



Education of a child with a parent or close relative in prison – information for parents and carers and families



The impact on a child if their parent or relative is sent to prison?

You may well be reading this because you are caring for a child whose parent or relative has been sent to prison. Initially, the whole family has to cope with many changes to their lives and learn to manage a new range of feelings when a parent or relative goes to prison. It may be several days before you know which prison they have been sent to, and longer before you can talk to the person in prison by telephone or arrange a visit.

All children respond to changes in different ways but it's possible that during these early stages, their sense of confusion and loss could be difficult for them to manage and this could affect their ability to learn and their behaviour at school and at home. They are however, innocent victims of their parent's offences.

One of the most important issues that families face is what to say to the children to explain the absence of their parent or relative. Some families decide to hide the truth from children as they want to protect them from the distress of having a parent in prison to keep them happy. To do this they may create a story e.g. that the parent is working away, but this could be difficult to continue, especially if they wish the children to visit the parent in prison. To inform the children of the fact that their mum or dad are in prison is a very difficult thing to do. However, children are naturally curious and will ask questions and there is no guarantee that they will not learn the truth from someone else in the local community or members of the family.

The decision of what to say to the children and when to tell them is the right of a parent or carer. Action for Prisoners' Families recommends that the key question parents should ask themselves is, 'When and what shall I tell the children?' rather than, 'Shall I tell the children?' Although difficult, the advice from groups who work with families of prisoners is to be truthful but to be prepared for questions. Castle Gate Family Support Centre has produced useful guides that give practical advice on talk to tell children about prisons. www.castlegatefscg.co.uk

Research and experience tells us that children who are worried, upset or anxious can find it very difficult to concentrate and learn in the classroom. They may be embarrassed or angry about having a parent in prison and this may affect the way that they behave in school. Living arrangements and financial circumstances may also change leading to money difficulties in the payment for equipment or school trips and events. This may lead to new emotions and feelings for the child concerned and could have a negative impact on their education and attendance at school.

Who can help?

Gloucestershire County Council Children and Young People's Services are committed to supporting the education of children who have a parent or other relative in prison.

Gloucestershire Schools work hard to ensure that the five 'Every Child Matters Outcomes' (be healthy, stay safe, enjoy and achieve, make a positive contribution and achieve economic well-being) are achieved by all pupils. Our schools have a good reputation for the care and guidance that they give to their pupils and are also committed to supporting children with a parent in prison so that they can continue and succeed with their education.

There are a range of other services that have also agreed to work together with schools to provide support to children with a parent or relative in prison. Locally, these include charities like 'Castle Gate Family Support Centre' and statutory agencies such as Connexions, Gloucester Prison and National Offenders Management Service (NOMS) in addition to all the Gloucestershire County Council services for children and young people.

There are also a number of other national charities and organisations that can offer advice and support for children and families of someone in prison. Names of these organisations and the support they offer are provided in this document.

How do I get help for my children?

Schools are not automatically informed when a parent is sent to prison. It is the responsibility of the parent or carer to inform the school if this has happened unless there is a safeguarding issue.

Schools are very supportive and can offer children of prisoners a stable environment where routines and staff generally remain the same at a time when their personal life could be one of change and uncertainty. Head teachers and other school staff are experienced in keeping confidential information about their pupils and will support children in order for them to achieve the best that they can during their time at school.

Therefore, it is advisable to inform the head teacher of your child's school that their parent or relative is in prison. It may be that you can arrange a meeting with a member of the school staff to discuss ways that your child can be supported. This support could range from staff monitoring your child who may not wish for anyone else to know the circumstances of their parent in prison to offering more individual support with open discussion and support about their parent or relative in prison.

Once you have informed your child's school they may suggest additional support that can be obtained through a common assessment process. This is commonly known as 'CAF' which stands for 'Common Assessment Framework'. If you agree to this assessment being completed you can state which agencies you are prepared to share the assessment information with, so you are in control of who has access to the information. A 'CAF' will trigger additional support for the needs identified in the assessment. This support will be individually tailored to your child's needs.

All prisons in the south west of England now have visitor's centres to make the visit to a parent or relative in prison a more pleasant experience whilst maintaining the security of the prisoners and restricting the access to gifts and money. Gloucester Prison is fortunate in having the Castle Gate Family Support Centre that offers quality, practical support to families of prisoners in Gloucester Prison as well as advice to families whose relative is at prison elsewhere in the country. Castle Gate Family Support Centre also works with children to help them understand more about prisons and maintain communication with their parent or relative.

Schools have to monitor the attendance and punctuality of all pupils and report these to the government. It may be that a parent is sent to a prison some distance away from where the child and family live making visiting the parent in prison difficult and necessitating time off school. If this is the case it is advisable to inform the school of the absence in advance so that consideration may be given to classifying the absence as an 'authorised absence.' You may also wish to discuss any absence from school with the Education Welfare Service to avoid the risk of incurring any fixed penalty fines for your child's absence from school.

In summary

- The education of a child with a parent or relative in prison can be disrupted
- Advice from experts is for families to tell the children the truth about their parent or relative being in prison
- Life for the children and family following the parent being sent to prison could change radically
- Gloucestershire County Council Children and Young People's Services are committed to supporting children with a parent or relative in prison
- Telling the head teacher that a parent of one of their pupils is in prison will help the child as the school may be able to offer appropriate support and monitor the child's education and attendance
- Schools will treat this information in confidence
- Schools will work with families to find the best ways to support the pupil
- A 'CAF' may be suggested as a way to get extra support tailored for the child's needs. The parent/carer controls who shares in this information
- Castle gate Family Support Centre will offer support to all families with a parent or relative in Gloucester Prison and advice to families with a relative in any other prison