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# 'Mothering from the Inside'

## — A Small Scale Evaluation of Acorn House, an Overnight Child Contact Facility at HMP Askham Grange

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**Staff at Askham Grange open prison have been facilitating overnight contact for imprisoned mothers and their children for over two years. Children and young people stay with their mothers for up to 48 hours in 'Acorn House', which is within the prison grounds, with no intervention from staff, apart from when meals are brought from the main prison. Situated within a whole prison commitment to family support this innovative and pioneering project enables imprisoned mothers to spend quality private time with their children and to experience normal maternal activities. The safeguarding implications of this have been considered and approved by the local Safeguarding Board. If they are involved, Social Workers are consulted and careful consideration is given to the impact of staying overnight for the children involved, taking into account when they last stayed overnight with their mother. This article will focus upon what the authors learned from interviewing children and imprisoned mothers who have used Acorn House about the limitations of the usual prison visiting arrangements, compared to the benefits offered by overnight contact at Acorn House.**

Children who have a mother in prison are likely to experience far more disruption than those who have a father in prison. This is explained by the fact that only

5 per cent of children whose mothers are sentenced to imprisonment remain in the home they were living in prior to their mother's sentence<sup>2</sup>. Also, only 9 per cent of children are cared for by their father during their mother's sentence<sup>3</sup>. This contrasts with 90 per cent of children with a father in prison being cared for by their mother in their own home<sup>4</sup>. The implications of this for children and young people with a mother in prison are huge. They may have to move school and lose contact with their friends and familiar surroundings at a time when these points of stability could be particularly important to them in terms of assisting them to cope.

Imprisoned mothers cite being separated from their children as the most difficult aspect of incarceration<sup>5</sup>, with a fear of losing contact exacerbating mental health and substance misuse problems<sup>6</sup>. Loper and Tuerk<sup>7</sup> have shown that levels of anxiety and stress are similar between mothers and non-mothers upon entering prison, however, mothers' levels of anxiety remained after a six-month period whereas those of non-mothers were diminished<sup>8</sup>. They have also shown that mothers in prison experience high levels of role strain, with a reduction in parenting confidence<sup>9</sup>. Borrill et al<sup>10</sup> highlighted consistent themes of loss and rejection in their exploration of the motivations and intentions of women in prison who attempt suicide. The most common factor they identified related to a loss of contact with or rejection

1. With thanks to Amanda Swallow, PhD student within the Centre for Applied Childhood Studies, who provided a literature review on children of prisoners.
2. Caddle, D. and Crisp, D. (1997) *Imprisoned Women and Mothers*. London: Home Office.
3. HM Government (2007) Response to Baroness Corston report: a Review of Women with Particular Vulnerabilities in the Criminal Justice System.
4. Caddle and Crisp (1997) see n.2.
5. Carlen, P. & Worrall, A. (2004). *Analysing Women's Imprisonment*. Devon: Willan Publishing.
6. Caddle and Crisp (1997) see n.2, Robertson, O. (2007) *The Impact of Parental Imprisonment on Children*, Quaker United Nations office, Geneva.
7. Loper, A. and Tuerk, E. (2006) 'Contact between incarcerated mothers and their children: assessing parenting stress'. *Journal of Offender Rehabilitation*. vol.43. no.1. pp:23-43.
8. See also Shami, M. & Kochal, R. (2008) 'Motherhood Starts in Prison': The Experience of Motherhood Among Women in Prison' *Family Process*, Vol. 47. 3.pp:323-340.
9. Loper and Tuerk (2006) see n.7.
10. Borrill, J., Snow, L., Medicott, D., Teers, K. and Paton, J. (2005) 'Learning from 'Near Misses': interviews with women who survived an incident of severe self-harm in prison'. *The Howard Journal*. vol.44. no.1. pp.57-69.

from their children. Loper and Tuerk<sup>11</sup> highlight that higher levels of contact between mothers and their children during imprisonment greatly assists the continuation of their relationship and protects both from experiencing the separation as devastating total loss.

It is widely recognised that for imprisoned mothers maintaining contact with their children can have a powerful impact upon their rehabilitation and resettlement, and is crucial to help them make and sustain the changes that reduce re-offending<sup>12</sup>. This is reflected in current policy with initiatives to create better resources and support in visitor centres, enhanced family visits and parenting programmes. However, the reality of women's imprisonment means that around 50 per cent of imprisoned mothers do not receive visits from their children throughout their sentence<sup>13</sup>. The most commonly cited barrier to visiting relates to logistical difficulties, with women held on average 62 miles away from their home<sup>14</sup>. The lack of visits may also be explained by the unsatisfactory nature of the normal visiting arrangements for mothers and their children, which is confirmed by the findings of this research.

The substantial increase in the female prison population in England and Wales from 1,979 in June 1995 to 4,282 in June 2010<sup>15</sup> has greatly increased the number of families disrupted through maternal imprisonment each year. Approximately 66 per cent of women in prison are mothers with dependent children under the age of 18 years<sup>16</sup>. Since it is not currently mandatory for prisons to record the details of prisoners'

children, it is estimated that over 17,000 children a year are separated from their mother as a result of imprisonment<sup>17</sup>.

There is a consensus amongst researchers that there are particularly negative effects on children who experience parental imprisonment. The impact is manifested as: experiences of trauma and increased potential of experiencing mental health issues<sup>18</sup>; experiences of stigma<sup>19</sup>; experiences of social exclusion<sup>20</sup>; and potentially an increased risk of expressing anti-social behaviour<sup>21</sup>. Boswell and Wedge<sup>22</sup> highlighted that children losing a parent due to imprisonment may experience it as bereavement, but without the sympathy that would accompany the death of a parent. With women making up only 5 per cent of the prison population<sup>23</sup>, having a mother in prison is relatively unusual. Therefore the stigma attached to having a mother in prison is generally greater for children than having a father in prison.

In recognition of the above factors, and the limitations of existing visiting facilities, The Head of Children and Families within HMP Askham Grange explained she identified the need for Acorn House as a result of seeing mothers return upset from home leave, as a result of '*feeling like visitors in their own homes*'. She described how she watched '*their confidence in their own parenting dissipate*'. She was aware that imprisoned mothers worry about their children but are

*powerless to do anything about it. It is this lack of power that contributes to them feeling*

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11. Loper and Tuerk (2006) see n.7.
  12. Caddle and Crisp (1997) see n.2, HM Inspectorate of Prisons (2005) *Women in Prison* [online] Available at: <http://inspectors.homeoffice.gov.uk/hmprisons/thematic-reports1/womeninprison.pdfview=binary>, Howard League for Penal Reform (1999) 'Life in the Shadows: Women Lifers.' London: Howard League for Penal Reform.
  13. Social Exclusion Unit (2002) *Reducing re-offending by ex-prisoners*. Office of the Deputy Prime Minister: London.
  14. Social Care Institute for Excellence (2008), Children of Prisoners — Maintaining Family Ties, [on line] Available on line: <http://www.scie.org.uk/publications/guides/guide22/index.asp>
  15. NOMS, Prison Population and Accommodation Briefing, 18 June 2010.
  16. Home Office Research Study 208 (2000), 'Women prisoners: A survey of their work and training experiences in custody and on release', Research, Development and Statistics Directorate, Home Office.
  17. Prison Reform Trust, (2006) '160,000 Children of Prisoners Ignored by Government'. London: Prison Reform Trust. [online] Available at: <http://www.prisonreformtrust.org.uk/subsection.asp>
  18. Boswell, G. and Wedge, P. (2002) *Imprisoned fathers and their children*, London: Jessica Kingsley Publishers, Social Exclusion Unit (2002) see n. 13, Laing, K. and McCarthy P. (2005) 'Risk, protection and resilience in the family life of children and young people with a parent in prison' [online]. Available at: [http://www.pcrd.group.shef.ac.uk/working\\_papers/newcastle\\_working\\_paper.pdf](http://www.pcrd.group.shef.ac.uk/working_papers/newcastle_working_paper.pdf). [Accessed: 12th November 2007], Lowenstein, A (1986) 'Temporary Single Parenthood — The Case of Prisoners' Families' *Family Relations*, Vol. 35, No. 1, pp. 79-85.
  19. Murray, J. (2005) 'The effects of imprisonment on families and children of prisoners'. In: Leibling A. and Maruna, S. eds. (2005) *The Effects of Imprisonment*. Cullompton: Willan Publishers, Boswell, G. (2002) 'Imprisoned Fathers: The Children's View' *Howard Journal of Criminal Justice*, Vol. 41, pp.14-26, Action for Prisoners' Families (2001) 'No-one's ever asked me: Young people with a prisoner in the family' [online]. Available at: [www.actionpf.org.uk/php/bin/readarticle](http://www.actionpf.org.uk/php/bin/readarticle)
  20. Murray, J. (2007). 'The cycle of punishment: Social exclusion of prisoners and their children' *Criminology and Criminal Justice*, Vol. 7, No. 1, pp. 55-58, Social Exclusion Unit (2002) see n. 13, Lloyd, E. (1995) *Prisoners' Children: Research, Policy and Practice*. London: Save the Children.
  21. Murray (2007) *ibid*, Murray, J. and Farrington, D.P. (2005) 'Parental imprisonment: effect on boys' antisocial behaviour and delinquency through the life-course', *Journal of Child Psychology and Psychiatry*, Vol. 46, No. 12, pp. 1269-78, McCarthy, P., Laing, K and Walker, J. (2004) 'Offenders of the Future? Assessing the Risk of Children and Young People Becoming Involved in Criminal or Antisocial Behaviour. DFES Research Report RR545' [online]. Available at: [www.dfes.gov.uk/research/data/uploadfiles/RR545.pdf](http://www.dfes.gov.uk/research/data/uploadfiles/RR545.pdf)
  22. Bowell and wedge (2002) see n.18.
  23. Noms (2010) see n.15.

*less, it just hacks into their self esteem and their self belief ... we want to give some of that power back.*

Family Learning Team staff put a great deal of time into helping mothers prepare for the overnight visits. The mothers who use Acorn House are required to work with the Family Learning Team and have to provide a plan of the activities they will be doing with their children prior to the visit. They can select board games and other play equipment from the prison's family resource room. Any potential difficulties are anticipated and the mothers spend time with the Family Support Worker thinking out how to resolve them. Issues tackled include how to engage with a child or young person who is very angry with their mother. If there are tensions between the imprisoned mother and the child's carers then West Yorkshire Family Mediation Service has a partnership agreement to offer mediation as a way of building bridges and improving communication. After the visits have taken place the mother debriefs what has happened with the Family Support worker.

There are no specific criteria regarding who is eligible to use Acorn House. In the words of the Senior Prison Officer in the Family Team *'it depends on individuals and their set of circumstances ... if there is a need regarding children that Acorn House can meet, the mothers will be given a chance'*. Therefore if a mother needed to spend some time with an older child for a particular reason, for example if they had suffered bereavement, then that would be just as valid as a mother spending time with younger children. The guiding principle behind all decisions is what is in the children and young people's best interests. There is a strictly adhered to rule that forbids partners from even entering Acorn House.

The authors carried out a small scale evaluation of the impact of the overnight stays on all the stakeholders involved. The evaluation was at the request of the Head of Children and Families within the prison. She wanted us to not only evaluate the impact of overnights stays from the imprisoned mother's point of view, but also from the perspective of the children and young people who used the facility, and those caring for them while their mother was in prison. She

asked us to seek the views of as many uniformed and non uniformed staff as possible. In short we were asked to provide a '360' evaluation.

### **The mothers who participated**

The five women who volunteered to participate were serving sentences ranging from 15 months to life. By coincidence they were all serving their first prison sentence. A general invitation to be involved in our research went out to all the prisoners in the dining room one lunch time. We had been prepared for up to eight women to put themselves forward. We were told by the women who were prepared to take part that the prospect of involving children and their carers had put off many other potential participants. It appeared this was due to their concern about adding to the pressure that their children and those caring for their children were already experiencing as a result of their imprisonment. We were heartened when we heard that many women were making the choice not to participate. From the outset we stressed the voluntary nature of participation, mindful of how important it was to do so in any prison environment where prisoners might be worried about judgements that could be made about them.

The mothers were interviewed separately in private rooms, without any members of staff present, using a semi structured interview schedule which asked open questions in relation to their experience different types of prison visiting arrangements, and home leave, leading up to their views on the Acorn House facility. All names have been changed to preserve anonymity.

### **The children and young people who participated**

The children and young people who were interviewed comprised: one son aged 12, and three daughters aged 13, 16 and 19 respectively. Three of the mothers who participated had younger children who they decided not to involve due to their ages and other factors. The carers comprised: the 22 year old daughter of one of the imprisoned mothers who was caring for her 5 year old younger brother; a father; a grandmother; and a friend. Two of the older young

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people who participated, aged 16 and 19, lived on their own. The 19 year old had been 7 years old when her mother received a Life sentence, and so had many experiences to share having visited her mother for 12 years in a number of different prisons.

### **The prison staff who participated**

We interviewed all staff who worked within the Prison Family Team, both uniformed and non-uniformed. The team made collective decisions regarding referrals for Acorn House. We also took up the invitation of the Family Support team to observe one of their meetings where decisions about referrals to Acorn House were made. In addition we interviewed three Prison Officers who were not directly involved in Acorn House in order to gain a wider perspective beyond the Family Team. The chair of the Independent Monitoring Board was also interviewed.

### **Mother and children centred methodology**

Our original intention had been to interview children, young people and carers in their home areas. However, when we consulted the mothers they expressed the strong view that they wanted to be nearby when their children were interviewed. They explained the importance of being able to debrief the interviews with their children, and to comfort them if they were upset in any way. Above all the mothers did not want our evaluation to add to their feeling of being excluded from significant events in their children's lives. The mothers came up with the idea of holding a 'family day' in the well appointed prison nursery, as a structure around which we could conduct the interviews. We also consulted the mothers about what activities would work well, and we came up with hand printing, and decorating frames for photos that were taken on the day. This was in response to what the mothers had told us about the importance of having 'memories' in relation to their children during their sentences. In this way we tried to include the mothers in the planning of the family day as much as possible. The day worked well. When children and young people were not being interviewed they could spend time with their mothers, either engaging in activities or enjoying the privacy provided by secluded corners of the nursery garden.

### **Key findings from children and young people's interviews**

Visits in closed establishments were viewed as being particularly negative by the children and young people. The older sister who was caring for her 5 year old brother vividly described the impact of his visits to his mother in a closed prison:

*and the fact like she couldn't move, you know, when you went to that prison, she couldn't move she just had to sit there ... when he got a bit older ... he used to say 'Mummy why are you not moving?' and stuff like that.*

*You were allowed to hug her but then that was it, just allowed to hug her and then she has to sit on one side and you have to sit on the other side (Son, aged 12).*

*and it just felt weird because at the tables ... you couldn't like get up and give her a hug and it just felt like you were there but you felt like really distant from her ... because you can't do what you naturally want to do (Daughter, aged 16).*

The young people all agreed that the ordinary domestic visits at Askham Grange were much more relaxed than those that they had experienced in closed institutions. This was because their mothers could move around freely and there was no restriction in terms of hugging. However even though these visits were more relaxed, they still did not allow private time when they could talk to their mother without the adults who accompanied them listening in. Therefore the lack of privacy remained as a major inhibiting factor with regard to the usual visiting arrangements at Askham Grange:

*No, you couldn't talk to her at all because it was like everybody's around you, your sisters and your Auntie and everything, so you can't talk to her really, it's hard like that. (Son, aged 12).*

*I just want to see my mum on my own own, because ... if there's other people there I don't feel like we can talk because she's got to entertain everyone, not just me, so I just want a one-to-one' (Daughter, 19 years).*

The 16 year old daughter who was living on her own following her mother's imprisonment commented on the contradiction inherent in the fact that she was regarded as old enough to look after herself and take over responsibility for the rent on her mother's house, but not old enough to visit her mother unless accompanied by somebody over 18 years. She spoke about how the presence of others severely affected the topics she was prepared to discuss, with result that anything of a personal nature was avoided. She described how she also felt inhibited talking on the phone about personal

matters, knowing that the call might be monitored by prison staff:

*I just didn't want to really talk over the phone when other people could hear me.*

It was only the overnight contact at Acorn House that delivered the private contact with their mothers that the young people prized so highly.

*just to have that one-to-one time and no interruptions, you can say what you want, do what you want, to an extent obviously, and you know, sit and watch TV, cuddle up and sleep while I hold her hand, it makes so much difference' (19 year old daughter).*

*It's like just being at home really because we just cuddle or watch TV, and if we want to talk about anything we just can (16 year old daughter).*

*It's nice to be with just that one person you want to be with (daughter aged 13).*

*It's all good you know ... everything's good and you can do like anything except for go out but you don't want to go out (son aged 12).*

He also confirmed that Acorn House could deliver privacy in a way that home leave could not, as when his mother came on home leave she came to the house he shared with the person caring for him and her children.

*Acorn House is better (than home leave) if you want privacy or something, when you're at home ... you can't have privacy at home.*

The young people also all recognised that their mother had become happier as a result of seeing them at Acorn House. This in turn caused the young people themselves to feel happier, as they were less concerned about their mother. In this way Acorn House created a 'virtuous circle' which improved the mental well being of both the mothers and young people who used it:

*my Mum likes me to come into Acorn House so obviously she's a lot happier and then when I get phone calls from her she's not down and upset so I don't get down and upset. (Daughter, age 16).*

It was also apparent that looking forward to Acorn House visits helped to keep both the mothers and their

children positive between the visits. The 16 year old daughter reflected on how it felt to say good bye to her mother after the overnight visits:

*I do feel a bit upset but I don't feel that bad because I know that I can come back next month and see her for a couple of days, so it gives me something to like look forward to and that.*

One young person explained how after she had started the Acorn House visits she agreed with her mother that it was no longer necessary to visit in the weeks between the monthly visits. She explained that her mother was fine with this, and that it meant she was free to pursue her hobbies and spend time with her dad and step sisters on the weekends between visits.

The 19 year old daughter summed up the feelings of all the young people:

*you can go in there, it feels like you're in your own little house, and it just feels like it's you in your Mum's house sort of thing and you just forget that there's a prison there, because it's up there and you're down here ... if I had millions and billions of dollars I'd put Acorn House in every single prison.*

### **Key findings from imprisoned mother's interviews**

Throughout the interviews the mothers expressed a profound fear of the long-lasting impact of their prison sentence upon their children and their maternal relationship. This was articulated as grief, loss and a crippling sense of guilt. Some mothers displayed a lack of confidence in their ability and their right to be a mother. Acorn House was viewed as a means of being available both physically and emotionally to their children during the separation caused by their prison sentences, supporting their children through the experience and nurturing their relationships to promote a successful reunification. Within the private and intimate space provided by Acorn House the mothers were allowed to 'mother' their children. This had the effect of protecting their maternal bond and supported their confidence to 'mother'.

The lack of privacy provided by other methods of visitation including domestic visits and childcare resettlement leave was a recurring theme throughout the mothers' transcripts. Anna describes the difficulty involved in dividing her attention amongst a number of visitors:

*... everybody else is talking to you as well and you can't really make any kind of connection with [child] ... it is hard.*

Similarly, Clare describes the difficulties in talking with her child[ren] during domestic visits with other people present:

*my [child] tends to be a bit more closed when there's other people there.*

The women were also acutely aware and appreciative of the sacrifices made by their friends and family who had escorted their children on the visits and felt obliged to provide them with their attention during their visits and when on home leave. As Clare describes:

*... I'm trying to give my time to three or four people that are on the visit.*

Equally Diane suggests:

*you dish yourself out so it's too thin, and it isn't the quality time what you want to spend.*

Therefore, one of the main benefits of Acorn House was the facilitation of privacy.

As described by Anna;

*... you can just concentrate on the children, just having that special time to be able to sit together, cuddle and talk ...*

Similarly Diane described the perceived benefits for her child[ren] :

*... it's just that complete privacy ... that you can talk to one another about things you need to talk about, things you need to discuss and it's private.*

In providing a private and intimate space the mothers were able to participate in normal mothering and respond to their child's needs. This was frequently described as enjoying attending to their basic needs, such as preparing food for them, bathing them and being able to put them to bed as Anna describes:

*Brushing their hair, you know, teeth and things, normal things.*

And as Diane describes:

*I run a bath for her and I sit and I comb her hair and, just generally pick up after her really, just generally being her mum.*

And Nicola explained;

*... doing all the things that you would normally do for your child at home.*

The privacy also enabled the mothers to respond to their children's specific needs. The statement below details Anna's appreciation of the way Acorn House allowed her to help her son with his homework after she was concerned that the trauma he experienced as a result of her imprisonment was affecting his schooling. She also describes how precarious telephone contact with her son can be:

*Well I think that's where Acorn House does help because of the fact that you can keep a check on things that they're doing like just homework and things, just how they are emotionally, you know you get the chance to expand on things ... you see phone calls I find are difficult, you can lose [clicks fingers] a phone call just like that by saying the wrong thing.*

Equally, Clare described being able to utilise the time at Acorn House to help her daughter with her coursework. Diane was also able to use the privacy at Acorn House to be able to support her daughter through her depression experienced as a consequence of her mother's imprisonment. At Acorn House mothers are also able to participate in activities that their children enjoy and in doing so they are able to create positive memories:

*... she's also very girly and likes pampering and for the last twelve, thirteen years I've not been able to pamper her ... she likes music so, you know, putting music on and we was up just being silly together in the lounge and having a bit of a dance ...*

*... we do crafts, ... so before I go down I get lots of paper, paints, glue and sticky things and sequins and glitter and stuff like that ... we take games, ... I just want to ensure that we've got plenty of things to do ... we can bake down there.*

In being able to participate in 'mothering', the mothers felt that their natural bond with their children was being protected or restored:

*... she just felt that she'd got her mum back ...*

*... it builds up natural bonds ...*

This then increased the women's confidence in their ability and right to be a mother as detailed in this quote.

*... because you've done something wrong and you're in here, you know, should you be giving them advice? But I think with Acorn House ... I can slowly build it back up again.*

After serving two years in a closed establishment before coming to Askham Grange, Rachel describes her reaction to having the opportunity to have an overnight visit with her son at Acorn House;

*I've never been to Heaven ... but I thank God, you know.*

Like Rachel, the women all expressed enormous gratitude and appreciation for the opportunity to use Acorn House, often finding it difficult to offer suggestions on how the facility could be improved. However, a sense of continuous emotional disruption was present in all of the women's transcripts with one mother describing the experience as a 'double edged-sword'. The women expressed great joy in being with their children but this was often accompanied by guilt, sadness and confusion. In being with their children and participating in mothering, the women became acutely aware of what they were missing out on as Rachel and Clare describe:

*... and I just cried, I were just happy as well, I was a bit sad and everything was going on emotionally ... (Clare)*

*you're given a taster of what you've been missing for all the years that I've been incarcerated, and it's a little bit, a double-edged sword in a way because it's wonderful to have the visit but it's so heartbreaking to leave. (Rachel)*

The most emotionally challenging part of the visit for all of the women was in saying goodbye. Each of the women described the pain of saying goodbye with some developing strategies in order to avoid voicing the words. The women experienced the 'goodbyes' as a symbolic transition with the walk from Acorn House back to the prison symbolising the loss of their status and identity as a mother and the reinstating of their status as 'prisoner'. Clare articulately describes this process;

*But you go through a grieving process every time, it's a massive sense of loss, it leaves me*

*feeling extremely guilty for, just for what she's had to endure, you know, even the journey up here and it's so painful saying goodbye, knowing that you're coming back into the house, your child's leaving, you've got to switch back into prisoner mode and ... you know that your child's leaving and you know they're on their own and there's nobody to comfort them, so it's, it's like being sentenced all over again, it's that feeling of I've got to go back to being a prisoner and my daughter's got to go back to being on her own.*

Similarly, Diane describes the process of goodbyes.

*Well we've come to a sort of come to a little agreement, we don't really say goodbye we just, pack the car up, I'll give her a hug and I'll walk away, and I just take a slow walk back up to the house, by that time I've wiped me tears and you think it gets easier but it don't, it doesn't get any easier.*

The women knew that informal support from staff and the other women was available to them on their return to the main prison building if they sought it. However, there was a sense of not wanting to burden people with their emotional difficulties.

### **Carer's views**

It was clear that the carers we interviewed were very committed to Acorn House. They were prepared to put the time into travelling in order to ensure the children and young people were enabled to spend time with their mothers there. One carer had to walk a considerable distance with her 5 year old brother to get to the prison from the nearest bus stop. The father of the 13 year daughter described how prior to having overnight stays his daughter would return from short two hour visits frustrated and moody. He explained that his daughter's mood swings had disappeared since commencing visits at Acorn House. He agreed with his daughter that it was much better for her to go for a longer visit less frequently, as it meant fewer weekends were disrupted, and she could do activities with her step sisters for whole weekends when she was not visiting her mum, rather than for just one day when the other day had been taken up with a short visit. Her grandmother was similarly enthusiastic about Acorn House:

*I think it's a good thing. She loves going, I've never found any complications with it at all.*

Another theme that emerged from our interviews with carers was the role Acorn House played in confirming to the children that although they were not living with their mother, their mother still had the key role in their lives. As the family friend who was caring for the 12 year old son observed:

*Personally I think it is crucial, they are living essentially with myself, another family who have maybe different ways of doing things, and they kind of fall under the radar of my family. It is really important for them from an identity perspective to know 'that's my mum that's the person that brought me up until a year ago'. And it's really important that they have that tie with their mum, that she has the responsibility with regard to the children ... If certain things are raised I will say 'really we ought to discuss that with your mother and see what she says'. It's helping the children to understand that ultimately the final decisions lie with their mum and not with me.*

The daughter who was caring for her 5 year old brother articulated similar concerns:

*sometimes I worry ... because he'll ask me for stuff and not go to Mum sometimes, you know while she's there, or he'll call me Mum by accident and it feels awkward sometimes.*

### **The views of prison staff**

Without exception all the staff we interviewed expressed positive views about what Acorn House could offer the families who used it. The Probation officer made point that when children were looked after by different carers during their mother's sentence, Acorn House gave them the possibility to spend time all together with their mother. The Prison Officer assigned to the Mother and Baby Unit summed up the benefits for mothers of seeing their children at Acorn House:

*they have 100 per cent control of their children, and to them, while they are still serving a sentence, that's priceless.*

She contrasted time at Acorn House with Family Days. She considered that Family Days were a good opportunity for mothers and their children to do activities together, but they did not provide the opportunity to 'discuss problems or find out how things

were going'. This was echoed by the Family Support worker who regarded Acorn House as providing:

*more time to just go with the flow ... and work at the pace of a daughter ... and to stay with maybe those silent moods.*

The Prison Officer also regarded Acorn House as a way of providing the opportunity for children to spend quality time with their mother more often than the eight weekly child care resettlement leave allowed. She considered one of the benefits was that it could potentially be flexible enough to allow time to be spent together on special occasions such as birthdays. Another Prison Officer who was not directly involved was equally positive. She explained there was a whole prison commitment to Acorn House:

*everyone wants it to work ... (it is) totally accepted I would say ... I certainly haven't seen any negative impact, only positive things from the women.*

### **Conclusion**

The views expressed by the children, mothers and carers who were involved in our research suggest that Acorn House is a very highly valued resource as it allows meaningful contact to take place. It was the opportunity to do ordinary activities, at their own pace, without other people present, that was particularly appreciated. It was also apparent that prior to being given the chance to meet at Acorn House the young people and their mothers viewed the quality of contact on visits as unsatisfactory, largely due to the lack of privacy. Children with mothers in prison are generally not cared for by their fathers. This means it is particularly important that they are given every opportunity to maintain high quality contact with their mother as a way of reducing the possibility of negative outcomes for them as a result of their mother's imprisonment.

During the course of our research it was clear that staff at Askham Grange were whole heartedly committed to making Acorn House work, and recognised the importance of the benefits it delivered for the mothers, children and young people that used it. They had all observed the positive impact that the Acorn House visits had on the mothers who used it. One member of staff summed up the whole prison commitment to supporting family links when she expressed her joy at 'the contentment you can see in mothers' faces when they have had a visit'.