Educational attainment gap - Involvement of parents: response from Families Outside

As Scotland’s only national charity that works solely to support the families of people affected by imprisonment, Families Outside would like to highlight the needs of a particularly vulnerable group of parents and carers, namely those who are in custody on remand or sentence or on Home Detention Curfew (HDC), and those who are caring for children and young people with a parent or close relative in prison.

Families Outside would like to highlight the following to the Committee in considering how parents and schools can best work together to raise all pupils’ attainment:

- A parent in prison is still a parent¹ and can play an important role in supporting their child’s education, even from behind bars. Involving an imprisoned parent in his or her child’s education need not be a burdensome task for schools. It is not unusual nowadays for schools to send out multiple copies of school reports (in cases of separated or divorced parents, for example), and this could easily be extended to a parent in prison. Newsletters, school photographs and examples of good work can all help the parent in prison to connect meaningfully with their child’s life at school and can in turn help increase the parent’s overall sense of wellbeing and motivation as well as help to improve their own literacy skills. Moreover, a relationship with a child which continues and develops during imprisonment is far more likely to be sustained post-release, giving the imprisoned parent a powerful incentive to re-engage positively in society.²

- Families affected by imprisonment are often reluctant to access support from outside agencies.³ This may be due to shame and stigma, a lack of knowledge of what support is available, or in some cases, a mistrust of statutory services. Schools, however, should be communities where families already have an established relationship with members of staff who can provide information and support in how to access other agencies. In this way, schools can be a gateway to further support and are less ‘threatening’ for families than contacting social services directly, for example.

- The Curriculum for Excellence recognises that strong home / school links are crucial to children attending regularly and reaching their potential; children do better at school and are more likely to reach their potential when parents and school staff cooperate and work closely in partnership with one another. This is particularly challenging for families affected by imprisonment who, as well as experiencing grief and shock, also fear further stigmatisation, and it is understandable that they often

---

avoid telling the school directly, particularly if they are unsure how that information might be used. Carers and imprisoned parents may have had very negative experiences of school themselves, many of them experiencing failure and shame, and it is extremely important that families are able to trust the school before divulging such sensitive information. A school community must, therefore, first and foremost be concerned with ensuring that all staff members are trained and have an understanding of the trauma and stigma experienced by these children so that they can support families in an appropriate and helpful way and so that carers have a fundamental trust in the school which enables them to share the information in the first place.

- Examples of positive practice exist that help improve engagement more generally between prisoner parents and their children but also to improve these children’s and parents’ engagement with education. Homework clubs such as the one at HMP Low Moss improve contact between imprisoned parents and their children as well as children’s engagement in their education. It also creates a non-stigmatising means for prisoners to improve their own literacy and numeracy. In addition, Families Outside’s school / prison link initiative offers an opportunity for parents, schools, and prisons to work together in supporting pupils’ educational attainment. There are several examples from Australia and the United States which highlight the positive role schools can play in supporting families affected by imprisonment, and these could easily be developed for use in Scotland.

- Finally, prisoners have no access to the internet and often have literacy issues. Any communication or materials intended to inform or engage with parents needs to take these factors into account. Furthermore, parents on Home Detention Curfew might have restrictions (e.g. locations / times) that limit their ability to attend meetings.

In conclusion, there are several practical ways in which schools can support parents in prison, or on HDC, and the carers of children affected by imprisonment to raise pupils’ attainment:

- ensure that all school staff are aware and trained in how to deal with issues around imprisonment;
- be a community that is aware and supportive of children affected by imprisonment – a ‘safe space’ where children and their carers can share what is going on;
- actively build positive relationships with families affected by imprisonment and help carers to access additional forms of support;
- provide information for children and families affected (posters, leaflets, helpline numbers);

---

liaise with partner agencies (sharing information appropriately and sensitively whilst bearing in mind the family’s right to confidentiality); and

where appropriate, keep the parent in prison informed (copies of school reports, newsletters, phone calls, visits if possible etc.) in liaison with outside carers and prison staff (e.g. Family Contact Officers).

The following case study demonstrates the difference that can be made if parents, schools, and prisons work together in partnership:

Following an in-prison CPD session for teachers, which was facilitated by Families Outside, a teacher contacted us to ask if he could conduct a course choice interview with the father of one of his pupils whose father is serving a prison sentence. The Families Outside Family Support Coordinator was able to liaise with prison staff and arrange for the teacher and his pupil to meet with the pupil’s father in the prison to talk about his studies and which subjects he would choose for S3/4. This meeting had several positive impacts:

- The teacher realised that a father in prison still has an important role to play in supporting his son’s education;
- The father gained a better understanding of the school system and, more importantly, of his son’s potential;
- The pupil was delighted that his father could participate in such an important decision; and
- Families Outside was able to offer ongoing support to the pupil’s mother and her family.

Since January 2013, Families Outside has taken over 850 teachers into prisons to help them understand the issues faced by families and how they can help. These sessions have made a considerable impact on staff and have led to some creative and innovative ways of reaching out to some of Scotland’s most vulnerable families. The 2014 report can be read at [www.familiesoutside.org.uk/prison-training-teachers](http://www.familiesoutside.org.uk/prison-training-teachers).

March, 2015
Sarah Roberts, Child & Family Support Manager