

Every June, Children of Prisoners Europe (COPE) holds a pan-European campaign on behalf of children with imprisoned parents entitled, “Not my crime, still my sentence”<sup>1</sup>. Promoting UNCRC Article 12, one of the main goals of the 2017 campaign is **to give children a space to communicate their views to prison directors in order to improve the prison visiting experience.**

Fostering child participation empowers children to become competent partners in society as both children and as future adults. **Giving them a platform to voice their opinions** about their experiences visiting prison and to have those opinions heard **can improve their relationship with their parents** in prison, as well as **boost their well-being, self-esteem and development.**

To gather the children’s views, COPE members (in the Netherlands, Poland, Scotland, England & Wales, Italy, France and Sweden) held workshops and discussion groups with children to talk about prison visits. Some children filled out the expression cards during or after a visit. Questions included, “What do you like about prison visits?”, “How do you feel when you visit your parent in prison?” and “What would make visiting better for you?”.



The aim was to move away from the negative language often used in talking about the issues relating to the prison visiting environment for children. By **focusing on positive experiences and progressive solutions**, the COPE campaign aims to credit good practice initiatives and **to focus on solutions co-constructed by prison directors,**

<sup>1</sup> <http://childrenofprisoners.eu/campaign/>

**staff and children.** Children all have different experiences of prison visits. Yet there are overlaps in experiences that span across Europe.

Citing **long journeys to and from the prison**, as well as time wasted **waiting in queues for security**, many children interviewed wished for **more time with their parent** and **to be able to physically interact with them**. In some contexts, prisoner parents are **not allowed to leave their chair, nor touch or hold their children**. **Physical contact, privacy, clear information, a calm atmosphere and shared activities** can help children feel at more at ease when visiting their parent in prison.

Now that the cards have been filled out by the children, they are being delivered to the prison directors to better inform the prisons what they are doing well, and things that they can improve upon to continue to improve the children's prison visits.

We hope that the children's opinions can provide insight into the positive changes that need to be made to improve their experiences when they visit their parent in prison. By using children's experiences to influence policy changes, we can better understand and work toward creating a more positive experience for all children visiting their parent in prison.



A selection of the children's comments from across Europe:

## What do you like about prison visits?

**Italy (SOS - Telefono Azzurro):**

"I like the flowers, the animals, the little house with all the games inside." - Nicole, 6 years old

"I like the garden, the games, the books. I would love to have a pool. I'm happy here and I like being here with my dad, my mum and my brother even if he can be a little bit spiteful." - Sonia, 7 years old

**The Netherlands (Exodus Nederland):**

"I like everything about the visit. Football, memories, photos, food and wrestling." – Lyshaijya

"The journey to the prison with the volunteer is nice, although sometimes I don't like to talk that much." – Lexi

"It is very nice to be able to visit my father: we have lots of fun. I love to draw there."

**England & Wales (Pact):**

"I prefer family days to usual visits, I don't like it when Daddy can't leave his seat."

"The play area is the best bit."

"I love it when we can all have tea together."

"I like it when I get to draw and colour-in on family day."

"I find it important so Mum can see I'm fit and well and so I can see the progress she is making. It keeps the bond very tight."

"I think visits are very important. If you weren't able to come and see them, both children and the parents would become stressed."

"I enjoy doing crafts and making things in the visits for my dad to take back with him."

**England and Wales (Children Heard and Seen):**

"I was able to make a card with my dad, it was good."

"I made my dad a present. He read a book in the corner to me."

"Having arts and crafts was great! And reading with dad."

"Thank you for carrying my brother as he gets scared of dogs."

"Family days are way better than normal visits and there was lots of fun things to do."

"I like that dad can come over here and make things with me, usually he has to stay in his seat."

**Scotland (Families Outside):**

"I like that I get to spend quality time with my Dad. I also enjoy playing games and drawing. We also like the view out the window."

"I like playing outside with Dad."

**France (Relais Enfants Parents Ile-de-France):**

"I am happy when I know that my dad is doing well."

"I'm happy when I go to see him, we can talk and play."



## What would make visiting prison better for you?

### Scotland (Families Outside):

"I would like the visits to be longer as I don't get enough time to spend with my dad."

"To be able to have lunch as a family."

### England and Wales (Children Heard and Seen):

"All visits should be family days. It's better as Dad can get up and play with us."

"Going through security was a bit scary but seeing my Dad was great!"

### Poland (Probacja Foundation):

"It is not a child-friendly place, although I forget about that when I am with my parent. It is a bit scary."

"I would rather go climbing or for a walk with my Mum. But that's not possible, so I try not to think that this is a prison and that I am just with my Mum." – Kasia, 9 years old

"When my daughter comes to visit, I can see that she is happy, despite the crowded and noisy visits room. She finds it difficult to stay focused and in contact with me. She doesn't understand that we only have an hour. Saying goodbye can be hard. Anastasia doesn't understand why her mom cannot come home with her like before." – on behalf of Anastasia, 2 years old

"Every time we have to say goodbye, he asks: "Why was it so short? And why can't I come with you?" Once I asked him if he wanted to come with me, but he said that he is scared of prison officers; those men who take his Mum away. His favourite place here is a colourful little play room, and those moments of togetherness there." – on behalf of Marcin, 5 years old

### England & Wales (Pact):

"I wish there was a visitors' centre so we wouldn't have to wait outside. I would like an outside play area or for the inside to be made to look like the outside."

"I would like to be able to bring in my animals to see Daddy."

"I would like to give Daddy a DVD of us playing so he can see us any time he likes."

"A play area for older children."

"I would like a play area or something for me to do when visiting Daddy on usual visits."

"The dogs come too close. It made me scared"

"It was scary. I didn't know what to do. I felt upset that my dad was in prison. I wish the place was happier, rather than dull and scary when we went."

### Sweden (Solrosen):

"I want windows and mats and wish I could have a bath with Dad. I wish there were pillows, so that we could build a cosy hut."

### The Netherlands (Exodus Nederland):

"I would like to be able to see the whole prison one time." – Djelexi

"I only get to see Dad once a month because it is so far from our home."

"I wish we could play sports together like football, tennis or trampolining."

### France (Relais Enfants Parents Ile-de-France):

"I would like to change the way we wait. It takes too long in the waiting rooms."

"I would like to go to the park when it's nice outside."

