

Children of Parents in Prison (CoPIP)

Overview Description

There are estimated to be 310,000 children who experience a parent or both parents in prison each year in England and Wales (The National Information Centre on Children of Offenders, NICCO). Imprisonment of a parent is known to be an Adverse Childhood Experience (ACE) and can have significant impacts on a child's progress within education with research suggesting that CoPIPs can be subjected to nearly 5 times as many ACEs to children without a parent in prison (Turney, 2018).

Parental imprisonment is associated with a range of psychological, emotional, behavioural, social, academic and physical challenges for children and young people and can create barriers to them reaching their true potential. Yet, there is currently no system within education, health and social care services that supports the identification of CoPIPs. This means that children and families need to self-disclose in order to identify themselves and will mean that children and families will not be receiving additional support. Therefore, it is important to consider holistic and ecosystemic approaches to supporting children, parents and families, in order to enhance the possibility of children and young people experiencing healthy, happy, safe, productive and empowered lives.

This chapter describes how parental imprisonment can impact children and young people, provides information on how protective factors can support and protect CoPIPs and signpost to further reading, useful links and organisations.

What changes can happen in children's lives when their parent is in prison?

Children of parents in prison experience significant changes within their day to day lives and will experience the loss of their normal relationship with their parent(s) (Kincaid et al., 2019). Some of these may include:

Where they live and go to school/college: children may live at home with one parent, however, many children may live with a relative or become a Looked After Child. This is more likely if the child's mother goes into prison as they are more likely to be the primary caregiver. This may mean that they move away from their friends, family and community and go to a new school/college.

Friendships: children may move away from friend or it may be difficult to share with their friends. Children and young people can be fearful of the stigma and judgement by the 'prisoner' label.

Income: families may lose income or benefits, have additional financial costs to support a child and increased costs for visitations.

Seeing their parent(s): they will see and speak to their parents less often, their interactions with their parents will change.

Many children often only have telephone contact with their parents. They may also not be able to hug or touch their parent during visitations.

Increased care responsibilities for the CYP: students may need to look after younger siblings or have increased responsibilities at home.

How can parental imprisonment impact children's social, emotional and mental health?

Dealing with the changes within their lives as well as the stigma and shame associated with parental imprisonment can have a significant impact on children, young people's and relative's mental health. Children and young people may also have witnessed elements of the criminal activity or the arrest of their parent or relative.

Research suggests that the imprisonment of a mother is more likely to impact the child's because: mothers are more likely to be the primary caregiver meaning the separation is likely to be more disruptive; and, female offenders are more likely to be held further away from home which can have an adverse effect on maintaining family relationships (Kruttschnitt, 2010; Prison Reform Trust, 2017).

The emotional loss felt by children affected by either parent being imprisoned has been suggested to be comparable to that felt by children who have experienced parental bereavement (King, 2002). However, CoPIPs do not always receive an empathetic and supportive response due to the reasons for their grief (Glover, 2009).

It is important to hold in mind that children and young people will be impacted by having a parent or relative in prison, just as children and young people are affected by any challenging or traumatic event they experience.

All children and young people respond differently however they may experience any of the following emotional response during or after their parent's imprisonment:

- Feelings of anger, guilt, sadness, rejection at the loss of a family member, which often occurs unexpectedly. This will be a grief response.
- Feelings of confusion, particularly if the child has not been told that the parent has been sentenced or the reasons for the changes within their lives
- Feeling worried or anxious, for example, concerned about the family member in prison, or concerned for the other family member dealing with additional stress.
- Feelings of disappointment when visitations or contact is cancelled.
- Feeling shame or social isolation which will be compounded by the stigma of having a family member in prison and feeling there is nobody else in the same situation.

These feelings are all normal and students may need a safe space with an adult who can listen and help to co-regulate them. These staff members may worry about what to say and may not have the answers to questions students pose: what is important is for students to feel safe, to explain it is okay to have these feelings and to reduce the shame about the thoughts and feelings that they are experiencing.

What you might notice for CoPIPs who are struggling with their parent's imprisonment?

All children and young people will respond differently and students with more protective factors are likely to be more able to cope and manage with the challenges they face. School staff may also not be informed about a parent in prison.

it is important to notice whether a child is presenting with any of the following:

- changes in their ability to express their emotions or speak to others;
- changes in behaviour, such as becoming more isolated than normal;
- changes in their mental health and wellbeing, e.g. being less able to regulate their emotions;
- signs of the loss and grief they may be feeling;
- difficulties paying attention at school, losing interest in school or missing school; and/or
- changes in their appetite or sleep pattern.

Research has identified that specific groups are more vulnerable to the impact of parental imprisonment including Black and mixed heritage children (Kincaid et al., 2019).

Over time, CoPIPs can be more at risk of:

- social exclusion
- being involved in antisocial behaviour
- Experience longer term difficulties with their mental health
- Involvement with offending behaviour: this has particularly been noticed for boys

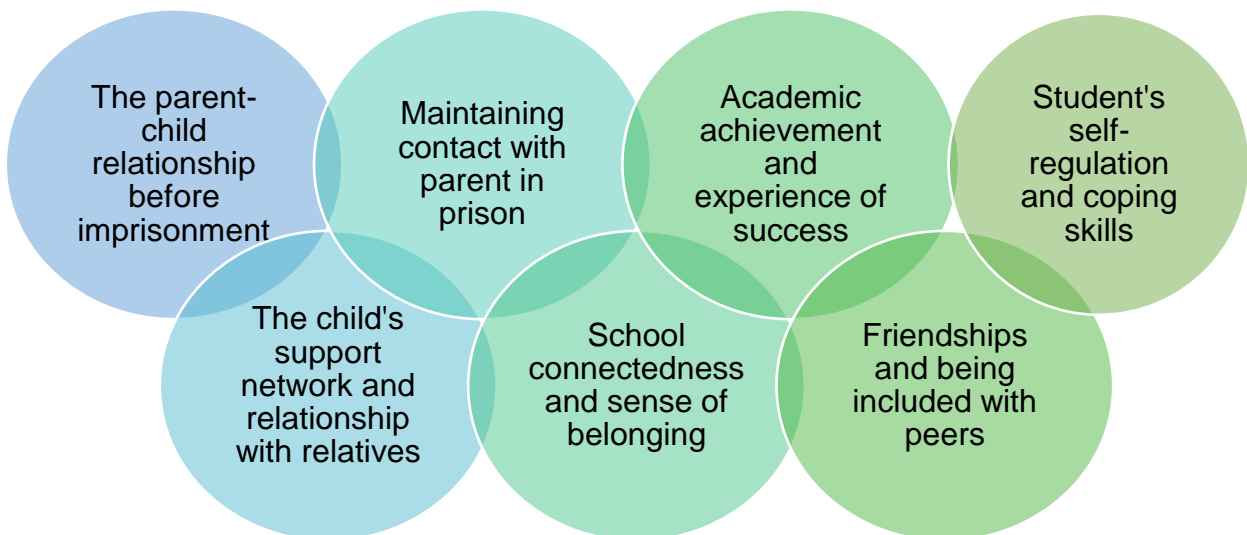
Cochran et al., 2018 and Glover, 2009

Early intervention and support to the child/young person and the family should reduce the likelihood of long-term impact.

If you are worried about a child and their behaviour, the best thing to do is to talk to them about your concerns and create a space for them to feel safe and supported.

What protective factors help CoPIPs and their families?

Children, young people and their families need protective factors to help them to manage and cope with the challenges that parental imprisonment can cause. For staff in school, it is important to explore what protective factors are supporting a CoPIP and their family and to try to ensure there are more protective factors than risk factors.



What can staff do to help CoPIPs and their families?

Schools have been recognised as having a critical role in supporting CoPIPs especially when students or families disclose about the parental imprisonment. School staff can be the first to notice changes in children's behaviours and identify children struggling more academically.

School has also been described as a 'game changer' as staff can help to reduce 'stigmatisation and discrimination' as well as acting as a 'champion' for students (p.5, Tuite, 2016).

Work with parents and relatives:

- It is essential to work closely with parents and/ or relatives so that information about the child, parent and family's circumstances are shared. This will help staff meet student's needs and understand changes in their presenting behaviours.
- School staff may need to consider how to communicate with imprisoned parents. Although it is recognised that most day-to-day communication will be with the parent/carer with whom the child lives, everyone recognised in law as being a parent has the right to participate in their child's education, and to

receive information about their child, including school reports (Department for Education, 2018b).

- It is important to understand what the child does and does not know about their parent's imprisonment. It is important to encourage parents and relatives to tell CoPIPs the truth about where their relative has gone, even if the child is very young. There are ways to explain to a child in an age-appropriate way that their relative has gone to prison, and be honest about how long they will be gone for. As with conversations about loss, the best way to explain is to use clear, literal language rather than euphemisms.
- It is important to understand contact arrangements. Children should be given the choice as to whether they wish to visit their relative, or not, as much as possible and they may share their view with a member of staff at school. With consent from the student, you may need to share their view about consent with whom they live with.

Safe relationships in school:

- Provide CoPIPs with a key worker or team of key adults (O'Keefe, 2014). There should be a focus on co-ordinating support, liaising with key adults and providing a safe space for the child to touch-base and share about what is going well and their worries, concerns and difficulties.
- Children are best supported by adults with whom they have a strong, trusting relationship, so schools should utilise existing members of staff.

Providing consistency and routines:

- CoPIPs are likely to have experienced a significant amount of disruption in their lives. Therefore, school should be a place that is consistent and predictable.
- Exclusions should be the last resort: as this will create further disruptions and changes and increase the likelihood of mental health difficulties for the child and their families.
- If the child does need to transition to a new school, it is important to carefully plan and involve the child in the transition plan (see good transitions chapter in this toolkit).

Support for staff in order to adapt the curriculum or be sensitive in their teaching approaches

- It is important to work with the student and family to agree who should know about their current life experiences especially as there can be subjects that may be triggering for a CoPIP. It is helpful for teaching staff to be sensitive to CoPIPs experiences when delivering the curriculum. For example: family trees; genetics; loss; stories or discussions that relate to criminal activities; citizenships curriculum; or, safe and health relationships curriculum.

- Providing staff with training about CoPIPs will raise awareness and improve their skills in meeting children's needs: relational approaches will be essential in order to notice and respond to CoPIPs needs.

Therapeutic support and mentoring:

- Some children and young people may need additional therapeutic support to help provide them with a safe space to talk, process and understand more about their life experiences related to a parental imprisonment.
- Mentoring or regular opportunity to meet and work with an adult has also been associated with positive effects for COPIP and may reduce low mood, support regulation skills and improve social and academic progress.

For further reading, Shaw, Woods and Ford (2022) systematic literature review reflects on how children of imprisoned parents in the UK can be supported in school.

Other chapters of this toolkit may also be helpful when working with CoPIPs such as:

- Inclusive Universal Provisions such as Belonging and Attachment and Trauma
- Supporting good transitions
- Coming into Care (LAC) and Placement Breakdown
- Chapters within the Family and Community Factors section
- Bereavement

Useful Organisations, Resources and Links

Out There: is a Manchester organisation that provides emotional and practical support for families

<http://www.outtherecharity.org/>

Barnados: have an easy to read website article about supporting CoPIPs as well as the Glover 2009 report that is a useful and interesting article

www.barnados.org.uk/what-we-do/helping-families/children-with-a-parent-in-prison

Prison advice: provides a variety of resources that can be used in school to support COPIP

<https://www.prisonadvice.org.uk/for-schools>

Building Families Together: also has an easy read website with advice and guidance about CoPIPs

<https://buildingfamielstogether.org/help-for-children/>

NICCO: This is the national information centre on children of offenders, the following link includes a directory of resources and services including the Kincaid, Roberts and Kane (2019) article “Children of prisoners: fixing a broken system”.

<https://www.nicco.org.uk/>

Parents of Prisoners: provides advice and support for families of offenders in the North West and Yorkshire

<https://www.partnersofprisoners.co.uk/>

Prison Reform Trust: a charity focusing on supporting adults in prison and their families. It provides information, advice, statistics and research.

<https://prisonreformtrust.org.uk>

Families Outside: Provides guidance and resources for schools in supporting children impacted by imprisonment

<https://www.familiesoutside.org.uk/content/uploads/2017/03/Guidance-and-Resources-for-Schools-in-Supporting-Children-Impacted-by-Imprisonment.pdf>

Department for Education: Has a guidance document about understanding and dealing with issues relating to parental responsibility.

<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/dealing-with-issues-relating-to-parental-responsibility/understanding-and-dealing-with-issues-relating-to-parental-responsibility>.

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