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**Special edition:  
Recovering from the COVID-19 Pandemic**

# Working with children of prisoners through the pandemic

*Sarah Burrows is founder and CEO of Children Heard and Seen and is interviewed by Dr Rachel Bell who is Deputy Governor of HMP Send.*

**Sarah Burrows is a qualified social worker who has worked with children and families for over thirty years within a variety of settings. These have included children's homes, family centres, looked-after social care team, youth offending services and early intervention services as both a manager and a practitioner. Through this work, she recognised that an overwhelming majority of young people entering the criminal justice system had a parent in prison already, and that that no services were in place to offer dedicated support these vulnerable young people. To address this need, Sarah founded Children Heard and Seen in 2014.**

Children Heard and Seen works to support children and families impacted by parental. This work was initially done wholly in Sarah's free time as she was still working as a full-time Early Intervention Hub Manager. Six years later, Sarah has transformed Children Heard and Seen from a kitchen-table project to a charity with an excellent reputation for delivering targeted and effective support to over 600 children since its founding.

The interview took place in October 2021.

**RB: What is Children Heard and Seen and prior to the pandemic what did you do?**

**SB:** Children Heard and Seen is a charity with a specific focus on supporting children with a parent in prison in their own communities and reducing intergenerational crime. We are currently supporting 247 children across the country. We offer specialised one to one support with a skilled practitioner for children to help them identify complex emotions relating to the imprisoned parent and to learn how to express them in a healthy way. In these sessions, a practitioner guides a child through our specially designed workbook, which is filled with guided exercises to help children understand the process of imprisonment by covering each stage of the custodial sentence. We also offer age-appropriate group work to reduce social isolation and combat feelings of shame by showing children that they are not alone. We also provide support to parents/carers, offering specific

groups for those where the parent is due for release in the next six months, where the parent has been convicted of sexual offences and for those who have no contact with the parent in prison.

Our work is child-centred and delivered in the community, rather than the prison. This means that we support children, whether or not they have contact with the imprisoned parent.

When the charity was initially founded, reaching families impacted by parental imprisonment formed a key barrier to service delivery, as the lack of systematic identification of these families, combined with the stigma attached to familial imprisonment prevented many families from accessing support. By March 2020, we had built strong relationships with many families and were receiving a steady stream of new referrals. When lockdown hit, we feared that to stop service delivery would mean losing these contacts and prevent us providing support. We acted quickly, introducing a range of modified online services, including one to one sessions, activity and craft groups to combat isolation, and parent peer support groups. Recognising that access to technology formed a major barrier for many families we support, we immediately launched an appeal for second-hand laptops, providing vital technology to over 60 families. The online arm of our work has been hugely successful, and, during the height of lockdown, we were able to run up to 75 one to one sessions and 15 activity groups per week. Prior to the pandemic, we had offered face to face services in Oxfordshire, Berkshire, and Milton Keynes. In addition to this core work, we have now expanded to provide online support to young people across the country.

At the time, I don't think I had fully considered what would happen after the pandemic. When lockdown hit, we were acting reactively to the immediate challenges that had been raised by the lockdown, which had pushed already vulnerable families further into isolation. As we begin to return to normality, it has become clear that this online arm cannot simply be wound down, as to do so would leave many families without support. As there is no statutory system to identify or support children with a parent in prison on a national level, we are the only option for

many families. Children in Plymouth, for instance, shouldn't have to reach out to Oxfordshire but they do because there are no local services to access. Delivering online work has drastically increased public awareness of our charity through word of mouth, which has caused a dramatic increase in families referring themselves to us from across the country. Now, we have an average of 5-8 new families being referred to us each week.

Our charity really has transformed as a result of the pandemic, and delivering online support is now central to our delivery.

**RB: So covid expanded your work in a way that you hadn't planned?**

**SB:** Yes. And in a way that I feel for families was quite cohesive. It enabled them to support one another in terms of the uncertainty and the anxiety they had about that family member in prison. It meant people really came together. It was really lovely.

**RB: What was it like for children of prisoners at the beginning of lockdown?**

**SB:** There was a lot of anxiety that I don't really think went away. As for all children, normal routines and structures weren't happening. And there was that anxiety about their parent, and what might happen to them on the inside. At the time, media reporting suggested that a lot of deaths may be happening within prisons as a result of the virus. Many of the children were terrified that their parent wouldn't be safe in prison, and a lack of clear and consistent communication to families meant that many assumed the worst.

For many of the children that we support, their parent had previously been able to spend time with the family at home on ROTL (Release on Temporary Licence). When lockdown hit, this contact suddenly stopped, causing confusion and distress to the children separated from the parent. It was as if the parent had come back into their life and then was gone again.

**RB: Did younger and older children experience the separation differently?**

**SB:** I think every child is different and every experience is unique. Their experience is heavily shaped by their existing relationship with the parent in prison, and the relationship with the person looking after them. We supported one grandmother to give evidence at the Human Rights Select Committee in January

2021. She talked about her grandchild, who was just 1 year old, crawling around calling for his mother. It depends on the age of the child, what they understand and what they don't understand, and how much they have been made aware of the situation.

Depending on the children's age and depending on the anxiety of the person looking after them, there was real worry. There were no end dates to the uncertainty and children really like certainty and to know what's going to happen. There was huge anxiety. Parents were reporting children being highly anxious, bed-wetting, twitching, real anxious behaviour.

**RB: HMPPS put in a series of measures to try to mitigate the harms of the separation. For example, video visits were rolled out and additional phone credit was granted. How successful do you think those mitigations were?**

**SB:** I think the trouble is that every prison is different, and that there was no consistency in the types of services offered. Family's experiences varied drastically depending on which prison the parent had been sent to. Those whose parents had in-cell access phones were much better equipped to have consistent and reliable relationships with them. One family we support had a father with in-cell phone access while the mother was forced to share a mobile phone with over

30 women. The difference is so marked between different prisons and therefore children's experiences are so varied. A lack of a consistent and coherent approach across prisons has left children confused and upset. This was made harder in group sessions when children without contact would hear other children speak about having regular contact with the parent, leading them to feel confused and angry about why the contact they could access was so different.

As these experiences varied so greatly, it raised challenges in group work as one child may say that they had been able to access regular contact with their parent

In terms of the video calls parents were reporting that it was causing distress to children as well. Many prisons had a rule that only four family members could be present on the call, and that one of these needed to be an adult. This caused huge problems, as families with more than 3 children would have to choose which children could see their parent after months of no contact.

This made older children more grown up than they needed to be. They would be the oldest of four or five

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and they would be the ones that would have to miss the call so the younger ones could participate. And the same when visits came. Always it was felt the older ones would understand more so the little ones would get the visit, leaving out the older children. There were also reports that any sudden movements could cause calls to glitch and the identities of those in attendance would have to be re-verified. This could eat away at the limited and precious time that families had with their loved one, causing further stress. Families talked about having bare feet and the call being stopped for nudity, and the screen freezing when children moved around.

As each monthly call was limited to 30 minutes, it placed too much pressure on the limited contact to be perfect, meaning that any perceived negatives caused extreme distress. The video calls also took a long time to roll out too, some prisons had video calls quickly and others took months before they were made available.

**RB: So, it unintentionally created issues of fairness based on fairly arbitrary factors like the number of children in a family?**

**SB:** Yes, or which prison their parent had been sent to. That was one of the challenges of group work. You'd have children talking about contact with parents but everybody's experience was different. For us, it doesn't matter which prison a parent is in, we'd support families no matter what, but everyone had such different experiences. Lockdown exposed how inconsistent a children's experiences of parental imprisonment are depending on which prison a parent has been sent to. Children with a parent in prison are facing a lottery as to how they will be able to maintain ties to their parent on the inside. This lack of consistency adds to the overall sense of hopelessness and confusion faced by children with a parent in prison. This has been the case when visits are operating normally too, the experience from prison to prison can be very different. Lockdown heightened and shone a light on these differences.

**RB: How have relationships between prisoners and their families been impacted by the pandemic restrictions in prisons, and to what extent do you expect those impacts to be long lasting?**

**SB:** For parents we have supported through the pandemic that have since been released, the relationships have disintegrated. Whether or not that is the result of the pandemic and the lack of communication I don't know but the relationships haven't been great.

**RB: Is that a change compared to release before the pandemic?**

**SB:** Yes. From both sides there's always been the experience of the person serving the sentence, and the experience of the family outside, and the challenge of how to marry those experiences. 'I was outside supporting and feeling really anxious, while you were inside having a hard time. But my time was as hard as your time.' That can be hard to work through.

The immediate weeks following release can be the most difficult for children, the family unit, and the returning parent, as expectations of a 'return to normality' can be quite different from reality. Where the returning parent moves back into the family home, it can take time for relationships to be re-established, particularly when they have been absent for some time. The space the parent once occupied has had to be filled as life moved on without them. Due to the reduced contact during the pandemic, it was even harder to have conversations about what it

would be like post release, families didn't have time to plan or discuss anything. Then when the parent was released, it was into a time of lockdowns so there were no opportunities to have space and time to adjust, where the parent went back into the family home, it was very intense, and it created tensions. The normal things that people would do to try to reorientate themselves weren't available post release due to the pandemic so there were all the usual difficulties that can happen when someone is released compounded by the pandemic.

**RB: As deputy Governor of a women's prison, lots of mothers told me that they didn't want their children to visit when they couldn't hug them. They said it would be too difficult. Now we have contact for children under 11, and test for contact for others, levels of children's visits**

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**remain far lower than before. Do you know why they are not coming back?**

**SB:** The reasons can vary so much between families as every situation is unique. Once you get out of routines of doing things it is quite difficult to step back into. Although we're out of lockdown, people are still frightened, especially if you're doing public transport and going a long way, and once you've got out of the routine of doing it it's hard to restart. People might say it's better for the children not to visit the parent in prison, but is it better for the children? It varies so much for each child and each relationship. The problem is that prison visitation isn't geared around children, and often the timings mean that they would have to take time off of school to visit the parent. This is a major barrier to visitation as many families do not want to tell the school about the imprisonment.

**RB: Are there effective measures that should be taken to help restore prisoner-child relationships following the pandemic?**

**SB:** More family days, and family services being centred around the family and, more specifically, the children rather than viewing those on the outside only as a rehabilitative tool to benefit the prisoner.

And for us as a charity, we are trying to facilitate more communication with the parent from the child's perspective. We've produced a series of letter writing templates to make the process of letter writing less daunting. Children can just write one word like 'I miss you because \_\_\_\_\_'. They are really lovely. For us it's about giving the child the opportunity to articulate their feelings. Because they may feel conflicted about visiting or not visiting, and about their parent being inside. They are having to navigate through negative public reactions at school. Often the story about the imprisoned parent has been published in the press, which can lead to bullying and isolation.

There needs to be training for social workers who may not understand prisons, or how visits work and the challenges this can raise for children. But it is also a broader issue, there is very little community support for families, and there's no support for the families who don't have a relationship with the person inside. All our work is centred on what is best for the child, it isn't about the prisoner at all. Whilst some people may think the prisoner doesn't deserve a visit, it's far more important to think about what the child needs, what do they want? For them, it is just mummy or daddy. Children can understand that a parent has done wrong, but that doesn't always mean they stop loving them. Until we see the experience of children in its own right, separate to the prisoner experience, we are not going to be providing the right support for them. The support for family engagement should be reconceived and

centred around the families themselves, rather than being seen as a tool to reduce parental reoffending.

There needs to be family group conferencing, pre-custody and before they come out. Particularly for women. It should address how everybody will be supported. That is what really should be happening. That is putting the child at the heart of it. That is how we start addressing inter-generational offending and everything else. The welfare needs of the child should be considered upfront. Where's the child going to live, how will they visit, how will they be supported? And then when you come out there may be a bit of resentment because the grandparent may have been doing it quite well and the mother feels disempowered. You need real, proper support through that. It's difficult. Particularly with grandparents looking after children.

**RB: What have you personally learnt over the pandemic, and will there be lasting changes to the way you do your work?**

**SB:** The virtual support will definitely continue to grow and develop. The 1:1 and the mentoring support is invaluable for families and children. But the virtual is not as good as face to face, you can build relationships with the children via online support, but I feel it is not the same as being able to meet with them in person. You get to know a child and their family in a different way when you see them face to face and it's the conversations you have outside of the planned work that help to build those relationships. That conversation you have while waiting for the kettle to boil, you don't get that with virtual support.

Our support will continue until children with a parent in prison are considered a vulnerable cohort and we are no longer needed. Ideally, children with a parent in prison would be identified through schools' admissions and made eligible for pupil premiums, as it is with parents in the military. It would be self-disclosure; they would be entitled to the pupil premium and then schools could support and find interventions in the community for the child. If all schools asked the question at enrolment and when children were starting a new term or year, it would remove the stigma because it would be a normal question to ask. We have families who have children in the same school but neither the school nor the families know about each other, it shouldn't be like that. So many families don't tell anyone outside of the family home about the imprisonment for fear of backlash and exclusion. This leaves them to feel even more isolated as their existing relationships and support systems fail. This can be really disorientating for children, particularly if they don't fully understand why a parent is missing. Our support, at its core, is showing up for these families and being that support system during such a difficult time, when they may not have anyone else to turn to.