "I took [daughter] to school, I was like, 'I'll see you later'... she didn't know till she came here and visited me". Similarly, Connor commented: "My dad was at home and I went to school, I came home and my dad wasn't there". Connor's mother suggested that his poor behaviour at school following his father's imprisonment may have been connected to the abrupt nature of the disclosure, and the consequent lack of trust Connor had in his parents.

Age appropriate disclosures

Even when honesty was considered to be the best policy, the age of the child was considered to be a significant factor in disclosure. This was expressed by Craig, a father interviewed for the COPING Project who suggested decisions around what to disclose should be based on the child's age:

Once you get to a certain age there is no lying to the kid and I think if you lie to them, then it makes things worse.

Similar sentiments were echoed by Robert: "Obviously, as the children get older they have got to know, you have got to explain to them" and Celia: "you know how much you can tell them and how much you can't tell them". This approach was also expressed by a Liam, a teenager interviewed for the COPING Project. Liam suggested that children should be given an outline when they are younger that is filled in with increasing amounts of information as they get older.

Chris drew the distinction between how he approached the issue with his children depending on their age:

Well luckily with me my eldest son, he knows what it's all about and by the time I get out my youngest are still going to be that young they are not going to really know.

Even when honesty was prioritised this often remained problematic with such stories regularly framed by a narrative of guilt and shame. For Richard, the thought of being honest with his daughter raised painful feelings:

In later life if they ask, then yes, I will tell them, but it's not something that I am proud of myself. I don't want to say to my child "Well when you took your first steps I was in jail" because that hurts me that. To get a picture of my daughter taking her first steps and I am not there watching her, that hurts, so you don't really want to drag it back up.

This was also noted by Lauren:

At the end of the day when he does get old enough to realise I will tell him and I will tell him the experience that I've been through with doing what I did and, just that little mistake, it has made me pay so big.

Whilst age appropriate disclosures are often advocated by imprisoned parents, carers and professionals, an 'age appropriate' narrative was often adopted to continue to avoid disclosure.

Kelsey told of how the decision had been made not to tell her younger brother of their mother's imprisonment as "he's not really going to understand that". Kelsey went on to tell of how her and her mother would "explain that when he's a bit older". Similarly, Fi suggested that she wanted to be honest with her daughter but did not feel confident in her ability to assess an appropriate age to disclose: "I'm just not sure what age to start that, to say to them..., when do you say that, you know, it's a difficult one isn't it". Whilst many imprisoned parents suggested that they felt able to assess when and how much to disclose to their children, others such as Fi remained uncertain which served to threaten their confidence in their own parenting (Raikes and Lockwood 2011).

Restricted autonomy over disclosure

Parents in prison often told of restricted autonomy over disclosure. Fear of disclosure from other sources such as media and peers often forced a disclosure. For some the fear of others making the disclosure was too much to bear, as told by Penny who suggested: "I couldn't have handled it if she'd have heard it from somebody else and then I think that would have been worse for her". When imprisonment could not be concealed parents tended to take ownership of the disclosure, framing it as responsible parenting. Penny knew her daughter had access to the internet and could use it to find information relating to her offence and imprisonment. Therefore, Penny had limited control in the disclosure, yet framed this positively suggesting it facilitated her ability to provide ongoing emotional support:

I've been very open ...I thought that was the best thing for her and in light of things it was the best thing for her because it did go in the papers and school, people at school knew, so she was fully prepared and fully

supported.

For some imprisoned parents, appreciation of the effort and continued commitment of their children's carers led them to be tentative in their role, lacking confidence to assert themselves as parents, as identified by Rose who suggested:

it wasn't really my decision to tell him at that time, I suppose, or it wasn't really fair on me to tell him, for everyone else to be asked the questions.

For others such as Clare, the decision was taken from them to disclose by other family members, who used the power of disclosure to punish the imprisoned parent:

She [daughter] was coming up with the social worker one time and she actually turned round and said "is it why mi Mammy doesn't love me and she's in prison for hurting someone and she doesn't want to be with me" ...I'm like "the only way she could possibly think that is through her Dad", bearing in mind she's only like three and a half.

Manby et al. (2014) highlight the importance of the non-imprisoned parent maintaining a positive view of the imprisoned parent in order to promote their children's resilience. Both Clare and Rose indicated feeling powerless in relation to the disclosure of their imprisonment. Exploring the meaning of decisions over residency of mothers living apart from their children, both Kielty (2008) and Bemiller (2010) found that women's stories often shifted between acceptance and resistance dependent upon their agency in the decisions made. As with Penny, if imprisoned parents can take ownership of the disclosure they may be more able

to construct a story with which they can live. As Manby et al. (2014) observed above, it is beneficial for families to put time into agreeing a collective approach to disclosure.

Conclusion

This chapter has illustrated the different stories told by parents and their children to account for parental imprisonment and the way in which these stories serve to impede or enhance families' ability to cope with imprisonment. Families themselves are often best placed to judge how much information to share with their children. The consensus from organisations working with prisoners and their families is to be as honest as possible with children.

However, the stories of parents in prison explored within this chapter indicate that this is easier said than done. Parents in prison often fear the consequences of a disclosure; fear of the social consequences for their child if stigmatising information leaked out into the wider world; and often with an acute sense of shame, parents also feared rejection from their children if a full disclosure was made. Despite this, both imprisoned parents and their children told of the negative impact of non-disclosures. Parents told of existing in a constant state of anxiety with a continuous fear of disclosure from others. Similarly children of prisoners spoke of living with ambiguous loss and a constant sense of fear and uncertainty. Whilst age appropriate disclosures are advocated by organisations working with prisoners and their families, imprisoned parents often described a sense of concern and a lack of confidence in their own ability to assess what was appropriate for the age of their child. Young people who participated in COPING advocated children being provided with an outline which gets filled in as children get older. Likewise, Swedish young people who participated in the COPING project suggested that parents may need advice and assistance to navigate this very challenging subject. When parents are in shock in the aftermath of a prison sentence they have little mental space to consider how to break the news to their children.

Therefore unless more resources are made available to provide this support, many children with parents in prison may continue to be confused and upset by the partial, ambiguous and often untrue information they are given. If a parent is separated from their child by an illness such as cancer, professionals are often at hand to suggest ways of discussing the parent's medical condition with their children. Unfortunately the services available to provide that kind of support to families affected by imprisonment are few and far between. There are good sources of support and information available for families facing these issues, along with practice advice for professionals working with these families. However, there needs to be more awareness raising to ensure families gain access to information, support and guidance as when it is required.

Further recommended reading

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Endnotes

¹ Each of the studies was conducted by or in partnership with the University of Huddersfield. They were each carried out in compliance with strict ethical principles and duty of care to participants and they were all approved by the University research ethics committee.

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