

## Telling the Children

“My oldest boy was three years old when his dad was arrested, and he kept asking for him. Where's my dad? Where's my dad? I told him he was away working in a big house, so that's what he thinks.”

This Outsiders booklet provides helpful and practical information about the impact that imprisonment of a parent has on the children. The booklet covers a wide range of issues from what to say to the children, dealing with the child's changing role in the family to coping with changes in a child's behaviour.



£1.00

# Telling the Children

an Outsiders guide for the partners and families of prisoners

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ISBN 978 0 9521072 7 9

Registered charity no: 267879. Company Limited by Guarantee No. 1168459

## Telling the Children

*This booklet 'Telling the Children' is one of a series of information booklets for families of prisoners and offenders called 'The Outsiders' published by Action for Prisoners' Families (APF).*

*Action for Prisoners' Families is a membership organisation which works for the benefit of prisoners' and offenders' families by representing their views and those who work with them, and promoting effective work with those families.*

### The Outsiders

Sent to prison  
Living with separation  
Telling the children  
Preparing for release

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ISBN 978 0 9521072 7 9

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*Freephone support helpline offering information, advice and guidance to prisoners' and offenders' families*

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## Caring for Children on your own

Family members often need support and guidance to make decisions about the children in their family. For parents or other extended family who are bringing up children alone, the pressures are doubled and they are greater still if you are a parent, carer or other family member trying to bring up a child or children while their parent is in prison.

One of the most difficult things to address when someone is imprisoned is what or whether to tell the children. Whatever you decide it is important that you talk to the child about what is happening and don't try to pretend it isn't happening.

Each child is different and you will know the individual personalities in your family. What works for one child may not be a good idea for another, and it is always important that you take decisions that suit the needs of the individual child.

The parent, carer, or other relative, looking after the children is likely to experience a lot of stress. You could feel lonely and isolated with nobody to turn to. You may feel overburdened with responsibility, anxious about money, worried about how much the child will miss their parent, and worried about visiting the prison. Such worries make it very hard to give the children the time and attention they need.

Adults play a big part in helping children recognise their feelings (for example explaining to them that a tight feeling in the tummy could be anger or anxiety).

Just as the adults have to cope with many changes, children also have a lot of adjustments and a whole new range of feelings to manage when a parent goes into prison.

## What to tell the Children

When we asked prisoners' relatives to identify the most important issues they had to face, many said, 'the children and what to tell them'.

Parents and other close relatives may often hide the truth from children. When they are small we may encourage children to believe in fairies and in Father Christmas – it's only later they learn where the presents come from. When relatives pass away some parents may tell their children that they are safe in heaven. Some adoptive parents find it hard to tell their children that they were adopted and not birth children.

Children are often told what we think will protect them and make them happy and secure.

Deciding how to tell the children that their parent is in prison and what that actually means for them, is much tougher. The children are bound to ask

questions that you will have to deal with, and it is usually better to tell them the truth, explaining it in a way that they will relate to.

It is of course any parent's right to decide how and when to tell the children.

Remember that there is no guaranteed way to protect children from finding out about what has happened in some other way such as from school friends, the newspaper, or social media – e.g. Facebook or Twitter.

The most important thing is that you choose a time where you can give the children all of your attention and when you won't be disturbed, to answer their questions and, where necessary, to comfort them.

The key question perhaps to ask yourself is not, 'Shall I tell the children?' but "When and what shall I tell the children?"

## Your Situation

### What if you were the victim?

If the child/children's parent committed a crime against you, particularly if it was a violent or sexual nature, you may not want to talk about it with the child or children, or want to visit.

If you are the parent, your children will undoubtedly be asking where their father or mother is and if they can see them, so you will need to think about what to tell them.

You may want to say something along the lines of: 'people can do bad things, but it does not make them a bad person', or 'your dad has broken the law and hurt me and is being punished' or 'sometimes people lose their tempers. They can't control it, although they should, but they can still love you'.

Of course if you don't want to keep in touch with your partner that's completely understandable,

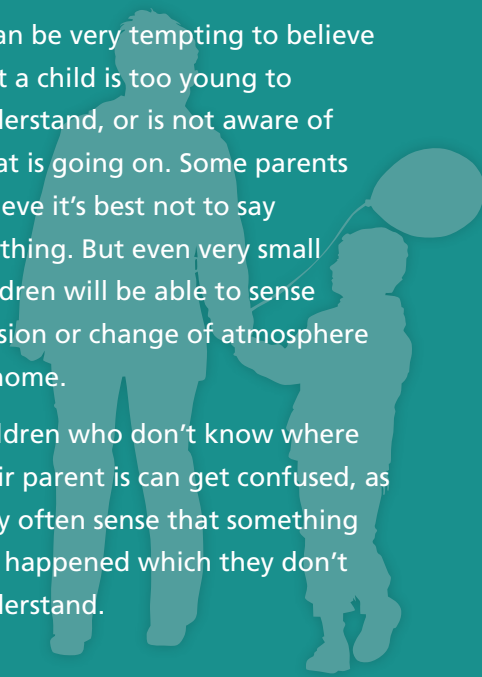
but your child may still be able to visit without you (depending on whether the parent is seen as a risk to the child/children) – other people such as a friend, relative, or social worker may be able to take them.

### What if you just say nothing?

*"They were so young and I just couldn't tell them what was happening."*

It can be very tempting to believe that a child is too young to understand, or is not aware of what is going on. Some parents believe it's best not to say anything. But even very small children will be able to sense tension or change of atmosphere at home.

Children who don't know where their parent is can get confused, as they often sense that something has happened which they don't understand.



Children may think that they cannot ask questions and then imagine things, which may be far worse than the reality!

Providing an explanation that a young child can understand may relieve at least some of the anxiety. Lack of information, on the other hand, may make children insecure and afraid.

There is also the risk they will find out some other way. However, if the parent is serving a short sentence and the child is very young you may be able to manage without telling the child/children.

### Making up a Story

Though some parents keep up the pretence that a parent is working away for a while it is difficult to maintain this for long, especially when you want to take the children with you on a visit. A small child may accept that the prison is a hospital or a factory, or even a hotel – but the older they

get the more difficult this fiction will be to maintain.

Other children may tell your child the truth anyway. It will be more hurtful coming from them than it would from you, because you will not be there to support your child, explain the situation and help them come to terms with it.

A woman prisoner said that at first she was so ashamed of being in prison that she decided not to tell her young daughter:

*"At first I tried to pretend this was college I was at. But one day my daughter said she wanted the TV on during the visit and I said we weren't allowed. So she said, 'Can't you ask the officers?' I'd always called them teachers and she looked really ashamed of letting it out and I realised she knew this was a prison. I was amazed how she'd picked it up - she's only five!"*

Another mother whose husband is in prison said:

“When I first visited Robert with Shane, I used to tell Shane that prison was Daddy’s work because it was easier, but I don’t think that lasted long. Now we’ve explained it briefly, but not in detail. We told him that the policeman said Dad was in a fight and somebody got hurt, so that’s why he’s in there. His best friend at school knows, but I don’t think many of the other kids know, and so far he’s not had any problems.”

And another woman recalled what she said to her children:

“When it was all on the news, I used to run in the room and shut off the TV before they could see anything. For ages I told them he was working away. It was only when the youngest girl wrote a letter to Father Christmas asking for him back that I felt I had to tell them the truth. The girls cried, I cried, but in the end it was all right.”

“When their father was sentenced, I told the children he was sick and in hospital in part of the jail, because he couldn’t stop drinking. I had to tell them he was in jail, in case their friends said something.”

This last woman invented a good cover story, which might work for a time. But, it really is better if you, as their mother or father, or other close relative can decide who tells what, when and how, in the best way possible to help the child feel safe, maintain their trust in adults, and stay protected. And that means the decision should be made as soon as possible, even as soon as when the parent is arrested. Most parents feel it is their responsibility and their right to tell their children eventually.

The hardest thing is when, how and how much to tell.

## Where to start?

A useful starting point is to think about what a young child already knows. That Daddy or Mummy isn’t at home? That Grandad is upset? That men in uniforms came to the house? That people stop talking when the child comes into a room? Or maybe they don’t stop, and the child hears things he or she cannot quite understand, or understands all too well.

Adults can be careless about what they say in the hearing of children, wrongly assuming that the children will not understand and it’s all right to talk.

An older child may have guessed what has happened, or heard neighbours talking, or read the headlines in the papers, found out about it on the internet, Facebook, or Twitter or seen something on the television news – or a friend may pass on the news. Older

children will need to know some of the facts to be able to face their mates and be clear about how to cope with what their friends know. Teenagers will certainly know, even if they pretend they don’t – children also sometimes protect their parents!

## Telling and reassuring a Child

Children who have witnessed an arrest need explanations and comfort to help them deal with this shocking experience.

Even fairly grown-up children, well into their teens, may expect their parents to be all-powerful and strong against the world. It can be really shattering to discover that outside forces can split their family, and remove a parent to some unknown place. Their home and their community may suddenly feel unsafe for them.

The age of the children is of course important. You might consider

saying something like this to a very young child, 'Your daddy has to be away for a long time and we'll miss him, but we'll visit him when he's away and he'll come back one day.' However, bear in mind that a child's understanding of time will be very different from yours.

A child of three or four is old enough to pick up information in a playgroup or by overhearing adults talking, so it may be necessary for you to say a bit more and a bit more urgently.

You could say, 'You know your daddy's away – did you know that the place where we're going to see him is called a prison? That means he can't come home for a long time, but we'll keep visiting him so he knows we still love him.'

Older children need much more information, and they will get it somehow. If you are the one to tell them, you have some control over the quality of that information and you can also have some influence over its emotional impact.

Most people prefer to hear painful news from someone they can trust.

## What could be the outcome of telling the children?

Your children may ask you a lot of questions about prison, or they may just accept the information and not want to raise the matter again for a while. A child may feel sorry for the parent in prison, or critical and angry with their mother or father for going away. Some children may even be proud, some may be embarrassed and some may be ashamed. Some will be very upset and you may see changes in their behaviour, some of which may be difficult to deal with. This may happen while they come to terms with the information and with their parent's absence from home.

Once you have told the children, you may feel greatly relieved to know that they now know the truth and you no longer have to worry about someone else telling them.

## Coping with the situation

Every child and every family, copes in a different way with the fact of imprisonment. It can be helpful to some adults and children to seek support from others in the same situation through prisoners' families support groups and on-line forums and chat rooms. A list of support groups is on our website [www.prisonersfamilies.org.uk](http://www.prisonersfamilies.org.uk). You could also think about starting one up yourself. A guide on how to do this is on our website. Many families have also found support from youth and community workers, faith groups or other agencies in the community.

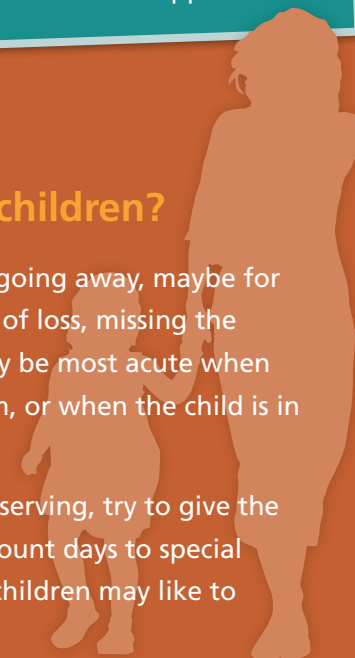
It may help you to talk with other family members who have discussed serious issues with their children, to see how they coped with the situation. If you visit a prison where there is a staffed Visitors' Centre or a staffed Children's Play Area there should be someone there willing to talk with you.

If you are not sure who to talk to, the **Offenders' Families Freephone Helpline 0808 808 2003** is there for information and support.

## How will things change for the children?

How will the child feel about their dad or mum going away, maybe for some years? A child may experience a real sense of loss, missing the company of the parent who is in prison. This may be most acute when friends talk about doing things with dad or mum, or when the child is in trouble with the parent at home.

Whatever the length of sentence their parent is serving, try to give the child a sense of the future. Encourage them to count days to special events such as birthdays or the next visit. Older children may like to



keep a diary whereas younger children may like to tick off the days on a calendar. Some prisons run homework clubs or special family days when children can visit in a more relaxed environment. Many prisons also have access to Storybook Dads or Mums where parents in prison can record stories on CD to send out to their children.

The loss of one parent is bound to change relationships with other family members. The parent at home has to take on more responsibility and may become at times, tired and irritable. As a result, children may not get as much attention as when the other parent was at home, and may feel sad and alone.

Children may have muddled feelings about the parent who is in prison and may even think that in some way they are to blame.

Children need to know that they are not to blame.

They may feel guilty, angry, resentful, let down or ashamed. These feelings are likely to be

stronger if the trial and sentence have been reported in the papers, on social media or on television.

### Children's reactions

Some children may show little sign of being upset and appear to cope as if nothing has happened. Others may be so distressed that they seem to have different personalities.

A lot depends on the child's age and the circumstances surrounding the arrest.

Some children go back to displaying behaviour they outgrew long ago. They may become clingy and demanding, crying endlessly, becoming unsettled at night and wetting the bed.

All of these kinds of behaviour show they need attention and understanding. They may feel unloved and insecure. Although you may be feeling awful yourself, try to spend a little more time doing things together with the children, such as talking to them and reassuring them.

Here are some examples of how children reacted:

Susan was nearly three when the police came and took her dad away and she remembers that night. Since then she has become very clingy and tearful. She screams if anyone comes into the house and won't let her mum out of her sight. She had a very frightening experience at home, as well as having to cope with losing her dad. She may be worried that her mum will also go away, and whether she'll ever see dad at home again.

Sean, aged nine, was at home when his dad was arrested. He shut himself in his room and cried for hours. His behaviour changed and he became very withdrawn, not wanting to talk to anyone or play with his friends. He bursts into tears every time his dad is mentioned.

Ruby is four, and since her mum was taken away she is very restless at night and often disturbs her dad with nightmares. He sometimes takes her into his bed to try and settle her and help them both get some sleep. He hopes that in the future she will become more settled again and he is trying to be reassuring to show he understands her feelings.

Justin was 13 when his father was sentenced to three years imprisonment. He coped reasonably well, visited prison regularly, and helped at home with the younger children. But when his dad was paroled recently, Justin was a changed boy. He resented his dad's presence in the family, was cheeky and rude and said he dreaded his dad coming home for good. Justin is finding it very hard to adjust to his dad being at home and the changes this will bring. He needs the chance to talk through his feelings and his fears.



Here are some common problems:

### Bedwetting

“ Since his dad's been away, John has wet the bed every night. He's nine years old. What can I do? ”

If a child has been dry at night for some years and then starts to wet the bed, it is helpful to try and find out the cause of their anxiety because this is probably the reason

for the bedwetting. John may be worried about how his dad is coping in prison, or about difficulties at home that may have made it harder for John himself to cope, or be struggling at school. Try and talk to him about what is making him so anxious. When the parent or other close family member begin to understand the causes, bedwetting should become less of a problem. If the child is pre-school age, you could contact your local children's centre and see if they can offer advice and support. For older children, you could speak to your GP to see if they can help or if they can refer you on to another service or agency.

### Temper tantrums

“ Sarah is three. She used to be such a contented child, but lately she always seems to fly into a tantrum if she doesn't get her own way. I don't know what to do with her. ”

Sarah may be reacting to some tension she feels in her mum since her dad was sent to prison. But in fact, it may be nothing to do with this. Young children often have tantrums if they don't get

what they want. If the adults give in to them, they will soon learn that tantrums work. Adults need to remain calm and in control, even though they may feel very angry with a child in a tantrum. Don't be tempted to let a child's behaviour make you change your mind. If you have said 'No

sweets today', keep to that, regardless of the tantrum.

Sarah's parent should speak calmly to Sarah and let her know they realise she's angry. Sometimes holding a young child firmly in your arms helps to calm them. If you are in a crowded place, try to remove the child to a quieter area until the tantrum passes.

Remember that a child in a tantrum is a child who has lost control and one who needs adults to be able to regain control. Shouting at and smacking the child don't work and they may just make the tantrum last longer.

### Jealousy

“ Mark is very jealous of his new baby brother who arrived soon after my husband went into prison. Mark demands constant attention from me. He was toilet-trained before the baby arrived, but lately he's had several accidents. I'm finding it hard to cope, especially with all the prison visits and so on. I think I might put him in a playgroup every morning so I have a break to be with the baby. ”

Jealousy like Mark's is very common in small children when a new baby arrives, and it is harder for a lone parent to cope with, without the day-to-day support of a partner. Mark may think for example, that the baby takes

up too much of his mum's time. He needs to be shown that he is still very important and that he could be involved in helping his mum care for the baby.

Special time together while the baby is asleep may help, and gradually Mark should be able to adjust. Once he's accepted the baby, he will be able to settle into playgroup better. If he is sent to playgroup before this happens, he may feel he is being rejected in favour of the baby.

Jealousy can happen at any stage between brothers and sisters or between children and their parents, though tensions in a family may be more acute if one parent is in prison. If parents are aware of possible jealousies, they may be able to address them before they get out of hand.

## Depression

“ Philip is 12, and lately - since his mum went to prison - he seems to have lost interest in everything. He doesn't even want to go anywhere. I think he's seriously depressed. ”

Some children act out their feelings and unhappiness by becoming aggressive and destructive. Others bottle up their feelings and withdraw from everyday activities they used to enjoy.

Philip may feel very low and may have the idea that since he 'lost' his mum when she went into prison, he has also now lost his dad's attention and affection. His dad is probably so taken up with trying to keep the family together and run the house that he hasn't had time to sit down and talk to his son or do other activities together. Talking together or doing a favourite activity together to encourage communication may help to clear the air and reassure Philip.

## Anger

It is important that children have the opportunity to express and discuss their angry feelings. Jake sounds as if he is angry against figures of authority, like the police who he probably regards as taking his father away, and the teachers who are trying to control his

“ Jake is 8. He seems to have so much anger against his dad, the police and even his teachers. ”

behaviour. He is also angry against his dad, maybe for letting himself get into this situation, and then leaving Jake at home without a father.

Jake's mum should try to accept his angry feelings and help him use them constructively. Angry children can often cause adults to be angry too.

## Refusing to go to school

“ Cathy is 10 years old and she's always been a nervous child, but her behaviour since her dad was arrested is really worrying me. She's become almost silent at home and she's refused to go to school for the last few days. She doesn't want to leave her room or see her friends. ”

Maybe Cathy feels she just can't face people at the moment. She may think they are all talking about her, or that they know more than she does about what's going on. Her home and her own room offer her some security at present, and she

may have real fears about leaving them to go to school. Cathy needs help to express her worries before she can face the outside world again.

It's important to find the real cause and try to face it. This may involve seeing the teacher or head teacher so you can all work together to get the child to return to school. It is helpful to be understanding but firm, as your child needs to return to school as soon as possible. The longer children remain out of school the more difficult it will be to get them to go back.

It may be worth making teachers aware of the situation, particularly where it affects teenage children taking exams at the time (though do ensure that you have the young person's permission).

## Helpful Tips

- **Praise, encouragement and affection** are important to children of all ages, whatever their family circumstances. Showing interest in what your children do at home or at school will encourage them. Praise will help them feel more confident.
- **Routine** is important to children, particularly if one parent going to prison has disrupted the family. Routine helps children feel secure if they have some idea of what to expect from day to day.
- **Be consistent**, agree some reasonable rules for behaviour and keep to them. Children can bully, persuade, whine or plead to get their own way. They may be testing you and if you are having a bad day, are worried about your partner, or close relative in prison or about money, you may be tempted to give in. You may also try to compensate for the absence of their other parent. Don't give in.
- Let them know you mean what you say, firmly but gently.
- **Take time together.** Children enjoy individual time with a parent. One expert in children's behaviour recommended that however many children you have, you should be able to find five minutes each day to spend alone with one of them.
- **Communicate.** Children usually say more if they feel they are being listened to. Encourage family chat and discussion to help you understand one another's feelings. This is particularly important if there is a special circumstance such as one parent being absent.
- **Discipline** does not mean being harsh: it simply means teaching children how to behave. The best way to do this is by setting an example by the way you behave yourself, and by having clear rules about behaviour which children can understand. Sometimes they will test you to

your limits, often on days when you feel least able to cope.

With small children, try to distract them before the misbehaviour becomes extreme. Later when the child is calmer, explain why some behaviour is dangerous or unacceptable.

Older children should respond if you link any unacceptable behaviour to some logical consequence. For example if a young person was messing about and broke a window, having to pay for a replacement is an appropriate and logical consequence.

Do not make threats or promises unless you are intending to carry them out. Tempting as they may be, shouting and smacking are not successful, as they tend to make children agitated and angry, and cause resentment between parent and child. Remember however, that from the child's perspective, negative

attention is better than none whatsoever.



## Where to get Support and Advice

For information and support you can talk to your local health visitor or counsellor (you can find out how to do this through your GP surgery) or you can call these freephone helplines;

- Childline 0800 1111 (only for children)
- Family Lives 0808 800 2222
- Lone Parent Helpline 0808 802 0925 (England & Wales), 0808 801 0323 (Scotland)
- Gingerbread 0808 802 0925
- Offenders' Families Helpline 0808 808 2003

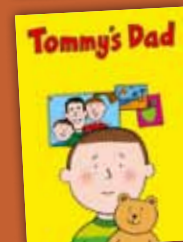
If you are a family member you can get one copy of each Outsider booklet free. To order a copy of the books, please contact APF's offices. Details on the inside and back cover of this booklet. **Free copies are available for family members: contact our offices or see [www.prisonersfamilies.org.uk](http://www.prisonersfamilies.org.uk).**

## Action for Prisoners' Families' children's books and resources

Depending on the age of your children, you might find APF's accessible children's books helpful (they are free to prisoners' families). We publish four books and a magazine for older children which aim to help children to explore their feelings by giving them a story they can relate to:



**Danny's Mum (£3)** – aimed at children up to 6 years. This is the story of Danny, whose mother is sent to prison. It covers his feelings of loss and confusion. Through talking to friends at school about his mum, Danny begins to look forward to her return.



**Tommy's Dad (£3)** – aimed at 4-7 year olds, tells the story of a young boy and his sister, whose father is sent to prison. It explores their feelings of loss, anger and frustration at not being told what's going on, until their mother finally decides to take them to see their dad.



**Finding Dad (£4.50)** – aimed at 8-11 year olds, tells the tale of 8-year old James who turns detective to find out the truth about his dad, who disappears with the police early one morning.

More information on publications and resources available is on our website [www.prisonersfamilies.org.uk](http://www.prisonersfamilies.org.uk).

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