



Transcript:

Children of Prisoners: Arrest

Narrator: The identities of children featured in this film have been protected. Children are badly affected when a parent is sent to prison. The effects last throughout the custodial period and beyond. Mental health problems and anti-social behaviour are common. And the seeds are sown from the moment of arrest; something which a child is likely to experience at first hand.

Angela Lawton: Some of the children I've worked with, the Police have burst into the house at six o'clock in the morning. The children have been asleep and then wake to find dad being taken away. That destroys their whole sense of safety really; that somebody can break into their home and take their dad or mum away, is quite disturbing and that goes on for a long time. Those children then find it very difficult to trust.

Narrator: Amanda, who's from West Yorkshire, remembers clearly when the father of her children was arrested by the Police in an early morning raid at their home.

Amanda: My little lass were in bed and she toddled out of bed because she hears loud bangs and people screaming and like, the Police running upstairs and shouting "Police, Police", you know, "don't move" and all that lot but when somebody who's in a big suit and my little lass don't know who she is, that's scary for her. She's not aware ... they're not in normal Police uniform so she's not aware that they're Police officers so she knows that they're there to help her sort of thing. It's just like unfamiliar to her, you know. You don't see normal Police officers walking out the street like how they come in your house. So it's scary when they come and get you off-guard in the middle of the morning.

Deborah Cowley: Arrest can be a hugely traumatic experience for children. If an arrest happens in a child's home, it ruptures that feeling of security that

they've got. We know that witnessing an arrest can be equivalent for a child as witnessing domestic violence with all the emotional repercussions of that for the child. The other thing about arrest is children do love their parents and if they are suddenly taken away, they are suddenly bereft of that person who loves them and who they love so much.

Narrator: Current Police procedure should ensure that a child is not left alone in the home after a parent is taken into custody but operational issues mean that a child will invariably be exposed to the dislocating experience of arrest.

Amanda: How can you explain that Police have got to treat her dad like that, because that's their dad, regardless what he does when he isn't at home and being a dad, you know, when he's going out and doing things that are criminal and things like that. That's their dad. Kids can't see wrong in their dad, sort of thing. So they're thinking well, what are they doing that for, my dad's not that bad. I don't think Police understand like, after-effects it has on kids, you know, when they've been in your house but it can last for years. Like my daughter still remembers – I mean, she were only two and a half and she still remembers exactly what went on. You know, and it must be in her head and think God, that happened to my dad and you know, although only a little one, she still is aware of that. I think it was because it was so traumatic that it stuck in her mind and it can last for a lot longer than just that day them coming in and taking their dad away. So it, you know, it can last a lot longer.

Narrator: The trauma of witnessing an arrest typically can lead to dramatic changes in a child's behaviour, ranging from bed-wetting and nightmares to aggression and withdrawal. Bev is another mother whose children were suddenly separated from their father by arrest and custody.

Bev: My daughter's, she's now ... she's usually really loud and bubbly and attitude and now she's quiet. She's withdrawn. She won't even speak about him. She gets angry and upset at the slightest little things. My

son, he's angry. He's very angry all the time now. He's always been quiet anyway but he gets ... he's violent. He's turned nasty. When he first got locked up, my son wet the bed for three weeks, every single night for three weeks. He took it really hard. And then just as I thought he was getting over it, that's when my daughter started. She's very quiet. She'll just sit in the corner and draw all the time now. They've reacted in very different ways to it.

Narrator: Because there is currently only limited statutory support for families of prisoners, mothers like Bev have only the voluntary sector for advice and practical support. Partners Of Prisoners, based in the North-West of England, has pioneered early support initiatives, such as locating an outreach worker at the courts in Manchester.

Lesley Ward: The support that we're offering for children is in an indirect way because children can't actually come to the court if they're under the age of fourteen. And obviously the courts open on a weekday when the children would still be going to school. But what we can do is, as we said earlier, provide literature for the parents to read around telling the children about prison. And we can also advise them on how to link in with the children's centre and with the school. And we try to make schools and children's centres aware of the needs of prisoners' families and the fact that that is going to affect a child. There might be behavioural problems. They might be upset. They might be angry. And we can also speak to the school about that.

Narrator: One of the first dilemmas after arrest and during the early stages of custody for a parent like Bev, is what to tell the children. Studies suggest it's best to find a way of letting children know the truth about a parent's arrest.

Lesley Ward: There's quite a lot of explaining to do, and we believe it's best to be honest with the child and tell them what's going on, because they'll probably know anyway. And they might find out off other children, which could be really upsetting. So we can give advice on how to explain to a child what's happened.

- Angela Lawton: Sometimes they don't know. Sometimes that information has been kept from them because the parent thinks it's best that they don't know and that they're not going to take them to the prison, so they can pretend that dad's gone away or he's working away. And I strongly advise parents to tell the truth, because they will hear from somebody else. They'll know, and sometimes that's difficult for a parent. And I guess that depends on what the crime is. Sometimes that's harder to tell a child than in other circumstances, but I still believe that honesty is the best way, and even if it's quite a serious crime.
- Bev: They know he's in gaol now. When they were younger, they thought that he worked away and that's why he wasn't coming home. But he's, he's looking at a big sentence so they've ... I've told them. They're old enough to understand that he's been naughty and because he's been naughty that he is in prison. They know where he is. They don't know what for. They don't need to know that just yet.
- Narrator: It's estimated that about a third of children whose parents are taken into custody are not told anything at all about where their parent has gone, whilst another third are lied to.
- Deborah Staples: I've recently been supporting a mum who's partner's just gone into prison. He's got a three year sentence and she contacted me because she's so concerned for the children. She thinks that it would be best that they don't know where dad is, so she's actually told them that he's working away. She asked us for our advice and obviously I, I did speak to her about it; that statistically it's proven that the children should know where their dad is, and they will cope with that situation. And how's she going to keep dad away from them, you know, for three years? He's going to miss their birthdays. It's going to be Christmas and so on. And so we did give her all the literature and we gave her the advice, but at the end of the day it's her decision. And if she decides not to do that then obviously that's down to her because she's got her children's best interests at heart.

Narrator: And whatever decision a mother makes, the children often find out what has happened through school, media reports, or word of mouth in the local community.

Bev: The kids are frowned upon at school. They're the only kids in the school who've got a parent in gaol, as far as I know. They're frowned upon. Parents don't let their children play with my children, even though it's not the kids' fault. The kids haven't done nothing wrong. They've told them in the school playground blatantly, in front of me, that to stand near them and not to come and stand near us. And it's ... they just down their noses right at us and I just tell them to ignore them then. It's not their fault. The children know it's not their fault. They know their dad were naughty and that's why he is where is he. But it's not other children, it's the other children's ... it's adults, it's parents. They think my kids are going to be bad just because their dad has been naughty, basically. It's not a very nice reaction though. It upsets the kids a lot.

Narrator: Whilst stigmatisation remains difficult to combat, Partners Of Prisoners is due to pilot a scheme that will give them a presence in Manchester's main charging Police Stations, enabling more immediate support for children affected by arrest.

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