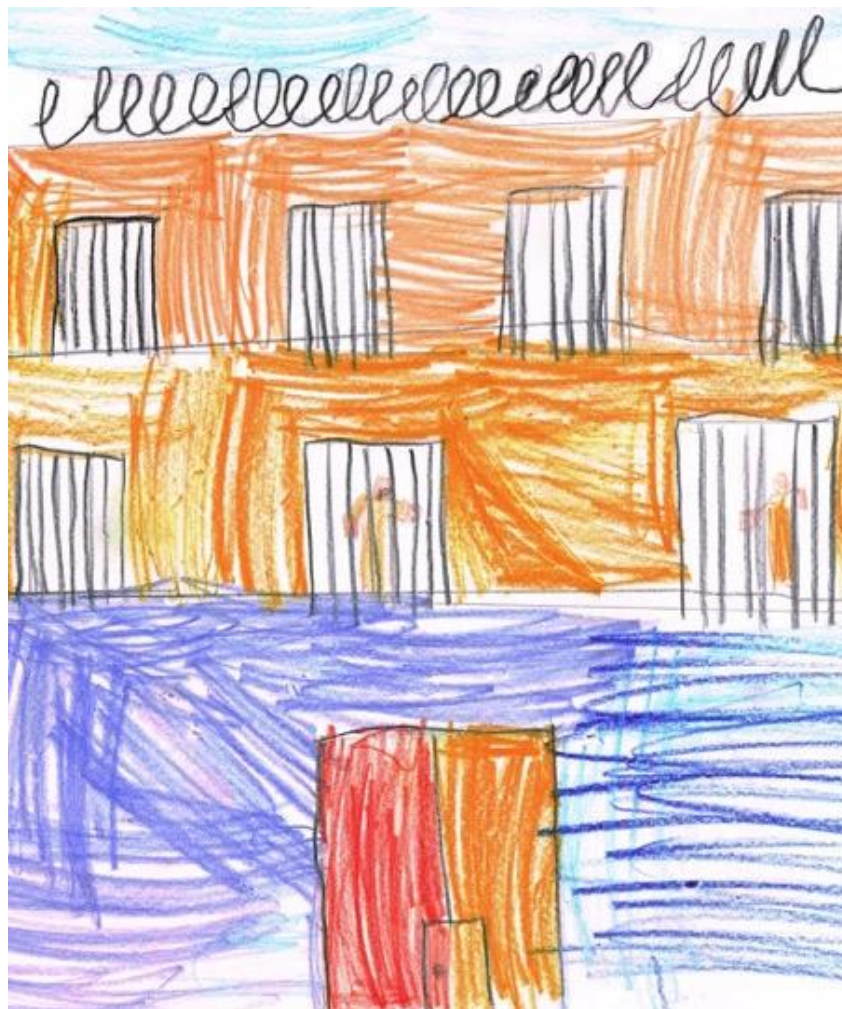




Reading between the lines: a toolkit to help schools support children with a parent in prison

Children of Prisoners Europe



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Introduction

In December 2017, Children of Prisoners Europe (COPE) published volume 6 of the European Journal of Parental Imprisonment: *First port of call: The role of schools in supporting children with imprisoned parents*.¹ The articles highlight the key role schools have in supporting children affected by imprisonment and explore the importance of Human Rights Education principles; listening to children, even in their silence; training for school staff; and involving imprisoned parents in their children's schooling.

This toolkit is intended as a practical accompaniment to the journal. It aims to provide support for COPE network members in how to work collaboratively with schools, giving examples of existing initiatives and addressing challenges. It also offers information and resources in the Appendices, which can be adapted as necessary and left with schools. Drawing from across the COPE network, the toolkit is designed to be a dynamic document that allows for ongoing updates from network members. In it you will find practical suggestions, things to consider, and examples of good practice from network members as well as international colleagues.

All of the quotes in this report are from children who participated in the pan-European study, The Children of Prisoners: Interventions and Mitigations to Strengthen Mental Health (COPING), unless otherwise stated. The names of children and young people quoted have been changed to preserve anonymity.

Background

An estimated 2.1 million children across Europe have a parent in prison, 800,000 children in EU-28.² In addition to having to cope with separation from their parent, children with a parent in prison are vulnerable to stigma, instability, poverty, and violence. The imprisonment of a household member is one of ten Adverse Childhood Experiences known to have a significant impact on long-term health and well-being.³ The more ACEs a child suffers, the more likely this is to impact negatively on outcomes in terms of health, school attainment and later life experiences. Recent research in the UK has highlighted the impact of ACEs⁴ and looked at how recognising and responding to ACEs is key to improving life chances.⁵ The higher the number of ACEs, the greater the likely negative impact on a child's future. Compared to those with no ACEs, children

¹ https://childrenofprisoners.eu/wp-content/uploads/2015/03/EJPI_06_2017-ENGLISH_Web.pdf

² Source: COPE network (extrapolation based on data from International Centre for Prison Studies and SPACE).

³ Felitti, V.J., et al. (1998). Relationship of Childhood Abuse and Household Dysfunction to Many of the Leading Causes of Death in Adults. *American Journal of Preventive Medicine* 14(4), 245-258. The ten items recognised as key as Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs) are: physical, emotional and sexual abuse; physical and emotional neglect; mental illness; mother treated violently; divorce; substance abuse; incarcerated relative.

⁴ Public Health Wales NHS Trust (2015). ACEs and their impact on health-harming behaviours in the Welsh adult population.

⁵ Health Scotland (2017). Tackling the attainment gap by preventing and responding to Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs).

and young people experiencing four or more ACEs are, for example: four times more likely to be a high-risk drinker; six times more likely to have had or caused unintended teenage pregnancy; 14 times more likely to have been a victim of violence over the last 12 months; 15 times more likely to have committed violence against another person in the last 12 months; 16 times more likely to have used crack cocaine or heroin; 20 times more likely to have been incarcerated at any point in their lifetime.⁶ The impact of ACEs can be reduced: children with support from a trusted adult are significantly more resilient. In one study, children experiencing four or more ACEs were asked whether, as a child, they had an adult they trusted and could talk to about their problems; even those experiencing four or more ACEs were four times less likely to end up imprisoned if they had an adult they trusted to talk about their problems with.⁷

The Role of COPE

Although overall progress on the issue of parental imprisonment has been made in Europe, thanks in part to EU support for advocacy on their behalf, some countries still have little awareness of it as an issue.

Even though [recent EU-funded research](#) indicates that 25 per cent of prisoners' children are at risk of greater mental health difficulties and other studies⁸ show that regular contact with an imprisoned parent promotes resilience in children, levels of service provision vary greatly, and policy is lagging. To compound these difficulties, few countries record data on prisoners' parental status, and children can easily fall between the gaps of the array of sectors, unique to each country (e.g. criminal justice, police, prison, education and welfare), which are required to meet children's multiple needs. COPE, the only pan-European network for children with imprisoned parents, is vital to ensuring that advocacy work continues.

"...it's good to talk so that I feel relieved, I do not hold it in me, I feel much better."

—Alexandru, 15

Working hand in hand with its 85 members, experts, and affiliates across Europe and beyond, COPE is changing the way people perceive children with imprisoned parents. We are committed to ensuring children and young people's voices are heard; using their messages to inform decision-makers; refining and systematising training and support initiatives; building new strategic alliances; and maximising network impact by capacity-building in communicating issues and solutions more effectively. Our ultimate goal is to further raise the visibility of prisoners' children, get them onto policy agendas, promote policy to ensure their needs are met, and ensure the healthy development of even a greater number of children.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Bellis, M. (no date). ACEs, Resilience and Equity: Setting course for a healthier Wales. Presentation. Public Health Wales

⁸ In addition to the Coping study, see for example Poehlmann, J., Dallaire, D., Loper, A. B., Shear, L. D. (2010). Children's contact with their incarcerated parents: Research findings and recommendations. *American Psychologist*, 65(6), 575.

The importance of schools in supporting children with a parent in prison

Guiding principle: *Schools provide a major opportunity to support children of incarcerated parents and to help meet their needs.*

Recommendation: *Guidance should be prepared and training provided so that teachers and other adults in schools are aware of the particular needs of children of incarcerated parents and can appropriately support such children in their performance, attendance and behaviour.*

(Recommendations and good practice from the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child Day of General Discussion 2011⁹).

The role of schools now extends far beyond a focus on children's academic performance. It is widely recognised that children cannot learn to their full potential if they are not supported when facing significant challenges. Most schools acknowledge that they have a duty of care to nurture children's emotional well-being and to provide appropriate additional support when necessary.

For the estimated 2.1 million children affected by parental imprisonment on any given day across Europe, school communities can be a lifeline. The Children of Prisoners: Interventions and Mitigations to Strengthen Mental Health (COPING) study was a child-centred project, running from 2010 to 2012, which investigated the resilience and vulnerability to mental health problems of children of imprisoned parents.¹⁰ Covering 4 countries (Sweden, Romania, Germany, and the UK), the COPING research found that children's resilience is closely related to sharing information with them openly and honestly about what has happened and the reasons for their parent's imprisonment, consistent with their age and maturity. Study findings also identified the importance of sharing information about the parent's imprisonment with professionals, notably teachers. The research highlighted the potential for schools to contribute to the emotional well-being of children of prisoners, particularly by supporting the child and

⁹ Robertson, O. (2012) Collateral Convicts: Children of incarcerated parents, Recommendations and good practice from the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child Day of General Discussion 2011. Geneva: Quaker United Nations Office, p. 51.

¹⁰ Jones, A., Gallagher, B., Manby, M., Robertson, O., Schützwohl, M., Berman, A.H., Hirschfield, A., Ayre, L., Urban, M. and Sharratt, K. (2013) COPING: Children of Prisoners, Interventions & Mitigations to Strengthen Mental Health [online], available from: <http://www.hud.ac.uk/research/researchcentres/acc/projects/coping-children-of-prisoners/>

helping reduce bullying and stigma. This toolkit is intended to support schools in implementing the COPING study recommendations.

There is strong evidence to support that having one strong, compassionate, caring adult in life is a protective factor and a means of resilience for a child. Schools can offer a web of caring staff, including teachers, in-school social workers, special educators, psychologists, nurses, counsellors, school guidance counsellors, librarians, janitors, and wardens. They can be places where children feel safe to talk about their feelings (see Appendix A) and where they can gain an understanding that what has happened is not their fault and, crucially, that they do not have to cope alone (see Appendix B).

"I used to get sad when classmates would say the word 'prison,' but my teacher talked to the class about it..."

—Elsa, age 7

Unfortunately, children affected by imprisonment are often not recognised in the very systems of care that are there to support them. If they are unknown, it is likely that they are lacking support. For some children, schools are places where, however unintended, stigma is reinforced, trauma increased, and bullying is commonplace.

Schools are the one institution that almost all children regularly attend. They are an important source of support for children with imprisoned parents and have potential to contribute to their emotional wellbeing. However, schools are often unaware of the existence of the children of prisoners, or their needs. Where the fact of parental imprisonment becomes public knowledge, children can be bullied and stigmatised. Where teachers or other trusted school staff (such as assistants or school nurses) do know about the situation, they can support the child emotionally, academically and practically, although this does not always happen.

(From the COPING report¹¹).

¹¹ Ibid.

Beyond the COPING study, there are additional studies highlighting the negative outcomes for children with a parent in prison, including a higher risk of poor mental health and an increased likelihood of antisocial behaviour.¹² While data of this nature is compelling, statistics alone can reinforce stigma, and the narrative that children with a parent in prison will do badly can be very damaging for children.

Working collaboratively with schools, and helping teachers and other school staff have a better understanding of the impact of imprisonment, can help to reduce stigma, trauma, and bullying so that children can reach their potential (see Appendix C). Schools can help to normalise parental incarceration by including it in the preliminary check-lists that all parents have to fill out at the beginning of the school year in the same way as parents might report special health concerns, food restrictions, or changes to family arrangements, for example. If the reporting of parental imprisonment is part of standard procedure for every single child, this can go a long way to reducing stigma.

Something to consider

- ✓ Think about how your organisation uses statistics, especially when engaging with schools. Highlight the importance of support for children, enhancing a child's rights and the key role teachers and other school staff have in this. Make sure that when you use statistics, you explain the reason behind the outcome – for example, it is not the imprisonment of the parent in and of itself that means a child will misbehave, but rather the response to the imprisonment (which may include social isolation and bullying), or the lack of response, that increases the risk factor of stigmatisation and acting-out behaviour.



¹² See, for example: Murray, J. & Farrington, D. P. (2005) Parental imprisonment: effects on boys' antisocial behaviour and delinquency through the life-course. *Journal of Child Psychology and Psychiatry* 46(12), 1269 - 1278.

"In my old school I told this one teacher about it because I trusted him. He was pretty cool. He asked me about my dad, things like do I see him, how I was feeling, that kind of thing...

There's another teacher – he was always negative, putting me down. He didn't like me and when he found out my dad was in prison, he took advantage of that. He'd say, 'you won't be anything. You're going to end up just like your dad.'

... I think it's better if teachers know because then they can help if I'm having a bad day."

—Frankie, age 14

(From Families Outside's Guidance and Resources for Schools in Supporting Children Impacted by Imprisonment)



Working with schools

There are many ways that organisations supporting children affected by imprisonment can engage positively with schools.

1. Thank school staff for the work they do!

Teaching is a really important job (most of us were helped, inspired, or encouraged by a teacher at some point), but it can also be very difficult, especially now that teachers have more to think about than just academic performance. Many teachers and other school staff feel more like social workers and are overwhelmed by the level of need they see in their pupils. Thanking school staff for the work they do, and acknowledging the challenges they face, can help to build a positive relationship with schools.

Practical suggestions

- ✓ Write to the head teachers of the schools in your local area and thank them for the work they do. You could use this an opportunity to tell them about the work your organisation does and the support you can offer to schools. Acknowledge that schools may not know who is affected by imprisonment but that it is likely that, at some point, most schools will have a child affected. Emphasise the importance of a collaborative approach so that schools don't feel this is just one more issue they need to be aware of and do something about! Consider offering a follow-on meeting to discuss collaborative working.
- ✓ Remind schools that they already have many of the skills and resources available to support children affected by imprisonment and that your organisation can provide any additional specialist knowledge/support if helpful.
- ✓ Work with schools to develop a policy of having a standard check-list at the start of each school year which includes parental imprisonment alongside other information.

Something to consider

- ✓ Schools are very busy places and may not respond initially – it is worth being persistent! Finding the right contact person in a school/education authority can help.

2. The importance of training

Training for school staff is essential if children affected by imprisonment are going to receive the support they need. Without adequate training and awareness of the main issues, staff may unintentionally add to a child's distress through casual comments or silence, particularly if the child knows that the teacher is aware of their parent's imprisonment but says nothing about it, for example. Some teachers may even openly and directly undermine a child's potential. Training is not just important for teachers: school administrative and support staff all have their role to play in creating a non-judgemental and caring community for children and young people. There are several ways of offering training to school staff, depending on an organisation's capacity:

i. In-school training

Most schools have a commitment to the ongoing training of staff, and parental imprisonment is often a topic that is not routinely addressed. Offering training to schools can be a good way of engaging teachers. Training can either be a short slot within a wider training day for all staff or a longer session for particular staff, for example teachers who are directly responsible for children's wellbeing.

Practical suggestions

- ✓ Find out who organises the staff training a) in individual schools or b) across groups of schools or regions. Having the right contacts can ensure that training is embedded into a school's / region's training plan, rather than just a one-off event.
- ✓ Make sure training sessions are interactive with lots of room for discussion. Possible activities include a true / false quiz as an introduction; a PowerPoint presentation to highlight the main issues; case studies to encourage in-depth discussion; and a short video to summarise the learning. Offer a certificate on the completion of training – this could act as a reminder to school staff about how to access support for children in the future.
- ✓ Work with schools to develop an organigramme (flowchart) with resource and contact information on where children and parents can seek support.
- ✓ As a follow-up to the training, suggest that teachers write an article for the school newsletter about what they have learned. They can then tell parents to get in touch if they have been affected. This can help to reach families affected by imprisonment that the school may not be aware of, while allowing them to reach out for help confidentially.

Things to consider

- ✓ What is the key message you would like school staff to take away from a training session? Make sure this key message empowers teachers to want to make a difference, rather than reinforces judgments and stigma.
- ✓ Is it possible to have a young person with a parent in prison speaking at a training event? If so, what support will they need prior to, and following, this?
- ✓ What ongoing support can your organisation offer teachers in their support of children with a parent in prison? Make sure staff know what you can do to give them a hand.
- ✓ Offering training for free may help you reach more teachers. On the other hand, schools sometimes have a budget for training, and this could be a helpful way of generating income that can then be spent on direct support for children.
- ✓ Make sure that training sessions emphasise the importance of a multi-disciplinary approach. Perhaps the training itself could be co-delivered as an example of working together?



Examples from the COPE network

- ✓ Barnardo's has developed a [Champion Initiative](#) whereby teachers receive training and are then given the role of 'Champion' to ensure that the needs of children affected by imprisonment are considered within schools. The Champion is then a point of contact for families and for Barnardo's.
- ✓ The Office of the Ombudsperson for Children in Croatia has undertaken research around the importance of training for teachers. In collaboration with the Ministry of Science and Education and the Education and Teacher Training Agency, training is offered to teachers in training as well as to established teachers.

ii. In-prison training

Training that takes place in a prison can help teachers to experience the various emotions a child might feel at each stage of the physical journey of visiting their parent. This is best done in collaboration with prison staff and has the added benefit of training prison staff about the needs of children at the same time.

Things to consider

- ✓ It is important to ensure that the focus of any training, particularly when it takes place in a prison, remains on the child and not on the person in prison.
- ✓ Training in a prison is more likely to attract people out of curiosity – this can still be beneficial for teachers, and curiosity is a natural reaction.

Practical suggestion

- ✓ Give each teacher a short profile of a child as they begin their journey through the prison (e.g. a 6-year-old visiting mum for the first time; a 13-year-old who is nervous about seeing dad again). Stop at various points (e.g. in the visitor centre, at security, in the visits room) and ask teachers to imagine how that child is feeling. This will help the focus remain on the child, rather than the person in prison.



Example from the COPE network

- ✓ Families Outside has developed an in-prison teacher training programme across a number of prisons in Scotland. For more information, contact admin@familiesoutside.org.uk

iii. Training for student teachers

Raising awareness about the impact of parental imprisonment on children as early as possible is important. Training for education students ensures that teachers are aware of how to support children right at the start of their teaching career.

Practical suggestions

- ✓ Make contact with the providers of teacher training to ensure that the impact of imprisonment is included in the fundamental training of every teacher.
- ✓ Use quotes from children and young people throughout the training so that their voices are heard.



"[My teacher] has been so kind, and every time I got upset ... I could always talk to her ... and she would just really help me ... because sometimes I just bottle it up and I just want to tell people, but I am too scared."

—Isabel, age 10

Example from the COPE network

- ✓ Barnardo's has developed an [Academic Resource Pack](#) to be used with teachers in training. It includes a training session and support materials for teachers in training.

Our International Colleagues

- ✓ [Project WHAT!](#), run by Community Works in San Francisco, helps children affected by imprisonment become advocates for change by developing the skills to give presentations to teachers and other professionals such as social workers. Participants receive training in public speaking; become part of a support network; and affect change in government policy and sentencing laws.

3. Provide schools with information for children

Schools often have a place (e.g. a library or health and wellbeing area) where pupils and parents can access information about a variety of topics, and this is a great opportunity to help children who have a parent in prison, even if schools do not know who they are. Having posters and leaflets available from organisations in the area can help to destigmatise imprisonment and might encourage children affected to seek further help.

Practical suggestions

- ✓ Offer information leaflets and posters etc. alongside training to ensure that teachers have an understanding of how to offer support.
- ✓ If your organisation is not able to offer training, arrange a meeting with the head teacher before distributing information; sending information to schools without training or prior contact might at best be ignored or worse only reinforce judgements.

4. Help schools to address issues of parental imprisonment in the curriculum

Article 1 of the Council of Europe Recommendation on children with imprisoned parents (adapted into child-friendly language by COPE network children):

Children of prisoners are all different; their feelings should be heard and they should be asked about what they want and need. Children should also be able to choose who knows about their parent in prison or be told who needs to know and why. Information should only be shared if it keeps children safe. People should care about the family's private life, and people should think about how to support the parent in prison.

Example from the COPE network

- ✓ As part of our 2015 "Not my crime, still my sentence" campaign, COPE produced posters for schools in 8 different languages that are designed to highlight the different emotions experienced by children when a parent goes to prison. For more information, email contact@networkcope.eu.

Raising the issue of parental imprisonment generically can help children directly affected have the confidence to speak to someone. It can also help other students understand that when a family member goes to prison, children

affected by imprisonment serve a kind of sentence, even though they have not committed a crime. There are several ways in which schools can include the impact of parental imprisonment in the curriculum (see Appendix D).

Some schools have regular themed assemblies, and this can be a good opportunity to reach a large number of children and teachers. It may also be possible to co-deliver a lesson in school as part of the curriculum. There are a number of resources to support this (see Appendix E).

Practical suggestions

- ✓ A handbook is a useful way of ensuring that schools have information readily available so that they can offer ongoing support to children affected.
- ✓ Encourage schools to give students opportunities to speak out if they have been affected by imprisonment.

Examples from the COPE network

- ✓ Children Heard and Seen held an art competition open to all schools in the region. Pupils were asked to draw a picture / take a photograph representing what they thought it would be like for a child with a parent in prison. This provided Children Seen and Heard with an opportunity to tell local schools about their work. Contact childrenheardandseen.co.uk for more information.
- ✓ COPE was invited to deliver workshops at the 2018 CATS (Children as Actors for Transforming Society) forum on the theme of ending violence against children. This workshop could be adapted for other related themes such as children's rights (see Appendix F).
- ✓ FFP developed a workshop that can be delivered in schools as part of an existing programme, for example bullying or mental health. The workshops are interactive and give students and teachers an understanding of the issues when young person has a parent in prison and how they can help (as a friend and as a teacher). See Appendix G for details. For further information, contact post@ffp.no

“School becomes something of a mine trap – gossip and rumours spread fast...the last thing you want is for someone to find out, and there's so much stigma attached to parental imprisonment [...] I ended up in this situation where I felt like I just didn't 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 (real name), age 25

(From volume 6 of the *European Journal of Parental Imprisonment: First part of call: The role of schools in supporting children with imprisoned parents.*)



5. Help schools connect with the child's parent in prison

Even if they are in prison, mums and dads remain parents of their children. They [should be able to] continue to encourage them, to tell them off, to sign their children's school reports and to love them as if they were still at home.

(Article 41 of the Council of Europe Recommendation on children with imprisoned parents, adapted into child-friendly language by COPE network children)

Under Article 9 of the UNCRC, children have the right to a relationship with their parents, unless this is not in the child's best interests. In order for any relationship with a child to be truly meaningful, it must include his or her school life. School is where friendships are formed, hobbies and interests developed, strengths identified and encouraged, and future plans discussed. A relationship to a child that has no connection to their schooling is far from meaningful.

Things to consider

- ✓ Although contact with family members can reduce reoffending, it is important that children are not seen as a means to this end. Children are entitled to a relationship with their parent just because they are children.
- ✓ Prisons and schools are two very different worlds that do not naturally meet. Organisations that support children affected by imprisonment can act as a 'mediator' between these two worlds, ensuring that both remain centred on the best interests of the child. Developing relationships with the right members of staff¹ in both 'worlds' is key.

Involving an imprisoned parent in a child's education can be very helpful for children and need not be complicated (see Appendix H). It is not unusual for schools to send out multiple copies of school reports (in cases of separated or divorced parents, for example), and this can easily be extended to a parent in prison. Newsletters, school reports, and examples of good work can help the parent in prison to connect meaningfully with their child's life at school.

Contact between the imprisoned parent and the school can help reduce stigma for children and can help them realise that their parent still has a role to

play in their life. Parent / teacher meetings when a parent is in prison can be done through telephone calls, video conferencing, and, where possible, face to face meetings. Training and support are essential in ensuring that this is beneficial.

Practical suggestions

- ✓ Give schools a simple summary of all the ways in which they can support a relationship between a child and an imprisoned parent (see Appendix H).
- ✓ Consider involving teachers in homework clubs in prisons. They will need support and training, but this can be very beneficial for school communities, as well as for families.

Examples from the COPE network

- ✓ The work of Relais Enfants-Parents en Milieu Carcéral in involving imprisoned parents in their children's schooling was discussed in [volume 6 of the European Journal of Parental Imprisonment](#). The article highlights the importance of collaborative partnerships, national agreements, and training.
- ✓ SPIP, Eure et Loir set up a homework club for imprisoned fathers and their children at Châteaudun prison, France. Eliane Frenkiel-Pelletier, Deputy Director of SPIP, Eure et Loir, wrote about this in volume 6 of the European Journal of Parental Imprisonment.

"I want to be treated the same as everyone else."

—Karl, age 17

6. Help schools commit to the ongoing support of children of prisoners

Rather than a one-off event, it is helpful for children if schools can commit to the ongoing consideration of the impact of parental imprisonment. This will ensure that teachers continue to recognise children of prisoners as a group with unique needs, and it will help more children and families to cope. It is common for schools to get involved in regular campaigns or focus days, and this can help 'normalise' parental imprisonment as just one of several issues a child might face. In the same way, schools often have policies on various issues (e.g. bullying). A school-wide policy on support for children affected by imprisonment is a very good way of ensuring that support for children is embedded into a school's ethos.

Practical suggestions

- ✓ Engage schools in COPE's annual ["Not my crime, still my sentence" campaign](#) – being part of a European-wide campaign can be a motivation for schools to be actively involved.
- ✓ Have an annual 'focus day' (this could be related to the COPE campaign) where schools are asked to incorporate parental imprisonment and the challenges children face into their lessons. Use resources and ideas from this toolkit to get started.

Example from the COPE network

- ✓ Pact has developed a [schools policy framework](#) that outlines a school's commitment to support children affected by imprisonment.
- ✓ Families Outside's Guidance and Resources for Schools in Supporting Children Impacted by Imprisonment contains an overview of the issues with lots of [practical advice and resources for teachers](#).
- ✓ Barnardo's has developed a [handbook for schools](#).

Our International Colleagues

- ✓ The National Resource Center on Children & Families of the Incarcerated in the US has developed the 'Baker's Dozen', a list of 13 things schools can do to support children who have a parent in prison (see Appendix I). Contact Ann Adalist-Estrin for further information.
- ✓ Pillars in New Zealand has a [toolkit for teachers](#) working with children of prisoners written especially for schools. For further information, contact Verna McFelin at verna.mcfelin@pillars.org.nz.

7. Collaborate with schools where there might be high numbers of children affected by imprisonment in offering specific support

Many schools now have counselling services, and it may be possible to offer training to counsellors to increase understanding of the issues around parental imprisonment and to increase referrals for children affected. Similarly, if your organisation offers mentoring, work with schools so that they can refer directly to your service when they become aware of a child with a parent in prison.

One of the most effective ways of supporting children is through peer support groups; these can help children know that they are not alone and build up resilience and coping strategies. Schools sometimes offer groups for other issues (e.g. anger management; bereavement). If there are high numbers of children with a parent in prison in a particular school, or in a group of schools, organisations that support families of prisoners can work with schools to co-facilitate groups.

Example from the COPE network

- ✓ My Time facilitates peer support groups for children with a family member in prison. It is made clear to children that everyone in the group has been affected by imprisonment. This assures children that they are not the only ones affected and helps reduce stigma. Groups are organised around games, activities, and discussion. For more information, contact Lorna Brookes at info@mytimeltd.org.uk.
- ✓ Fédération des Relais Enfants Parents director Alain Bouregba has written about the importance of seeing a child not as a cause, but as a person with a story to tell. Listening and storytelling can help children relate to their experience in a more helpful way.

Our International Colleagues

- ✓ SHINE for Kids in Australia has an Education Program which assists primary-school aged children who have a parent in the criminal justice system. In weekly one-to-one sessions of 45 minutes, the child receives help with school work and any other barrier to the child's education such as behavioural issues, bullying, or any other social concerns. The focus is on both developing the child's literacy and numeracy as well as increasing their self-esteem so that children can reach their full potential. For further information, contact inquiries@shineforkids.org.au.

Conclusion

Schools have a significant role to play in supporting children and their caregivers when someone in the family is in prison, but this cannot be the responsibility of teachers alone. When organisations that support children affected work in collaboration with individual schools and the departments of education and justice, so much more can be achieved to support children. The following Appendices are designed to be able to be adapted for your own context and to be left with schools as appropriate.





Appendix A: Feelings children may have when a parent goes to prison

The imprisonment of a parent or close family member can be a traumatic and devastating experience for children, affecting almost every area of life, especially if they have a new caregiver or need to move house or change school. They face a unique set of challenges and can experience a wide range of emotions, including:

Anxiety about being separated from their parent;

Trauma, especially if they witnessed the arrest;

Worry that they will be taken away too;

Shame about why their parent is in prison;

Anger at their parent for leaving them and at the authorities who took them away;

Embarrassment at what their friends will think;

Fear that they can't talk about their parent or ask any questions;

Confusion about what will happen next;

Social isolation, particularly if the crime is high profile or reported in an unhelpful way;

Sadness that the family has changed;

Relief that there are fewer arguments at home;

Grief because they deeply miss their parent;



Guilt if they somehow think they are to blame;

Burdened if they feel they have to keep the imprisonment a secret;
and

Overwhelmed, especially if they have to take on extra responsibilities at home.

*“My sister and me—we are real masters of suppressing things.”
—Claudia, age 14*

Children often feel a mix of these emotions at the same time, and different emotions on different days, and that can make it very hard to learn. Many children with a parent in prison also experience discrimination, bullying and increased poverty.

Schools can be important communities of care for children with a parent in prison. Teachers can help children just by listening to them and offering a safe space where they can share their feelings. It is also important to listen to children's silences – if they are keeping their feelings inside, this can be damaging. Giving children time, and helping them to build trust, is very important.



Appendix B: How to help children when a parent goes to prison

It can be very hard to know what to say or do when a child's parent goes to prison. Children in the COPE network have told us that they find it helpful to understand that what has happened **is not their fault** and that **they are alone**. Knowing these two things can make a significant difference to children and can help them to cope better. It is helpful to remember:

1. Parental imprisonment is just one of many challenges a child may face

If schools can 'normalise' parental imprisonment and ensure that it is considered alongside other possible challenges children may face (e.g. divorced parents or a health issue), families will be much more likely to share information with the school.

2. Not every child feels the same

Each child is different, and feelings can vary even within sibling groups. It is important that every child feels listened to and knows they can speak to someone about how they feel if they need to.

3. Feelings can change

If a child is really angry one day and says she never wants to see her father again, she might not feel the same the next day. Children need to be given opportunities to change their minds and revisit decisions they have made (for example about contact with their parent).

4. Not saying anything can be hurtful

If no one mentions their parent in prison, children may feel more ashamed. Even asking about how their parent is, can help. If the crime is reported in the news, it might be helpful for the school to write to the family and offer support; reassure them that the school's focus is on the needs of the child, not the reason for imprisonment.

5. Not everything is about the imprisonment

Having a parent in prison should not define a child – there are lots of other elements of their life that are also important. Sometimes children are upset because of something unrelated to their parent in prison. It can be hurtful for children when adults attribute every emotion to the imprisonment.



6. See the potential, not the problem

It is hard to have a parent in prison, and children can feel judged or stigmatised. Because of this their behaviour might be difficult. Teachers can help children to maintain high aspirations for their lives and can show understanding and support.

7. You don't need to solve everything

Having a parent in prison is a complex situation, and it can be hard to know how to help. The most important thing for a child is that someone cares about them. Just listening can be enough. Sometimes it is also helpful to ask other organisations who can help.



Appendix C: Common misconceptions

1. **“We don’t have anyone in our school with a parent in prison.”**

Just because the school does not know, does not mean that there isn’t a child with a parent in prison. There are 2.1 million children with a parent in prison on any given day in Europe. It is likely that, at some point, every school will have a child with a parent in prison. Having a parent in prison is not something that children want to share, because they may feel ashamed or worried about what people will think if they find out. By ensuring that parental imprisonment is addressed, schools can help children even without knowing.

2. **“I need to know about the crime to be able to support the child.”**

Children with a parent in prison have not committed a crime, and they need support in their own right to cope with one of life’s most devastating events. It is important to focus on the relationship, rather than the crime. For a child, the person in prison is first and foremost their father or mother, not a criminal.

3. **“I don’t want to upset the children more by talking about it.”**

Not talking about it can mean that children feel the imprisonment of their parent is something to feel ashamed about, especially if they know that the teacher knows their parent is in prison. Even just asking how their parent is lets children know you see that parent as a person, not someone children should be afraid, or ashamed, to mention.

4. **“He’s just like his father – you can see how it’s going to turn out for him.”**

Some children worry that they are a ‘bad person’ if their parent is in prison. It is helpful to reassure children that their parent can still be a good person and parent, even though they are in prison. If a child’s behaviour becomes negative, it is important to consider why this might be (e.g. bullying, stigma, social isolation) and help with this, rather than judge the behaviour itself.

5. **“We’ve read about the father’s crime and don’t think she should have any contact with him.”**

You may have your own views on the crime committed, but it is important to address the situation non-judgmentally from the child’s perspective. The child has done nothing wrong, yet their life has changed dramatically. Decisions about contact should be child-centered.



6. “It’s important that all of his teachers know what has happened.”

Careful consideration should be given to who needs to know and why; it is best to discuss this with the child first so that they understand who knows what. Some teachers may only need to know that a child is experiencing a difficult situation, while others might need more detail. Trust and confidentiality are very important at such a difficult time.



Appendix D: Addressing the issue of parental imprisonment in the curriculum

It is important to provide as many opportunities as possible for children to be able to talk about having a parent in prison. Because we do not always know who is affected, referring to parental imprisonment in general can help children feel less stigmatised and more confident about asking for help.

It is also important to think about language. For example, it is easy to refer to someone in prison as a 'criminal', but that might feel very hurtful for a child with a father in prison; to the child, that person is simply 'dad'. In our language we can help children understand that a person is more than the crime they have committed. Challenging judgemental attitudes can help children of prisoners feel that they can talk about their experience without being condemned by the crime of their parent.

Religious education / philosophy / ethics etc.: include discussions around questions such as, 'Should dependent children be taken into account in sentencing?' and 'How can you balance justice for the victims of the crime with justice for the victims of the sentence (e.g. children)?'

Foreign languages: translate articles from the [Council of Europe's Recommendation](#) on children with imprisoned parents.

History: consider the key moments in history of prison reform in your country. Have imprisonment rates increased or reduced in your country? Why is this?

Politics: consider the key influences of the justice system in your country. What trends are there in criminal justice in your country?



Appendix E: Useful resources

800,000 Voices

Publisher: COPE

Running time: 2 minutes

Available at: <https://childrenofprisoners.eu/videos/800000-voices/>

800,000 Voices was made by young people for young people. Reflecting the wide variety of experiences of having a family member in prison, the video highlights the fact that each young person is unique. It is available in several languages.

Here are some ideas for its use:

- ✓ Facilitate a discussion about the young people's responses – e.g. why some of them enjoy visiting and others don't (prisons are often far better equipped for young children. Teenagers don't want to play with toys and find it hard just sitting opposite someone during a visit); and why some of the emotions are positive (for some children, life has been so chaotic prior to the imprisonment that the removal of that family member might bring some relief).
- ✓ Role play a prison visit with students sitting opposite each other as in a prison visits room. Some pupils could be prison staff watching on. Make sure students know that they are not allowed to have anything in their hands (e.g. no phone!), and the prisoner is not allowed to leave his / her chair (NB – visitors are allowed to go to the vending machine and return to their seat, but there are strict rules about this (e.g. the prisoner and visitor must not share and food or drink). Questions to ask: How does it feel to have a conversation sitting directly opposite someone? How does it feel to have a private conversation with people (other family groups and prison staff) nearby?

Reversible Thinking

Publisher: Families Outside

Running time: 2 minutes

Available at: <https://vimeo.com/71246866>

This short video is highly effective in challenging the perception that young people affected by imprisonment somehow 'inherit' criminal behaviour.



Ideas for using Reversible Thinking:

- ✓ The video works well as a stand-alone ending to a lesson or assembly and can speak for itself. Depending on the class, you might want to open up a discussion around the following questions: Why do we label people? Have you ever felt negatively labelled? In which ways would you like to reverse people's thinking about young people?
 - ✓ As an extension activity, ask pupils to write their own 'Reversible Thinking' poem (NB – this is not easy! Phrases such as 'You're wrong if you think...'; 'It's not true that...'; 'Don't think that...'; 'Don't ever believe...'; and 'Don't assume that...' are very useful!)
-

Because it's our right

Publisher: COPE

Running time: 2 minutes

Available at: <https://childrenofprisoners.eu/videos/because-its-our-right/>

Designed for raising awareness around the rights children have to maintain contact with both parents no matter where they are, this film is useful for one-to-one work with a child and can be used to discuss ideas for maintaining contact.

Ideas for using Because it's our right:

- ✓ After watching, discuss some of the ideas for maintaining contact with an imprisoned parent. What are their thoughts? Do they have any ideas for what they would like to do?
-

COPE members

Our best resources are our network members themselves! Our database of ideas and resources is updated regularly so if you have any examples of engaging with schools in any way big or small, or you would like to find out how others have coped with challenges, please get in touch! We would also like this toolkit to be a dynamic document that is regularly updated and would value



feedback, suggestions, and examples of good practice. Please email contact@networkcope.eu if you would like to contribute in any way to this.



Appendix F: Workshop Suggestion (1)

This workshop was designed by For Fangers Pårørende (FFP) in Norway and can be used within existing programmes such as mental health or bullying. FFP has found it helpful when teachers also attend the workshop, as it increases their awareness and helps them understand how they can support children. If there is a child whom you know has a parent in prison, it can help to speak to them before the lesson to prepare them and to assure them that you are not going to divulge any information about them. It is also worth asking them to consider the possible impact if they share information with the class. There may also be students in the class who are affected whom you don't know about; remind everyone at the beginning of the lesson that you are available to speak to after the class if this is helpful.

Mins	Activity	Details
5	Ice breaker	A simple name-game such as throwing a ball to someone as you say their name.
5	This is Eric	Introduce Eric as a young person who is the same age as the group participants. Ask students to imagine details about Eric's life – e.g. interests, friends, music, etc.
5	Eric's dad is in prison	Tell the group that Eric has just found out that his dad has gone to prison. Ask them to imagine how Eric feels about this. Try to draw out a range of emotions (see Appendix A as a guide). Students may have lots of questions about Eric's dad's crime, but it is important to keep the focus on Eric's feelings. NB this in itself can be a good discussion point, as it is very common for there to be a lot of focus on the person who has committed a crime, while those affected are at best ignored or at worst stigmatised.



Mins	Activity	Details
25	Situations	<p>Give students different scenarios to imagine and enact, focusing on how Eric might be feeling at these times (this can be done in groups with each group presenting their scenario to the others):</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none">1. Eric and his mum on the bus on their way to the prison2. Eric and his teacher in the classroom (Eric has not completed his homework and has been late for class a lot)3. Eric and his best friend at a party (someone asks Eric where his dad is)
20	Conversation	<p>Discuss the different emotions Eric has in each scenario and the support that he might need. This can be widened into a conversation about children who have a parent in prison and how their life is affected.</p>
15	Hot seat	<p>The facilitator is Eric, and students can ask Eric any question they want about what it is like to have a parent in prison.</p>
10	Further support	<p>Ask students to think of what they might be able to do to make things easier for Eric. This is also an opportunity to tell students about your organisation and what you can offer.</p>



Appendix G: Workshop Suggestion (2)

This workshop was designed by COPE for the 2018 CATS (Children as Actors for Transforming Society) forum on the theme of, “Safe together: working to end violence against children.” The aim of the workshop was to consider the role of basic and targeted services in supporting children of prisoners and how children can be more included in the design of services so that they know they can ask for help when they need it. The workshop could be adapted for related themes (e.g. children’s rights, inclusion, etc.).

Mins	Activity	Details
5	Ice breaker	In a circle, each person says their name and their favourite animal.
5	What are basic and targeted services?	In 3 small groups - each group receives cards of services that children may use for support and sorts them into basic (e.g. education, health, etc.) or targeted (e.g. counselling, prison services, etc.) by sticking them on the wall in two columns.
10	Children of prisoners as a hidden group who need to be protected from violence	Play the video 800,000 voices; ask for feedback from the video; discuss what kind of support children with a parent in prison may need.
10	Ari’s story – dad’s arrest	Introduce Ari. Ari’s dad was arrested and sentenced to two years in prison. Participants consider how Ari is feeling; what risks of violence there are (e.g. witnessing the arrest); and what support Ari needs.



10	Ari's story continued	In 3 small discussion groups- each group has a part of Ari's story (visiting the prison; coping with the imprisonment at home and at school; and after release). Each group considers how Ari is feeling at this point; what risks of violence there are; and what support services Ari needs to reduce those risks of violence.
15	Feedback	Each group presents back to the whole group about their part of Ari's story.
30	Extension activity	Extra time can be used to think about the outcomes for children like Ari when they don't get support from services. The Reversible Thinking video demonstrates the difference it makes to have support and someone who believes in you. Students may want to write their own version of the Reversible Thinking script!

Background notes for workshop

All children have a right to "basic" services and special "targeted" services, including services that help prevent violence, and provide care and support in situations of violence and separation. Children who have a parent in prison may be at high risk of experiencing some very different types of violence.

Violence can be felt in many different kinds of ways. For example, we often think of physical violence, but children can also experience violence by witnessing something violent, such as the arrest of their parent in the family home. Children can cope with these situations but they might need some help from services. Each child and each situation is different, and each child may need a different set of services. Some of these children may not know what services they can turn to for help or may not have access to services at all.



Services that can help

During the arrest:

- ✓ Child protection services
- ✓ Social services
- ✓ Health and mental health service
- ✓ Information services

During imprisonment:

- ✓ Child protection services
- ✓ Social services
- ✓ Health and mental health services
- ✓ Information services
- ✓ Prison services should be aware of children's needs and should help make visits more accessible and child-friendly
- ✓ Family services which support all members of the family - these services ultimately reduce the effects of violence and separation on children
- ✓ Parenting services inside prison
- ✓ Peer support services where children can speak to and share with other children in similar situations

During the trial:

- ✓ Child protection services
- ✓ Social services
- ✓ Health and mental health services
- ✓ Information services
- ✓ Services that aim to keep families together
- ✓ Services that promote child participation: for example, via child impact statements

After release from prison:

- ✓ Social services
- ✓ Health and mental health services
- ✓ Information services
- ✓ Reintegration services for parents and children to help them get used to life after the parent's imprisonment, which can be a difficult time of readjusting
- ✓ Peer support services: children may still need support after their parent's release from prison; other children in similar situations can help with this time of readjusting
- ✓ Neutral support from charities



Appendix H: Connecting a parent in prison with their child's school

A parent in prison is still a parent and can play a role in supporting their child's education, even from behind bars. In most cases, it is beneficial for children to maintain contact with their parent, and it can be very helpful for children to know that their parent can still have a role in their life. Here are some ways schools can help children feel more connected to their parent in prison:

- ✓ **Send school reports to the parent in prison;**
- ✓ **Encourage the child to write / send examples of work to the imprisoned parent;**
- ✓ **Contact the imprisoned parent directly (by letter, phone call, video conference, or in person, if possible) to discuss child's education;**
- ✓ **Encourage the child to keep a scrapbook to share with their imprisoned parent;**
- ✓ **Help children prepare for a visit and debrief after a visit; and**
- ✓ **Authorise absences from school to visit the prison if visiting is easier during the school day; prisoners are not always imprisoned close to home, and it can help families if they know that they can be honest about why a child is missing school.**

It is good practice to discuss any of the above measures with the child's other parent/carer first so that they understand what is happening and why it can help the child. It is also important to establish whether the child knows that their parent is in prison. Sometimes parents find it hard to tell children that the other parent is in prison because they are so confused themselves or scared of what others might say. Schools can help parents tell children the truth, in an age- and stage-appropriate way.

What if no contact is allowed?

The most important thing is that children feel listened to. Children need to feel that their views are taken into account. Some children find it helpful to write a letter to their family member, even if that letter is never sent. Others will need



specialist support to come to terms with what has happened – children have a right to understand reasons why. This can be a lengthy process and must always be child-centred.



Appendix I: 13 Ways to Support Children of Incarcerated Parents in Schools¹³

1. Know yourself and your staff: The feelings, experiences and attitudes of school personal influence the way children of incarcerated parents feel about themselves.

You do not have to say negative things about the parents – if you think it, children sense it.

2. Remember: All children of incarcerated parents mourn the loss in some way, even if they did not live with or have contact with that parent.

Honouring the significance of the parent to the child is critical to building trust and providing appropriate support.

3. Be aware and sensitive through universal outreach. Understand that children and families of the incarcerated are everywhere and by considering that parental incarceration is a possibility without being judgmental.

Advertise services to all families – not just families in “those” neighbourhoods.

4. Display and provide materials and articles about children of the incarcerated on bulletin boards and in parent newsletters for all families. You may be reaching a family that you would not have thought was impacted by incarceration. Families also know other families. Provide educational materials to parents and support them in talking to their children about the incarcerated parents. See *the Children of Incarcerated Parents Library* at <https://nrccfi.camden.rutgers.edu/>

5. Help children talk about their feelings by creating an atmosphere of safety and trust, acknowledging the confusion, pain or anger felt by children with an incarcerated parent and by mentioning that this is a life circumstance for many children.

Waiting for children to bring it up may make the child feel that the adult is uncomfortable with the topic. The children say they typically get uncomfortable silence or a well-intentioned pep talk about how the child

¹³ Adalist-Estrin, A. (2014). 13 Ways to Support Children with Incarcerated Parents in Schools. Camden, NJ: The National Resource Center on Children and Families of the Incarcerated.



doesn't have to follow in the parent's footsteps when they talk about their parent and both feel judgmental.

6. Form support groups for children of incarcerated parents.

Contact us for our training information on designing a support group, <https://nrccfi.camden.rutgers.edu/>

7. Promote inclusion of books and materials about children of incarcerated parents in classrooms and libraries. On the COPE website you can find a list of such books in the resources section.

Would you use books like "Visiting Day" by Jacqueline Woodson or "An Inmates Daughter" by Jan Walker or the new "Little Children, Big Challenges: Incarceration Toolkit from Sesame Street in your classroom even if there were no known children of the incarcerated among the children?

8. Consider including the topic of incarcerated parents in specific curriculum areas such as word problems in Math, examples in units on families or feelings and research projects for older children.

9. Explore the possibility of including incarcerated parents, where feasible and appropriate, in school conferences and classroom activities such as Mystery Readers.

This requires collaboration with the prisons, jails and Departments of Corrections. Do you know who to contact to plan for this?

10. Develop awareness about the impact of school practices and policies on children of the incarcerated and advocate for training opportunities for teachers, counsellors and school social workers on children of incarcerated parents.

11. Find out about community programs that provide services to children and families of the incarcerated such as mentoring, transportation, re-entry or visitation supports.

Visit our Directory of Programs <https://nrccfi.camden.rutgers.edu/>

12. Bring the topic to the public's attention by suggesting children and families of the incarcerated as a focus for programs and projects for service organizations and communities of faith in your community.



Encourage the use of accurate and helpful statistics in portraying the needs of children and families of the incarcerated

13. ALWAYS include children of the incarcerated, their caregivers, incarcerated parents and formerly incarcerated parents in defining the problems and designing solutions. They should have a place at every meeting or table where their needs and concerns are discussed and planned for. They are the experts!