



**Parent in prison:  
What support  
does the child  
need?**

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*Zagreb, 20 May 2016*

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**What did you do at school today?  
We talked about our families....**



## What we know:

- Children of imprisoned parents have specific needs and their development is at risk.
- They experience numerous changes: in the relationship with their parents, in their life and financial circumstances.
- Their emotional state and behaviour change as well as their **adjustment**.
- They experience loss and often a traumatic separation.
- They are exposed to stigmatisation and discrimination.
- Their needs are often not recognised at school/kindergarten/ family/community.

# Consequences

- Parental imprisonment is related to child antisocial behaviour (Murray, Farrington, Sekol, 2012)
- Risk for mental health difficulties (Lewis, Bates, Murray, 2008)
- Risk of exposure to peer violence, isolation, feeling of stigmatisation (Gill, 2010)
- Young children develop secure attachment with more difficulty (Pohlmann, 2005)
- **PROTECTIVE FACTORS:** Maintaining the parent-child relationship (unless it is not contrary to the best interest of the child) and child care quality are the most important predictors of the child's later adjustment

# Despite common needs and shared risks ...

- Children of imprisoned parents are not a homogenous group.
- It is important to establish common guidelines for action and practice as well as to assess every child's individual characteristics and unique needs.
- What are mediators of consequences for the child?
- What are risk factors and protective factors for the child?

# Some indicators of the group's heterogeneity

- **Age:** preschool children/school children/ adolescents – various reactions and needs
- **Parental arrest** – for some children a source of stress, for others a traumatic event
- **Parental behaviour** is a source of stress for some children
- Varied experiences and **relationships with parents** prior to parental imprisonment
- Available /unavailable **support**
- Some children need support of people close to them, while others need an **intervention/treatment**

# Does a parent/offender cause trauma to the child?

- The best interest of the child should be given priority over parents' responsibility
- All recommendations derive from the child's right to protection
- Distinguishing between *"being safe"* and *"feeling safe"* when working with children
- **The primary goal:** to provide support to the traumatised child and enable his/her recovery
- The source of renewed traumatisation interferes with the treatment
- Developing coping strategies and skills, possible positive prognoses for the child, the child's consent: CAUTION!!!
- This group of children requires the system's **ongoing** support and expert assessment.
- The needs and best interests of children may vary even within the same family.

# Parent – a source of trauma for the child

- Murder or attempted murder of a parent
- Attempted murder of a child
- Physical and sexual abuse
- Abuse of another child in the family
- Serious family violence



## **IMPORTANT: Stress assessment of children of prisoners' growth conditions and traumatisation in several phases**

- **Conditions prior to imprisonment:** life history, relationship with the parent: supporting, neglecting ..., risk and resilience factors, support from the environment, traumatic and stress experiences, earlier losses
- **Parental arrest:** characteristics, one or more stressors, type of offence, child's witnessing, telling the child, loss, separation

## Stress assessment of children of prisoners' growth conditions and traumatisations in several phases (cont. )

- **Coping:** information received by the child, reaction of the family, parents and the system, symptoms of the child and the persons closest to the child, changes in the environment, other stressors and losses, grief
- **Consequences:** legal consequences, establishment/non-establishment of contact, relationship with the parent, long-term reactions from the environment, treatment of the child/family, recovery

## Children need support in each of the following phases

### *Approach:*

- Multidisciplinarity
- Systemic approach (child, family, school, community)
- Developmentally focused
- Direct and indirect support
- Child-specific

### *Practice:*

- Identification of children and families
- Assessment of their needs
- Children's rights perspective
- Prevention
- Interventions
- Therapy/treatment

# Support immediately following parental arrest

- Children should be told about parental arrest by a person close to him/her in a language that he/she understands
- Support and psychoeducation for parents/guardians
- Problems are most often caused by parents' need to protect the child – this increases stigmatisation
- First hours and days are crucially important for the child's later experience
- Preventing difficulties later in life
- Importance of family intervention
- **Crisis** – *requires a direct intervention: information, “allowing” the expression of feelings, normalising the reactions of the child and the reactions of others, support network identification*

# Support for the child

- Children are willing to receive support in difficult situations
- Support should be **offered** before symptoms develop
- **Yet**, it should be attuned to the child
- The child's willingness to receive support, even from various persons, as a rule, is not harmful. It is important that the adult acts patiently.
- However, after a traumatic and stressful experience, **an expert** should have the key role in the process.

# The child will feel safe if

**we:**

- listen actively
- offer support actively
- provide emotional support and encourage emotional relief
- show interest and empathy
- normalise child's reactions with psychoeducation
- provide specific information and answers to questions

# Difficult topics for adults when talking with the child

- What does imprisonment mean?
- Is that my fault?
- Can I do something about that?
- Loyalty conflict in the family
- Legal system's complexity
- Parental arrest and other stressors
- Images of arrest (if the child was not present)

# Child wants answers to the following questions

- *Where are you?*
- *Why are you there?*
- *When are you coming back home?*
- *Are you OK?*
  
- **Is that my fault?**
- **Do you love me?**



# Support to the parent/guardian

- Parent: needs support in order to provide support
- Traumatized child = parent in a crisis
- Empowerment versus shame
- Identification of the parent's protective role
- Instructing the parent in open and clear communication with the child and expected children's reactions
  
- **Key dilemma:** how to separate feelings for the partner from parental feelings
- Parents need support in resolving the dilemmas about communication with the school/kindergarten, community, grandparents

# Child and the imprisoned parent

- Care is mutual, responsibility is parental
- Aggravating circumstances (distance, finances, changes within the family, loyalty conflict, manipulation...)
- Traumatization of the child ought to be taken in the account
- Relationships are best maintained through visits and contacts (where possible)
- Various forms of maintaining contact
- Contacts often depend on the relationship prior to imprisonment
- Parenting from prison is challenging

# What kind of support the child needs from an imprisoned parent?

An imprisoned parent:

- listens to the child
- is not afraid to ask the child about his/her life (“She did not ask me anything, she does not care about me”)
- keeps in mind that the children want and are entitled to privacy and that they will keep many things to themselves
- encourages the child to do some things *together*
- shows interest in the child’s everyday life and feelings
- plays a board game with a child during the child’s visit
- does not “moralise and patronise“, does not give unrealistic promises to the child
- separates his/her behaviour from that of the child

**The child needs the support now**

# Parenting courses for imprisoned parents as a source of support

- **Benefits for all family members** (parenting methods, closer relationships, better understanding ...)
- **Benefits for the child** (new parenting skills, alleviating negative consequences of separation, the parent-child relationship ...)
- **Benefits for the prisoner** (reduce recidivism, increase empathy, promote personal development ...)

# School, kindergarten and child of an imprisoned parent

- Who needs to know? – ***Only those who need to know!***
- School – a common source of stigmatisation
- It is important to recognise expected reactions and not to pressure the child
- Support from school can be a protective factor and its absence a risk factor

# Role of school/kindergarten

- Confidentiality dilemma – a common source of stress for children and their families
- Connection between the school, family and child protective services
- Teachers are often the most important persons for young children outside their family – this is why they are an important source of support
- Older children and young people are more cautious, peer-centered, it is important for them to know that the teacher is available
- Be frank with children when they confide in you – explain confidentiality issues and limits of confidentiality

# Supporting teacher

- Sensible towards child's behavioural and emotional changes, concern for the other parent, fear from being bullied and stigmatised
- Listens
- Children are unique, even if they come from the same family
- Avoids identifying the child as a victim
- Acknowledges child's feelings and decisions
- Doesn't question the child about parental offence
- Requires support and help when necessary
- Does not judge
- **Continues to see the child, rather than the child of an imprisoned parent**