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A Difficult Disclosure:

The dilemmas faced by families affected by
parental imprisonment regarding what information
to share ...

and how they '*reconcile their inside and outside
lives*' (Reeves, C. (Ed.) ,2016:229)

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- Data from four studies – large scale (COPING) and small scale
- Background context
- Honesty advocated by NGO's
- Stigma / shame means parents not always honest
- Quotes to illustrate consequences of disclosure and non disclosure

COPING Project

**(Children of Prisoners
Interventions and
Mitigations to Strengthen
Mental Health)**

Child Centred

**Emphasis on listening
directly to children**



childrenofprisoners.eu/the-coping-project



- 1 in every 100 child in Europe has a parent in prison
Children of Prisoners Europe (COPE)
childrenofprisoners.eu
- 7 % of European children will experience the imprisonment of a parent during the time they are at school

(Families Outside, Scotland)

www.familiesoutside.org.uk

Rise in prison populations leads to more children impacted by loss of their parents

More Severe Impact for Children with imprisoned mothers

- Women = 6% of UK prison population, approx. 65% have dependent children (Carlen and Worrall, 2004)
- Fewer female prisons – harder /further to visit – less open prisons – less open visits
- Only 5 % of children whose mothers are in prison remain in their own homes, 9% cared for by fathers = stress – by comparison -90% of children with father stay with mother (Caddle & Crisp, 1997)
- Fewer female prisoners = more unusual = more stigma for children of imprisoned mothers
- Impact on child of having an imprisoned mother is 'nothing short of catastrophic' (Corston, 2007:2)

Negative impacts of children with parents in prison

- 25% (UK) to 50% (Romania) more likely to suffer mental health problems than those without imprisoned parents (COPING Project)
- Impacts on academic achievement
- Can cause isolation and withdrawal from friends and wider family social networks
- Some studies suggest that children with parents in prison are more likely to become offenders themselves. Caution – can justify stereotyping. COPING Project encountered many children with parents in prison who were achieving well at school – determined not to follow their parent into crime.
- Key factors to mitigate adverse effects were positive contact with imprisoned parent through good prison visiting facilities and good support from selected school teachers

Stigma and Secrecy

- Children of prisoners experience the loss caused by the imprisonment of their parent as a “bereavement” but one that is unlikely to elicit empathy – a ‘disenfranchised grief’
- However it is a “bereavement” they cannot easily share with friends or teachers due to shame and guilt – fact of imprisonment is concealed
- NGOs advise to be honest in age appropriate way – easier said than done - dishonesty confuses child – ‘ambiguous loss’ (Bocknek et al.,2009)
- Often they are not told the truth about what has happened by their parents – only to find out through the media or taunts at school
- The more serious the offence – the more stigma and secrecy attached = more stress
- Secrecy ‘selective denial of uncomfortable truths’ (Reid and Walker, 2003: 85) – maintains unequal power imbalance
- No disclosure by children means no support – formal or informal

- Narrative approach adopted to understand consequences of children receiving or not receiving information about the imprisonment of their parent
- *‘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’* (Lockwood & Raikes in Reeves C. 2015:233).
- Stories about imprisonment often told in sensational way through media – rare for stories to be told from the point of view of families

- Whether disclosure or non disclosure chosen by families it was justified as being in the best interests of children
- Parents considered it protected them from consequences of disclosure – like negativity about them from teachers
- *‘as soon as you mention the word “prison”, everybody looks down on you and points a finger at you’ (Imprisoned father)*
- Secrets involved often far fetched cover stories:
e.g. ‘making tables and chairs for the Queen’
‘away looking after a friend’
- Parents described the constant fear of enforced disclosure – e.g. by the media

Consequences for children and young people of non disclosure

One 19 year old young woman whose mother had been in prison for 12 years when I interviewed her described some of the stories she had been told:

' she's gone away...trying to be an air stewardess...I'd get mixed things from different people...and every Christmas they'd be like "oh yes, she'll be home this Christmas" ... and she never came so I just kind of blocked it out'

She never understood why her mum could not come home with her after prison visits:

'I remember being really upset because I didn't understand what was going on and why I was being taken away from her after an hour or two...it just broke my heart'

- Some parents considered that by being honest they could make it less likely that their children would follow them into a life of crime
- One father considered being honest was the '*best decision we ever made*' as it allowed his children to respond to questions in the playground by saying: '*yes he is (in prison). He did something naughty so that's where the judge puts you*'
- Another mother thought by not being honest imprisoned parents were storing up problems for when they were released, creating a situation which as she put it '*could come and bite them on the bottom. The kids could look at them and say "well why have you lied to me?"*'
- Children can lose trust in other things adults tell them if they find out they have been lied to

- One young man whose father was in prison told researchers the best approach was to give young children an honest '*outline*' and to fill in the details as they got older
- Ideally preparing children for possibility of imprisonment was desirable to avoid the situation where child goes to school in morning and then the parent is suddenly not there when they return later that day
- Harder for parents to prepare children if remanded in custody – much easier if one bail awaiting sentence.
- Parents / carers need guidance regarding what to say and how to say it – easier said than done – NGOs provide guidance
- Swedish young people stress their UNCRC *right* to receive information

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