

# Improving prison visiting experiences for imprisoned fathers and their children in England and Wales

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# Families

- 200,000 children have a parent in prison in England and Wales in 2009 (Williams and others, 2012).
- Almost two-thirds of prisoners reported having children (63%) (Prison Reform Trust 2014).

# Forms of contact

- Family days
- Children's days
- Normal visiting
- Letters
- Phone calls
- Homework club
- Video link and skype
- Story Book Dads
- Emails – email a prisoner
- Christmas present from Chapel

# Why is contact a Public Health Issue?

- Imprisonment of parent and family breakdown can increase emotional and mental health issues in children, increase caring responsibilities and increase poverty (Action for Prisoners' Families, 2003, 2007; Loureiro, 2010).
- Family breakdown has been identified as a risk factor for suicides in custody (Akhurst, Brown, and Wessely 1995; SCIE 2008).

# However,

- Social Exclusion Unit (2002) showed that between 43-48% of prisoners (sentenced and remand) lost contact with their families because of imprisonment.

# Research

- Aim: to explore the experiences and perspectives of fathers in prison about 'keeping in contact' with their children.
- Carried out in 5 male prisons in England and Wales.
- During 2014 and 2015.
- Spoke to male prisoners, prison officers and visiting centre staff. Next stage children and female prisoners.

# What men said:

- 'prison is not a place for children'
- 'the problem is the children are running around in the hall and the nonces are sat here watching them....I cannot leave my seat and they are out of my sight'
- 'They give them prison food – prison sandwiches, biscuits –they shouldn't have to eat what we eat – it is disgusting – we should be able to pay for them to have some proper food – something proper to eat'.
- 'I cannot interact so well with my kids and play with them – I am in a category C prison – I have a pick axe when I work – I could put that in someone's head if I wanted and they allow me to go around with this but not interact with my kids – my movements are restricted in the visiting hall but not so much in the prison. I want to get up and go to the play area with my kids'.
- 'Sometimes they are late bringing them in – so not at 2pm at 2.50pm and then they leave at 4pm – not our fault they are late – we are sat here waiting for them'.
- 'The children don't really like it and I don't want to say you must come – it is boring and it has lost its novelty'.
- 'One of the screws shouted at me in front of my kids.....I was so angry but I had to keep it together...it made me feel so small in front of my kids'.
- 'I don't think the children know they can go in the play area...there is never anyone in there'.

# What prison officers said: the positives

- 'I believe it is important for families to remain in contact with each other, especially children with their parents, to allow them to play an active role in their lives. The family days improve the relationship with the children/parent as it gives them the opportunity to play games with them and allows the parent to have an insight into their child's skills, as the family days involve drawings, making things and sports games. It is important for them to have quality time with one another and not just sat in a visiting hall'.



# What the prison officers said: some difficult issues

- Prison officers are not there to look after or be in charge of kids’.
- ‘Never really thought about the kids – I am here for security – prison officers no remit for this – only security’.
- ‘Would be better if designated staff for visiting – but it is whoever is on at the time’.
- ‘Children’s visits are dependent on good will of staff and charities – no money’.
- ‘Teenagers get bored on visits.....okay for younger children’.
- ‘I find it hard sometimes because without asking the children to raise their arms they automatically do so and seem at ease in the environment although some might be frightened of the dogs. Staff do all they can to make the visit as enjoyable as possible providing a relaxed environment. I have also known a baby coming to visit in Winter that was less than 48 hours old’.
- ‘Sadly visitors use children to hide illicit items in their clothing and to see staff search confused and frightened children is not very good’.
- ‘Children can be exposed to difficult environment - sometimes they witness things in the visits hall that are not age appropriate e.g. restraint, drug passing’.
- ‘It can normalise prison for a child which could result in them thinking it is 'ok' to come to prison’.
- ‘How can you stop a young child sitting on their lap’.

# What makes a good visit

- Food available.
- Creche available to take pressure off and allow some fun time.
- Professional and family orientated staff in visits.
- Clear boundaries for behaviour for all.
- Appearance of visits hall - more colour, less intimidating.
- If parents get on during visit.
- Timely and not delayed.
- Prisoners treated with respect and dignity.
- Less obtrusive surveillance.
- Good interaction between the parents and the children. A positive and friendly environment.
- A relaxed atmosphere where the children are allowed to run around and have many things to do. The children dip in and out of conversations with the prisoner and adjust to them being around.
- Flexibility around visits.
- Good training for prison officers around the issue. Emphasis on how to support prisoners and their families.
- Assistance with costs.
- Lots of activities in children's visits – xbox.

# Importance of Leadership

The development of a more welfare and child rights culture in prisons and criminal justice (as opposed to an over-whelming focus on security and control)

Led from the top in terms of policy making and discussions around what prisons are for and the importance of maintaining family relationships

# Good Practice: Family Intervention Project?

- Whole prison approach to families
- Not an add on
- Specially trained staff in visitors centres – same staff
- Special unit for those on the family intervention project (telephones in rooms)
- 24/7 telephone support
- Reception staff who have customer care NVQ
- Free shuttle bus and assisted travel
- Homework club
- Language and Play Club
- Baby Steps

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