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IMPRISONED MOTHERS: 'OUT OF SIGHT, OUT OF MIND'. A MISSED OPPORTUNITY FOR REBUILDING MOTHER-CHILD RELATIONSHIPS

Ben Raikes

Senior Lecturer

Division of Criminal and Community Justice

University of Huddersfield

U.K

**Literature Review by Kelly Lockwood – PhD Student,
Centre for Applied Childhood Studies, University of
Huddersfield**

The author works as a Senior Lecturer within the Division of Criminal and Community Justice at Huddersfield University. He is also a member of the Centre for Applied Childhood Studies which is a research centre within the University. He has previously worked as a Probation Officer and as Project Manager at NCH Family Mediation, Children and Parents' Support Service. The project was a non statutory organisation operating in the Greater Manchester region in the North of England. In that role he was involved in setting up and managing the NCH Parenting Project at Styal women's prison, which is situated near Manchester. After moving to his current academic role in Jan 2007 he undertook an evaluation of the Styal prison Parenting Project. This paper is based on the findings that emerged from that evaluation.

Abstract

Introduction: All countries have female prisoners, many of whom are mothers. In most cases imprisonment leads to the separation of mothers from their children, which generally has harmful consequences. Moral judgements often mean that imprisoned mothers are not considered as a priority group for resources and thus services to support mother-child relationships during imprisonment are generally underdeveloped. This paper examines the barriers faced by imprisoned mothers when they try to make use of their time in custody to take steps towards rebuilding relationships with their children. The paper explores lessons learned from a project that operated at a Women's Prison in the North of England, providing both Positive Parenting Courses and Family Mediation. The literature suggests that few countries have addressed the impact on children when their mothers are imprisoned. The paper thus raises important questions for policy and practice internationally and is a significant contribution to knowledge in this area.

Method: Literature regarding the issues faced by imprisoned mothers is reviewed. Semi structured interviews were conducted with staff and prisoners involved in a Prison Parenting Project. A focus group was also facilitated with prisoners who had attended the Positive Parenting Course. Key policy and practice points were identified to inform the way social care agencies work with imprisoned mothers and their children.

Findings: Imprisoned mothers consistently reported that during their time in prison there was minimal acknowledgement of their role as parents. However they regarded stress and guilt arising from enforced separation from their children as the primary cause of suicide, self harm and violence towards staff and other prisoners. This view was confirmed by prison staff from all departments. Additionally, the literature indicates that children are often emotionally affected when separated from mothers who are imprisoned and that these effects may be significant and long-lasting.

Policy and practice Implications: It is clear that many imprisoned mothers want to use their time in custody to face up to the mistakes they have made in relation to parenting their children. This is a painful process which requires a considerable degree of self analysis, but with assistance from appropriate parenting support programmes mothers in prison can be empowered to take gradual steps towards focussing more

clearly on their children's needs. This has the potential to deliver great benefits to their children. Caribbean countries, like many other parts of the world, have increasing prison populations and an increasing number of children who are affected by the incarceration of their mothers. In a cultural context in which women have the primary responsibility for care giving, this paper raises important issues for consideration for rehabilitation policy and programming.

This paper commences with a review of the literature relating to imprisoned mothers to set the work that was undertaken at Styal prison in context. After sketching out the background to the project, the attributes of the women using the service are discussed, as are the different care arrangements that were in place for their children during their sentence. The Positive Parenting Courses are explored, starting with the themes that emerged from a focus group that was held in June 2008. The focus group was made up of imprisoned mothers who had undertaken the Course.

The original idea in relation to the mediation side of the Project within the prison is contrasted to the different, but equally valuable work that was carried out. Issues relating to Social Services in relation to the Project are explored. The different approaches of the mediation project are discussed, including letter writing, and the potential for the indirect mediation that took place to act as a catalyst to improve relations between imprisoned mothers and those providing care for their children during their sentence. The benefits of assisting imprisoned mothers to record DVDs are described in relation to a prisoner who made a DVD, whilst noting that unfortunately, for security reasons, this side of the project was not developed as much as had been anticipated. The importance of good relations with other personnel within the prison is highlighted, with reference to the differences in approach that occasionally arose between the Probation staff and the Mediator / Family Support Worker.

Literature Review by Kelly Lockwood, PhD student, Centre for Applied Childhood Studies, University of Huddersfield

On September 21st, 2007 the prison population of England and Wales stood at a massive 81,915 (Home Office, no date). Of this population 4,399 prisoners were female. Figures for the corresponding period ten years earlier show a dramatic difference with an overall prison population of 61,467 and only 2,672 of that population being female (HM Inspectorate of Prisons, 2005). Although women constitute only a small percentage of the overall prison population (Quaker Peace & Social Witness, 2007; Sheehan & Flynn, 2007), these statistics suggest that during the ten-year period from September 1997 to September 2007 the female prison population rose by nearly 65% in comparison to the much higher male prison population, which rose by less than 30% over the same period. These statistics correlate with findings offered by Black et al (2004); Carless (2006); Deakin & Spencer (2003); Carlen & Worrall (2004) to suggest that the number of women remanded in custody or receiving custodial sentences is increasing at a substantially higher rate than that of the male prison population. (For a detailed analysis of the increase see Gelsthorpe & Morris, 2002; Deakin & Spencer,

2003).

Despite the number of incarcerated women increasing at a much higher rate than that of incarcerated males, women remain the minority of the prison population (Carless, 2006; HM Prison Service, no date; Quaker Peace & Social Witness, 2007). In England and Wales the average female prison population equates to 5.7% of the overall prison population (Carlen & Worrall, 2004; Carless, 2006; Walmsley, 2006). The impact of this reality manifests in the concentration of prison policies engineered towards the needs of male prisoners, with the gender specific issues arising from women's imprisonment being largely neglected (Carlen & Worrall, 2004; Carless, 2006; Home Office, 2007; Fawcett Society, 2007; Kruttschnitt, 2005; Quaker Peace & Social Witness, 2007).

Spalek (2008, p50) suggests that the proliferation of the equality agenda within the Criminal Justice System offers increasing protection for 'group collectivities in relation to race, ethnicity, gender, faith, sexual orientation, disability and age'. However, campaigners continue to strive for greater recognition within the Criminal Justice System, for the specific needs of imprisoned women and more specifically imprisoned mothers (Fawcett Society, 2007; Quaker Peace & Social Witness, 2007).

Imprisoned mothers

Reliable information and statistics relating imprisoned mothers and their children is not routinely recorded and there is no statutory body specifically responsible for systematically co-ordinating and evaluating their needs (Brooks-Gordon & Bainham, 2004; HM Inspectorate of Prisons, 2005; Murray, 2007; Prison Reform Trust, 2006; Sheehan & Flynn, 2007). In 2004, it was announced that a record of prisoners' children would be kept on the National Offender Management Service (NOMS) database, however, this commitment has yet to be realised (Prison Reform Trust, 2007).

Despite there being no definitive statistics on the number of women in prison who are mothers (HM Inspectorate of Prisons, 2005) literature suggests that around 66% of women in prison have dependent children under the age of 18 (Brooks-Gordon & Bainham, 2004; Black et al, 2004; Carlen & Worrall, 2004; HM Inspectorate of Prisons, 2005; Prison Reform Trust, 2007; Revolving Doors, 2007). It is suggested that on average each incarcerated mother has 2.1 children, 34% of those children are under the age of 5 and a further 40% are aged from 5 to 10 (Black et al, 2004; Home Office, 2000; Revolving Doors, 2007). However, the original source of these statistics tends to relate to Caddle & Crisp (1997) and therefore may not be an accurate representative of current statistics incorporating the dramatic increase in female prisoners over the last decade.

Contact

In terms of the prison experience imprisoned mothers often have enormous difficulties coping (Caddle & Crisp, 1997). Research indicates that for many imprisoned women the fear of losing familial contact can exacerbate mental health and substance misuse

problems (Caddle & Crisp, 1997; Quakers Peace & Social Witness, 2007). Equally, it is widely recognised that for imprisoned mothers maintaining contact with their children can have a powerful impact upon their rehabilitation and resettlement, and is crucial to help them make and to sustain changes that reduce re-offending (Caddle & Crisp, 1997; HM Inspectorate of Prisons, 2005; Howard League for Penal Reform, 1999).

However, despite the rapid increase in the prison population, and in the number of visits prisoners are permitted (Caddle & Crisp, 1997), familial contact is decreasing (Brooks-Gordon & Bainham, 2004; Prison Reform Trust, 2006; Sheehan & Flynn, 2007). One of the main reasons stated for the absence of visitation relates to the distance that prisoners are held from their homes and the logistical difficulties this imposition incurs (Caddle & Crisp, 1997; Carlen & Worrall, 2004; Murray, 2007; Prison Reform Trust, 2006). Due to the relatively small number of women's prisons and their remote geographical location (HM Prison Service, no date; Brooks-Gordon & Bainham, 2004; Sheehan & Flynn, 2007), this factor impacts disproportionately harshly upon women. Literature suggests that half of all women prisoners are held at least 50 miles from home (Women in Prison, no date; Caddle & Crisp, 1997), and a quarter are more than 100 miles away (Caddle & Crisp, 1997; Prison Reform Trust, 2006). Consequently, domestic ties are fragmented (Caddle & Crisp, 1997), with only half of imprisoned mothers receiving visits from their children (Black et al 2004; Caddle & Crisp, 1997; HM Prison Inspectorate, 2005; Prison Reform Trust, 2007; Sheehan & Flynn, 2007).

Caddle & Crisp (1997) suggest that for 85% of imprisoned mothers, imprisonment was their first significant separation from their children (Caddle & Crisp, 1997); only 5% of the children of imprisoned mothers are able to remain in their own homes; only 9% are cared for by their father (Caddle & Crisp, 1997), in contrast to 90% of the children of male prisoners being cared for by their mother (Prison Reform Trust, no date); 24% are cared for by grandparents, while 8% are taken into local authority care (Caddle & Crisp, 1997). The Revolving Doors Agency at Holloway Prison has reported that 3% of women have no knowledge regarding the care arrangements for their children, and that 19 children under the age of 16 are caring for themselves (Revolving Doors, 1997). Caddle & Crisp (1997) suggests that 10% of imprisoned mothers who had lived with their children before going into prison did not expect to do so after release. For many imprisoned women being separated from their children is the most difficult aspect of incarceration (Carlen & Worrall, 2004).

Background Information

The original idea for the NCH Parenting project at HMP Styal arose from discussions between the NCH Family Mediation Service (Greater Manchester) and a prison based Senior Probation Officer. It became clear that the parenting interventions that the Family Mediation Service was operating in community settings had the potential to deliver benefits to imprisoned mothers and their children.

A focus group was held with prisoners at HMP Styal at the start of the Project in Oct 2005. It established that there was a desperate need for a focus on Parenting and

issues relating to the prisoners' separation from their children. The prisoners who took part told us that most of the problematic behaviour displayed by imprisoned mothers had anxiety relating to their children as its underlying cause. The behaviour they referred to was fighting between inmates, assaults on and rudeness to staff, and self harm. The prisoners described how their status as mothers was largely ignored during their sentence, which made them feel like part of their identity was missing. They also acknowledged that many women with children in the prison were carrying huge amounts of guilt about the way they had parented their children. They considered that there were very few, if any, opportunities to engage with the guilt they were carrying. Therefore it was apparent that there were practical and emotional reasons why there was such a need for parenting interventions within the prison. The interventions provided by the project were Positive Parenting Courses and assistance from a Parenting worker. Who was a trained Family Mediator.

Attributes of imprisoned mothers accessing the Parenting Service

Many of the mothers participating in the Styal prison Parenting Service had experienced domestic violence at some stage, and in many cases drugs had been a significant factor in their offending. For example they often felt coerced into keeping drugs safe for their partner or stealing money to buy drugs for their partner. The women were also isolated whilst in prison, receiving little or no support from their partners or from their parents. Often their parents had disowned them as a result of their offending. Women who are sentenced to imprisonment are more likely to be disowned by their families due to the shame involved, as a result of the fact that it is far more unusual for women to be sentenced to imprisonment than men. Most of the women the Parenting Service had worked with had not been convicted of offences of a child protection nature. Child Protection offences would generally rule mothers out of working with the Service. However many of the women who accessed the service had had some contact with Social Services.

Care arrangements for children of imprisoned mothers accessing Parenting Services

The possibilities in terms of accommodation arrangements for the children during their mother's sentence were as follows:

- a) With extended family members, e.g. grandma, partner, sister, aunt with no involvement from Social Services
- b) With extended family members, e.g. grandma, sister, aunt in an arrangement ratified by Social Services under a Court Order that had been obtained by Social Services. In these cases the person who had Residence under the Court Order would decide on the level of appropriate contact.
- c) The child could be in Local Authority or Foster Care, often on the other side of the country. Visiting in these circumstances would be very time consuming and often Social

Services did not have the resources to undertake such visits.

Contact with Social Services by Parenting workers

The task of contacting Social Services was particularly difficult. Prisoners serving their sentences at HMP Styal come from all over the country. Often prisoners did not know which Social Worker was holding their case during their term of imprisonment. Therefore when Social Services were contacted for each new case it would involve building up a relationship with a new Social Worker, and explaining the work of the Project from scratch.

The first stage was to send a letter to introduce the Service, since without a written request Social Services were not allowed to reveal any information due to data protection procedures. The next stage was to follow up the letter with phone contact. However even finding out where to send the letter was sometimes very time consuming as often it was not clear whether it should be sent to a local office or to the central Social Services office. On some occasions a letter would be sent to the central office, but when finally phone contact was made, the worker was told to contact the local office. Contacting Social Services generally involved leaving multiple messages. This situation was incredibly frustrating for the mediation worker, and it gave some insight into how hard it would be for the imprisoned mothers themselves to make contact with Social Services using a prison phone card with limited credit.

A key theme that emerged from the files was the view expressed by Social Services departments that the imprisoned mother had previously had many chances to engage with them whilst in the community, which she had not taken up. In many cases Social Services had been concerned about the child/ren before the mother's imprisonment due to her chaotic lifestyle. In these circumstances Social Workers were sceptical about the commitment of the mother to making an effort with her child/ren whilst in prison. Often when asked about their view on contact they would explain that it was something for the person who had a Residence Order in relation to the child/ren to decide. However they would also explain that they would be sympathetic if the carers considered that contact was too disruptive for the child, who may only just have settled with the carers following the mother's imprisonment. Social Services would often suggest that once the mother was released, that was the time for her to make contact with them, to show her commitment to her child/ren when she was back in the community with all the associated distractions and temptations. Generally Social Workers did not have the resources to assist with facilitating contact, and they were holding the case on the basis that they would act as a source of advice for the carers.

On a few occasions when Social Services were contacted it became apparent that review meetings were being held. The mediator gained the impression that the contact with Social Services resulted in the imprisoned mother being kept informed about decisions being made about her children in a way that she would not be if the mediator had not made contact with the Social Services Department. When these situations arose the mediator was able to provide information to the mothers about their right to

legal representation.

There was a theme in how the imprisoned mothers regarded Social Services. They were all too aware of how they had not cooperated at times in the past, and were embarrassed about this. This meant they were reluctant to face Social Workers who had a poor opinion of them, which in turn lessened the chances of them engaging with Social Workers once they were released. However the Parenting worker was able to work with the mothers to reiterate to them the importance of making contact with their Social Workers to show their commitment. She was also able to act as a messenger on behalf of the Social Workers passing on the concerns that Social Workers had, which in turn gave the women a chance to think about how to address them prior to their release. This also provided an opening for the mediator to refer mothers to the Positive Parenting Group, which was a tangible way in which they could express their commitment.

POSITIVE PARENTING COURSES

The purpose of the courses

The Positive Parenting Courses were designed to assist with the practicalities of parenting, but also to provide a forum where imprisoned mothers could start to rebuild their identity as parents. As the groups started it was quickly apparent that most of the parents who attended had not had the opportunity to talk about their children in an organised setting before. The feedback received from prisoners that was recorded in the evaluations that were completed after each group by the course facilitators reflect how both practical and emotional needs were met by the groups.

The Positive Parenting Courses took place twice a week in blocks of ten sessions, in view of the high turnover of prisoners at Styal prison. The groups were held in a room with an informal atmosphere which in turn helped to create a relaxed environment. The groups focussed mainly on children under 11 years of age, but also discussed issues relating to older children where this was raised by participants. Different sessions were focused on different themes, e.g. discipline, boundaries and children's needs. A focus group of prisoners who had attended the Positive Parenting Course was held in June 2008, and the finding that emerged are summarised below.

Key Findings : Positive Parenting Courses

It was clear from the outset of the Project that there was a real need for a forum where imprisoned mothers could feel safe to share their experiences of parenting whilst in prison. It was also clear that the women gained a great deal from being in a group, both in terms of benefitting from the support of others as well as learning from one another and the course facilitators.

The most striking theme that emerged from the evaluations of each group and the focus group was how highly they valued the time that they could focus on their identity as mothers, as opposed to their identity as prison inmates. They appreciated the fact that the groups allowed them to be treated "like a woman and not just a number". It was also clear that many of the women participating in the Positive Parenting Courses had low

self esteem, which was raised by their attendance at the groups. One participant had commented that she had particularly valued “listening and being listened to”. Clearly being listened to would have helped her sense of self worth. The appreciation of the Course facilitators’ willingness to share their own difficulties would also have served to raise self esteem, since the knowledge that everybody struggled at some points with parenting issues would have been reassuring and comforting.

It was apparent to me when I attended sessions of the Positive Parenting Course just how committed the mothers who attended were to making the best use possible of the course. For example they were asked to work in small groups discussing ideas around a particular topic such as “boundaries”. Not only was it hard to bring the group discussion to a close, but also there were numerous and carefully thought out points that were recorded on flip chart for feeding back. The group leaders, who had experience of running similar group exercises in community settings, told me that they considered the prisoners applied themselves to the discussion and exercises in the course with more energy and commitment than those in community settings.

It was also clear from the evaluation and focus group that the chance to put dilemmas and frustrations “to the group” was immensely valuable, both to act as a release for tension and to gain guidance and advice. It also appears that the women increased their motivation to live their lives differently on release by pledging to do so in front of other group members, who in turn gave them their support and backing. There was a sense that the group left them far more motivated than they would have been if they had simply considered the issues they were facing on their own.

Another theme was that some of the problems faced by imprisoned mothers could only be understood fully by those who had experienced imprisonment, and the separation it enforces between mother and child. Between them the group members had a large bank of experience to share with each other on these issues, particularly relating to how to deal with guilt and the temptation to overcompensate through illegal means such as theft. It is unlikely that out of a prison setting the women would ever be able to access support from a group of mothers who had experienced imprisonment again. In the setting of a parenting group that was run in a community setting it is unlikely anyone would admit to having been in prison due to the stigma that they could face as a result. This points to the importance of capitalising on the time women are in prison to create opportunities for them to focus on the particular issues that imprisoned mothers face, since there are very limited opportunities for them to do so once they are released.

It was apparent from the focus group that many of the women who attended were not used to having a good experience in terms of their dealings with people in authority. In many cases this was in part as a result of workers calling them to account for their chaotic lifestyles. Many of the women were unaware of non statutory services such as NCH, and how they can offer more informal support in settings such as Family Centres. One of the points made by the Positive Parenting Course facilitators was that it was important to take advantage of all possible sources of support. It was clear that having experienced what it is like to have good support from a group within prison, imprisoned

mothers would be much more likely to access this support in the community.

MEDIATION WORK

The Mediation side of this Project was originally envisaged as a Service that would focus on preparing for and conducting face to face meetings between imprisoned mothers and the people who were caring for their children with the purpose of improving communication. However, whilst face to face meetings were always considered as a possibility, and several joint meetings took place, there were various barriers that limited the number of joint mediation meetings that were conducted. The barriers tended to be one of the following factors. Firstly reluctance on the part of carers to engage in joint meetings either due to their belief that contact was not in the best interest of the child, or due to their anger at the way the children's mother had behaved towards them, or a combination of both these factors. The carer's were often dismissive of the mother's commitment, a comment that emerged from one of the files summed up the attitude of many of the carers: "Of course she's thinking of the child now, she's got nothing else to do in prison". Secondly the time involved in travelling what could often be a considerable distance to attend a mediation meeting. Thirdly Social Services expressing the view that contact was not in the child's best interest.

Therefore the mediator focussed on helping the prisoners to make the best contact they could with their children taking into account these limitations. The result was that most cases involved indirect mediation as opposed to direct mediation. It became apparent during the course of the project that a great deal of work needed to be undertaken with many of the women to help them to process the mistakes that they had made in terms of their parenting, and then to assist them to start thinking about their role as a mother differently. The key challenge for the mediator was to enable the mother to start to separate her own needs from the needs of her children. The approach that the mediator took was to signpost the mothers towards services within the prison that could meet their own needs, such as housing and drugs services, whilst at the same time focussing on the issues relating to their children.

Indirect Contact - letter writing

After contacting the carers of the imprisoned mothers' children the mediator would often be told by the carers that they had no faith in the mother due to the nature of the letters that she was writing to her children. In some cases the carers had not shown letters to the children, believing them to be too upsetting. The mediator would then meet with the mother to give her this feedback, and invite her to show her the next letter that they were planning to send. The mediator would often discover that the letter would contain negative references towards the child's carers, and expressions of frustration that she could not see her children. The mediator would then spend time talking this through with the mother, inviting her to think about how such a letter would be received by her child or children.

The mediator would also endeavour to build the mother's empathy for the carers' point of view. This would involve asking the mother to appreciate that without the support of the family member who was caring for her child/ren the child/ren might be in care. If it was grandparents caring for the child then the mediator would ask the mother to appreciate how it would be for an older person looking after young children full time at their age. In the cases where the mother's sister or brother was caring for the child the mediator would work to raise the mother's awareness of how hard it would be to integrate another child into your existing family. Over time the mediator was generally able to build up this empathy from the mother to the child/ren's carer, and then to assist the mother to write a letter to express this new found empathy.

The letters that emerged from the discussions between the imprisoned mother and the mediator would include a section that would let their child know how much they appreciated the care that was being provided for them. They would also include wording that was designed to support the child's carer, such as an expression of hope that the child was behaving well with the carers. Then the mother would give details of what she was doing in prison, in terms of work and education, before inviting the child or children to share their news. Often the mothers had underlying resentments, believing that the carer was only looking after their child to increase their benefit entitlements. However over time the mediator was able to convince the mothers that they needed to leave these sentiments out of letter and focus on more positive points if they were going to successfully build up relationships through letter writing.

If mothers were unable to see the situation from the point of view of the person caring for their children, then it was hard to take the work with them very far. However the mediator's experience was that in most cases it was possible to bring the mothers round to having more empathy for the carers as a result of talking about their situation. It is also important to note that a significant number of the imprisoned mothers did show an understanding the situation those caring for their children were in from the outset.

Many of the women struggled with literacy, so the mediator was able to assist them with expressing their thoughts in writing. It was apparent to the mediator that many women were ashamed of not being able to read or write and therefore it was a measure of how safe they felt with the mediation worker that they were able to share this with her.

Indirect mediation acting as a catalyst

The mediator considered that in many cases direct mediation was unnecessary as the contact that she had with carers acted as a catalyst that assisted many families to sort out their differences without further intervention. A common theme was that carers did not even know which prison the mother had been sent to. As a result of their negative feelings towards the mother they often had little motivation to find this information out. However the mediator's experience was that once she got talking to the carers on the phone, and they had had a chance to off load their frustration, underneath their negative

feelings they were concerned about the mother. If the carer was the child/ren's grandmother then it was not uncommon for them to express the view that they blamed themselves to some extent for their daughter's prison sentence. They were also reassured that the mediator was going to put their concerns to the mother. The mediator considered that the process of hearing their concerns was therapeutic for them, and allowed them to move on in many cases. The mediator explained that often after a long phone call with a carer she would meet with the imprisoned mother again to find that she had received a conciliatory letter from the carer which had led to some phone contact between her and the children. It was apparent that carers did not have many outlets through which to express their frustration at the situation they were in.

DVD recording

One idea that was developed during the Project was the possibility of recording imprisoned mothers speaking to their children on DVD. The Service was given access to recording equipment within the Prison. A pilot DVD was made and it was clear that this means of communication had great potential. When the pilot DVD was made the mediator recognised that the prospect of sitting in front of a camera was daunting for the mother who participated. Therefore the mother was given assistance to prepare for the DVD filming. All the points that had been relevant to letters were just as relevant to the filming of DVDs. As the mother was dependent on the carer agreeing to show the DVD, it was important that the DVD contained appreciation of care that was being provided for the children. It was also important to reinforce the importance of the child/ren behaving well for the carer. It was then important for the mother to write some prompts to assist her to structure the points she wanted to raise. It was helpful to have a card or something similar that the mother could talk about and then send on to the child. In the case of the mother who recorded a DVD she had a large intricate card she had made of a teddy bear that she was able to show on the film and talk about how she had prepared it. She also thought about the information she had received from the child's carer about her son's activities and referred to this in what she recorded. Although the process of recording the DVD was understandably very emotional for the mother, she made a huge effort to remain upbeat and positive. There was a rehearsal before the recording, and after the DVD was recorded the mother was able to watch it back. She came across very well, and there was the chance to affirm her efforts.

It was hoped that many more DVDs would be recorded as another medium through which mothers could make contact with their children. Unfortunately soon after the first DVD was recorded and sent off the prison rules changed forbidding staff members to be on their own with prisoners. The result was that it was very hard to find staff to be alongside the mediator when she was recording DVDs, so only one DVD was produced.

Working with the Probation Department

From the outset of the Project close working relationships with the Probation department were established. This brought benefits, but also some potential tensions. Since the mediation worker was not authorised to access the Prison computer record

system, early on a Probation Officer was contracted to undertake some hours each week for the Service in order to gather information from the prison records to screen women who wanted to access the service. This information gathered both internally within the prison record systems, and from outside Probation staff determined whether the service was offered to a mother or not. It is significant that during the last nine months of the project the mediation worker was authorised to collect information directly from the prison record systems. This is testimony to the excellent working relationship that she established with the Probation Department within the prison over time.

Where a mother was deemed unsuitable for mediation a decision was taken early on that the news would be broken to the mother by the mediator with back up from a worker from the Probation department. It was decided that to break such negative news by letter would be inappropriate, since the mother may need help to manage her feelings about not being able to access the service. This worked well, but the danger was that if the mediation worker was seen as too closely associated with the Probation Service, then the benefits of being an independent non statutory service could be lost. Generally it was an advantage to be an outside agency in terms of engaging prisoners.

A problem that occurred from time to time was when mothers were prevented from accessing the mediation service as a result of breaching prison discipline, for example by testing positive for drugs following a random test. The view of the Probation staff within the prison was that attending the mediation service was a privilege, whereas the mediator's view was that ultimately the service was there to deliver benefits to children, and that by denying the mother access to the service, this was in effect preventing the child/ren from receiving the benefits. However the mediator respected the fact that the Service had to run within the parameters set by Probation and other prison staff, even when this approach meant that good work was abruptly terminated.

Another example of where different viewpoints were expressed was in relation to whether to work with remand prisoners or not. The service was continually oversubscribed, so there had to be some way of working out who to prioritise. The exclusion of remand prisoners had the logic of making sure that work would be seen through. This might not have been possible to achieve with remand prisoners as they could be released at short notice, for example after being granted bail at a court hearing or due to receiving a non custodial sentence at court. However there was another dimension to the Probation department's view that remand prisoners should be excluded. They argued that prisoners could potentially use the fact that they had engaged NCH Parenting services to receive a lighter sentence at court. However the view of the service and the mediator was that if the prisoner was motivated to work with her that could only benefit the children involved. However, again the service respected the view expressed by the Probation department and abided by it.

Key findings: Mediation Service

It was apparent that the community based model of Family Mediation that involved a third party facilitating face to face joint meetings between people involved in a child's life

did not translate easily into the prison setting, in the way that the Positive Parenting Courses did. Joint meetings were difficult to arrange as a result of the distances carers would have to travel, and their reluctance in many cases to give time to the imprisoned mother who they had negative feelings towards.

However it was clear that there was a need for indirect mediation, with individual sessions being conducted with the mother to assist her to process her previous mistakes in relation to parenting, and to reflect on how she act differently in the future. It was apparent that women accessing the mediation service faced difficult home circumstances, particularly in relation to domestic violence and drug related issues. These factors in turn had added to the likelihood of their lives becoming chaotic and characterised by offending behaviour.

The result was that many of the women accessing the mediation service were isolated and cut off not just from professional agencies such as Social Services, but also their own families. However in order to assist the women using the service to re-engage with their families and professional services it was necessary to help them to see where they had made the wrong decisions and the impact that this had had on others, including their children. This was a painful process, involving the women using the service facing patterns of behaviour and guilt that they had buried for many years. A number of the women did not feel able to discuss these matters in a group setting, therefore the option of individual sessions was essential.

Once the individual work had been undertaken, which often might take several sessions, then it was much more fruitful to approach the child/ren's carers. In parallel with providing a safe space where imprisoned mothers could process these issues, the mediator acted as a "go between" with family members and different agencies, sometimes advocating on behalf of the women in terms of how their attitude had changed and what they had gained from the Positive Parenting Course. Therefore the mediator's role was more focussed on indirect mediation, advocacy and practical assistance rather than as a facilitator of joint meetings according to the 5 stage model of family mediation. However her skills as a mediator were well utilised when it came to engaging the people who were providing the care for the children.

It was clear that with a little help the imprisoned mothers could start taking responsibility for their situation, and take steps towards turning their lives around, for example by changing the tone of the letters they wrote.

CONCLUSION

This paper has provided an account of some of the barriers that imprisoned mothers face in terms of maintaining contact with their children during their prison sentence. These barriers are physical, structural and emotional. Physical barriers relate to the distance between the prisons in which they are held and where their children live, which makes visits problematic. Structurally these barriers are exacerbated by the fact that women comprise less than 6% of the UK prison population (Carlen&Worrall, 2004), with

the result that there are fewer female prisons and less resources directed towards the issues that women prisoners face, in a system that is geared towards the needs of men. I have also sought to highlight the barriers that exist for imprisoned mothers as a result of cultures that exist within organisations that gate-keep whether contact between them and their children can take place or not, such as Social Services departments. This paper has provided evidence to suggest that there is at times an institutional scepticism regarding the ability of imprisoned mothers to improve their parenting skills during their prison sentences, even when they have engaged positively with Parenting Services during their sentence. The participation of prisoners in parenting work is seen as a privilege, which can be withdrawn as a result of even relatively minor breaches of prison rules.

In addition to the physical and structural barriers described above, and perhaps most significantly, there are emotional barriers. Many imprisoned mothers carry significant amounts of guilt about their past parenting deficiencies. For many it is too painful to process this guilt whilst in prison. This often manifests as a reluctance to make contact with services that they perceive as having a negative view of them. The lack of parenting programmes and support within many female prisons means that many imprisoned mothers find it hard to maintain their identity as mothers during their time in prison, within a system which at times seems reluctant to acknowledge them as parents.

The parenting interventions that I have described have demonstrated how it is possible for very constructive work to be done with imprisoned mothers whilst they are in prison, which can have a significant impact in terms of rebuilding their relationships with their children. Unfortunately all too often the opportunity that exists for this to take place is missed as a result of the low priority that prison parenting support has in terms of the allocation of resources.

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