

Children doing dad's time



Linda George

During my 15-year career as a school and charity-based therapist and family practitioner, I have often helped children express themselves to their parents and supported parents in hearing their children. Fathers in prison never get to experience this. Families normally look forward to visits, to connect and try to have a positive experience of family life. Visitors are aware it's the only outlet for a prisoner. Being a father in prison is probably something you have never prepared for; being a parent is challenging enough without this added pressure. This article is written to help you think through the lens of a child visiting a loved one in prison. At points, it might be hard to read, as it's hard to think about children's experiences. However, I do believe understanding some of these points can enhance communication and give better insight and connection to the parts of a child a father has the right to know about.

Challenges include feeling torn between needing to do things for oneself and the time it takes to visit loved ones. The fear of fights breaking out on visits and the worry that their father is in an unsafe place may lead to anxiety, nightmares, and a sense of helplessness. At the other extreme, the normalization of violence may cause children to enter into violent relationships or be violent themselves, leading to isolation from their peers and, in some circumstances, exclusion from schools. It's okay to talk to your child about the

environment being challenging, but say that you stick to the rules and this keeps you safe. Your children value seeing you; you help form a large part of their identity and history. You hold valuable stories about who they are.

Help your child understand you are not the crime you have committed. Children and young people can have complicated feelings about the crime. It's important for them to understand the crime is outside the boundaries of society, but this does not mean you are a bad person. We can love people but not accept behaviours, and this is what has happened. The crime is not the person. You are the best person your child can hear this from, as most young people say they are already too defensive to hear this from anyone else.

Young people say they often can't tell their friends that their dad is in prison, out of loyalty or fear of rejection. This can lead to feeling like a fake with their friendship group. Encourage your child to do what's best for them and share with who they feel safe. Your crime is not their shame.

This can have an impact on both social and educational development. Most young people report it takes a day out of a weekend every two weeks. It can be hard to keep up with your children developmentally while in prison. SATs, GCSEs, A Levels, picking options, and school plays can all need preparation time outside of school.

Children and young people often describe the need to care for the parent who is left missing you. They want to

protect them from hurt or pain. They are the only parent they have left to meet their basic living needs for a while. This can lead them to feel angry or frustrated with you, but remember it's your absence they are angry with. Remember that it's a good thing for them to express their feelings. It's not okay to be abused by your child, but you don't want them bottling up their emotions like a shook-up Coke bottle. It's painful for you to see others hurting, but if you can communicate this in person, they can see you can hold and contain them.

Ask your children what type of letters they like from you. Letters can be a great source of comfort, but can also lead to fantasies about you being alone and sad. Finding out if your child rereads the letters or only reads them once can be an indication of how they are internalising them.

As I stated at the start, parental challenges children face come in all shapes and sizes. Within almost all situations, helping them express how they really feel without making it about your needs is key in keeping a strong bond. Stand in their shoes; spend time before you see them thinking about how they might be seeing the world right now. In today's society, you will spend about 50 years as a parent; this means you still have time. However, parenting and the role you play change over time. Try and keep up with what your child/young person/adult needs from you.

Linda George is a psychotherapist and family practitioner

Inside Drink & Drugs News

Drink and Drugs News (DDN) is the monthly magazine for those working with drug and alcohol clients, including in prisons. In a regular bi-monthly column editor Claire Brown looks at what's been happening lately in the substance use field



Claire Brown - DDN Editor

We've just come back from our annual DDN conference - one day when people from all over the country meet in Birmingham. Is this remotely of interest to you? Well, I tentatively suggest it might be - because it's about making sure that we all have a voice, particularly if we're on the receiving end of services or treatment. Who's to say that services always get it right? And how can we be confident that politicians and policymakers are on our side?

Obviously we can't, and the erosion of confidence in our healthcare and support services has become deeper and more painful as they groan under the weight of ever-increasing admission numbers and over-stretched resources.

So this year the timing of the conference brought a new note of optimism - a hint of possibility. The fact that the incoming prime minister has already acknowledged the urgency of addressing prison overcrowding sets the tone for business. What our conference wanted to know was, can we get our priorities into ministers' inboxes?

Many people at our event have never been to a conference before. Some are fresh out of rehab or new to joining a recovery group. Some are just a short way along their treatment journey, tentatively working with the idea of making

their way without drink, drugs, gambling, sugar...whatever had previously dominated their lives and made all the usual life ambitions take second place. Others haven't reached that stage - they are learning to make the safest choices around their substance use, keeping the chances of self-harm and overdose as low as possible for themselves and their peers. It's the peer groups that are making sure naloxone goes out to their people who are most at risk of overdose. No need for a policy document - they are effective because they know what they're talking about and who they need to talk to.

Through talking together at this event we smash through the idea that politics isn't relevant to 'people like me'. Have you ever written to your MP? Been involved in a campaign? Protested against something that compromises your human rights? Realized that if the system ain't fair, you have a voice to change it?

I frequently get letters from you asking 'what next?' when you leave prison - what's out there for you to make sure you stay off using substances and have the chance to do what you want to do. Well, everyone's circumstances are different, but what I will say is that there's a huge network of support waiting for you, with groups all over the country who will welcome you with open arms. Some of the most inspiring conference speakers we've ever had have worked out their new game plan from prison - an opportunity for reflection that's motivated them to do great things.

DDN News Round-Up

Scottish drug deaths up

There were 320 suspected drug deaths in Scotland in the first three months of this year, according to provisional figures from Police Scotland. The number is 8 per cent higher than the previous quarter and 7 per cent up on the same quarter in 2023.

New nitazenes detected

Six of the seven new synthetic opioids reported for the first time to the EU Early Warning System (EWS) last year were nitazenes, according to the EMCDDA - the highest number notified in a single year. More than 80 new synthetic opioids have appeared in the European drug market since 2009, with 16 nitazenes detected since 2016.

Alcohol league

There are 2.6m alcohol-related deaths a year globally, of which 2m are among men, according to a report from the World Health Organization (WHO). This meant that 4.7 per cent of all deaths were attributable to alcohol consumption, with the highest numbers found in Europe and Africa. The European region's alcohol-related death rate stood at 52.9 per 100,000 people, while Africa's was 52.2 per 100,000.

Record cocaine seizures

Record quantities of cocaine have been seized in the EU for the sixth consecutive year. The trafficking of large volumes of the drug into ports like Antwerp and Rotterdam remains a 'significant factor' in its high availability, with 111 tonnes seized in Belgium in 2022, along with 58 tonnes in Spain and 51 in the Netherlands. Cocaine is now the second most common drug reported in Europe by people entering treatment for the first time or presenting at hospital emergency departments, and is the continent's most commonly consumed illicit stimulant - used by 4m European adults last year.

Homelessness plea

Nearly 120 homelessness and migrants' rights organisations including Crisis, Shelter, St. Mungo's and the Refugee Council wrote to leaders of the Labour, Conservative and Liberal Democrat parties before the election, urging whoever formed the next government to address the issue of migrant homelessness. 'The main political parties have all made commitments to vastly reduce homelessness and rough sleeping,' said Homeless Link CEO Rick Henderson. 'But the elephant in the room is the way our immigration and asylum systems push people into homelessness and destitution.'

Is DDN in your library?

Your prison can receive monthly printed issues of DDN magazine free of charge by emailing subs@cjwellings.com. DDN is also online at www.drinkanddrugsnews.com

Your opinions and personal experiences of addiction are very welcome and may be featured in the magazine. Please write to: DDN Editor, Romney House, School Road, Ashford, Kent TN27 0LT.

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