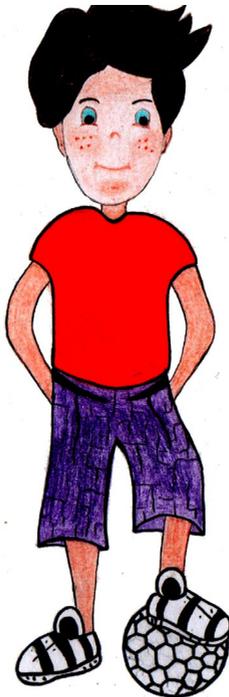


Visiting my Mum or Dad in Prison

A Children's Guide to Parental Imprisonment



ST NICHOLAS TRUST

Support for the Families of Prisoners

ST NICHOLAS TRUST

St. Nicholas Trust family support organisation was started in 2008 to support people who had a family member sent to prison. We have developed over the years into an organisation that hold fortnightly support meetings and out-reach support for those that cannot attend in the city. We also provide information to schools and community groups. Our members are drawn from a range of professional backgrounds as well as people who have experienced imprisonment in their families.

St. Nicholas Trust has produced two information booklets based on the experience of its members in order to help others in this difficult situation. With the support of the Governor of Cork Prison, we also provide refreshments and activities for children in the visitors waiting room at Cork Prison.

ST NICHOLAS TRUST CONTACT DETAILS

If you would like any more information or would like to talk to somebody who understands what you are going through contact our support numbers for confidential non-judgmental support information.

(086) 1768266; or

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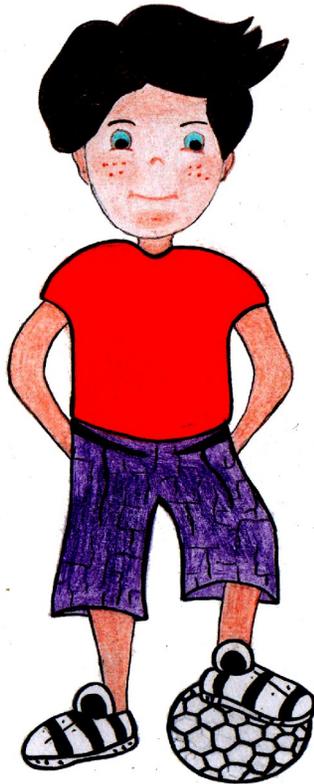
Introduction for Parents and Caregivers

When someone goes to prison it can be a very difficult time for the family on the outside. For parents, the period following arrest and conviction is the worst time. One of the biggest problems is telling the children. Parents may be reluctant to give this information to their children in order to protect them. However, children are sensitive to sudden change in the atmosphere in their homes and they may reach their own conclusions about what is happening in the family. Children of prisoners are innocent victims. If their needs are not recognized and supported, they are much more likely than other children to experience difficulties at school and in relationships with peers. Such children are at high risk of having their education disrupted, often dropping out of school. Research tells us that they are also much more likely to experience imprisonment in their own lives.

While this booklet is aimed at helping children, it also aims to raise awareness with the parent or caregiver of how the child may be feeling, and to prepare them for prison visits. The difficulties that Josh describes are taken from conversations with one particular child and other children who attend our hospitality service in a prison waiting room. At the bottom of each page are notes for parents and caregivers to help them understand the effects of parental imprisonment on children and how they may help at this difficult time.

The purpose of this booklet is to provide information to children who may be worried about visiting their parent in prison or concerned about visiting the prison.

My name is Josh. I am 11 and live with my Mum, Dad, younger sister and baby brother. My Dad takes me fishing and he comes to watch my soccer matches.



When I came home from school one day my Dad wasn't there. I wanted to talk to him about my match on Friday. We had our dinner. Then I played with the baby for a while and watched TV. Dad still wasn't home by my bed-time. When will Dad be home ? I asked my Mam when I was getting ready for bed, but Mam just said that he was working late. She was looking a bit sad and was cross with my sister when she asked her to read a story.



Children sense when something is not right with their family. Josh is already thinking about this and wondering why Mum is sad and cross

Dad wasn't home again the next day. I asked Mam again where Dad was but she just told me to eat my breakfast and go out and play. I was on my school holidays and I went to play with friends.

When I came in, my Dad still wasn't back. Mam told me that he had to go away to work for a few days. I was upset because I wanted to ask him about my match and now he might not be here for it. It was hard to talk to Mam because she was very quite and sad. I was worried that something was wrong because she looked like she was crying sometimes. I wished my Dad was home.



Children who are not told that their parent is in prison may invent their own reasons for their absence: that their own behaviour has caused Dad to leave, for example, or that their parents are separating. Children sense when something is wrong in the family. They may hear about the imprisonment in some other way, and by trying to protect the remaining parent they may worry themselves more.

One day when I was back in school, I brought my friend Joey back to my house to play. My Mam was in the kitchen talking to Joey's Mam. I heard my Mam crying and talking about prison. After Joey and his Mam went home, I asked Mam what was wrong and why was she talking about prison. She started to cry again and told me that Dad was not away working, but was really in prison. I was shocked when I heard this. I was really upset and started crying. Prison sounds so scary and I didn't want my Dad to be there.



When telling a child that their parent has gone to prison it is necessary to be open, honest and age appropriate. A child will have many questions about prison so it is important that the caregiver has sufficiently prepared in advance. Allowing the child enough time to talk without being disturbed is equally important. It may be a good idea to take the child out of the family home so that you can give him or her your full attention.

I was also really angry with my Mam for telling lies about where Dad was. She said she was sorry but didn't want to upset me. She explained that he had broken a law so he would have to stay in prison for a while. I asked, "When is he coming home?" She said, she didn't know. Mam said that we can write to Dad and talk to him on the phone. "But I want to see him now" I said. Mam said she wanted to see him too because she missed him but the visit had to be arranged with the prison.

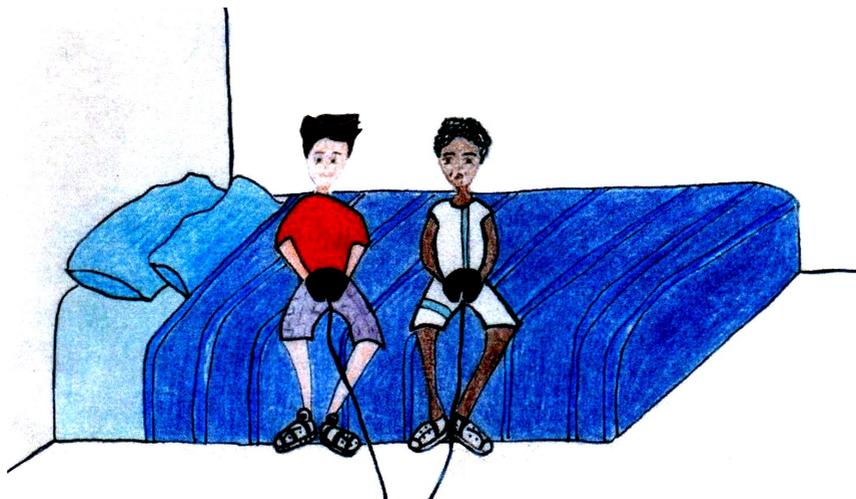


That night, I couldn't sleep for a long time because there were so many things I wanted to know, like why was my Dad in prison. I didn't want to ask Mam any more questions because she was crying a lot and

looked sad. I was really angry with my Dad.

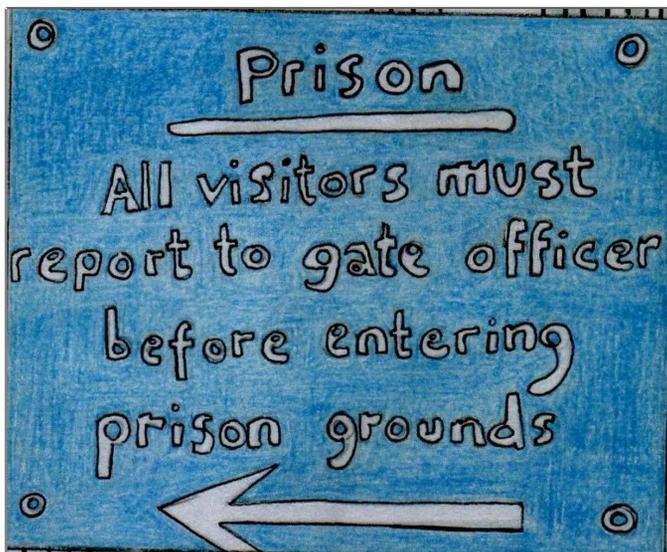
The following emotional reactions to parental imprisonment are common among children: anger, anxiety, disbelief, disappointment, withdrawal, fear, insecurity, sadness, embarrassment and powerlessness. It is important to help children understand and work through their feelings. Reassure them that you are always available to listen and that you want them to share their feelings.

When I went to school the next day, I was really quiet and I couldn't concentrate on my schoolwork. I didn't want to go to football practice after school either because I thought the other boys would know about my Dad. I wouldn't know what to say to them so I just didn't go. The next day, my Mam went to see my teacher. She told her about Dad so that she would understand why I was so quiet. My friend Joey came around for tea that evening.



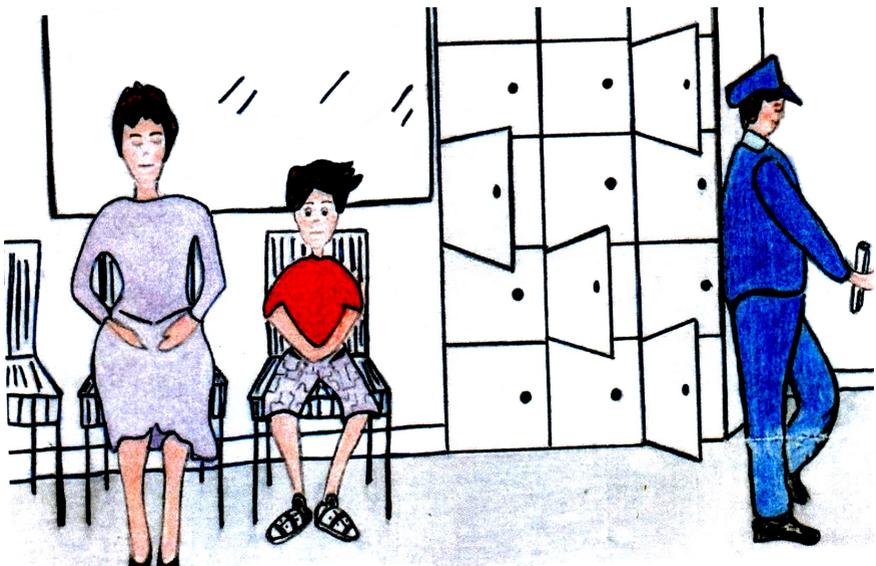
The stress of having a parent in prison can affect a child's performance in school. Keeping teachers informed about parental imprisonment helps them not only to understand a child's potentially changed behaviour but to better cater for the child's educational needs. A teacher is in prime position to prevent stigmatisation and bullying by other children and also be an extra adult for a child to talk to when worried.

Mam told me that we would be visiting Dad on Saturday. At first, I didn't want to go because I didn't know what it would be like. Would I have to go into the prison to see my Dad? Would he be wearing orange overalls like prisoners did on TV? But I wanted to see my Dad so I decided I would go. My Granny came to take care of my sister and baby brother so I just went with my Mam.



Security requires that prisons are governed by many rules and regulations. Visitors are not allowed to bring anything into the visiting area. Children's pictures or Dad's birthday present may be given to an Officer to be passed on later. Mum may give the Officer clothes for Dad when he needs them. If a child has sweets or a snack going to the visiting area, the security dog may smell them and cause problems for the family visit.

When we got to the prison, we had to put our things in a locker and then we were told where to wait until our number was called. A nice lady asked my Mam if she would like a cup of tea or coffee. I had some orange and biscuits. The lady said I would have to finish the biscuits before the visit. I brought a picture for Dad but the Prison Officer said I couldn't give it to him. I was getting cross about this but the Officer said he would give it to Dad later.



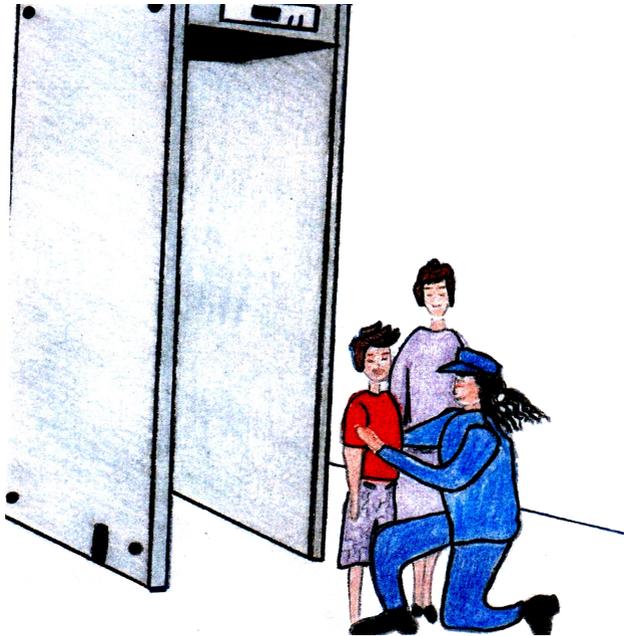
Studies show that maintaining contact can be beneficial to both the children and the imprisoned parent. Nurturing family relationships during the sentence will benefit the reunion post-release. Some families refuse to bring children on prison visits for many reasons. However, if explaining a father's absence involves lying or fabricating situations, this may affect the child's future relationship with his/her parents.

When our number was called we went through a big metal door with the other families. I was getting really scared but my Mum said it would be okay and gave me a big hug.



Visiting a family member in prison for the first time is very stressful for both the visiting parent and the children. Sitting down with the child at home and talking to them about what to expect may help to relieve some of the anxiety. Mum can also seek support and information booklets from St.Nicholas Trust family support group. Support meetings are held in Cork City every two weeks. Contact numbers are at the back of this booklet.

After going through the door, there was a big metal frame that we had to walk through. It was like the one I saw at the airport last year. We were told to take off our shoes and put them in a tray with my Mam's watch or the machine might beep.



The security systems in prison are mainly to insure that drugs are not passed on to the prisoners. Prison officers including the Governor, teachers, medical staff, solicitors and any person visiting the prison must also go though this system.

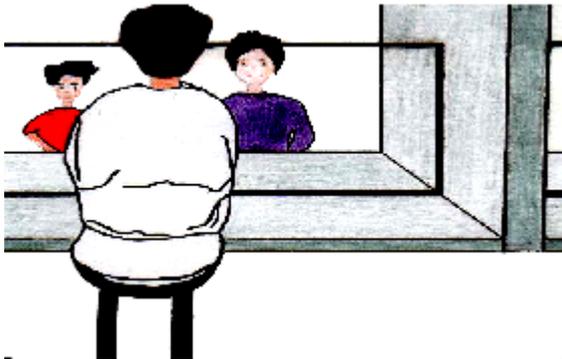
Next, we were told to stand and in a line to be sniffed by a dog. I didn't understand this but my Mam said it was because sometimes people brought drugs in to the prison and the dog would know if some one was doing that. After that, we were told where to go to wait for Dad.

PLEASE STAND IN A LINE



The first visit can be a frightening experience. Children should be informed about the security system, the uniformed officers, the sniffer dog and the ban on touching their Dad so that the visit is less stressful for them. Children may want to pet the dog but it is important that they know that this is not allowed.

When we got in, I could see my Dad sitting behind a big high counter. I ran over to him and really wanted to give him a hug because I missed him so much. Mam said “Remember, that you cannot touch him”. She had explained that it was because of security about phones and drugs but I didn't think she meant us. I was happy that Dad was wearing normal clothes and not those awful orange overalls I saw on TV. I told Dad that he had missed my matches, that it wasn't the same without him. I was angry with him too for what he had done because now he would have to stay here for a long time. I asked him if he would be home for my Confirmation and he said he didn't know. I tried very hard not to cry. He said “I messed up Josh, I am sorry for causing so much trouble”.



Older children may need to know why their parent is in prison. If they are not told they may seek this information from friends or the internet. This can cause more upset because it may be sensationalised. When his mother minimised the offence, Josh googled for more information. A child needs to be able to trust his/her parents to give honest information when he/she is old enough to ask the question.

I asked Dad what it was like in prison. He said that he had to get up early for breakfast. He then goes to the exercise yard and later helps to prepare meals in the kitchen. He told me about the art and carpentry classes he attends some days. He is painting a picture for me and my brother and making a doll's cot for my sister. He shares his cell with a man called Jim and the worst part is that they have to go back to the cell early. They play cards sometimes. He has pictures of us on his wall. I was still mad at him for missing the match and not being at home with us. When Dad was talking to Mam, I got bored.



Because the visiting area in Cork prison is very small, there are no facilities for occupying children. This can add to the stress of the visit. Children get bored and restless, resulting in the mother becoming even more stressed. If possible, find out about the quieter visiting times when arranging a visit with children. It may be a good idea to keep the visits short, especially with younger children.

When it was time to go, though, I was very upset and wanted Dad to come with us. He looked very sad too and I think he was trying not to cry. He said that when he comes home, we would play football and go fishing again. We talked about other things we could do, like going on the hikes that we had planned for this summer.



The release of a parent from prison can be exciting but stressful for all parties. Prior to release, it's important to set realistic goals for when the parent returns. Family relationships can change dramatically when a parent is in prison. Children can develop strong bonds with the remaining caregiver and bonds with the returned parent can be weakened.

My Dad is still in prison but things are not so bad now, because he was good in prison, we now get special visits where we can hug and talk on our own. We had some visits on Sundays when it was much quieter. These were my favourite ones. I wished though that we could take toys or books to play with. Now I am back on the football team and looking forward to Dad coming to see me play when he comes home.



Children can react to the parent's return in different ways: some can become clingy and insecure about their parent leaving them again, others may become resentful towards the returned parent. In order for relationships to be rebuilt, it's important that these feelings are acknowledged and discussed openly between parent and children.

Acknowledgements

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