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# A qualitative study of imprisoned fathers: Separation and the impact on relationships with their children

*Dr Geraldine Akerman, is Therapy Manager at HMP Grendon.*

*Charlie Arthur and Harley Levi were residents at HMP Grendon the time of the research.*

## Introduction

In English, the verb 'to father' means to sire and this implies a single act acquiring little effort or commitment.<sup>1</sup> Burgess<sup>2</sup> felt that fathers have long been confused as to their function. When asked about their role they produce such thoughts as protecting, providing and advising, but if asked to outline their actual relationships with their children, these things are rarely mentioned. Instead they prioritise intimacy, tenderness and trust. So, they may traditionally see their role as the protector/provider, but in reality, their relationship is closer and more loving. Lewis and O'Brien<sup>3</sup> mused that the ideal father was viewed as affectionate, emotionally involved and willing to play with the children, but on the other hand he is assigned the breadwinner, and so this can cause tension. In 1951, John Bowlby<sup>4</sup> presented a report highlighting the consequences for social learning and emotional development in young children who experience separation from their mothers. In it he claimed that '*mother love in infancy and childhood is as important for mental health as are vitamins and proteins for physical health*' Davies and Houghton.<sup>5</sup> Many psychologists have also mentioned that this can also apply to children that are separated from their fathers. Initially, Bowlby made scant mention of the father—child relationship, other than the his being viewed as an economic and emotional support to the mother; thus, devaluing the role of

the father. However, he went on to amend his view on this later,<sup>6</sup> in which he suggested that a child can have more than one attachment figure, but there would be an important one and other less important ones. Akerman,<sup>7</sup> conducted research, with the aim of exploring fathers' experiences as primary caregivers. Akerman concluded that some of these fathers had resolved to be better fathers than they had perceived their father's to be. Participants also acknowledged that there were generational differences in a fathers' role now and when they were children. In addition, they felt that there were differences due to their circumstances which enabled them to take a more active role in their child's upbringing. Most the participants reported that '*time was the most important thing my father could have given me.*' Thus, they had spent more time with their children and taken full responsibility in the day-to-day lives of their children. The consequence was that they felt they were extremely close to their children.

There is little research in the UK relating to the impact of separation of fathers and children by imprisonment.<sup>8</sup> Katova cites a study from the USA,<sup>9</sup> which primarily covers practical issues such as patterns of visiting and giving factual information rather than the emotional impact on those involved. Katova notes that the person in prison is also missing important milestones; anniversaries, birthdays, child's first steps, word etc. and explanations must be given to others when they are released. Furthermore, visitors describe

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1. Seel R, (1987) *The Uncertain Father, Exploring Modern Fatherhood*. Gateway Books. Bath.
  2. Burgess, A. (1997) *Fatherhood Reclaimed, The Making of a Modern Father*. Vermillon.
  3. Lewis C., & O'Brien, M (1987). *Reassessing Fatherhood*. Sage.
  4. Bowlby J. (1951) *Maternal Care and Child Health*. WHO Geneva.
  5. Davies, R. and Houghton, P. (1995) Development over the lifespan, '*The Attachment Process*'. In R. Davies, and P. Houghton (Eds.) *Mastering Psychology*, Second Edition, MacMillan Press LTD, UK, pp. 1-16. (p.6).
  6. Bowlby J. (1993) *The Making and Breaking of Affectional Bonds*. Routledge.
  7. Akerman, G (unpublished) *A Grounded Theory Study of The Dimensions of Fatherhood: Beyond Attachment*. Roehampton Institute. Thesis prepared for BSc. Psychology and Counselling 1998.
  8. Katova, A. (2014). Justice and prisoners' families. Howard League What is Justice? Working Papers 5/2014. Retrieved from [https://d19ylpo4aovc7m.cloudfront.net/fileadmin/howard\\_league/user/pdf/Research/What\\_is\\_Justice/HLWP\\_5\\_2014\\_2.pdf](https://d19ylpo4aovc7m.cloudfront.net/fileadmin/howard_league/user/pdf/Research/What_is_Justice/HLWP_5_2014_2.pdf)
  9. Merriman, P. (1979). The families of long-term prisoners. *Probation Journal*, 26, 114-120.

how at times they feel they are treated like criminals by the Police and Prison service staff. It stands to reason that the more comfortable those outside feel when visiting a prison, the more likely they would be to do so.

Lösel's<sup>10</sup> study, described as the first of its kind in the UK and Europe, reports half of those in custody have children under the age of eighteen years, and highlights how parental imprisonment can be one of the most critical life events for families. It can disrupt marital and family relationships, result in negative outcomes for children, and aggravate material and social problems. Families with strong ties can also be 'a resource, which is part of the solution'.<sup>11</sup> These relationships help to defend the children involved and assist desistance from further offending. The children involved in the Lösel study reported feeling a profound and challenging sense of loss when their father/step-father was imprisoned; missing day-to-day interactions, for instance the father being there in the morning, or supporting them at sports events. The opportunity to visit their father in a welcoming environment was important but these experiences could also be challenging, both practically and emotionally. Lösel concluded that the predictors consistently linked to positive resettlement outcomes for fathers, mothers and children were: Maintaining a high quality of family relationships; good communication between the father and family during imprisonment including high frequency of contact; there having been intensive involvement of fathers with children before prison; social support from family and friends; participation in family-oriented programmes (when controlled for quality of the parents' relationship); more material resources before imprisonment (i.e., income, employment, accommodation); and less previous involvement of the father with crime and the criminal justice system.

More recently, Woodhall and Kinsella<sup>12</sup> highlighted how prison visiting can be traumatic and anxiety-provoking with the emotional burden of seeing a loved

one within a daunting environment causing stress and worry. They comment that some of those in custody even stop visits because of the 'come-down' they feel after the time spent with those they love.

### Context of the research

HMP Grendon is an adult male category B prison that also holds category C prisoners. Grendon functions as a Democratic Therapeutic Community (DTC). Bennett and Shuker<sup>13</sup> describe the DTC model of change and its effectiveness. In brief there is an emphasis on encouraging the residents to take responsibility for their past and current behaviour. The environment is structured to offer the opportunity to residents to understand and overcome their previous difficulties in anti-social attitudes, interpersonal relating, emotional management and coping style.

Akerman<sup>14</sup> explains how the community is the agent of change rather than any one intervention within it. Psychodynamic therapy is undertaken, alongside Core Creative therapies (such as Psychodrama, Art Psychotherapy and music therapy) help this exploration. HMP Grendon houses men who have committed a range of offences, for example, murder, sexualised violence, rape, and violent robbery. Most residents are

serving indeterminate sentences with fewer determinate sentenced residents. In Grendon the residents, who volunteer for therapy, have complex needs, for example, disrupted attachment, various addictions and post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), arising from previous experiences, including their own offending. Akerman and Geraghty<sup>15</sup> report that the residents in therapy at HMP Grendon at the time of the research 69 percent report having had a significant separation from their primary caregiver. There is an emphasis on social learning, attachment and relationships within the therapeutic community. Included within this, is the men's own families, and

In brief there is an emphasis on encouraging the residents to take responsibility for their past and current behaviour.

10. Lösel, F. (2012). Risk and protective factors in the resettlement of imprisoned fathers with their families. University of Cambridge. Retrieved from [http://www.crim.cam.ac.uk/research/fathers\\_in\\_prison/final\\_report.pdf](http://www.crim.cam.ac.uk/research/fathers_in_prison/final_report.pdf)
11. Ministry of Justice/Department for Schools, Children and Families (2007). Children of offender's review. London: Ministry of Justice. (p.17).
12. Woodhall, J. & Kinsella, K. (2018). Striving for a 'good' visit: the facilitative role of the prison visitors' centre. *Journal of Criminal Psychology*, 8, 33-43.
13. Bennett, J., & Shuker, R. (2017). The potential of prison-based democratic therapeutic communities. *International Journal of Prisoner Health*, 13, 1-6.
14. Akerman, G. (accepted 28.7.16). Communal living as the agent of change. In D. P. Polaschek, A. Day, and C. Hollin (Eds.). *The Wiley International Handbook of Psychology and Corrections*. New York: John Wiley & Sons.
15. Akerman, G., & Geraghty, K.A. (2016). An exploration of clients' experiences of group therapy, *Therapeutic Communities: The International Journal of Therapeutic Communities*, 37, 101- 108. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1108/TC-12-2015-0026>

how they maintain these relationships whilst imprisoned. For most men, families can play a crucial role in providing emotional support, motivation to change and are considered as a protective factor associated with risk management. Grendon places a considerable amount of focus on maintaining family ties and provides the men with special visiting days throughout the year. These include Family Day, which happens on the wing and so enables family members to see the environment in which their loved one lives, have lunch with them and talk in a more relaxed environment and for longer. Children's Days are held in the gym and visits centre, and the men get to spend 6 hours with their families, play and socialise, and eat meals together. Both are set in a relaxed environment with prison officers and therapeutic staff—interacting with the families to assist in breaking down barriers between anti-authority views. This helps foster a sense of openness and transparency.

The prison also facilitates the 'story book dads' scheme through which residents can record a short story of their choice, which is sent to the child for them to listen to and enjoy hearing their fathers' voice. Lösel reported this scheme could be helpful in maintaining family ties.

The aim of this study is to explore the impact of paternal imprisonment on the father. From the findings of this study it is hoped that knowledge and understanding of the needs, experiences or effective responses to fathers and their children during the term of a custodial sentence is gained.

### Method

The research used interviews and focus groups to collect the views of the participants. Information on the study was sent to all wings in HMP Grendon and those who wished to, volunteered to take part. Each interview/focus group lasted between an hour and one and a half hours. The research was conducted in 2017 over a four-week period. A semi-structured interview was used, with questions relating to:

- How they felt about being separated from their children
- The impact separation had on their relationships with their children and on the relationship with the person who was now the primary carer

- What support they received at HMP Grendon, to what extent this met their needs, and what could be done to improve them
- How they saw their role as a Father in custody, how they could support their children and the primary care giver, and what support they received
- The impact their being imprisoned had on their children, how they were told, what input they had on that
- What their own experience had been of their Fathers and whether or not they had a parent in custody

### The Participants

Participants were recruited from all wings at HMP Grendon. Nine men participated, one was interviewed individually and as part of the first group, which included another 6 residents. The third interview was with 2 men. Their ages ranged from 24-51 years, mean = 37 years. Three of the men had fathers who were or had been in prison, two did not know their father. They were all convicted of sexual or violent offences, seven had committed violent offences against their current or previous partners, four in their index offences and three as previous convictions.

### Design

The participants were interviewed individually and in groups to collect rich detailed, first-person accounts of the participants' experience of being fathers who were separated from their child/ren by imprisonment.

### Procedure

A semi-structured interview was used to allow discussion to develop within the theme of the research. The first author undertook the interviews, and is female, so it was thought that having other fathers to discuss the subject with may help participants explore their experiences. The first author conducted the interviews, took notes throughout and recorded them to ensure as much data as possible was captured.

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Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis<sup>16;17;18</sup> was used to analyse the data. Shaw describes IPA as a qualitative method favoured by psychologists due to it seeking to understand meaning in a human experience. During the interviews participants were asked about their lived experience, and how they feel about their position as fathers in prison. The method aims, as much as possible, to 'walk in the shoes' of the participant, and as a researcher every effort will be made to interpret and analyse the information shared, while making sense of their experiences. This dual interpretive process is known as a 'double hermeneutic' is described by Smith and Eatough,<sup>19</sup> 'the double hermeneutic neatly illustrates the dual role of the researcher, in one sense the researcher is like the participant, drawing on the mental faculties they share. At the same time, the researcher is different from the participant, always engaging in second order, sense-making of someone else's experience'. It was thought that by having a group discussion it may evoke a more in-depth exploration of the subject. Two of the authors had devised the idea and so were both researchers and participants. Superordinate and sub themes were then identified through reading the notes and listening to the recorded material again in more detail.

To further help ensure the integrity of the findings an independent researcher was asked to complete the steps detailed above and discussion was had to the identified themes. Further, the two researcher/participants independently went through the anonymised data as above.

### Ethical Considerations

Prior to the research taking place, the participants were informed of the aim of the research and the issues being explored. The importance of 'co-researchers' was considered carefully. It is not deemed ethical for one resident to conduct research on another. However, the ideas grew out of discussion with two residents, and so it is also important for them to be given credit.

The superordinate and sub-themes are exemplified with narrative examples, as space is limited the full information is available from the corresponding author.

**The past, present, and projected future relationships with the child/ren and other family members.** The participants spoke about their relationships with the children when they were born, during their time outside, and since being incarcerated, and hopes and fears for the future (Relationship outside, Relationship now, Thoughts for future). With regards to **relationships outside** some participants did not have close relationships with their child/ren prior to their incarceration.

During  
the interviews  
participants were  
asked about their  
lived experience,  
and how they feel  
about their position  
as fathers in prison.

*[I was] already estranged from family before prison. I only saw her when she was staying with mum or dad. We had a more brother/sister relationships. I wasn't responsible for her. Mum, dad, and her mother protected her. (...) She remembers I chose to go out rather than be with her (P.1).*

*I had a child without wanting a child. At first, I wasn't ready for a child. I fell in love with her when she was born (P. 3).*

*Before I didn't appreciate them. Every time I went to prison I tried to do the right thing got back in touch (P.5.)*

*I saw I wasn't a good dad to my daughter. It wasn't her fault, it was me being selfish (P.8.)*

*Children born while I'm in custody...it's very difficult. Different feelings at different times in sentence. (P.9.).*

*I have periods when I'm out then not out. So, it's confusing for her (P.6).*

*I've not been in my son's life, but he went to university I don't think it would have happened if I'd been around. The bad influence I was (P.4).*

16. Aresti, A., Eatough, V., & Brooks-Gordon, B. (2010). Doing time after time: an Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis of reformed ex-prisoners' experiences of self-change, identity and career opportunities', *Psychology, Crime & Law*, 16, 169- 190.

17. Shaw, R. (2010) Embedding reflexivity within experiential qualitative psychology. *Qualitative Research in Psychology* 7, 233-243.

18. Smith, J. A., & Eatough, V. (2007). Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis. In E Lyons & A Coyle (Eds.) *Analysing qualitative data in psychology*. (pp 35-50.) Sage. (p.36).

19. Smith, J.A., Flowers, P. & Larkin, M. (2009) *Interpretative phenomenological analysis: theory, method and research*. London: Sage.

Others described how they had closer relationships, and this increased the impact when they were separated:

*[While I was] out for 2 years—I did what a dad should do, took her to school etc., now away again, she's lost all that. She's older now. She was used to me being there, now I'm not (P.6)*

*Kids remember the good times—lay on settee and watch TV. Forget holidays, quarrels etc. He remembers the smell of alcohol on me. It gave me a ray of light. I broke the family up, killed his mother, kids remember good times though (P.7).*

They spoke of the ways through which they maintained the **relationships now**. The range of options available, letters, phone calls, visits, emails were used:

*We don't write so much anymore. I'd rather talk to him. Letter less personal I make sure I talk to him at least a couple of times a week. We don't email, we talk a couple of times a week, him and his mother. You can go where you want with talking, easier than letters it's a conversation (P.8).*

*Daily phone calls vital; Phone calls are no longer superficial. She can tell if I've I have slipped back to old ways at times: She can tell when I'm lying now (P.1).*

However, there were times when their child did not want to speak:

*I can hear her iPhone in the background. She tells me, talk to mum, you're wasting your credit. I can't force her back on the phone. Now she usually wants to talk if her mum has told her off (P.6).*

*I haven't seen my daughter for 4 years due to going to prison. It's hard, I'm close to home, my daughter goes to school just down the road, it's terrible (P. 3).*

The men in custody had **thoughts and fears for the future**. The thoughts involved how their dreams of spending time together may not be straightforward.

Some had yet to meet the child or had to reinstate contact:

*I don't want to meet her on a prison visit. I don't want to come out and just walk back into her life (...) She said if I get out of Grendon she will let me have time in a contact centre. I thought at first it was muggy—now I realise it's for the best. She needs to get to know me (P. 3).*

*My little girl was 18 months when I left. Will have to go through the attendance centre for her to get to know me. I've got to think of her. She has to get to know me*

*I went to see son once outside but then I fucked everything up went back to drink and drugs. My fear is doing same thing for daughter as I did to him (P. 4).*

## The men in custody had thoughts and fears for the future.

While others wanted to do every-day activities:

*I want to do normal things like going to cinema. I don't want to make promises I can't keep: Fears for impact on them when I get out (P.1),*

*When I get out I want to be with the twins 24/7 but I know I can't smother them. First thing is you need to be there. I want that relationship with them, not just now, but when they they're 30. Best thing is not to lie. (...) I couldn't just walk out and say, 'daddy's home'. I know it's better for them. I want to meet them, take them shopping before I take them to my house:*

They were aware that they needed to put the needs of the child ahead of their own:

*You have to be responsible and do what's best for them (P.2).*

*I can't get involved in crime again, no more thrill seeking. If I'd started on the ladder of employment at the bottom I would be getting up now. I have to start that way when I go out (P.5.).*

**The relationships with the child's grandparents and extended family** were integral to whether or not they could remain in touch with the children. Those

caring for them outside, and their extended families, had taken on a parental role in their absence, which was appreciated:

*Dad has been a great role-model throughout. It's stabilised her right from birth and while in prison. He's filled that gap. Grandparents play a vital role for dads in prison. (P.1).*

*I haven't seen my daughter for 4 years due to going to prison. She goes to my mums' at weekends she knows her father is in prison. My mum reminds her who I am (P.3).*

*When they are at my mum's I ring them regularly. I put credit on phone and speak to them non-stop (P.5).*

*[Daughter's] mum passed away—[maternal] grandmother got legal custody. I have only met her [Grandmother] twice outside, she knows about me but was willing to give me a chance and she's given me a chance to keep in contact even though she knows my offending, as have the other mothers of children. [Daughter] had never seen me until she was 8, never met me. For 6 years she'd only seen my picture. My brother and sister-in-law saw her, they were part of her life and I wasn't. Because of that contact with them she as all over me when we met. Family had told her so much. She came straight to me, arms round me etc. I thought where has that come from (P. 8).*

There was also a powerful sense of **time passing slowly for the participants and fast for their child/ren**. They spoke of seeing their children grow up, for instance noticing the change in their clothing, how they interacted and how willing they seemed to be to maintain contact:

*Time stagnates here, it flies for them: Ripple effect of offending; She is growing up; used to wear little dresses (P. 1.)*

*I don't want her to grow up—I want to keep here where she is. Time is slipping away nothing I can do. They're growing up, I'm helpless. Can't stop time with them (P.3).*

They spoke of finding it difficult to put pressure on the child to visit, particularly as they grew up:

*I feel it's difficult to ask her to come up—it's hard for her. I don't force her to come, when she was younger she did (...). My daughter*

*was young—but now growing into a woman. I missed her teenage years being in before—now missing it again. She shot up. She's gone through the teenage years. That's one of the hardest things. That's what I've done. Hope to be out just before her 18th. Only out for 3 of 18 years. We are where we are now— but daughter growing up—nearly 14—it's more like talking to a little woman now. for her she doesn't want to be talking to dad on phone—she wants to be on Snapchat, but I've only got myself to blame. (...) She tells me, talk to mum, you're wasting your credit. I can't force her back on the phone. Now she usually wants to talk if her mum has told her off. It's horrible for me. It's part of the process of them growing up—you can't change, you can't press pause (P.6).*

Finally, in terms of relationships, they described their **relationships with their own father** and the impact this had on them. Some had little knowledge of their fathers, while others had fathers (and other family members) in custody. One had a son in custody, fearing that his son had been emulating his actions.

*[I have a] son in prison: I didn't meet my own dad: I'm an even worse father than him: Crime was son's way of bonding with me: It's a vulnerability when the parent is away they take on the identity they think they should have: Son is in for similar crimes. He didn't stand half a chance to stay out (P. 2).*

They considered whether having a father in custody had impacted on them. Some had visited their father in prison, and this had not been a negative experience:

*I grew up visiting jail—it was a badge of honour. Thought when I got out it'd be like when dad get out—it wasn't (P.4).*

*[I]Identify with the criminal. Biological mother was in prison in the short time we were together. My birth father was in prison. Adoptive father in prison (P.5).*

While others had not visited but their imprisonment had a negative impact:

*I didn't visit prisons—I was aware my dad and uncle were in prison, but I was living in a children's home. I didn't have that experience. Kids say, 'dad's away doing this'—It's embarrassing for us, for them it's like a badge*

of honour. You are a product of your environment. I grew up everyone was a thief.—It's what you show them (P.6).

All the feelings I went through as I child, my dad wasn't there and then I wasn't there (P.8).

**The impact of offences and imprisonment on the relationship.** While some participants had committed offences which impacted directly on their children, for others the separation was more important. In addition to the pain of separation, the participants spoke of the dilemma of explaining to children where they were and why.

*I feel like I've failed her. She asks—you said you wouldn't do it again, you're never going to disappear again. I said no definitely not. It upset me to see her here. Coming to prison pressed the regret button: How many years I missed out on. I can't be there day to day to help: Fears she may get into crime (...) I didn't think about it when she was a baby. I didn't think much of it, it was how it was. I didn't take on board what I was losing out on. Being out and building the bond, it's hit me harder this time. I appreciate what I'm losing. Regret the relationship I had but it gives me the motivation to be a better person. I've made mistakes—can't undo it. It's about learning from it. Now I want to value daughter's love and that lifestyle (P.6).*

*If you loved your children, you wouldn't do these things (...) It broke my heart she knew it all I was embarrassed: She was too young to know that. I didn't put her under pressure to tell me where she heard. She dealt with it in such an adult way when she was so young. I felt so ashamed. That feeling you get in your stomach that you are not there (P.2)*

*I'm here and can't do anything for them. It's hard not being there for your children when you're in custody. You can write and phone but not be there. I can't be there to soothe them*

**How the child/ren were told** where they were and why had a major impact, some participants felt powerless to influence this:

How the child/ren were told where they were and why had a major impact, some participants felt powerless to influence this.

*I didn't have a chance to tell, her mum did—even the extreme of the violence—it's shameful—degrading as a man. I thought she was too young to be told. She's a young innocent child—didn't want her to know I'm in prison for stamping over someone's head. but don't want her to resent her mum either if she didn't tell her the truth it's my fault (P.3).*

*I had to tell her what I'd done. The details were on front page of newspaper, I had to sit her down and tell her I had to go back to prison. It was one of the hardest things I've done. She was there when I handed myself in. I don't know if she was too young, but I talked to her like an adult. I try to not hide things from her. Not hide things. I don't know if she was too young—it was emotional—not seen me outside since. With the internet, they will find it all out. Got to be hard to sit and tell them (P.6).*

They discussed the **child's response to being told:**

*My daughters asked them why I beat up grandma. I said I was a selfish drunkard junkie. I gave them the cheater's version, then they Googled me. It's something they've always got over me—goes back to not being able to discipline them—can only advise them (P.6).*

*[My]son doesn't understand, and I can't explain [why pleaded guilty]. His life had been revolving around me coming to prison. He needed to have his own life...it would help him in the long run if he didn't visit me every weekend (...) [They are] affected by the press/social media even at a young age. They don't understand. [I had] concern of social media and them finding out about me that way. Hard to know what to tell the children about the offence—if they will find out if they want to ask questions how and when to tell them, age related (P.8).*

*We avoid talking about my offence. [I have] concern for when she finds out about it (P.1).*

The participants discussed **where the child/ren thought they were.** The way they were told and



what they were told was balanced between their ability to deal with their own feelings of shame/guilt at their actions, and the child being old enough to understand.

*I used to say I worked for the queen. That's why there's the signs (...) It's important for them to keep knowing who you are: They need to learn from a young age who you are: I'm not a figure of their imagination (P.2).*

*She knows I'm in prison she knows why. At first, I resented her mum for that. She was right though to tell her where I was (P.3).*

*[I was] not telling them where I was—She lived close by and told her friend her dad looks after the princess there and they told her it was a prison. That's how she found out. I should have told her the truth (P.4).*

They spoke of the **impact on the child/ren**, who appeared to have a lot of unresolved anger:

*[My] child was bullied; Daughter needed counselling; She takes it out on her mum (P.1).*

*My kids can be spiteful when they are fighting. I got them to listen. Maybe they're craving input from father (...)  
[I was] banged up since she was 2. I was banged up for 16 years, Served 9 years (P.6).*

In the case of a father who killed his partner he spoke of the profound impact this had on his children, how they expressed these feelings and how he felt about the future:

*A lot of the anger is there, son in a special school. He had lots of anger—chasing people with knives—he wanted me to be on the end of that. I'm not there for him to show his anger to. I Feel I've betrayed him. There's no way to challenge it (...) I thought of myself as a good dad, I worked, had a home. But one day my kids woke up and I'd taken everything—They went through the ultimate they lost mother and father. They went to sleep, and everything was taken. Any little fuck up from me now would send them running. If in and out you rebuild but if I mess up again that will be it*

*because of the seriousness of what I've done (...) [I] murdered my partner—as my children were in the house at the time I was put on level 3[risk assessment of risk to children]. [I was] no direct risk to children. I understand the psychological damage—they have lost father and mother. (...) I'm not just in jail, I've taken their mum away (P.7).*

While others described how their children had not seen this negative aspect of their behaviour:

*My kids never saw that side of me. They can't understand why I'm in prison and can't come home. It would be easy for me to fall into the trap of not taking responsibility. Their dad is not the person who committed that offence. Why can't I come home and be dad? (P.9).*

*They think I abandoned them: I've never done anything wrong to the children. I've just come to prison. My children are victims too: No wonder their behaviour got worse at school. You think they don't know but they overhear conversations. Imagine them going to bed after they heard that: My son would get into fights then hide*

*under the table and cry (P.2)*

They reflected on **things they have missed**.

*Birthdays and Christmas are difficult (P.1).*

*I can't go to school plays, Christmas, birthday, cheer-leading competition. When I was out before my life was dedicated to her and her mum. Took her to cheerleading, gymnastics, when I finished work, weekends together all the time, we had quality time together. Not to have it now, she feels lost she hasn't got that (P.6).*

*All the school runs, trips, after school classes, they want their mum and dad there (P.7).*

*First day at school, birthdays, children's days at schools, everything you can't physically be there to attend. just when they feel sad, or down, you can't give them a hug. You can't physically be there (P.9).*

My kids never saw  
that side of me.  
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understand why I'm  
in prison and can't  
come home.

*It's important not to forget the past. I remember that I miss plays. Not there to support other things (P.2).*

*Miss the intimacy-teaching him to drive; a hug and a kiss (p.8).*

They summarised their **general feelings**, mainly of regret and guilt and how being in prison had stunted the experience and expression of emotions. This seemed to have been a protective mechanism for them, but the relationship with their child had somehow cut through this defence:

*[I am] cut off from feelings: Prison made me shut down emotions. Now thinking about it [daughter being told where he was] I was so detached it didn't affect me. Maybe inside it hurt me, but the environment of prison made me shut down (...) I feel like I abandoned my child. I feel guilt I let her down: I feel physically homesick (P.1)*

*It took a while to sink in... the enormity of the situation...everything I was responsible for (...) Feeling lost. Feeling I had let him down. It hurt from day 1(P.8).*

*I feel guilty for causing emotional trauma-it's my fault (P. 2).*

*I have guilt/shame, everything, missing first everything I caused that by going out and getting pissed and being violent: I hate myself for putting her through this (P.3).*

*If I dwell on it. I can get upset. I make sure it's the last time. I have broken the cycle. My parents etc. were in prison. I have to not go back to drugs. Worst time I felt guilty and helpless—I'm a tree surgeon—she fell out of a tree. I felt sick that I couldn't be there. She shattered her wrist. She'd really hurt herself (P.5).*

*Embarrassing, I put myself in this position away from her. Regret—If Skype was around years ago, if I'd stayed out of prison I wouldn't have lost contact with daughter (P.6)*

The participants spoke of **Feeling deskilled as a father** as they were not with them on a regular basis to

offer an opinion as to their upbringing. They wanted to take a fathers' role in the relationship, by for instance, chastising the child, but this was difficult when they saw them infrequently. They also felt they were not in a position to tell the child off, having done that they had done;

*I support them by phone: I offer support and guidance: We agree on rules together (...) If I tell her off I'm a hypocrite; I can't take the moral high-ground: 'you can't talk dad' (P.1).*

*I can't discipline him: Hard to be a parent from prison: On visits, I let children get away with things: I can't take role of friend instead of parent: Need to be there to support them (P.2).*

*As a father in prison you make mistakes. You say the wrong thing and you can't reach out*

*We have to change our relationships (P.8).*

However, they recognised the need for boundaries:

*You have a responsibility to them. Say something if they slip. If I had said something said to me when I was younger I wouldn't be sat here now. I have to start slowly like I should have done when I was younger. Children do veer away from parents naturally to peers (P.5).*

*I set the punishment on the phone and missus follows it through. So, she's not the bad person. I feel the impact of not being able to tell her. Missus [has] been with daughter all her life but she tells me things she won't tell her mum. I tell her I have to tell her mum- I don't attack her when she's done something wrong—dad will go mental—I tell her how I feel. 'You've annoyed me'. Wife says why don't you tell her? I said she won't tell me again. I say you know you have to be punished I ask her what she thinks is a worthy punishment (P.6).*

*What right do I have to voice my opinion-I could have a solid opinion outside if I was always there. I want to say yes to make up for not being there...guilt kicks in. I'm not the*

parent who has been there I feel worse if I have to say no. (P.9).

This linked with **co-parenting** and how they made every effort to make joint decisions:

*We agree on rules together; Play one parent off against the other: I don't go against the mum; I find it hard to support her mother enough she is tired looking after her alone. We have 3-way conversations (P.1).*

*We make sure partner is not the bad one who says no. It's not how I would have done it if I'd been there. The dynamics change. We just dip in and out. I'm not part of the life—on outskirts looking in. Dynamics of the family totally change. Balance between what I'm doing here and family time. I'd split up with [son's]mum but good relationships. Still like a family—she's my best friend. We talk and discuss things, treat like a family. She and son understand we'll never be a family again don't know what the long term is, but will all help each other through it makes it easier (P.8).*

*Relationship is fractured but not unfixable (P.2).*

Further, their **relationship with the child's mother** had an impact, alongside the fact they were trying to maintain a relationship with the mother:

*[One] [Mother plays games. I appreciate my missus—I've been away for most of her life. For 14 years of my daughter's life I've been away 10 of them. First 9 years came up once a fortnight, got that bond. She visited all over the country. Our relationship with partner is on pause. Somehow that relationship is established enough to pause whereas the one with child is more fragile (P.6).*

*I'm lucky that females involved give me a chance to be involved but with that comes guilt (P.9).*

*Children are used as a weapon: The longer between seeing them the less likely it is authorities will encourage contact (P.2).*

*She feels left out in my relationship with her mother (P.1.)*

The **Benefits of being in therapy at HMP Grendon** arose out of the discussion. They spoke of the impact of being in therapy generally, in that they received support throughout their time at Grendon. They also spoke of the therapy having developed their ability to feel and express emotions.

*I can talk to men here about problems: Therapy visits help relationships with adults: If I hadn't come here I wouldn't have faced up to this, matured and built this relationship. When I first came to Grendon I started contact with [daughter. I asked mum if there was any chance of talking to her on the phone. I wanted to because of talking about families in the groups. I spoke about her on [assessment unit] and this made me realise and think about things a lot. Before Grendon I didn't think of anything. I missed my daughter and family but shut it off. Mum sent me photo early in sentence. I ripped them up. I couldn't face it. Access to phones all day—don't get in other prisons—lucky to have 5 mins. Letters—2 OLs [free letters] a week, emails (25p). Pin phone rates are good—better than before. 3 x Children's days a year. One of the biggest supports is the men here. I can talk about problems in relationships, don't have to just shut it off (P.1).*

## The Benefits of being in therapy at HMP Grendon arose out of the discussion.

*Understand myself better at Grendon: We get to explore relationships from the other perspective: If I hadn't come here I would have sent someone round: Self-awareness is so under-rated. We are privileged here (P.2).*

The additional opportunity for a Therapy Visit, which is facilitated by staff and involves the opportunity to discuss particular difficulties was deemed useful, but how this could be experienced by his son was considered:

*I've had offers from officers and [wing therapist] to have a therapy visit. They know it will be hard to have that first visit. For me that's great, but son it's the time first time he has seen his dad, that will be hard enough he's gone from a child to an adult. I worry*

*how comfortable he will be with a stranger, I've known staff 2 years. It's hard enough for him without the staff in and questions (P.7).*

Further, the increased understanding of their self in the role of father had been beneficial, along with the chance to talk to other residents and staff about the emotions evoked by visits and phone calls.

*If I hadn't come to Grendon I could have carried that on [not taking responsibility]. If I hadn't come here I'd have lied to myself, said I was a good father, but I wasn't. It's the best relationship I've had with them. In another prison in my experience no one to talk to. Good or bad mood. In other establishments cons don't want to know, staff don't want to know. You can't talk to someone if you come back from a bad visit or phone call maybe they can link in maybe they can't, but they listen. You can talk to people, be receptive to what they say. In Grendon it's relaxed. So many men together who don't speak about emotions—can't deal with their feelings, you crowd them all together. They just bottle things up, macho bullshit. put all those people together, such an unhealthy environment. How could they show emotions, break down and cry? do that in that environment. Here you can talk about everything going on for you. It would be like showing weakness in front of wolves. Here you're encouraged. You've tried in group and not found a way. In another prison if you have a difficult phone call you have no one to talk to (P.9).*

Participants spoke of the **quality and range of visits** available and how this helped their relationship:

*Childrens' days and quality of visits helped relationship (P.1).*

*Grendon visits best I've had, officers are friendly most relaxed ever. She likes the relaxed atmosphere. If there is something I know is going to be difficult, staff arranged it, so we were more away from others. Put to one side given time and space. Could relax (P.6).*

*It's the best relationship I've had with them. Throughout the prison estate you could not*

*have a better time anywhere. I am trying to make up for what I didn't do when they were younger. Kids know I'm in prison but not like another prison. The searching, the way family interact with staff. In other prisons, they are static. You can't move or play with kids. Here you can have a child sit on your lap, buy a drink, walk about. It's great to build relationship, a bond just the visits, especially with younger kids. It's so important to have that time with the kids. If you only have those visits like in other establishments, kids can't relax around you. This environment is best for your kids. It's so important to have that time with your kids. If you have a long time in prison and the visits in another environment is the only time you have you can't build the bond. If you're just the guy who writes or at the end of the phone and that is your experience of visits. When you're there with them if they can't relax around you it's very difficult to bond with your kids. I've seen the difference. Difficult to interact with your child. You can talk on the phone but when actually there if the kids can't relax around you, you can't have the bond. I saw the difference with my family. They can relax, don't feel like they're being watched obviously, they are being watched but staff are respectful. Staff bend over backwards for your visits. [visits are] number 1 priority. Other places it's security (P.9).*

This environment is best for your kids. It's so important to have that time with your kids.

Some suggestions for improvements to visits were made:

*Talks would be useful on Childrens' Days to inform them about Grendon (P.1).*

*Skype would be great to call from the comfort of their home: Restrictions should be explained before going on visits (P.2).*

Some offences (for instance if a child had been in the house at the time of the event, even if not present) have an impact on how visits can be conducted, and this had caused distress to the participants who had not had this explained to them prior to the visit. They spoke of the shame felt when they were told they had to sit in a particular place in visits, or could not go outside into the garden.

*I was told I was not allowed round children, I freaked out- while I was in the garden. I wanted to hit the Kanga [Officer]. I should have been told that before the visit (P.4).*

The need to have this explained prior to going on the visit was emphasised. Further improvements suggested included:

*[The ability to help with] homework would be great here. Great idea. I'm sure staff would be receptive to that if they could facilitate it. There's little I could say to improve it. Also, if you could have Skype calls, having the opportunity to see them (P.9).*

*A therapy-assisted visit would be useful. If you have a therapy- assisted visit family could have a phone call afterwards to support them (P.6).*

## Discussion

The results illustrate the complexity of the relationships between the imprisoned father and their child/ren. The many facets, such as how they related to their child prior to the offences, their current relationship and how this changed over time had a major impact. The participants spoke of watching their child grow up, and sometimes more distant, and how this emphasised the time passing. It felt to the participants that time was passing slowly, while their children were growing up without them, which had been experienced by the children in Lösel's study. Consideration was given to how the offence impacted on the child, and how they were told, which had been out of the control of some of those who participated. This highlighted how those caring for the children outside had to make decisions, (some of which those in custody agreed with and some they didn't), and then they had to work through the outcome. The conflict between telling the child where they were and how that may impact on them; as opposed to not telling them and the effect this may have on their relationship was difficult to process. The existence of social media also had an impact, as increasingly younger age children had access to information on their father which was in the public domain. Further thought could be given to those who are having to make these decisions, often while they are traumatised by the impact of the father being imprisoned, and how they can be supported. As Lösel had highlighted the importance of the relationship with the child's mother and other family members, were integral. Some of the participants considered that while the relationships with adults were more robust and established enough, those with the child were more fragile.

Like Woodhall and Kinsella reported, the visits had made the time in custody more bearable, but also evoked powerful emotions. The participants commented how the environment at Grendon enabled them to express these feelings openly, in contrast to other establishments, where this could be viewed as a weakness. This had provided a buffer to the 'come down' mentioned by Woodhall and Kinsella. The importance of the visits was emphasised throughout, and linking to Katova and Lösel's view the participants emphasised how the staff being more relaxed with the visitors had a major impact of the experience for the children in particular. This helped the development of a closer relationship. The findings support those of Katova and Lösel, from the father's point of view, thus triangulating the data. The participants' suggested ways through which the relationships could be maintained and improved. These included the use of more accessible services such as video visits, which could mean that the father could lift the burden from the primary carer through, for instance, helping with homework, or not having to make the long journey to the prison. The additional visits, such as Childrens' Days and Family Days, and therapy visits were valued, and suggestions such as talks being given to children to explain the regime could be implicated. This may relieve some anxieties the children may have as to how the father is cared for. It may also be supportive for the children who visit to have the opportunity to talk to each other about their experiences, helping them feel less isolated. The discretion of the staff to seat residents in a slightly more secluded area if they knew they had a sensitive subject to discuss was appreciated, and could be more widely used when it is apparent. This too may facilitate a closer relationship with the visitor, who may feel relieved having discussed the issue.

Having an independent psychologist analysing the data helped ensure that the researchers were not over-involved or biased. IPA allows for being creative, as in this case of enabling participants to be co-researchers, while thought is given to them in each position.

## Future areas of research to consider

This research has highlighted the complexities of the relationships father/child relationship while separated from them. Generally, they had reflected on their attachment to their child/ren and some expressed regret for the quality of the relationship prior to their imprisonment and what they had missed out on because of, and since being, incarcerated. Future research could collect data from children in this position and ascertain what they feel and what they think would help maintain and develop the ties so important for them. Further the use of technology such as video calls could be implemented, and its use researched.