



European Journal of Parental Imprisonment

First port of call: The role of schools in supporting children with imprisoned parents





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Children of Prisoners Europe (COPE) is a pan-European network of non-profit organisations working on behalf of children separated from an imprisoned parent. The network encourages innovative perspectives and practices to ensure that children with an imprisoned parent fully enjoy their rights under the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child and the EU Charter of Fundamental Rights, and that action is taken to enable their well-being and development.

The European Journal of Parental Imprisonment is a bi-annual publication that seeks to broaden the study of issues relevant to children affected by parental incarceration and meet a burgeoning interest in the development, implementation and evolution of entitlements, policies and practices that promote their well-being. With a view to fostering new perspectives for children with imprisoned parents, the journal features contributions by eminent scholars and experts in the fields of child rights, child welfare, criminal and social justice, psychology, penal affairs and other disciplines; published articles do not necessarily represent COPE's opinions. Selected articles are editorial screened but not peer-reviewed. The editor is committed to reasoned ideological diversity and welcomes suggestions for special issues and contributions.

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Applying Human Rights Education principles when discussing parental imprisonment in the classroom

Hannah Lynn
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“School becomes something of a mine trap—gossip and rumours spread fast [...]. [T]he last thing you want is for someone to find out, and there’s so much stigma attached to parental imprisonment [...]. It forces you to become a really good liar. I had to be prepared with a lie in any conversation I had, in case someone asked about my dad. When you’re so concerned with not slipping up all the time, and you’re carrying around this huge burden, it makes it almost impossible to truly establish an emotional connection with anyone. So I ended up in this situation where I felt like I just didn’t really belong anywhere—the fact that my dad was in prison was a huge part of my life and my history and I couldn’t share that or express my feelings about it. So I retreated into myself, I spent a lot of time alone, had very poor social skills and was generally very unhappy for a number of years.

In hindsight the only reason I felt like I had to hide it is because I’d never heard anyone talk about it before. We had never discussed the legal system in school. There was no information on how to deal with this at all, and I truly felt like I was the only person in the world with this experience.”

- Dylan Moore, 25 years old

11th European Forum on the Rights of the Child
European Union, Brussels, 6-8 November 2017

Protection from discrimination is a universal human right, and children across the world¹ are entitled to this protection as laid out in article 2 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC). The article stipulates that children be protected from all forms of discrimination, including that “on the basis of the status, activities, expressed opinions, or beliefs of the child’s parents, legal guardians or family members”.

School can and should be a place for child protection and development, learning and growing, mentoring and peer support. For some, however, it can be a place of discrimination, stigmatisation, bullying and exclusion. Children may be discriminated against and bullied for a variety of reasons, and one of these may be that they have a parent or other family member in prison.

As European Commission Coordinator for the Rights of the Child Margaret Tuite recently said, schools can be “game-changers”² for children impacted by the imprisonment of a parent. The ensemble of staff that comes into contact with a child experiencing parental imprisonment should be a web of caring for that child: teachers, in-school social workers, special educators, psychologists, nurses, counsellors, school guidance counsellors, librarians, janitors, wardens. These staff members, often a neutral, stable presence in a child’s life, have a unique role to play in boosting the

resilience of children dealing with the imprisonment of a family member. They are in contact with the children outside of the familial context, sometimes on a daily basis, and can be the first port of call for children looking for support outside the family. If, as Alain Bouregba writes on page 7, a primary school teacher comes into contact with on average 25 children separated from an imprisoned parent throughout their career, they are clearly important figures who need to know how to effectively deal with the situation, with confidence and caring.

Helping staff to look out for and look after children affected by the imprisonment of a family member can take many forms. All school staff could benefit from training or awareness-raising which helps them know how to broach the subject of parental imprisonment with a child; helping them know what to say, what to ask and what to avoid, as confirmed by the research carried out by the Office of the Ombudsman for Children Croatia (see Maja Gabelica’s article, page 15). The NGO Bambinisenzasbarre, COPE’s member in Italy, provides for this in their landmark Memorandum of Understanding on children with imprisoned parents, which calls for the creation of a working group of representatives from the NGO, the Ministry of Justice and the Children’s Ombudsman’s Office, which will inform and raise awareness among school staff who come into contact with children with imprisoned parents. Teaching staff can be provided with resources and lesson plans to help them reach out to children affected by parental imprisonment and to foster understanding among other students. A positive example of a lesson plan for teachers is provided by Pact, a COPE member based in

¹ 196 out of 197 countries have ratified the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC), and are State parties. The United States of America is signatory but has not ratified.

² Margaret Tuite, European Commission Coordinator for the Rights of the Child, at COPE’s May 2016 conference in Zagreb.

the UK, available for free download on their website³. Teachers can also receive training and advice from an NGO working with children separated from a parent in prison. This can be in-school training, group training in the NGO's offices, or even training from within a prison, where teachers can experience first hand what it is like for a child to visit their parent behind bars. A positive example of this type of training in Scotland is detailed on pages 8-11. Finally, they can also be trained in using Human Rights Education techniques, as this article details below.

Teaching is about bringing people in. It is about inclusion. Children can quickly feel “left out” or excluded from a lesson if they do not feel concerned by its subject or if they do not understand the topic nor its relevance. It is essential, even if not always easy, to bring those children who are not connecting with the lesson back into the group. Human Rights Education, or HRE, is a technique used and promoted by rights organisations, the Council of Europe, the European Union, the United Nations and many other key stakeholders to promote the understanding of rights in the classroom and other educational settings. HRE is a process of teaching and learning about human rights through an interactive and participative approach which includes every member of the class and invites both individual and group reflection and debate.

The United Nations Declaration on Human Rights Education and Training⁴, adopted by the UN General Assembly on 19 December 2011, defines HRE as “education, training and information aimed at building a universal culture of human rights.” For the United Nations, Human Rights Education “fosters the attitudes and behaviours needed to uphold human rights for all members of society”⁵.

The Council of Europe sees education as a “defense against the rise of violence, racism, extremism,

xenophobia, discrimination and intolerance”⁶. In 2010, Council of Europe Member States adopted the Council of Europe Charter on Education for Democratic Citizenship and Human Rights Education⁷ in the framework of Recommendation CM/Rec(2010)7. The training of teaching staff is called for in the Charter, which also highlights the importance of HRE in developing the social skills and understanding that help to reduce conflict, build mutual respect and promote non-violence⁸.

For Amnesty International, a leader in Human Rights Education, HRE techniques aim to empower: to enable participants to take action in defending and promoting their own fundamental rights as well as those of others.

Human Rights Education techniques allow for thorny or difficult subjects to be broached with sensitivity, caring and understanding in class. They can help participants to “develop awareness and empathy

on the one hand, and resilience and assertiveness on the other hand so that people can avoid, prevent or stand up against discrimination”⁹. They allow for active participation from the group, avoiding at all costs a “lecture-theatre approach” where the teacher speaks and the students listen. What is more important than making sure children have the right answer, is ensuring they are reflecting independently, expressing their views freely and learning from one another. Depending on the context, students may even be asked to share their experience with the class, an action which can be beneficial not only for the student relating but also for those listening, as Alain Bouregba puts forward. Other general HRE principles include:

- allowing and encouraging each child to participate, vocally or by other means;
- using a variety of techniques (such as small group work or written contributions) to encourage less vocal or less confident children to contribute to discussions;
- listening to each child and respecting their views;
- encouraging reflection and debate, letting the children know that their opinion is valued and will be listened to;
- bringing discussions back to the idea of rights;

3 Pact. Resources for schools: <https://www.prisonadvice.org.uk/for-schools>. See, for example, their lesson plan: <https://www.prisonadvice.org.uk/Handlers/Download.ashx?IDMF=fadfea50-432c-4a6c-8079-6ca50aca44be> and their “William the bear” resource: <https://www.prisonadvice.org.uk/Handlers/Download.ashx?IDMF=38a7eb95-7347-47aa-9d52-e02cf268670c>

4 UN General Assembly. 66/137. *United Nations Declaration on Human Rights Education and Training*: <https://documents-dds-ny.un.org/doc/UNDOC/GEN/N11/467/04/PDF/N1146704.pdf?OpenElement>.

5 United Nations. (2012). *World Programme from Human Rights Education. Second Phase. Plan of Action*: http://www.ohchr.org/Documents/Publications/WPHRE_Phase_2_en.pdf, p.2.

6 Council of Europe. *Background information on the Charter on Education for Democratic Citizenship and Human Rights Education*: <https://www.coe.int/en/web/edc/charter-on-education-for-democratic-citizenship-and-human-rights-education>.

7 Committee of Ministers Recommendation CM/Rec(2010)7 on the Council of Europe Charter on Education for Democratic Citizenship and Human Rights Education: https://search.coe.int/cm/Pages/result_details.aspx?ObjectID=09000016805cfo1f.

8 *Ibid*.

9 Council of Europe. (2002). *COMPASS: Manual for Human Rights Education with Young People*. <https://www.coe.int/en/web/compass/discrimination-and-intolerance>.

- using games and activities to involve all children so as to have them participate in a fun and interactive way, fostering their learning;
- if appropriate, using videos and other tools, while ensuring that follow-up activities are interactive and participatory.

There is a general consensus among HRE advocates that classes should encompass learning *about* human rights (e.g., learning about the right to be protected from discrimination, how this is safeguarded and by whom or by which texts), learning *for* human rights (by developing the skills to apply what has been learnt about human rights and to take action to protect them) and, crucially in the case of discussing parental imprisonment, learning *through* human rights (by fostering a respectful and empathic learning setting and process which is consistent with the very values that are being imparted).¹⁰

Alain Bouregba writes that transposing a child's experience into other contexts may help them, and potentially others, understand their experience¹¹ and feel empathy with respect to it. In order to tackle the topic of prison and the imprisonment of a family member, teachers could, for example, plan a series of lessons on inclusion and exclusion, on bullying, on the law or criminal justice, or on discrimination in general. They could touch on the issue of familial imprisonment specifically, or choose not to. "Car tu porteras mon nom" ("Because you have my name"), a valuable Belgian documentary, provides examples of awareness-raising in schools, where children are asked what certain words mean to them, such as "prison", or how they would feel if their parent had to go to prison¹². As Tim Haines cautions, staff must be aware that some children may not wish to have this topic brought up in class, and they should therefore speak to the child or children affected in advance of any planned activities. Even those with the best intentions may unknowingly end up stigmatising the child further. A principle of care should be implemented at all times.

Eliane Frenkiel-Pelletier's article on her pilot

¹⁰ This "about", "for" and "through" framework is specified in the United Nations Declaration on Human Rights Education and Training adopted by the UN General Assembly on 19 December 2011, article 2.

¹¹ "The Asia-Pacific Regional Resource Centre for Human Rights Education makes particular reference to the relation between human rights and the lives of the people involved in HRE: HRE is a participative process which contains deliberately designed sets of learning activities using human rights knowledge, values, and skills as content aimed at the general public to enable them to understand their experiences and take control of their lives." <https://www.coe.int/en/web/compass/introducing-human-rights-education>.

¹² Verkindere, S. (2007). *Car tu porteras mon nom*. Brussels: Agit. Prod. S.A. "Car tu porteras mon nom" can be viewed online on the website of the Fonds Houtmann: <http://www.fonds-houtman.be/fr/les-documents-a-telecharger/>.

homework initiative in Châteaudun prison in France (featured on pages 12-14) shows how caring and inclusive educational activities can take place not only within school walls but from within a prison. She highlights the benefits for the imprisoned parent and the child, but also for the family as a whole. She hypothesises an improved child-parent relationship and reduced stress levels at school for the child; the latter is also a project aim outlined in Isabelle Carpentier-Tuboef's feature on page 19. These types of initiative could be linked to the school setting. A child who participates in an in-prison homework club initiative could, for example, prepare a presentation about the prison with his or her imprisoned parent, before delivering it in class at a later date.

Human Rights Education techniques not only aim to give students the capacity to act upon what they have learnt—seeing different views, opinions and experiences not as a challenge to one's own opinions and views but as an enrichment, for example, thus listening to and respecting peers as a result of the HRE class—but also and, perhaps more importantly, to give them the desire to act. Using HRE techniques to organise a lesson focussing on the imprisonment of a family member should ensure that the class is carried out in a respectful, caring and non-discriminatory manner; that children separated from a parent in prison feel listened to, valued and included; and that all those involved are moved to take action to promote the rights of children separated from a parent in prison.



Helping children draw benefit from their life experiences, whatever the circumstances

Alain Bouregba

Psychoanalyst, psychologist, director
Fédération des Relais Enfants Parents

Putting one's life experiences into words does not always alleviate a situation that has caused great distress. Verbalising something must not cause the speaker to close in on themselves, but on the contrary to open up to others. Yet if someone is complaining, they are actually distancing themselves from the person listening to them. Narrating a certain experience connects the person speaking about it to the person who is listening when the latter finds a way to make the experience their own.

Communicating one's experience is to bear witness to our humanity, as it undergoes certain challenges by particular events, to an alter ego who can give a fresh perspective on our common nature. Sharing one's experience is similar to the following idea: from where I am, look at how we perceive ourselves.

The shame of feeling ashamed of one's imprisoned parent, which is the root of the child's sadness, anger or acting out in defiance, is common to many children's experiences, in varying degrees of intensity and duration. With this in mind, the testimony of children facing the imprisonment of a parent will most likely enrich those who are listening to it. Testifying connects, whereas complaining isolates.

Encouraging a child to interpret and share their life story from a victim's perspective, regardless of the adversity they may be facing, is a dangerous attitude, however well intentioned. What is more of a concern, however, is the kind of hypocrisy that results in a moral perversion whereby children are intentionally construed as victims, exploited as such, so as to advance a given cause.

For a child is not a cause, a child is a person. A teacher should therefore encourage the child to look for elements in their life story that will connect them to the person listening to it, and thus alleviate the child's isolation.

Over the course of their careers, primary school teachers come into contact with on average twenty-five children separated from a parent in prison. This can vary by a factor of up to six times the average, depending on the social milieu in which the teacher works. A teacher is

one of the *tuteurs de résilience* (figures or mentors of resilience¹) most favoured by a child. How can they be assisted in guiding children in relating their life experience with the aim of enriching others, rather than motivated by the desire to complain? Three simple guidelines can help: by listening to the child's silences; by transposing their experience into another context; and by encouraging in the child the desire to relate their story and even the pleasure of doing so.

An adult who is attentive to a child who has shut down completely as a result of sadness listens to the child's silences and takes the initiative to speak. Listening in this way will enable the adult to transpose the child's experience into a narrative in which the emotional dynamics are similar to those troubling the child, but are placed within a context different to his or her own.

The interpersonal processes that constitute or lie behind our emotional make-up are limited in number, in contrast to the infinite number of contexts and circumstances that can trigger them. Two contexts linked to events—quite different from one another—can lead to connections between similar people. This is the reason why the modes of relationship and emotions that bind a person to a loved one are sometimes expressed in mythology or in fiction or in a context that is completely alien to the person's daily life. Stories from the House of Atreus in mythology help us more effectively to understand the meaning and intensity of emotions that bind us to our loved ones than our endless introspective questioning does.

These kinds of stories speak to the child, they don't speak about them. This transposition reflects to the child their inner turmoil and dissociates them from the events that triggered it. This process of distancing the child from their emotions and the circumstances that triggered them helps foster the child's ability to relate their experience, or at least fosters their desire to do so.

¹ "*Tuteurs de résilience*" is a term used by French psychiatrist, neurologist and ethologist Boris Cyrulnik, who developed the idea of resilience in children after American psychologist Emmy Werner first coined it in 1982. "*Tuteurs de résilience*" refer to any role model or mentor in a child's life who guides the child and provides support, boosting their resilience. This may be parents, teachers, special educators, psychologists or any other relevant figures in the child's life.

The importance of schools being aware and sensitive without discriminating further

As a relatively inexperienced primary teacher, I recall the behaviour of a boy in my class changing. Periods of withdrawal would be interspersed with outbursts. It was clear something had changed, something was wrong.

On discussing with a senior colleague, I learnt that his brother had recently been sent to prison. Looking back, I know that the first question that came to mind was, “What did he do?” My focus was immediately on the brother—the offender—and not the child, the learner in my class going through a challenging time.

Even though I knew my responsibility as a teacher was to my student, it was a subject I didn’t feel comfortable with. It was the “elephant in the room” I wasn’t sure how to address. There was a sense that talking about it, mentioning his brother, or discussing imprisonment would somehow make it worse. The easy, and perhaps selfish approach, was simply to observe from afar, recognising that there was a reason for the behaviour, but not really reaching out to offer support.

When I reflect now, I know that I must hold my hand up and recognise that I got it wrong. My thinking was blurred; the child with potential needs wasn’t being placed at the centre.

This article considers how important it is for education staff to be aware of the potential impact of having a family member in prison, and to feel confident and able to approach the topic in a way which doesn’t further discriminate against the child. It discusses the importance of school support, but also the challenges in reaching out to and supporting children—an action which, whilst well intentioned, may run the risk of inadvertently further discriminating against a child.

Why are schools so important when it comes to supporting children?

Roberts confirms the important role that schools can play in supporting children affected by imprisonment and makes a number of recommendations for practical steps schools can take.¹ At the heart of this support lies the need to understand the issues, display sensitivity around them, and to approach the subject from the perspective of relationships.

Families Outside, a national charity supporting families

¹ Roberts, S. (2012). *The role of schools in supporting families affected by imprisonment*. In Brief 07, Families Outside.

Tim Haines
Family Support Manager
Families Outside

of prisoners in Scotland, has pioneered training sessions for schools. These in-prison sessions, run in partnership with the Scottish Prison Service, allow teachers to experience visiting prison from the perspective of a child. They provide a platform to raise awareness on the impact on learners and promote discussion around how school communities can best reach out to, and support, children in this situation. The impact of these sessions has been significant—“a must for all current and future educators” (University Education Lecturer).²

Without such awareness-raising, education staff can lack the necessary confidence and knowledge. At no point in my training, nor in my professional career, had I considered what a child might be experiencing when a relative was sent to prison. Whilst I was trained to be sensitive to the needs of all children, imprisonment was an issue I hadn’t really considered, and when I did, it seemed like an awkward topic, one I didn’t feel skilled to address. Bringing up the subject felt like opening Pandora’s Box, and if you opened it, you, as the teacher, needed to have the answers, the solutions to all that emerged.

In my subsequent work with Families Outside, I have learnt that offering the key to the box is often the best form of support a teacher can offer. As one student said, “having just one person who understands can make such a difference.” Reaching out and letting students know you are there for them and are willing to talk when they are ready, can have a positive impact on a young person. One young person explained this as being like offering “the smallest key for the door to be opened and that person can just keep the key and they don’t have to open it. It just shows that you’re willing to talk about it.”

Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs)

The importance of teachers taking these small steps is significant when considered in the context of research into Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs). The imprisonment of a “household member” is now recognised as one of ten ACEs known to have long-term negative effects on health and well-being.³ The research

² Families Outside (2017). *Teacher “Continuing Professional Development” (CPD) Training*. Available online: <https://www.familiesoutside.org.uk/content/uploads/2017/05/Education-Staff-Training-Numbers-and-Feedback-Summary-16-17.pdf> (Accessed 22 September 2017).

³ The Scottish Adverse Experiences Hub (2017). *Tackling the attainment gap by preventing and responding to Adverse Childhood Experiences*. NHS Health Scotland.

also tells us that the single most common finding amongst children who end up doing well, despite having suffered ACEs, is the presence of a stable relationship with a trusted adult.⁴ Teachers can play an important role as significant adults in this respect, as laid out in a 2017 Scottish Adverse Experiences Hub paper published by NHS Health Scotland.⁵

The paper interestingly frames approaches to ACEs in the context of raising school attainment. Adopting trauma-informed practice, which recognises the impact of ACEs and places relationships at the root of responses to them, represents good practice in supporting children at risk more effectively, and can positively impact on achievement at school.

Reaching out without further discriminating

Children with parents in prison are often well aware of negative assumptions directed towards them due to their parent's incarceration.⁶ This risk of stigmatisation can contribute to them preferring that their situation is kept secret. Schools must therefore approach the subject in a sensitive manner, recognising that many children may be reluctant to seek, or accept, support for this reason.

The importance lies in developing a nurturing school environment, where children feel more able to ask for help where needed. Equally, the nurturing environment must encompass parents, so that they feel able to approach the school and inform them of their situation. In doing this, schools will be better placed to put support in place. Often the key can lie in pupils and parents feeling they won't be judged, knowing that the school's focus will be on how the child can be best supported, and not on the offence committed.

This focus on the child and not the offence is expressed well in the following feedback from a teacher, post-attendance at a Families Outside Continuing Professional Development (CPD) session: "As a direct result of our [CPD prison] visit yesterday, my colleague and I felt confident enough to speak to one of our parents this morning and ask her about the issues that she faces relating to her partner being in prison. It really opened up a useful and valuable dialogue with the mum, and we found out more about the family circumstances and specifically about how

4 National Scientific Council on the Developing Child (2015). *Supportive relationships and active skill-building strengthen the foundations of resilience*. Working Paper 13.

5 The Scottish Adverse Experiences Hub (2017). *Tackling the attainment gap by preventing and responding to Adverse Childhood Experiences*. NHS Health Scotland, p.7. Available online at: <http://www.healthscotland.scot/publications/tackling-the-attainment-gap-by-preventing-and-responding-to-adverse-childhood-experiences>

6 Nesmith, A. & Ruhland, E. (2008). Children of incarcerated parents: Challenges and resilience, in their own words. *Children and Youth Services Review*, p.1119-1130.

we could help her and her son's understanding of what was happening to them."⁷

Difficult considerations arise where a school becomes aware through channels other than the family themselves, that a relative has been imprisoned. The school must consider how, and whether, to approach the family, and on doing so be respectful of their wishes. Care must be taken. There may be occasions where the child does not know about the imprisonment, the family having chosen not to tell them. The support of specialist organisations can be helpful to a school, to work with a family in these situations, to consider what is in the child's best interests.

Doing nothing—a form of discrimination?

It is worth considering that doing nothing—not recognising the situation—can be a form of discrimination in itself. Take a situation, for example, where a school becomes aware through local media coverage that a child's dad is in prison. The dad is well known to school staff, having regularly picked the child up from school and attended school events. By doing nothing—not asking the child anything about their dad or even how they are—the imprisoned relative, inadvertently in the child's eyes, may become someone who almost doesn't exist, or someone they should be ashamed of.

The effects of imprisonment are akin to bereavement, but for family members the experience can be a form of "disenfranchised grief". The experiences are not recognised and the imprisoned family member may not be spoken of, or if they are, only referred to in negative terms. For the child though, the imprisoned relative is first and foremost their relative—a mum, dad, brother or sister—not a prisoner or offender.

Reaching out and raising awareness through the curriculum—reducing stigma?

Families Outside has produced an e-resource, *Guidance and Resources for Schools in Supporting Families Impacted by Imprisonment*⁸. This document provides schools with background information, together with links to a range of resources to use both in supporting individual children, and to integrate issues around imprisonment into the school curriculum more generally.

7 Families Outside (2015). *Teacher "Continuing Professional Development" (CPD) Training*. Available online: <https://www.familiesoutside.org.uk/content/uploads/2015/02/Report-of-in-prison-CPD-sessions-for-teachers-2014.pdf> (Accessed 26 September 2017).

8 Families Outside (2017). *Guidance and Resources for Schools in Supporting Families Impacted by Imprisonment*. <https://www.familiesoutside.org.uk/content/uploads/2017/03/Guidance-and-Resources-for-Schools-in-Supporting-Children-Impacted-by-Imprisonment.pdf> (Accessed 21 September 2017).

By introducing issues around familial imprisonment into the curriculum, the stigma felt by family members can be challenged. KIN, a group of 16-25 year olds from Scotland with experience of having a close relative in prison, uses the creative arts to tackle the stigma they feel young people in their situation face. In their manifesto they state:

“We know there is a stigma about family imprisonment in our society. We believe society needs to acknowledge that a sentence goes beyond prison walls. The issue of young people affected by family imprisonment is not broadly recognised or given enough support. When a young person is disconnected from both their family and society, there is a responsibility to address this isolation.”⁹

Unless as a society we start talking about the issues involved, changing the focus from the crime and the offender, and start seeing the impact of the offender’s actions through the lens of those impacted, including their own family, relatives will continue to feel stigmatised due to the actions of their imprisoned relative, through no fault of their own.

Raising issues relating to imprisonment in a sensitive manner in the classroom setting can help tackle this stigma as well as create opportunities for children to reach out for support. With no formal mechanism for identifying children with a relative in prison, schools are often unaware of what these children are facing and are therefore not in a position to offer support.

Generic themes such as feeling isolated or burdened by carrying secrets, relevant to a range of children facing challenging circumstances and not just those experiencing familial imprisonment, can be set in the context of lessons on imprisonment. Families Outside has produced a resource, *My Diary*¹⁰, which can be used in this way. Teachers have reported using it generally as a literacy/personal and social development resource, which has led to children feeling comfortable enough to approach their teachers and discuss their own experience of having a relative in prison.

Of course, following such lessons, many children may still not wish to ask for help, but there may still be benefits to them in hearing the experiences of others, realising they are not alone in what they are facing. As one young person explained, “knowing that it wasn’t just me and that other people were going through similar things made a huge difference to me.”

⁹ For more information about the work of KIN, see: <http://www.voxliminis.co.uk/kin/>.

¹⁰ Mike Nicholson, (2016). *My Diary*. Families Outside.

Universal lessons around the impact of imprisonment, however, raise the question of whether there can be an unintentional danger of additionally stigmatising children affected.

Where teachers are aware of children with parents in prison, good practice dictates discussing with them in advance how they would feel about the issues being raised in class. Families Outside has supported young people where they have specifically asked for lessons to be organised for their peers in school. The important step has been involving the young person in this discussion, so they can be prepared, and of course the young person’s anonymity should be preserved, unless they have specifically requested otherwise.

Raising issues relating to imprisonment in a sensitive manner in the classroom setting can help tackle stigma as well as create opportunities for children to reach out for support.

Supporting at school: benefits and challenges

Education settings are a constant in a child’s life—a place where nurturing relationships can be formed. For

some children this may represent just knowing that they have an adult they trust whom they can speak to, as and when required—an adult who maintains a non-judgmental attitude.

In one primary school, support staff gave personalised support to siblings outside class, allowing them space to talk about their feelings. Their class teacher reported that, each time after visiting their dad in prison, one girl was always keen to tell the rest of the class about what had happened during her visit. Never once though did she mention that she was visiting her dad in prison. What was important to her was being allowed the space to share with her peers, the experience of spending time with her dad. This emphasises the key point: that for children in this situation, the person in prison to them is a mum, dad, brother or sister, not a prisoner. Approaching it from the perspective of relationships, not crime, is key.

Schools may feel they lack some specialist knowledge to support children around imprisonment. There can be a role for specialist agencies in terms of supporting children around specific matters such as visiting prison, understanding their family member’s offending behaviour, or particularly where the child has been the direct victim of the crime.

In many circumstances, if a strong relationship already exists between the child and school, appropriate support can be for the specialist agency to work with the school professionals already in place to support the child. What is clear, is that there is not a “one size fits all” approach.

The most important part is involving the child in any discussions about what forms of support would best suit them and being aware of what different agencies may be able to offer.

Schools are busy places, and finding the space in the school day to offer support can present challenges. Some children report that being taken out of class for support leads to questions from peers, curious to know the reason someone wants to speak to them. This can be difficult for young people, who may welcome support, but do not want others to know about it. Discreet support and working with a child to help them to decide what to tell their peers, are therefore important aspects of any support package.

Raising awareness and ensuring high expectations

There are many benefits to schools being aware of children impacted by imprisonment, both in terms of understanding changes in behaviour and putting appropriate supports in place. However, without sufficient awareness-raising amongst staff around the unique challenges faced by children with imprisoned

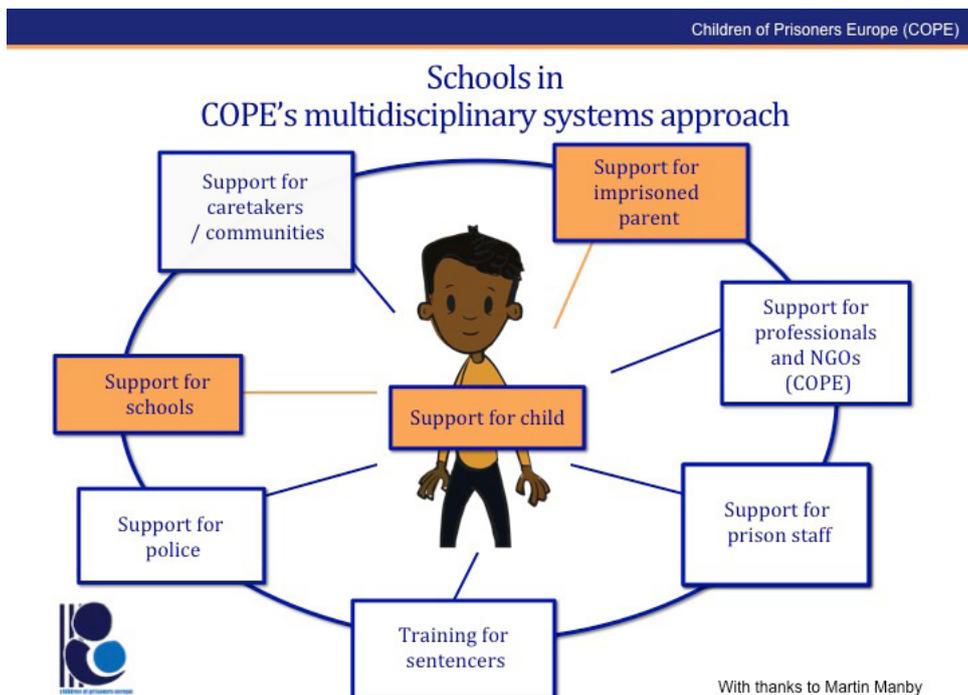
parents, there is a danger that these children will be prone to a sub-conscious form of negative labelling.

Dallaire and colleagues found in their American study that children with mothers absent through imprisonment were assessed by school staff as less competent than those with mothers absent for any other reason¹¹. This is an area that merits further research. It highlights the importance of awareness-raising within education settings, ensuring that when staff become aware of children with a relative in prison, it does not result in lower expectations being placed on them.

What would I say to myself ten years ago, as a teacher finding out a pupil had a brother in prison? It would be to see the relationship, not the offence.

To return to the example I gave from personal experience in the article’s introduction, what would I say to myself ten years ago, as a teacher finding out a pupil had a brother in prison? It would be to see the relationship, not the offence; to not feel unable to broach the subject, or feel my role was to “fix” a problem, but rather recognise that I had much to contribute, just by being there to listen in a non-judgmental and informed way.

¹¹ Dallaire, C., Ciccone, D. & Wilson, L. (2010). Teachers Experiences with and expectations of children with incarcerated parents. *Journal of Applied Developmental Psychology*, 31, p.281-290.



Imprisoned parents and their children in school: Pilot project at Châteaudun prison, France

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Just over two years ago, I decided to explore the idea of setting up a “homework club” for imprisoned fathers and their children at Châteaudun prison, Eure-et-Loir, in the Centre-Val de Loire region of France. As part of this, I oversaw an initial pilot project, which took place on 22 April 2015.

Above and beyond the more concrete objective of setting up a regular homework club, the project’s goal was to restore the bond between imprisoned father and their child, a relationship that is inevitably undermined by the parent’s incarceration. Logically, an additional aim was to reinforce the support of all family members with a view to helping prepare the prisoner for release. Before assessing the success of this experimental phase and reflecting on future steps, I’d like to first highlight the relevant French legislation underpinning this kind of initiative.

Since the humanist reform of the prison system undertaken by Paul Amor, the first director of the French prison service after World War II, resettlement and support for imprisoned persons have been incorporated into the objectives of various professionals working in the prison setting. The twelfth principle of the reform¹ states: “In order to facilitate their resettlement, support will be provided for prisoners during and after their sentence.” At a meeting of the “Prisoners’ Social Support Commission” on 25 April 1945, Amor articulated how families of prisoners should not be abandoned “to the fate brought on by one of their family members.” He continued: “Social services must serve as the fraternal link between a prisoner and society, and between a prisoner and his or her family, as well as a tool for facilitating rehabilitation upon release.”² Following this, socio-educational services in prisons, as well as—since the 13 April 1999 bill³—the French prison and probation service (*Services pénitentiaires d’insertion et de probation*, SPIP) have been responsible for preserving and protecting family relationships.

The SPIP must facilitate the relationship between imprisoned parents and their children. Indeed, the SPIP’s

mission, according to article D. 460 of the French penal procedure code, is to “help prevent the desocialising effects of incarceration on prisoners, to promote maintaining social and family ties, and to help them prepare for their social rehabilitation.” This mission was reinforced by the European Prison Rules (EPR) adopted by the Committee of Ministers of the Council of Europe on 11 January 2006, which, although not legally binding, are seen as an authoritative document by the French government. The EPR explicitly state that prisoners have a right to family relations: Rule 24.4 stipulates that “the arrangements for visits shall be such as to allow prisoners to maintain and develop family relationships in as normal a manner as possible.” This is underlined by Rule 24.5 which states that “Prison authorities shall assist prisoners in maintaining adequate contact with the outside world and provide them with the appropriate welfare support to do so.”⁴

It is therefore logical that the issue of “preserving family ties” was once again made explicit in the 19 March 2008 circular⁵ regarding the SPIP’s missions and intervention methods (article 1-2-2). On this basis, “a prisoner’s right to maintain relations with his or her family” was incorporated into French penal law of 24 November 2009⁶ (article 35).

In the application of this law, the 20 February 2012 circular regarding maintaining prisoners’ links to the outside world through visits and the sending or receiving of objects⁷ provides for relations to be maintained between imprisoned parents and their children. Several provisions—such as article 4.3.3, paragraphs 10 and 11—relate to this, stating the need to “facilitate visits by young children. The situation of a person with young children should thus be given special attention” and “pushchairs shall be available if the layout of the premises permits”, to facilitate the child’s relationship with their imprisoned parent. Moreover, with respect to schoolchildren, like those involved in the pilot experiment at Châteaudun, “notebooks, report cards, homework diaries, etc.” that are useful for decision-making can be given to the detained parent (article 5, section “Documents relating to family life and fostering the exercise of parental authority”).

¹ This reform followed the designation of a Commission instituted by decree on 12 December 1944. Source: https://criminocorpus.org/media/filer_public/2013/07/09/dap_ra_1945.pdf, annex 1, page 37 of the Prison Administration Board of Governors meeting minutes of 30 January 1946 (*Conseil supérieur de l’administration pénitentiaire*), (accessed on 9/06/2014). The fourteen principles of the Amor reform are available in full online on the following CRIMINOCORPUS site (French language only): <https://criminocorpus.org/fr/reperes/legislation/textes-juridiques-lois-decre/textes-relatifs-aux-p/de-1945-a-nos-jours/les-14-points-de-la-reforme-amor/>.

² *Ibid.*, Note 1, annex 26, 113.

³ NOR decree: JUSE9940058D, n°. 99-276 of 13 April 1999, modifying the penal procedure code (Part III: decrees), which led to the creation of the prison and probation services.

⁴ Recommendation Rec(2006)2 on the European Prison Rules, <https://rm.coe.int/16806ab9b6>, p.13, (accessed on 11/05/2014).

⁵ NOR Circular: JUSK0840001C of 19 March 2008 regarding the missions and intervention methods of the French prison and probation services.

⁶ NOR Law no. 2009-1436: JUSX0814219L, penal law of 24 November 2009.

⁷ NOR Circular: JUSK1140029C of 20 February 2012 regarding maintaining prisoners’ links to the outside through visits and the sending or receiving of objects.

With respect to modalities, article 5-1 stipulates that items may be given directly “during visits carried out within the context of a visits permit, for all documents relating to the imprisoned individual’s family life and to their exercising parental authority”, (article D.431-2° of the Penal Procedure Code). These provisions confirm the existence of theoretical principles and practical arrangements aimed at preserving the imprisoned parent’s relationship with their child, a bond undermined by the court decision to place the individual in custody⁸.

The legal basis for the 2015 pilot project to be put in place was established within this context.

The pilot project enabled two imprisoned parents to be more actively involved in their children’s schooling. Three children benefited directly from this initiative; another, a toddler, was also present.

The imprisoned fathers were able to consult their children’s report cards and could test their level of learning by reviewing various subjects. From the outset, the participants expressed their satisfaction at being able to participate in the pilot project. Following the end of the experimental phase, the parents expressed their desire for such initiatives to be systematised and made available on a regular basis.

The atmosphere during the meetings was lighter and happier than during standard visits. Indeed, the child was the focus of attention, not the incarcerated parent and their endless list of worries and concerns. One imprisoned father wanted to take the child’s report card with him, finding it a very important and valuable document. Another, after noting his child’s grades in English, began to drill the child on how to say certain colours in that language.

The role of the wives and mothers was crucial in their support for this initiative and their role bringing and accompanying the children on the visit. They enthusiastically confirmed their desire for this “homework club” to be a regular activity. The overall goal of supporting parenting and children’s education was unequivocally attained. This will ultimately help foster the parent’s reintegration in the family, even if only part of a pilot project.

The pilot project was carried out with each family separately, whereas the initial project had been conceptualised using a more collective approach (the

latter was not feasible this time, however, due to the insufficient size of the premises).

The head of Châteaudun prison⁹ authorised the visits area to be used for the pilot project, greatly facilitating its being carried out. Prior to the pilot’s launch, professionals in other countries who had previous experience with “homework help” initiatives were contacted; partners in Scotland sent feedback. The first question asked was: how can prisoners, who often have had poor schooling themselves, help their children with their homework?

The response was unequivocal: the parent’s lack of education has little impact on the initiative, because when there are questions about the child’s homework, the imprisoned parent knows they can contact the family coordinator or “coach” for the answer¹⁰. What matters most is the quality of the parent’s relationship with their child.

The prison’s Local Education Manager¹¹ was also asked to give their advice, in view of their detailed knowledge about the prisoners and their potential to be involved in such a project. Initial comments given by an experienced, uniformed member of prison staff were also helpful in preparing the initiative, given his familiarity with the imprisoned parents and their suitability for participating in such an initiative. This member of staff indicated the most appropriate site for the project. Similarly, the presence of a prison officer during proceedings facilitated the initiative and allowed it to be carried out in favourable conditions.

Lastly, another key element was the participation of a NGO specialising in parent support that, prior to the project’s launch, obtained the authorisation from the imprisoned parents for the project to take place and contacted the spouses. An NGO representative also served as a family coordinator during the actual initiative itself.

The project aims to make this type of initiative sustainable and to develop it even further, so that children can do their homework with their father’s assistance in small groups. One possible way forward would be to see if penal execution judges would authorise the prisoner to access a child-friendly room outside the prison using requests for temporary leave.

Assessments of this type of action in other countries¹² reveal that children feel more reassured when other

The results of this pilot initiative highlight the importance of a collective multidisciplinary approach to strengthening the relationship between the imprisoned parent and their child. A cascade of positive benefits in such an initiative impacts the family as a whole.

8 For the non-French reader, I wish to highlight the existence both of so-called Family Life Units (*Unités de vie familiale*, UVF) and family visits rooms, the set-up of both of which is underpinned by the following legal text: Note NOR: JUSK1440060N of 4 December 2014 relating to access and the functioning of Family Life Units and family visits rooms.

9 Mr. Régis Pascal, Head of Châteaudun prison.

10 This refers to feedback received from the Family Coordinator of Low Moss prison, Glasgow, who helped prepare the French pilot initiative.

11 Mr. Ludovic Nivault, Local Education Manager.

12 As with footnote 10 above, this refers to feedback from the Scottish project at Low Moss prison.

children experiencing a parent's imprisonment participate in these types of initiatives.

The successful implementation of this type of project requires the involvement of a family coordinator or coach, responsible for overseeing the initiative. There are different options in terms of who serves as family coordinator and how the role is defined, depending on the professional or volunteer human resources available on the local level.

There are a variety of practices in countries regularly operating homework assistance initiatives with respect to the family coordinator, ranging from prison staff to retired volunteers with a background in teaching, or to the voluntary sector.

In terms of expanding the pilot at Châteaudun prison, there are plans to contact an association of qualified professionals specialising in the field

of family ties. In order to make this educational initiative as fruitful as possible, there are plans to involve children's teachers to link homework help directly to their schooling.

COPE's methodological support in securing the link with schools should optimise the fathers' involvement in helping with their child's homework.

The results of this pilot initiative highlight the importance of a collective multidisciplinary approach to strengthening the relationship between the imprisoned parent and their child. A cascade of positive benefits in such an initiative impacts the family as a whole. The usual caveats notwithstanding, it is possible to hypothesise the initiative's positive impact on the child in terms of reducing stress at school and helping to restore links with the incarcerated parent, inevitably weakened by the parent's imprisonment.



Kindergartens and schools as places of support for a child whose parent is in prison

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Office of the Ombudsman for Children, Croatia

Children whose parents are in prison often grow up in silence, faced with many obstacles which challenge the development of their identity and sense of well-being. Their needs are not recognised and, more often than not, the entire family is affected by poverty, stigma, rejection and many other forms of social exclusion. Children with imprisoned parents are frequently subjected to prejudiced and stereotyped attitudes and are seen as being troublesome, “just like their parents”. Some children choose to exclude themselves, in an attempt to make themselves “invisible”: they withdraw and avoid participating in activities with their peers.

Everything that a parent in conflict with the law undergoes throughout judicial proceedings can lead to many changes in their child’s life, requiring considerable adjustment to the new circumstances. This in turn requires support, particularly that of adults and peers close to the child.

Relevant competent bodies such as government institutions, civil society organisations, human rights institutions, the media and others may all serve as catalysts for the inclusion and non-discrimination of these children and their parents. Schools and kindergartens are certainly such key catalysts.

For over ten years, the Office of the Ombudsman for Children has, as an independent human rights institution in Croatia, been working on the protection and promotion of the rights of children whose parents are in prison. Thus far, the focus of activities has been on maintaining a quality relationship between the child and their imprisoned parent; strengthening the imprisoned parent’s parenting skills; providing services for children and parents and contacts to civil society organisations; raising awareness about the needs of these children in public and among all institutions working with children; sharing European experiences, practice and research; media coverage; promoting the importance of providing support to the child’s family and recognising the particular vulnerability of these children.

This article presents the views of the Ombudsperson for Children with regard to kindergartens and schools being places of support for children whose parents are in prison; providing information and shedding light on the factors that render this support difficult; and offering solutions and examples of good practice.

What makes kindergartens and schools key places for support?

School has a great impact on the life of a child and, given that children spend much of their time there, their teachers and peers quickly become important

figures in their growth process, in the resolution of developmental crises and in promoting positive development outcomes. The first places of organised education for children—kindergartens—are therefore also important places for support, even if not all children attend. Indeed, they are perhaps even more key than schools, given the young age of the children, who are thus more receptive to positive influences. These early childhood education channels, coupled with the fact that parents are usually relatively involved in their children’s early education, facilitates early intervention and support.

Both kindergartens and schools create opportunities for strengthening the child’s resilience to negative influences, difficulties and exclusion, and for strengthening their mechanisms for coping with stress and the challenging changes they are exposed to inside and outside of the family. After the family, they are the second most important place in terms of the development of children’s social skills and teachers naturally become points of support for children.

In addition to their learning and academic requirements, schools also provide opportunities for children to form new relationships, with staff and other children. The quality of these relationships is crucial for the quality of support received.

Sometimes teachers know what is going on in a child’s family, but often they do not. They observe and react to changes in the child’s behaviour, relationships with others, socialisation, emotional state, playing and interests as well as cognitive performance. Sometimes, however, if there are no major “disturbances” to the child’s school performance, teachers can miss or ignore such changes.

To successfully recognise a child’s needs and in order to effectively create the conditions for meeting those needs, we must pinpoint what it is that identifies the specific needs of children with imprisoned parents with respect to those of other children in school or kindergarten, aside from the fact that they find themselves in a particularly challenging situation.

For a child, the arrest, trial, sentencing and imprisonment of their parent is commonly associated with feelings of shame and guilt. In addition to the formal punishment of the parent, an informal “punishment” felt by the child is not uncommon: exclusion at school, with the child being bullied, stigmatised and seen as troublesome or untrustworthy by their teachers. Other children and even staff may make disparaging comments, potentially regarding the child’s family. On the other hand, the child may

be pitied, not given incentive to try more demanding school activities, or be excluded from certain activities under the assumption that they would not do well or for fear of them being hurt. Secrecy is perhaps the most complex criterion that distinguishes this group of children from other vulnerable groups.

Some scholars argue that poor outcomes such as delinquency and dropping out of school are not due to a parent's imprisonment *per se*, but rather due to peer violence and a lack of in-school support¹.

What are the obstacles to providing support for a child in educational institutions?

Despite professional expertise, experience and motivation, many teachers say they do not know how to deal with and respond to children with a parent in prison.

Some teachers exhibit prejudice and tend to attribute negative features to these children—which, according to them, distinguish them from other children—or focus on the assumed causes of a child's inappropriate behaviour (having a parent in prison) or on the outcomes of such behaviour (a lack of concentration or bad grades), neglecting the child's real needs in the process. Very often, the school curriculum is considered more important than what a child is experiencing at home or what psychological processes they might be going through. Most teachers are ready to admit their lack of experience or specific skills required for appropriate support. Some note that they lack expertise in relation to the child's needs and that they have difficulty answering certain questions: should the child be told the truth; should teachers encourage prison visits; should they speak to the child's caregivers; what should they do if the imprisoned parent contacts the school; and what is the best way to respond if a child exhibits inappropriate behaviour?

Teachers are often unaware of the fact that the quality of the relationship between an adult and a child is not measured by whether the teacher has seen or heard the child, but by the way teachers respond to what they have observed². Adults tend to respond to a child's inappropriate behaviour by warning of the

Some scholars argue that poor outcomes such as delinquency and dropping out of school are not due to a parent's imprisonment per se, but rather due to peer violence and a lack of in-school support.

consequences such behaviour, without showing any interest for the needs hidden behind the observed behaviour. Such responses from adults can cause the child to withdraw further and distance themselves from any possible closeness with the adult. Some teachers are not interested in what the child is going through. Their warnings and threats about what will happen if the child fails to behave or hits another child can make sense, but they will not have developmental value unless the teacher shows interest for the child's needs, feelings or thoughts that led them to behave in such a way. Teachers often lack the skills to respond in a way that will create opportunities for the child to gain experience and develop a sense that what they need, how they feel and what is happening to them matters to others, and to create a sense of connection with an adult on whom the child depends.

Teachers also often lack information about the child's family situation and find parental imprisonment a "difficult" topic to broach. They sometimes show no interest in the issue, claiming to have no pupils affected by this. In other cases, they seek support themselves, commenting on the child's family with other teachers, thus jeopardising the child's privacy.

Findings from Croatia

In Croatia, in the context of Children of Prisoners Europe's 2017 campaign "Not my crime, still my sentence"³, the Office of the Ombudsman for Children explored the attitudes of teaching staff towards children with imprisoned parents in primary and secondary schools: consideration of their needs, rights and ways of providing support.

It was found that many teachers (56 per cent) had had experience working with children of imprisoned parents. The vast majority of them (85 per cent) felt that information on the parent's imprisonment was important for their counselling work with the child, since having that information enabled teachers to support the child in their relationships with peers and their inclusion in preventive learning support programmes. They noted that this information should be provided to them ideally by parents or other family members, and failing this, by the relevant social welfare centre or the school's expert care team. With regard to the child's needs, the teachers consulted felt that the key need that should be met was providing an encouraging learning environment for the child.

In general, most teachers voiced their insecurity and lack of knowledge on the issue; they saw children as "objects in need of protection" and limited teacher support to academic accomplishments and

1 See, for example: Moore, S. (1991). A link with normality: The role a school could play to help a prisoner's child in crisis. In: Shaw, R. (ed.), *Prisoners' children: what are the issues?* New York: Routledge, p.170-177; Scharff Smith, P. (2014). When the innocent are punished: prisoners' children. In: *When the innocent are punished*. Palgrave Studies in Prisons and Penology. London: Palgrave Macmillan; Romstein, K. & Gabelica Šupljika, M. (forthcoming). "Not my crime, still my sentence": Rights of children of incarcerated parents in educational settings. In: Romstein, K. & Velki, T. (ed.). *Children's rights in educational settings. International scientific monograph*. Osijek: Faculty of Education in Osijek.

2 Milanović, M. (2014). Što s djetetovim ponašanjem koje nas brine (How to deal with problematic behaviour in children). In: *Pomožimo im rasti (Let's help them grow)*. Zagreb: Golden marketing-Tehnička knjiga.

3 Romstein, K. & Gabelica Šupljika, M. *op cit*.

achievements and to preventive activities, fully neglecting peer support and the child's emotional and psychological needs in the process. They also tended to subconsciously have hidden negative attitudes, believing that children with imprisoned parents were at an increased risk of violating the law themselves. Over one third of those consulted felt that such children were at risk of "ending up like their parents" later in life. They also noted that these children had considerable emotional problems; that imprisoned parents are "bad role models" and that such children should be monitored more closely than other children to enable timely intervention. Nevertheless, over half of those consulted were of the opinion that children should stay in touch with their imprisoned parents.

In general, the teachers interviewed felt that they were not sufficiently prepared to support children with imprisoned parents, and that they could improve their skills through workshops and seminars, reflexive practice, professional literature and exchange of experiences.

Examples of good practice in Croatia

In her work with children whose parents are in prison, the Ombudsperson for Children and her team observed the need for an integrative approach for these children as well as for children in other vulnerable situations and the need to raise the awareness of and to equip school and kindergarten staff with all that is necessary to be able to support and meet the needs of this group of children.

We at the Office of the Ombudsperson for Children are convinced that raising teachers' and physical education teachers' awareness as to the needs of children with imprisoned parents should take place during their initial training and in graduate and postgraduate study programmes. For that reason, Office representatives regularly hold workshops and presentations for students at the Faculty of Teacher Education, the Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences and the Faculty of Kinesiology in Zagreb. While some of these presentations focus only on children of imprisoned parents, others also focus on the needs of other children in vulnerable situations. Students show great interest in this group of children, but education authorities still need to be sensitised as to the importance of including this group in the specific curriculum texts which define general and specific outcomes, approaches and activities in schools and kindergartens. This topic should also be addressed in all teacher training programmes to enable students throughout the country to learn about it.

In addition to awareness-raising and education during teacher training, it is important that those teachers already working are also sensitised to the needs of these children. The Ombudsperson for Children has tried to achieve this objective by forwarding the recommendations that came out of the EU-funded Coping Project research to the Ministry of Science and

Education, among others, emphasising in particular recommendation 12: "The role of schools: helping schools recognise and respond to the needs of children of prisoners"⁴. The Ministry has, in cooperation with the Education and Teacher Training Agency, introduced additional training into the further training programme for teaching staff, to contribute to providing better support to children of imprisoned parents. Ombudsperson's representatives participated in some of these trainings. The number of training initiatives relating to children with imprisoned parents needs to be increased on national, regional and local levels and care should be taken to include as many teachers as possible.

During her regular school visits, the Ombudsperson suggests to staff that they provide learning and homework support for these children, these being the areas which the children interviewed in the aforementioned Coping Project indicated as one of their primary needs, in addition to spending time with family after school and receiving support during prison visits.

Following the recognition of the needs of children with imprisoned parents by various civil society organisations in Croatia—thanks to the work of the Ombudsperson over the years—and following the piloting of programmes which they now carry out in several prisons nationwide, some of these organisations have expanded their scope to include schools and teachers, with the aim of reducing discrimination and fostering the social integration of former prisoners. An example of a valuable project is Uključeni roditelji ("Included parents") carried out by the parent-focussed organisation Korak po korak ("Step by step"), with the slogan Dalje, bolje ("Further, better"), which offers free workshops for children and families with loved ones in prison; psychological counselling for parents, former prisoners and their families; and a support group for parents. Teachers and parents can also contact this organisation for help with children's school activities and homework. It remains to be seen how many teachers and parents make use of this offer.

Reading programmes implemented in prison by the organisation RODA,—where imprisoned parents read and record stories which are sent to their children with a view to connecting parents and their children during the former's time in prison—are linked to an ever increasing extent to local libraries and reading groups, which seems a positive step towards an alliance for children of prisoners forged across different sectors and institutions. The National Reading Society in Croatia is one of RODA's partners in their projects for children with imprisoned parents. Members of local reading groups—part of the National Reading Society—lead prison-based workshops for imprisoned parents, whereby they explain and interpret children's books

4 Jones, A., et al. (2013). *Children of prisoners: Interventions and mitigations to strengthen mental health*. Huddersfield: University of Huddersfield.

for prisoners and provide an inventory with summaries of the books categorised according to age. In this way, they boost the imprisoned parent’s reading skills and confidence to record stories for their children.

Educational institutions can contribute to the expansion of this network and the creation of a sense of community by making donations to prisons in the form of furniture, toys, picture books, board games and magazines for prison visiting areas and centres. We believe that this helps in lessening the stigma surrounding children with imprisoned parents and contributes to enhanced public awareness about children of prisoners, reduced social exclusion and improved understanding of the difficulties and needs of children with imprisoned parents.

Conclusion

It is worth noting that currently in the vast majority of cases, it is only teachers’ “curiosity” that leads them to take an interest in the child and to make a

decision as to when to intervene or show the child they are there for them.

Not for a moment should the views of an adult on how the child “should” behave have priority over the child’s best interests, and no part of the child’s life should be compromised in favour of the adult’s priorities or objectives. This requires readiness on the part of the adult to change their views, objectives, strategies and expectations in line with the child’s best interests and abilities, and requires skills for building relationships with the child and for action which fosters healthy child development in particularly challenging circumstances⁵.

⁵ Milanović, M. *op cit.*



Pilot project: Involving imprisoned parents in their children's schooling

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Relais Enfants-Parents en Milieu Carcéral

Good relationships and active cooperation between families and schools help improve school performance and prevent student dropouts. It is crucial that incarcerated parents, like all other parents, be involved in the pupil's schoolwork and be aware of the various goals and hurdles associated with their child's education.

The Relais Enfants-Parents en Milieu Carcéral (REPMC) has been working to support parenting in prison since 1991. Parents who are imprisoned often make requests with respect to monitoring their children's schooling. In response, a working group was set up with Philippe Henrot, member of the REPMC Board of Directors, school principal and co-author of the book "Teachers, parents, student success: What kind of partnership?" ("Enseignants, parents, réussite des élèves, quel partenariat?"), with the aim of developing an initiative to help prisoners support their children's schooling despite the challenges inherent in parenting from prison. This project echoes the various circulars distributed by the French Education Ministry, notably since 2006.

Circular No. 2006-137 dated 25 August 2006 and entitled "The role and place of parents at school" highlights the role which each parent plays. "Schools and educational establishments must be able to foster relationships with both parents, relationships which are required for the monitoring of their child's schooling. (...) Therefore, the information sheet to be filled out by families at the beginning of the school term will mention contact details for both parents. When two addresses are given, any information that is sent by mail will be sent to both addresses." In addition, it is expected that "Principals and school directors should take all appropriate measures so that parents can actually see the results of their child's schooling." The use of new technologies is particularly relevant with respect to this.

This vision of the parents' role was mentioned in the French Education Ministry Circular no. 2013-142 of 15 October 2013 which stipulates: "In order to make school a successful experience for all pupils, strengthening partnerships with parents, especially those furthest removed from the school system, is a major challenge."

Activities to be implemented are those that bolster the parents' rights to both information and expression, by paying particular attention to those parents who are isolated from or furthest removed from the education system; fostering cooperation between parents and schools; and offering a variety of opportunities and means for exchange between professionals and parents by developing partnerships, particularly with associations.

In view of the various circulars and onsite observations carried out by the REPMC over recent years, it became clear

that any activities relating to the training and awareness-raising of school staff should be carried out in partnership with Rouen's Local Education Authority, given a shared objective of supporting the child in their schooling.

After receiving the backing of several local politicians, we met with Geneviève Avenard, Children's Ombudsperson, in Paris, who supports this project. In 2015, Najat Vallaud-Belkacem, then Minister of Education and, in 2016, Jean-Jacques Urvoas, then Minister of Justice, both expressed their interest in this pilot project.

In order to allow the REPMC to represent prisoners at their children's school establishments (upon request by the former), it is vital that a national agreement be reached and signed with the relevant ministries: Ministry of Justice, Ministry of Education, Ministry of Agriculture and Ministry of Ecological and Solidarity Transition. We have also been contacted by various representatives from agricultural and maritime establishments who wish to participate in the project.

Prisoners incarcerated in the various prisons in the Eure and Seine-Maritime departments (French: départements) have children living throughout France, which explains why the agreement must be national in scope.

Due to the recent change of government, it has not yet been possible to set up an initial meeting with the various ministries concerned in order to look at the draft agreement drawn up by the REPMC. It is now crucial that the agreement be signed. With the support of Rouen's Local Education Authority and many heads of establishments in the sector, it is, however, possible to bring this project to light.

We have implemented various training initiatives, both short term and long term, with Education Ministry staff. We have carried out awareness-raising initiatives in several schools in an effort to foster various partnerships. Finally, for the first time this year, we have enabled prisoners to request support from the REPMC in monitoring their children's school progress. This initiative has proved to be very popular, both with prisoners who have no longer have contact with their families or receive visits from their children accompanied by REPMC staff; and those who have regular contact with their families yet are experiencing difficulties in effectively monitoring their children's school progress.

Support for following school progress can consist of individual interviews with prisoners, meetings with schools (with or without the prisoner) and group meetings revolving around such issues as course or career choices or changes in how the child's schooling is organised. This support can also allow incarcerated parents to follow the evolution of—often complex—administrative and technological policies which affect how pupils are monitored and supported at school.

1 Madiot, P. (2010). *Enseignants, parents, réussite des élèves, quel partenariat?* CRDP de l'académie d'Amiens.

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