



Protecting Children by Supporting Imprisoned Parents: A Briefing for Professionals¹

This briefing is a guide for supporting the relationship between children and their imprisoned parents. It details two professional approaches, based on Child and Space's experience working with imprisoned mothers at Sliven Prison in Bulgaria, and a joint forum for training and reflection held at Sofia Prison and organised by Child and Space with COPE in September 2018.

Support for the relationship between children and their imprisoned parents, in this briefing, involves two aspects:

1. Support for the child-parent relationship; and,
2. Support for the parent as an individual in society and in their role as parent.

Preamble: This briefing is not a proposal of a model, but instead a discussion of experiences that reflect ways of thinking about issues surrounding children who have imprisoned parents, with the goal of integrating some of those ideas into practice. Process, in this case, is as important as the end result; what this briefing aims to do is to show the link between theories—the ideas behind practice—and experiential actions in various contexts, in this case the Bulgarian context.

¹ Based on the experience and expertise of Vessela Banova, Therapeutic Director of the Child and Space association, psychoanalyst, Adviser to the UNICEF project "Children First", lecturer at New Bulgarian University; Alain Bouregba, psychoanalyst, president of the Federation des Relais Enfants Parents and founder of the Children of Prisoners Europe network; Liz Ayre, Executive Director of the Children of Prisoners Europe network and Research Fellow at Maastricht University; Hannah Lynn, former Assistant Director of Children of Prisoners Europe network; and Brianna Smith, Project Coordinator and Researcher at Children of Prisoners Europe.

Working with imprisoned mothers

When working with imprisoned mothers, programming should focus on restoring the self-image and self-esteem of participants. Support networks and programmes for mothers afford them opportunities for personal and professional development, enhancing self-esteem and parental competence and enabling them to better meet their child's needs. Support can be provided through programmes that encompass some of the following:

- * **Vocational training.** For women prisoners: Vocational training sessions can be used as a vehicle for support. Highlight positive language and feedback during training sessions for beauticians as the treatments and hairstyling sessions are carried out.
- * **Dreams.** Use dreams as a basis for discussion. Case study of an Italian psychoanalyst who organized sessions with imprisoned parents that revolved around their dreams. Another efficient approach to encouraging expression is to identify something concrete and ask the individual to express something, either in words or through illustrations that tells a story about them. For example, one New York initiative suggested thinking about a scar that participants have on their body and developing a story about this. The stories were later performed onstage at the prison, by famous actors and actresses.
- * **Poetry.** Poetry can be a good means for expression and “unloading” feelings, and provides opportunities for self-affirmation.
- * **Photographs.** Draw on a photograph of the individual as a vehicle for expression. Photographs can inspire the individual to speak about themselves, their image. Looking at one's photograph can be difficult for some people at times, as can be gazing in the mirror at the self. When someone looks at another individual's photograph, it is a convergent process; when one looks at one's own photograph it is a divergent process. There are cultures in which people are afraid to have their image captured on film, for fear that it steals their soul. There have been cases where imprisoned mothers have torn up photographs of themselves, as well as photographs of their children. Shame can be one explanatory factor with respect to this. They don't want others to know that they are mothers, and suggest difficulties with self-image, and with their image as mothers.

Working with imprisoned fathers

Fathers in prison need support to better understand the adverse impact that incarceration can have on the child-parent relationship, and the benefits of remaining active in their role as fathers, as non-violent role models for their children. In some countries, professionals need training on how to better support imprisoned fathers and strengthen the child-parent bond—by reducing humiliation and alienation and fostering agency and decision-making in imprisoned fathers, while respecting children's rights and needs.

Violence within prisons is a major challenge—and an unspeakably complex issue—for imprisoned men. Whereas the tendency is for women to internalise violence, men tend to externalize tension and violence, to see a solution in acting upon violent urges. Sometimes violence in prison is a question of pride, of manhood, of solidarity, or of survival, and often these forces interact. Power dynamics between prison officers and inmates can make interactions between the two difficult, even when intentions are good. The attitude of male prisoners can vary depending on whom they are talking to; electing older professionals to work with younger prisoners, across generations, can be a constructive way to ease tension, as interpersonal dynamics can be quite different. As is always the case when working to support imprisoned parents, trust is deeply important.

The Papa Plus program came out of the Sliven prison initiative, and aimed to enhance the protection of children's rights and wellbeing by supporting the bond between father and child, and in so doing supporting a more respectful and calm prison atmosphere. Dynamic security—the idea that promoting family contact calms the prison atmosphere—is a central tenant of Papa Plus, which is a good example of the kind of reciprocal relationships that can emerge when prison administrations and staff work with prisoners to support them as parents.

The Papa Plus video developed by COPE, is an indispensable education and training tool central to this toolkit.

Papa Plus offers concrete pathways for supporting and strengthening the child-father bond, minimizing risks to the relationship and protecting children's healthy development. It also serves to raise awareness of prison personnel on how their daily work can incorporate children's rights and needs, and offers ways for accessing further help, advice and support as a parent from relevant cross-sectoral agencies. The cross-sectoral Papa Plus model can be replicated across Europe, geared and tailored to the specific needs of each specific context, and can serve as a vehicle for the cross-fertilization of COPE expertise and good practice. It fits solidly within a multidisciplinary support systems framework that is crucial to progress for children affected by the imprisonment of a parent.

Case Study: Child and Space - Sofia, Bulgaria

Child and Space is a non-governmental organisation established in 2004 that works to provide concrete support to children at risk, children with special needs and children suffering from mental health problems, as well as their families. Using an interdisciplinary approach, the team also contributes to the creation of support spaces for professionals from different domains related to helping children in difficult situations.

Child and Space carried out a one-year study at the women's prison in Sliven, Bulgaria. The study involved fifty women and mothers with children living both in and outside the prison, as well as professionals working in the Social Action and Rehabilitation sector. The project had two axes:

- * Workshops with imprisoned mothers;
- * Training of professionals working in the Social Action and Rehabilitation sector.

At Sliven prison, imprisoned women are able to study, receive training and acquire professional and vocational skills, and engage in structured activities with others in groups based on common interests—all of which provide a foundation for re-integration into society, and which many had not had access to even before their imprisonment. Child and Space implemented "clubs" or workshops that fostered reflection on family-related issues, provided insight on one's emotional life and needs, and enhanced awareness of basic rights. Women who participated could develop their own means of expression and gain a greater understanding of troubling personal and societal issues, which many articulated to have brought greater purpose and meaning to their lives. Trust was a key component of a healthy working relationship developing.

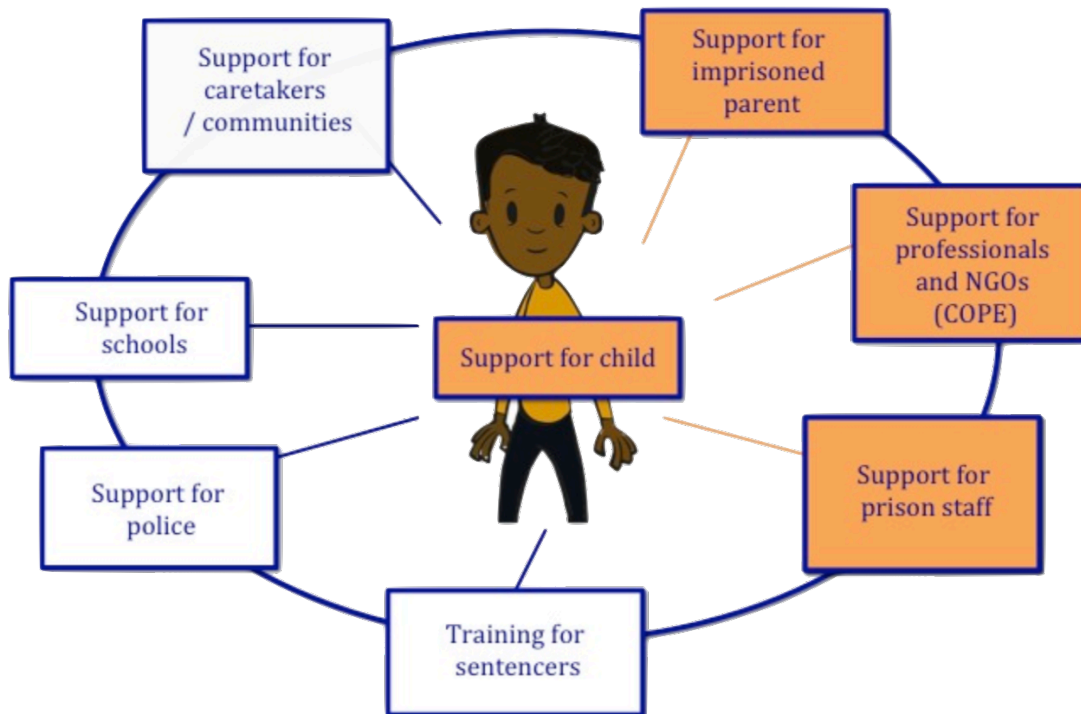
Findings: Working on self-image and self-esteem through personalised, structured activities were very effective, particularly art therapy. Activities included:

- * Unstructured focus groups
- * Drawing and collage workshops
- * Letter-writing workshops
- * Regular cultural activities (theater, dance, gardening — the latter proved to be very restorative).

Activities inside prisons were twinned with sessions at family consultation centers in the community with Roma mothers and young infants. Mobile workshops that travel to Roma communities should be considered in the future.

Conclusion: Socio-educative work that aim to build bridges between Rom mothers inside and outside prison proved to be very successful.

Papa Plus in COPE's multidisciplinary systems approach



Recommendations for professionals training on support modules:

1. Observe what is already taking place and insert and include suggested practices when defining the module and support intervention. This approach can be very beneficial and much more efficient in implementing.
2. Document what already exists. In Sliven, for example, social workers are responsible for focus groups and cultural activities. Professionals could expand upon this and incorporate a specific focus on children and families, once a certain progress with respect to self-image and self-esteem had been made.
3. As another way of building on what exists, enhance the role of prison personnel already active within the prison setting. In Sweden, for example, it is the prison officers and professionals who facilitate the support groups for imprisoned parents. Professionals need to accompany the introduction and development of this type of activity. Professionals will note that the enhancement of the prison staff's role in facilitating this type of initiative will in turn enhance how prison staff view the prisoner — who becomes not only a prisoner but a parent. This adds a new dimension to their relationship. Professionals thus can help restore the prisoners' image vis a vis the prison staff.

4. Have a third party such as a professional present during visits between children and their imprisoned parent. This serves as a kind of mirror for the prisoner, who can become more acutely aware of their behavior and interactions with their child.
5. Engage prison staff in role-play, where the prison staff themselves experience what it is like to be searched, among other activities. This is very useful. Prison staff can also play the role of children.
6. As a professional, don't propose a model, but a way of thinking and reflecting, and how to put this into practice.
7. A misunderstanding is a dynamic between two people. A focus on misunderstandings can be a constructive way forward — acknowledge the misunderstanding and work towards a rapprochement of the two perspectives.
8. Reflect on the difference between expressing oneself and communicating with another.
9. Speak in conditional tenses, not imperatives. This helps relieve tension, especially where children are involved.
10. Know the context you are working in when training prison staff. Are they family contact development officers or prison officers? Do you train them together in the same space or do you have separate training sessions? It depends on their relationship. Many family contact officers have been prison officers previously and therefore possess insight and empathy into the latter's work experience.
11. Invest in training family contact officers; they can have a positive impact on prison officers. Encourage peer-to-peer interactions that open up channels of communication.
12. The support initiative is about a relationship to knowledge. Everyone has the right to knowledge.
13. Respect differences in engaging with the world. If there are some who are more used to speaking, work to avoid this inhibiting others.
14. Some prison officers are against contact between children and parents. Try to bring them onto a more universal plane — discuss their relationship with their own parents and how they would have felt if separated from them, or currently, from their children. Foster empathy whenever possible.
15. Raise awareness on how imprisoned parents can be encouraged by prison staff to ready the visits area where they will be meeting with their children. This can give them a sense of engagement with the space and make them feel more comfortable when their children are visiting.
16. When implementing training sessions such as Papa Plus for prison staff:

- * Be self-reflective: remain aware of the biases and judgements you as an individual bring into the room²
 - * Remain as concrete as possible in discussions with prison staff when working towards a shift in attitudes;
 - * Identify areas in which the work of prison staff intersects with the overall aims of the prison support initiative and how their work can be enhanced;
 - * Break down into small groups as much as possible (mixing together prison officers and family contact officers);
 - * Work with what already exists (e.g., build on an existing initiative or one that used to be in existence);
 - * Ensure that there is some kind of follow-up to the training sessions, even if only a report to the justice ministry documenting discussions and highlighting challenges and needs.
 - * Take a systems approach when carrying out the training — how every action and reflection can create a cascade effect that can contribute to the institutionalising of its action and reflection and its sustainability.
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