

INFORMATION FOR FAMILIES

What About The Children?

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This leaflet provides information on two of the main issues confronted by the carers of children whose parent is in prison abroad. The first section looks at the immediate impact of that parent's arrest - when, what and how to tell children. The second section looks at the on-going effects on children of their parent's imprisonment and how their carer can help them cope.

On learning of the arrest

One of the first and most difficult issues a parent or relative may face when learning of their partner's/ relative's arrest overseas is what and how to tell the children. People often feel they must protect the children from what is happening, especially during the initial period of shock. However, children often pick up far more than adults realise and are usually aware that something is going on. They will probably cope better with the crisis in their family life if they feel they are being given the truth and that the family is facing the situation together.

Should you tell the child?

One of the most difficult things can be deciding whether to tell the child. There are no easy answers but there are a number of points that you can think about:

- will the child find out elsewhere or overhear a conversation ?
- what are the consequences of not telling the child ?
- will you be able to maintain a story to explain their parent's absence ?
- what are the consequences of telling the child ?
- how might they react ?
- will they need to talk to other people ?
- will you be too upset to tell them ?
- can you explain their parent's absence in the short / longer term ?

Some people choose not to tell their child immediately as a way of coping whilst they find out basic information first. However, children who are not told the truth at any stage about where their parent is can become confused as they often sense that something has happened which they don't understand. They may think that they aren't allowed to ask questions or they may imagine things which will worry them more.

In many cases, people intend to tell their child but not knowing how to do so means they keep putting it off. As time passes, it may become increasingly difficult to raise the issue and the deception may need to become more and more complicated.

Not telling

Many people recognise that they need to tell the child but, in reality, find it impossible to do so. There may be fears of the child telling others which might lead to harassment or bullying. There may also be concerns that the child may blame and reject the parent who is in prison abroad and it may therefore feel easier to shield them from the truth. Some people choose to tell the child that the parent is working abroad or is visiting relatives overseas. However, there is no doubt that whilst such explanations may work in the short-term, it is almost inevitable that the child will find out the truth at some stage even if it is from someone else.

"I can't bring myself to tell my children where their father really is. I've never told them he is in prison. I say he works in France. Now my daughter is getting older and I think she'll soon realise and I worry about the reaction and what she'll think of us for not being honest with her".

How should you tell them?

It is your choice whether and when to tell your child but if you do, there are a number of things you may like to bear in mind:

- do you want someone else to be with you, either at the time or immediately afterwards ?
- provide basic, honest and simple information and stop there
- provide reassurance that their parent is OK
- allow time for their questions and for them being upset
- reassure them that you love them and will look after them

You will need to plan some of what you are going to say - each child is different and you are the best judge of how they should be told.

Longer term

How will my child show his or her feelings? All children are different and will show their feelings in different ways:

"The youngest is very clingy now, won't sleep without me, wants to know my every move, wants to see his dad".

"Since last year, because their father is not here, my son has been very disruptive, not concentrating on school work and has a temper and temper-tantrums. The teachers don't understand why as I could not confide in them"

Some of the effects you may encounter include the child becoming babyish, fretful, clingy, isolated, anxious, attention-seeking or aggressive. He or she may become quiet and suffer from depression. They may begin overeating or may lack appetite. They may start bed-wetting, having nightmares or temper-tantrums. Some will have difficulties at school. Children are often afraid that they will lose the other parent, that they will be bullied and that other people will find out.

These are sometimes passing phases whilst the child comes to terms with the situation and their parent's absence. Some children will not display any of these symptoms. However, sometimes you may find it helpful to seek outside support and advice on dealing with the child's behaviour (see list of useful organisations at the end of this leaflet).

What can you do to help them cope?

Children are likely to be anxious and worried about where their parent is, and whether he or she will be coming back. They may also feel that they are in some way responsible for their mother/father being away. If you can dispel some of these fears, then the child will be less troubled.

Once you have told your child, the most important thing is to keep listening to them. If they don't want to talk about it, don't force them. Children will cope best if given love, understanding, constant reassurance and time to express themselves. Some other useful suggestions made by parents in similar situations about helping your child cope are:

- respect them as individuals - no matter what age they are, they have opinions which should not be ignored. Babies and very young children will obviously not be able to understand what has happened but you can still talk to them about the other parent.
- be honest and open with them.
- share your own feelings. If you are upset, say so. If you are angry, explain why. Don't exclude them by saying nothing.
- give them time for questions.
- allow time for their tears and anger.
- don't be afraid to ask for advice on meeting their needs (see list of useful organisations below).
- it may be helpful for your child to have a second person who they feel they can trust - a relative, friend or teacher. There may be things they feel unable to tell you, perhaps because they are worried that it will upset you.
- keeping a routine going can be important as it helps children feel more secure if they know what to expect each day.
- being consistent and setting clear rules on behaviour can sometimes feel like more hard work than it is worth, but in the longer term can help keep the family on an even keel.

Whatever the length of time their parent is away, it is important to give the child a sense of the future. Count days to special events like birthdays, school holidays and, if appropriate, the next visit. Older children may like to keep a diary. You need to take account of your child's wishes when it comes to keeping in touch - by using letters and drawings (and, if appropriate, by telephone calls and visits), your child can choose how much contact they have. They will need your support and encouragement in the choices they make. They also need to know that it is still OK to love their parent who is in prison - whether it appears that the parent has done wrong or not - and that their parent still loves them. Above all else, they will need constant reassurance from you and help in maintaining contact with their parent in prison abroad.

What about other people?

Unfortunately, you may not be able to stop other people knowing about your situation which means there may be times when you will have to help your child deal with people saying or doing things which upset them. In the case of an arrest with media coverage, prejudices and fears in the local community may be strong. The children will need your support and reassurance that they have done nothing wrong. You may

also like to think about confiding in your child's teacher so that they are aware of the additional stress on your child. A helpful booklet for teachers called "Working with Children and Families of Prisoners – a guide for teachers and education professionals" is available from Ormiston Children and Families Trust (www.ormiston.org). You can ask the teacher to treat the information you give them as completely confidential - other staff only need to know that there are changed family circumstances and that one parent is no longer at home.

What about your own feelings?

The absence of the parent who is in prison abroad changes relationships within the family. The carer at home has to take on more responsibility and in some cases, assume a responsibility they did not have before. Grandparents, siblings and friends may suddenly find themselves caring for a child when there is no one else to do so. The burden of child-care may feel overwhelming at times especially when combined with worrying about the welfare of the person who is in prison abroad. At times, you may well feel tired and irritable. Finding another adult, a family member, friend, or someone in the same situation (Prisoners Abroad can help with this) to talk to and off-load some of your feelings on to is really important.

A list of organisations which provide support to the children and families of prisoners is available from Prisoners Abroad's website entitled "Family Support Organisations", along with a list of useful publications.

If you require this leaflet in a large print format, please contact us. Our details are below.

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