

# NICCO: Assisting fostering teams to support children of offenders and the families that care for them



“I miss my mum. One day she went out and didn’t come back.”

**5%**  
of children remain in the family home when a mother goes to prison.

Find out how to support offenders’ children and their families

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 **Barnardo’s**

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Funded by



Department  
for Education

## Who are we?

NICCO is a service that supports professionals to work effectively with offenders' children and families. NICCO collates and promotes examples of services, interventions, resources, policy and research around this vulnerable group.

Barnardo's was commissioned by the Department for Education to develop this service as an online information hub with a focus on England ([www.nicco.org.uk](http://www.nicco.org.uk)). The service is targeted at all professionals who come into contact with offenders' children and their families, from various sectors including education, health and social care as well as the criminal justice system.

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## “We was there when he got locked up”

–7 year old girl

It is estimated that **200,000 children a year**<sup>1</sup> experience the imprisonment of a parent in England and Wales. Research increasingly shows the impact that parental imprisonment can have on these children – **poorer outcomes, stigma, isolation**. However there is currently no routine identification of who these children are and therefore no way of ensuring their needs are met.

## “I just bottle it up...I don't want to tell anyone.” –11 year old girl

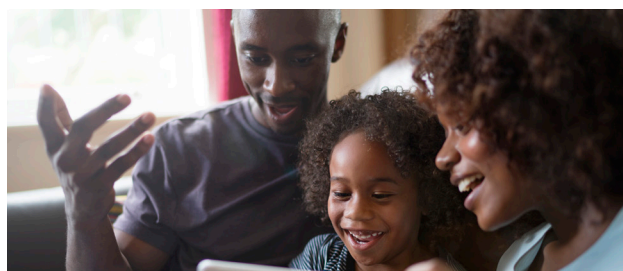
- Parental imprisonment is associated with negative school experiences such as truanting and bullying<sup>2</sup>
- Prisoners' children are more vulnerable to poverty and physical illness<sup>3</sup>
- As a group, they are significantly more at risk of mental health issues<sup>4</sup>

## Looked After children of offenders

It is likely that fostering teams frequently arrange care for children of offenders. When a mother goes to prison, only 5% of children remain in the family home and 12% go into care with foster parents or are adopted<sup>5</sup>. More broadly, many children are fostered due to neglect or risks in the home which are sometimes related to parental offending.

Children who are fostered following the arrest or conviction of a family member may have to suddenly leave their home, sometimes for the first time. Some children witness their parent's arrest which can be a traumatic experience in itself. Traumatized children can display regressive behaviour such as bed wetting, may respond by acting out or internalising emotions, and some may begin to resist the authority figures they see as having removed their parent<sup>6</sup>. Ordinary daily events, such as seeing police on the television, could trigger an upsetting memory in a child.

Parental imprisonment has been described as an “ambiguous loss”, as children may not be told the truth about what has happened, making it harder to understand and accept<sup>7</sup>. For children in temporary care, this may be exacerbated by the uncertainty around if, or when, they will be reunited with their parent.



Children of offenders may be at risk of involvement in an intergenerational cycle of offending, with one study concluding that 65% of children with a father in prison when they were younger than 10 went on to offend themselves<sup>8</sup>. Considering recent research revealing the disproportionate representation of children from Local Authority Care backgrounds in the youth justice system<sup>9</sup>, children of offenders who go into care, arguably already at risk, may particularly need considered support to avoid this cycle.

Despite all this, Social Care teams do not always focus on parental offending in their needs assessments, meaning the particular needs of offenders' children may not be highlighted to fostering teams.

## “I'd like them to see if I was alright and not down and talk about it to make you feel better about it” –13 year old boy

For some children of offenders, going into foster care may be the first period of stability they have had in their lives. Fostering teams can support this stability by training carers on the impact of parental offending on children and some of the associated behaviours.

The impact of parental imprisonment should also be considered during Local Authority Care reviews with input from fostering professionals and the families they support.

Research has suggested it is best for carers to speak openly – and as positively as possible – to children about parental imprisonment<sup>10</sup> in order to break down stigma and encourage emotional resilience. Answering children's questions as they arise is important to help them feel secure and fostering teams can help carers consider positive responses.

Children have a right to contact with their imprisoned parent, if in their best interests,



and the right to be heard in things that affect them<sup>11</sup>. In conjunction with Social Care, foster carers can support a child to have these rights recognised. If appropriate, children may visit their imprisoned parent and should be supported in this at home as well as by their Social Worker. Other means of contact may be via letter or phone call.

**“When we get to see him we get to huggle him... we never get to see him lots of times.”**  
–7 year old girl

### How can NICCO support fostering teams?

**“A fantastic service...I share it with as many people as I can.”** – Safeguarding Lead

NICCO is a national one-stop information service for all professionals working with children and families of offenders. It brings together:

- **resources** for children and families and for professionals to use directly with children
- details of **local and national services** to signpost families to, that work specifically with children and families of offenders
- details of local **training for professionals**
- up-to-date, national and local **policy frameworks, government guidance and recommendations** about this group of children
- **guidelines and toolkits** to support professionals to work with these children, and to assist in developing practice
- **research** into the impact of imprisonment on children and families

NICCO recognises that fostering teams operate under pressure with demands on their time. NICCO puts all the resources in one place so help and information is there when it's needed.

Note: Children and young people's quotes are taken from interview transcripts for the following: Gill, O. (2009) 'Every night you cry: Case studies of 15 Bristol families with a father in prison', Barnardo's NICCO Quality Statements & Toolkit consultation with young people's group, Bristol, 2015

- 1 Williams et al (2012) Prisoners' childhood and family backgrounds: Results from the Surveying Prisoner Crime Reduction (SPCR) longitudinal cohort study of prisoners. Ministry of Justice.
- 2 Clewett, N. & Glover, J. (2009), Supporting Prisoners' Families. Barnardo's.
- 3 Smith, R. et al. (2007) Poverty and disadvantage among prisoner's families. Joseph Rowntree Foundation.
- 4 Jones et al. (2013) COPING, Children of Prisoners, Interventions & Mitigations to Strengthen Mental Health. University of Huddersfield.
- 5 Corston, J. (2007) The Corston Report. Home Office.
- 6 Codd, H. (2008) In the Shadow of Prison: Families, imprisonment and criminal justice. Routledge.
- 7 London Bockneck, E. et al (2009) 'Ambiguous Loss and Post-traumatic Stress in School-Age Children of Prisoners' in Journal of Child & Family Studies 18 (3), pp. 323 - 333
- 8 Murray, J. et al. (2009) Effects of parental imprisonment on child antisocial behaviour and mental health: a systematic review. University of Cambridge: The Campbell Collaboration.
- 9 Prison Reform Trust (2016) In Care, Out of Trouble. Prison Reform Trust.
- 10 Manby, M. et al. (2014) 'Children of prisoners: exploring the impact of families' reappraisal of the role and status of the imprisoned parent on children's coping strategies' in European Journal of Social Work 18 (2), pp. 228 – 245.
- 11 United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, accessed at <http://www.unicef.org.uk/UNICEFs-Work/UN-Convention/>

### Resources for fostering teams

To develop your practice with offenders' children, the **NICCO Quality Statements & Toolkit** is free to download and guides you to make achievable action plans for your service.

A video can be a great way of introducing issues in carer training – see **NICCO** for multimedia **resources** on offenders' children.

### Visit NICCO

Visit [www.nicco.org.uk](http://www.nicco.org.uk) to discover resources for fostering teams and the children and families they support. Sign up to become a member to receive free NICCO e-news.

