



Transcript:

Children of Prisoners: Custody

Narrator: The identities of children featured in this film have been protected. Around 7% of school age children experience the imprisonment of a parent during their school years. It's estimated that about 160,000 children a year have a parent who is sent into custody. This means that each year more children are separated from a parent by imprisonment than by divorce. All the evidence suggests that it can be a disorientating and disruptive experience.

Angela Lawton: Children really worry about what it's like in prison, if they have no knowledge and maybe they've seen snippets of old films on television. I had one little boy that really thought that his dad was chained to walls. Another child thought that you know, when you were in prison you were tortured. So they don't have anybody to explain what really goes on. And that's really hard. They have no way of knowing that daddy's safe.

Narrator: So why are children of prisoners more vulnerable than other children who are separated from a parent, and what's being done to support them?

Deborah Cowley: Imprisonment has many effects on family life. Not only does it affect their relationships profoundly, it also affects them economically, that they're losing someone who may be bringing in income. It might affect their housing and also the fact that they are stressed and don't feel able necessarily to share that and so that has an impact on education and their ability to make friends and all kinds of areas of their lives. So, there are lots of material reasons that it makes them more vulnerable as well as emotional ones.

Angela Lawton: Children of prisoners are particularly vulnerable because often they're living a secret life. Even if school know, there aren't many of their

friends that know, so whenever the subject comes up about dad, they have to either avoid it or tell a lie, and that's really hard. And I guess with teachers not being aware then you know, some of the behaviour for these children and some of the difficulties for the families, you know, that adds to their pain.

Narrator: Although the problems faced by children of prisoners is slowly attracting more attention, there is currently limited statutory support available.

Deborah Cowley: Care for prisoners' families has really been pioneered and developed by the voluntary sector and although it's important that the statutory sector and the prisoner estate also get involved with supporting prisoners' families, there'll always be a really important place for the voluntary sector because prisoners' families do experience stigma and they very often feel that they can trust the voluntary sector most.

Narrator: Encouraging a visit between a child and an imprisoned parent is a particular area of voluntary sector activity. Research shows that contact between a child and their parent whilst a custodial sentence is being served, can help some of the emotional and behavioural problems experienced by these children. Dudley is an ex-offender who faced the challenge of maintaining a relationship with his child whilst serving a long term sentence.

Dudley: When I got arrested he was less than one ... he was eleven months when I got arrested and my nephew and sisters and all my family used to bring him up to come and see me. And even though I was in prison, he was the main focus of my life. It's your child. You've got to do your best you can for them, regardless whether ... where you are, whether you're in prison or whether you're on the street. Some people might think it's not nice for your son or your daughter to come and visit you, but it is important, because then at least they know where you are and that you're still alive, and that you're in contact with them. If you don't have that contact, everything else breaks down. And it does help you going through your sentence as well.

- Narrator: The practical issues in making a prison visit are never simple and can expose children to an alien, and sometimes hostile, environment. Bev has three children with the father currently in custody in West Yorkshire.
- Bev: We have to get everything ready, organised before we go so there's nothing in none of the kids' pockets, no toys. You're not allowed nothing in the visits with you, apart from I'm allowed one nappy and two wipes and one bottle of milk. So we set off, get on the bus, go all the way to town, wait for another bus from town to take us up to the gaol and then we get into the visitors' centre, and then go over, get searched, sniffer dogs, searched again and then we're took through outside of the gaol into a waiting room, and then we're in on the visit. And we have us hour visit. Sometimes it's not even an hour. Then do it all again but in reverse on the way home. It takes us hours. It's a full day for a three quarters of an hour visit. On a normal visit they usually misbehave a lot afterwards and I think it's because they're annoyed. They get really annoyed because he's not allowed to play with them and stuff and their behaviour for at least a week afterwards is awful. They're terrible. Their behaviour is not nice at all. They just get a nasty streak in them.
- Farida Anderson: I think the experience from a child's perspective in visiting prisons must be quite traumatic, and I think it's traumatic when the gate shuts. There's dogs ... if you're not used to dogs, when you're visiting an establishment. All of those things are fear factors.
- Bev: Sometimes they'll just give me a quick pat down. They'll just pat the kids' ankles, like, see if they've got anything in their socks but then other times it's awful. They'll say take your shoes off, search your tights, search all the coat pockets and they won't let me take, do you know, like gloves and sometimes ... she doesn't have a dummy, she has a blanket and sometimes when I'm being searched they won't let me take my blankets through.
- Deborah Cowley: The other area that's really important is that prisoner's families live in communities. They don't live in prisons. They spend very little of their

time at prisons. They go for visits and those times are very important, but a lot of the time when they're battling with housing difficulties, difficulties associated with their poverty, school difficulties, they're in their community and they're hiding themselves away, but they do have needs and that's not always acknowledged by local services. These are hidden families, so teachers, social workers and mental health workers are working with these families now, whether they know it or not.

Narrator: A blueprint for good practice in supporting children of prisoners has been developed by the Ormiston Children and Families Trust, which has a range of support services for families and prisoners in the East of England. Angela Lawton, an experienced play therapist, is one of their most senior practitioners.

Angela Lawton: *[driving] I'm going to see a child in a lower school and I see this child at the moment weekly. It's a good place to see children because I can always catch them, you know, they are there, and luckily if the school are happy for me to sort of fit in, but it's also really useful because the staff have a really good relationship with me. They're interested to know about the child and what might help. So it's really good that they continue to support the child in the way the child needs.*

Narrator: Angela uses toys as a way of letting children unlock their feelings.

Angela Lawton: The children often play out some of the dramas that they've experienced and that helps them to process those events much, much better. Often they've just been stuffed inside them somewhere and they don't talk about it. I've had children that have put the guns under the bed ... the sorts of things that obviously shows some of their fears. It's not what you would call normalised play. One little girl that I worked with, who was really traumatised by dad's arrest actually played out the same scene week after week. It gradually changed. It became more positive. There was a positive outcome in the end and that showed that she'd actually worked through it. But she needed that space and time to assimilate, you know, what had gone on so for her, that was the best way. And the Police Station [toy] gets used a

great deal. It's got a little cell and there are some keys as well that are kept in this little box. And that seems really important for the children, to have the power of having the keys. It's also got a little window that ... it's fallen out at the moment ... but you can break out of the window, and the children often play the prisoner breaking out. But he gets caught again and he goes back. And various angles on the story, but it's then working out what they'd like to happen and what the reality is that actually dad or mum has to stay in that cell. So the toys are just absolutely valuable. I, I don't think ... I couldn't work without the toys. They just allow the children to express themselves more freely.

Narrator: Angela's work in the community is localised and part time, reflecting the fragmented nature of existing support services for children of prisoners.

Angela Lawton: You know, there are children out there that I haven't come across and people don't know of the service. There is a limit to the amount of time that I have as well. So, you know, it's a hard one. If everyone knew and was using me to full capacity, you know, I wouldn't be able to cope.

Farida Anderson: I think for offenders' families and children it's a post code lottery. It's the biggest thing I've struggled with. I'm from the North-West and I've remained in the North-West but I constantly feel for people who can live in another area where there's absolutely nothing. And it's about how do you create something within an area where there isn't anything.

Deborah Cowley: It's very important for criminal justice to make contact with social services and education and mental health services and health services in general so that they can work together.

Angela Lawton: The children that I'm working with, you know, they are some of the most vulnerable that I have ever come across, because often, you know, they haven't led everyday, normal lives and maybe drugs have been involved prior to that so it isn't just about the imprisonment. It's

about life before, life afterwards. It just goes on and they are really, really vulnerable.

[End of Recording]