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The Role of Schools in Assisting Children and Young People with a Parent in Prison – findings from the COPING Project

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Abstract

Children who experience parental incarceration are vulnerable to facing poor outcomes in terms of their mental health and education. Schools have the potential to provide a point of stability during a parent's prison sentence, thereby assisting children affected by parental imprisonment to remain resilient. This paper will present school related findings from COPING, a three year pan-European research project that investigated the impact of parental imprisonment on children in the UK, Romania, Germany and Sweden. It will focus on good practice points for schools regarding how they can most effectively support children of prisoners by drawing on the views expressed by young people and families affected by imprisonment, as well as professionals who work in a school setting. Young people placed a high value on support from trusted school staff that had a general awareness of issues relating to parental imprisonment as well as knowledge of their own particular situation. This paper will therefore stress the need for all school staff to be trained with regard to the impact upon children of parental imprisonment. The paper will also include a discussion of workshops involving young people in Secondary education that were designed to enable them to think about the impact of parental imprisonment.

Keywords: *Coping, parental imprisonment, stigma, citizenship*

1 The COPING Project overview

The COPING Project was a three year European Commission funded research study of the impact of imprisonment on children which focussed on the U.K. Sweden, Germany and Romania. It concluded in January 2013 and was a child centred research project that focussed on hearing from children directly about their experiences. It was one of the largest studies of the impact of parental imprisonment ever undertaken. In each country a University was partnered with a Non Governmental Organisation (NGO) that worked with children of prisoners. The NGO Eurochips, that supports organisations working with children of prisoners across Europe, and the Quaker United Nations Office, that campaigns on Human and Children's Rights issues, were also partners.

2 Methodology

In each partner country separate surveys were completed by children between the ages of 7 and 17, and the adults caring for them, to assess their well being. Established research instruments such as Goodman's Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire, the Rosenberg Self Esteem Scale and Kidscreen were embedded within the surveys. This allowed the

results of the surveys to be benchmarked against results for children who did not have a parent in prison. The Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire is a tool for behavioural screening developed by Robert Goodman, a UK based child psychiatrist, in 1997. The answers to questions are scored with the total score indicating the extent to which a child is struggling or coping in terms of their mental health. (Goodman, 1997). The Rosenberg Esteem Scale was developed by Morris Rosenberg in 1965. It is widely used to assess the global self esteem of children and young people and poses questions relating to self-worth using a Likert scale. (Rosenberg, 1965). Kidscreen was a study of the emotional well being of 22,000 children from 12 European countries that concluded in 2012, which examined various risk factors in relation to children's mental health and made cross cultural comparisons. (Ravens-Sieberer & Klasen, 2012).

The COPING Project involved up to 250 children and their carers completing surveys in each partner country. From the children and carers who participated up to 40 families were selected in each country to undertake in depth qualitative interviews regarding a range of issues relating to all aspects of parental imprisonment. Where possible, the imprisoned parent in the selected families was interviewed too. Families with imprisoned mothers as well as those with imprisoned fathers were included in the COPING study, although as the female prison population is much smaller than the male prison population many more families with imprisoned fathers were included. Not all imprisoned parents could be interviewed due to permission not being granted to access prisons in certain areas. Stakeholders with knowledge of families affected by parental imprisonment were also consulted, including staff who worked within schools. In addition a mapping exercise in relation to the services that exist for children of prisoners in each country was undertaken.

2 Background issues relating to children of prisoners

An estimated 800,000 children in Europe currently have a parent in prison. (The Danish Institute for Human Rights, 2011, p.4). This is an estimate as exact numbers of children of prisoners are not systematically recorded in many countries such as England and Wales. (Ministry of Justice, 2012). Astonishingly in 2006, in England and Wales, more children were affected by parental imprisonment than by divorce. (Action for Prisoners Families, 2007). In 2007 a review was carried out in England and Wales in relation to children with a parent in prison which concluded that they are a group that is invisible to policy makers, and about whom little is known in terms of their support needs. (Ministry of Justice, 2007). Children with incarcerated parents are a particularly vulnerable group, for example they are three times more at risk of developing mental health problems than their counterparts without a parent in prison. (Murray and Farrington, 2002). These were the key reasons for the COPING research coming into being in order to find out more about what assisted this under researched group of young people to cope with parental incarceration.

The higher the prison population is in a country, the more children are affected by parental imprisonment. The effects of parental imprisonment are often felt most acutely by those who have their mothers in prison. Only 9% of children with a mother in prison in England and Wales are cared for by their fathers. (Corston, 2007) with the result that only 5% of children with imprisoned mothers in England and Wales stay in the same home they were living in prior their mother's sentence. (Caddle and Crisp, 1997). This results in children with incarcerated mothers often having to move schools and away

from their friends at a time when these sources of stability are particularly crucial to their well being. Some children may find themselves living with uncles, aunts, cousins or grandparents who may resent their presence and the pressure it puts on the household. Others may be cared for by foster parents or living in residential care homes. By contrast, 90% of children whose father is sent to prison are cared for by their mothers. (Caddle and Crisp, 1997). This means that most children with imprisoned fathers at least have some continuity in their lives following their father's imprisonment. The disruption for children with imprisoned mothers often continues after their mother is released since one third of imprisoned women lose their home and possessions as a result of their imprisonment. (Wedderburn, 2000).

Studies have revealed that parental imprisonment, and particularly maternal imprisonment, can result in poor school attendance (Trice and Brewster, 2004). Children with a mother in prison are particularly vulnerable to being "NEET", that is "not in education or employment", after leaving school. (New Economics Foundation, 2008). Also, as an adult, they are more likely to be convicted of a criminal offence than children with a father in prison. (Ministry of Justice, 2012). As women make up only 5% of the overall prison population in England and Wales (Ministry of Justice, 2012a) there are far fewer female prisons. This means they are likely to be held in prisons further away from their homes than male prisoners, with the result that it is harder for their children to come and visit them due to the cost and time involved. In England and Wales in 2009, 753 women were held in prisons over 100 miles from their homes (Hansard, 2009) with the average distance of the prison from their home being 55 miles. (Hansard, 2010).

Children of prisoners often face stigma, as a result of being judged adversely due to the actions of their parents. As a result of this stigma they are not always likely to receive a sympathetic reaction from others in relation to the situation they are in. This contrasts with children who experience losses through illness or death which can reliably elicit a sympathetic response. (Arditti, 2003). Sometimes the stigma is so great that they do not feel comfortable sharing their situation with the adults around them such as school teachers or even their best friends. The stigma is increased when it is a mother who is in prison as this is a much rarer occurrence than having a father in prison. One of the young people who participated in the COPING research told us that she had rotten tomatoes thrown at her as she entered her school when her mothers' court case was in the media. This stigma can have a very corrosive effect on young people's confidence and feelings of self worth. (Robertson, 2007). The more serious the offence the more severe the stigma experienced is. One 15 year old young woman explained how she made different decisions about what she was prepared to share as her school career progressed:

"In primary school, neither my friends nor teachers were aware that my dad was in prison. I discussed the situation with my mum and we decided that I would say my mum and dad had just separated – mainly so I didn't get bullied. As I have got older and more confident, I have been more open about my situation. Now most of my classmates, and some of my teachers, know where my dad is and are very supportive."

Robertson refers to children with incarcerated parents as "Collateral Convicts", innocent but suffering as a result of the consequences of their parents' crimes. He reminds us that all children, including children with a parent in prison, have rights under the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child. These rights include not to be discriminated against based on the status or activities of their parents; the right to be

heard in any judicial or administrative activities affecting them; and the right to have their best interests as the primary consideration in all actions affecting them. (Robertson, 2012). In England and Wales the priority is to punish offenders in proportion to the seriousness of their offences. This means that the impact of parental imprisonment upon the children affected is not the primary consideration.

3. Impact on children at all stages

Children with parents in prison are often living with stress related to poverty, domestic violence or substance misuse prior to their parent's arrest. The arrest of their parent can be particularly traumatic if for example they see their parent being forcibly handcuffed or are present when the front door of their house is broken down and the contents of their room turned upside down during a search. Some children interviewed for the COPING project described how the arrest of their parent and the searching of their home felt akin to a burglary.

Following the arrest of a parent the time spent waiting for the Court case to be heard could be very anxiety provoking too due to the uncertainty involved in terms of what might happen to the parent arrested. If the parent was remanded in custody then often children did not have the chance to say good bye properly and due to prison bureaucracy may have to wait sometime before having a visit. Children interviewed agreed that once they had the first visit to their parent in prison and saw that they were coping with the experience, they felt a huge sense of relief. If the parent arrested was on bail then often that parent would cope by drinking heavily, which in turn could cause arguments and violence within the home. The stress of the impending court case and possible imprisonment in many of the families interviewed caused deterioration in the mental health of the parent who had offended. All these factors impacted adversely on children.

The sentencing of the parent at their court hearing is very upsetting for children, due to the uncertainty involved and the fact that they are generally excluded from courts. Some children interviewed for the COPING Project reported waiting outside the court while their parent was sentenced in order to be as close as they could to them. As with parents remanded in custody, if the parent went to prison then until they had a visit they would be very concerned about their parents well being. Some children interviewed were well prepared by their parents for the possibility of their parent receiving a prison sentence. These children generally coped better with their parent's imprisonment. Other children were kept in the dark about the possibility of their parent receiving a prison sentence. They would say goodbye to their parent in the morning and then be shocked to be told he or she had been sentenced to prison while they were at school. Those children who were given little information found it most difficult to cope. It should be acknowledged that for some children the sentencing of their parent to a prison sentence is a relief if that parent has been abusive towards them or other members of the household.

Visiting their parents in prison was at first a frightening experience for children, especially if their parent was held in a high security prison and until they got used to the procedures. Many children imagined their parents being held in very harsh conditions, for example with a ball and chain, and were therefore very daunted by their first visit. They were generally relieved when they saw that prisons were not quite as bleak as they imagined, and they were pleased that opportunities for positive activities were offered.

Being searched and sniffed by dogs as they entered the visits area was very traumatic for some children too. Their fear was compounded by the sound of keys and gates clanging shut. For children who had experienced the Police arrest their imprisoned parent with force the sight of uniformed Prison Officers could bring back the trauma of the arrest. Visits were unsatisfactory for children in closed prisons as their contact with the imprisoned parent was limited to a brief hug at the beginning and end of the visit, and their parent was unable to leave their chair during the visit which restricted the activities they could do together. One young woman interviewed spoke of how strange it was to have her mother physically close but at the same time very distant in terms of what they felt comfortable talking about whilst being watched by prison officers.

When their parent is eventually released children would then experience an unsettled period as the released parent adjusted to their freedom and renegotiated their place within the family. Some children reported that this might mean the resumption of being smacked if their father was more disciplinarian than their mother. In any event the children had the anxiety of having to adjust to new parenting routines.

4 Summary of Key COPING Findings

A quarter of the children and young people with incarcerated parents in the UK, Sweden and Germany, interviewed for the COPING Project, were found to be at greater risk of developing mental health problems compared to their counterparts without one or both parents in prison. This rose to half the children with imprisoned parents in Romania.

Schools were regarded as the most important resource to assist children with parents in prison to cope after their family. Schools could assist with academic performance and homework, as well as providing support by signposting to services such as counselling. Many young people found school staff to be supportive such as the young woman who is 16 years old below:

“It was good because once a week I had a meeting with my head of year. If anything happened I could tell them and they were always asking if I was alright. There was one teacher who I confided in a lot. They were both alright because I had known them for 5 years...it was easier to talk to them than my mum because I never talked to my mum.”

Other families found that schools were less supportive, not allowing young people to miss school days to visit their parent in prison for fear of damaging their attendance rates. Schools also stated that they did not wish young people to miss out on their education. However young people responded that if they were worried about their parent in prison, for example if they had been moved to a new prison, then they would not be able to concentrate on their school work until they had visited their parent and established that they were coping.

5 Advice from young people to school staff

Young people with parents in prison had clear advice for teachers. They considered that school staff should receive training to give them insight into the impact upon children when a parent goes to prison, and that this should ideally be integrated as part of the

teacher training curriculum. They considered this would make teachers more understanding of the importance of visiting for children and the need to allow time off during school time on occasions if required. Young people considered schools should have days focussing on imprisonment and the legal system to “clear out rumours” and to show that it is not unusual for a parent to be in prison. Young people wanted just a few trusted teachers to know their parent was in prison, not the whole staff group as they feared gossiping and judgement.

One young person aged 14 years summed up the thoughts of many young people when she expressed her advice to teachers as follows:

“Remember there is a stigma attached to the whole family when a parent is in prison. I would like teachers to be open-minded and not to judge children like me for their parents’ mistakes. Being asked why a parent is in prison isn’t the most comfortable question to be asked by a teacher. I don’t think knowing would affect the needs of the child”.

Young people gave examples of how well meaning interventions from teachers could make their situation worse. A boy aged 11 years described how his teacher took the opportunity to quietly ask him how his father in prison was doing during maths test. The young man described how as soon as his teacher mentioned his father his mind went off the maths test and into missing his father and worrying about his well being. Not surprisingly he achieved a bad grade in that test. A girl aged 12 described how her teacher asked how things had gone with her mother over the weekend in full hearing of the rest of the class. This comment aroused the interest of her class mates and some of them guessed that her mother was in prison which made her feel out of control of which information was shared about her. Young people also thought that teachers needed to be sensitive about Mothers’ and Fathers’ Day when they were aware there were children of prisoners in their class. However they also acknowledged that due to the stigma faced many young people never disclosed to school that they had a parent in prison, with the result that teachers did not have the opportunity to adjust their approach to meet their needs. However fears about stigma were well founded, with some children reporting that if teachers were aware that they had a parent in prison they would use that information against them. An example given was that when a young person with his father in prison misbehaved his teacher told him that he would turn out “just like his father”.

Another young woman who was 14 years old used the metaphor of a bath to assist teachers to understand why she had a lower threshold for stress than her peers without a parent in prison. She explained that for her metaphorical bath was always half full, with the water representing anxiety and stress. This meant that if she was exposed to stressful events it would overflow. She thought her peers without a parent in prison had empty baths so they therefore could absorb more stress before their baths would overflow.

6 Concluding thoughts on a positive note

Myself and a colleague from the University of Huddersfield had the privilege of facilitating a workshop for young people aged 13 – 16 years on the subject of parental imprisonment. Knowing that bullying had been identified as a major issue for many of the young people interviewed during the COPING research we decided to test the attitudes of the young people who participated to parental imprisonment. We provided some factual information about prisons and numbers of children affected by parental

imprisonment. We then provided a scenario regarding a young woman whose mother is in prison and we asked the participating young people to consider what the young woman was feeling and what support they could provide her with. We were very encouraged by the empathic responses the participants came up with, a few examples of which are recorded below:

“Make sure she never feels alone”

“People should treat her as they normally would because it isn’t her fault”

“If the young person was a student at my school I think the best thing to do would be to be a good friend to her and maybe to help her when someone decides to judge her on her situation”

This supported the view expressed above about the importance of schools raising awareness of the issue of parental incarceration. From the workshop we facilitated it appeared that once young people had been given some facts to consider they were much more likely to be supportive to their peers with parents in prison.

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