

“It’s No Holiday” – the experiences of young people affected by imprisonment

in brief

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“Yeah, the reason why my sister went to prison was she started doing drugs, and obviously me and my younger sister never knew anything about it, we just knew there was something going on, but nobody would talk about it.”

Key points

An estimated 13,500 children and young people are affected in Scotland each year by the loss of a family member to imprisonment. The consequent stress to them can damage their health, educational attainment and short and long term life chances — including risk of their own involvement in crime.¹

Traditionally, this factor has been overlooked in policies and practice for vulnerable families across all areas of social policy, yet young people have the same need for information, support and involvement as adult members of the family.²

“Its No Holiday” is a DVD produced with young people (aged 14–19) which captures their experiences of losing a family member to imprisonment.

The resource forms the core element of tailored training packages for the range of professionals and agencies which have a role to play in either mitigating the damaging effects of the experience or in providing active support.

Our target audiences are in education, children and family services, health, community education and youth work, as well as the justice system — police, courts and prisons.

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1. *Prison Without Bars* by Dr N Loucks, Families Outside, 2004. Available at www.familiesoutside.org.uk
2. *Teenagers with a Family Member in Prison*, Families Outside, 2002.

Young people speak for themselves

The impact of losing a family member to imprisonment is not a one off trauma. It starts at the point of arrest, reverberates through court and trial, imprisonment itself and then the readjustments demanded of all family members after release.

Arrest

The arrest of a family member can be a frightening experience for a young person and in the midst of a stressful situation their own need for information and reassurance can easily be overlooked:

“My big sister was there and there was obviously the police, my dad was sort of arguing and that so you could tell there was something going on... obviously, we were really upset and we were just like what’s going on? And we never knew what was going to happen.”

Arrest can also be the start of a role change for older siblings who begin to take on adult responsibilities for the family, often at the cost of suppressing their own needs:

“I got a phone call from my wee sister... and she was like, watch when you go in cos dad’s greeting

and that and I was like what for? And she goes well, mind how mum was meant to be getting 80 hours community service or something, the court says that she’s gone in for four month the day and so it was really just trying to, in a sense watch over them and trying to no show that it was really hurting me inside too.”

Trial and Conviction

Young people can get caught up in family splits and rifts, adding to their stress:

“Some folk in my family were glad, obviously my step mum was upset and all that, but I was still a bit confused... you hear a lot off a lot of folk like, aye, that’s why your dad went to jail, your stepmum’s lying to you and all that, but you just forget about it eh?”

Often adults attempt to “protect” young people from the reality of the imprisonment although they often find out:

“They just said he was going away on a wee holiday for a couple of month, that was basically it... like I knew he was in jail and all that, but they all tried to sugar it all up for me, cos I was just a kid basically, so if anybody asked me Where’s your dad? Oh, he’s on holiday this place and all that.”

Visiting

Visiting a prison is a stressful experience:

“...I really hated it, we went through the metal detectors and then there was I don’t know if they were prison officers or something, but they searched everything, they searched our pockets, our bags, they even searched the baby’s nappy for stuff...”

Yet it’s possible to lessen the stress by giving information in the right way:

“It was all right, eh, cos I can understand that they were trying to search me just to make sure that I wasn’t taking drugs in or knives in or whatever for him eh, so it was all right.”

The limited nature of the contact causes frustrations:

“...It’s nothing like what you see on the TV or what people talk about. You go in, you’re allowed to have a cuddle but that’s it, you’re no allowed to do anything else, just have a cuddle, you’ve to keep your hands on the table, I wasn’t allowed to touch him when we were sitting at the table, unless I was going away and then I was allowed to cuddle him.”

Prison visits are often characterised by both parties not wanting to worry the other — and for young people restricted opportunities to be “parented”.

“It was like you never got to say everything that you wanted to say, and neither did he so you had to wait until the next time, and then after when you went the next time you never had a chance to say everything you wanted to say, when you went back up, so, it was no long enough.”

Exposure to prison can also be damaging in other ways:

“I think it was exciting. I knew most of the things that were going on by then, in jail. Eh, so I was like, so what, anything different happened from then, and all that, just learning from it. So, if ever I go there I would know. *(Smiles)* IF I go there...”

Reunion

For some young people reunion is straightforward:

“The day that she came out, we went out somewhere and all that, in a sense it was like a birthday party but better.”

But depending on a whole range of factors including the nature and victim of the crime, reaction of the family and community or previous relationships the situation is more complex:

“Nah, I knew nothing had changed, I wasn’t really pleased he was back, because I don’t have a very good relationship with my dad.”

“I was really close to my uncle Brian and when he got put away it was like a six year sentence for me, I never got to see him, never got to spend any time with him, so that was bad for me as well as for him.”



“The way we grew up is we keep it all inside the family, we don't tell anybody outside, and the police, the social workers, don't say anything, cos they're only there to either hurt you or do something terrible.”

Telling friends

Friends are a significant source of support for young people to deal with many personal problems³, especially when adults are unable, or unwilling to offer support yet the stigma of family imprisonment is a barrier which further isolates these young people from their peers:

“Basically I didn't want them to know cos, most of them were more upper class, their parents didn't go getting arrested and that, so basically I wanted to keep it a secret from them, cos I suppose on some level I basically felt ashamed of my dad, ken ashamed to admit he was a criminal, and that, and that he was stupid enough to get caught”

Where to go for help

Generally young people had little experience of any sort of proactive support to share:

“We got a bit of support off the teachers and that, at my primary school, but that was about it.”

“...Like there's no much information readily available for like young people or even older people to go and visit relatives, or friends, boyfriends in jail and all that.”



How has it affected your life?

The young people recognised for themselves how the imprisonment of a family member had impacted on them; affecting behaviour:

“I used to be a little shit in school basically, even with my mum and that and I think that actually comes from my childhood.”

The pressure of adult responsibilities:

“I was more like a mum to her (her sister), because she saw that, she saw me as a mother figure. Like, cos of everything that was going on, I looked after her.”

Our original research showed how professionals as well as communities stigmatise young people who have lost a family member to imprisonment:

“I am who I am — it doesn't matter who my dad is.”

“Think about your kids and how you're going to affect your family, before you do it, simple as that, cos they're the ones that are left picking up the pieces when you've been put away inside.”



What young people need

The young people who shared their experiences for this initiative and during our previous research highlight how strains on the whole family impact on them including: not being given information to make sense of what is happening, family splits and conflicts of loyalty (especially where they — or another family member — have been the victim of the crime), having to live elsewhere and loss of familiar home environment, loss of support — from the absent family member and because remaining adults are dealing with their own stress, taking on adult responsibilities eg caring for younger siblings, wanting to emulate the absent person by copying the criminal behaviour, being bullied and stigmatised at school or in their communities, dealing with the difficulties of trying to maintain a relationship whilst separated.

Feeling an ongoing sense of loss akin to the grief of a bereavement.



Without acknowledgement and support young people can end up expressing their stress through substance abuse, behavioural problems, deterioration of school performance, poor mental health.

The key message for professionals is to recognise and address the support, information and signposting needs of these young people.

Most important is simply to acknowledge the impact of imprisonment of a family member (especially when it may be just one feature of a complex and chaotic family situation) and to listen to what that means for the young person. In effect applying good practice in child centred approaches to help these young people deal with a burden which can rob them of their childhood.

To discuss tailored training options based on this material contact the Director



Families Outside provide a free confidential national Helpline available to anyone who has a family member or friend in custody in Scotland which enables and empowers families by offering information, support and a signposting service.



We undertake research, development and deliver training independently and in partnership with a range of agencies which have a role to play in meeting the needs of families affected by imprisonment.



We work positively with the Scottish Prison Service, Scottish Executive, Local Authorities and other statutory and voluntary bodies in order to achieve positive change for families affected by imprisonment.

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voicing the needs of families affected by imprisonment