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Children at the Centre: Considering the Whole Child in a National Model of Support for Children with a Parent in Prison

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Abstract

The Welsh Government commissioned research to develop a national model of support to improve wellbeing and educational outcomes for children when a parent goes to prison, with a particular interest in collaboration between prisons and schools. Central to this ASPIRE project (Actioning a Schools and Prisons Independent Research Evaluation) were children's rights, listening to the voices of children and families, multi-agency collaboration, evidence-based practice, and solution-focused development. Numerous studies highlight the potentially devastating impact of a parent's imprisonment on children, but the existing literature is limited regarding what works in improving outcomes for children. Further, a disconnect exists between prison-focused policies promoting family contact and policies relating to the needs and rights of children. Few national policies refer to the needs of children with a parent in prison, and the rhetoric remains focused on the prevention of reoffending or on 'breaking the cycle' of offending and imprisonment within families. Positive pockets of support were notable in prisons, schools, and communities, but more work is needed to build on existing practice, promote existing services/resources, and support collaboration. This article considers what a national, rights-based approach to support should look like, recognising a parent's imprisonment as one of many elements in a child's life.

Keywords: parental imprisonment; children; children's rights



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1. Introduction

In July 2023, the Welsh Government commissioned a 1-year research project to:

- Review the existing literature and practices relating to support for children affected by parental imprisonment;
- Consider how the 'school zone' model in His Majesty's Prison and Young Offender Institution (HMP and YOI) Parc operates and the extent to which it represents good practice;
- Consider what a national model of support for children affected by a parent's imprisonment could look like.

The aim was to provide options and considerations for a national model of support to improve wellbeing and educational outcomes for children in Wales affected by parental imprisonment, with children's rights central to the final model.

The Invisible Walls School Zone model provided the impetus for the Welsh Government's commissioning of the project and consideration of a pan-Wales model of support. The main School Zone event is, in effect, a parent–teacher meeting held with teachers, parents and carers, and their families inside the prison to showcase the children's work and to build relationships between parents and teachers, in and out of prison. The event is a celebration of achievement, with food, awards, and valuable time for conversation and relationship building. It runs as part of Invisible Walls Community Interest Company's wider programme of work with parents in prison to help them reconnect with their children and wider community.

The research team was a collaboration led by Families Outside (a national Scottish charity that supports families affected by imprisonment) and supported by the University of Huddersfield, Cardiff University, two independent consultants specialising in policy and practice related to children affected by imprisonment, and two research assistants (Loucks et al. 2025b). The team named the project ASPIRE: Actioning a Schools and Prisons Independent Research Evaluation.

ASPIRE was delivered over five key phases from July 2023 to June 2024:

- Phase one: Scene setting and foundations.
- Phase two: Review of HMP and YOI Parc School Zone model.
- Phase three: Foundation-building for a comprehensive model of support.
- Phase four: Final gathering of evidence to develop the model.
- Phase five: Presentation of the model within the final report.

An expert advisory group representing key stakeholders, including His Majesty's Prison and Probation Service (HMPPS), third sector organisations delivering specialist support, and family members with experience of imprisonment, supported and informed the project throughout.

Discussions subsequent to this research, for example at the global conferences in 2025 for Children of Prisoners Europe (COPE; see also [Parental Imprisonment Collective 2025](#)) and the International Coalition for Children with Incarcerated Parents (INCCIP) underlined the fact that a parent's or other close family member's imprisonment is only one aspect of the lives of children and young people—one identity of many. Any supportive solution must recognise this and reach children where they are, working for the child rather than for a particular service, agency, or government. Effective responses must consider the whole child, placing the child at the centre, providing consistent and informed support that reaches the child, wherever they are.

2. The Literature

Parental imprisonment can have profound and enduring effects on children's emotional, social, and developmental wellbeing (Condry and Scharff Smith 2018; Jones et al. 2013; Robertson 2011). While the adverse consequences of parental incarceration are well established, comparatively limited evidence identifies effective interventions that improve outcomes for affected children (Flynn 2017). Research consistently highlights experiences of loss, stigma, shame, fear, and social isolation, with families often treated as “guilty by association” (Flynn and Eriksson 2017; [The Centre for Social Justice 2022](#)). Despite not having committed any offence, children with imprisoned parents are frequently subject to punitive social and institutional responses and have been described as “collateral convicts” (Robertson 2011). These experiences can have a negative effect on children's

immediate emotional wellbeing and their longer-term health, educational attainment, and social prospects (McGillivray 2016).

Children with an imprisoned parent are up to three times more likely to experience mental health difficulties than their peers (Families Outside 2017; Philbrick 1997; Jones et al. 2013). Commonly reported difficulties include depression, anxiety, low self-esteem, sleep disturbances, and symptoms associated with post-traumatic stress (Myers et al. 1999). The reluctance to disclose parental imprisonment, combined with stigma and inadequate access to support, may partially explain these elevated risks (Jones et al. 2013).

Parental imprisonment frequently gives rise to disenfranchised grief, defined as grief that cannot be openly acknowledged, publicly mourned, or socially supported (Doka 1989). Children may experience sadness and loss alongside emotions more specific to imprisonment, such as anger, guilt, confusion, loneliness, and fear (Roberts 2012; Kincaid et al. 2019). Unlike bereavement, however, parental imprisonment is rarely accompanied by established support structures within schools or communities, leaving children particularly vulnerable during periods of disruption (Worden 2009).

Maternal imprisonment is associated with especially severe consequences for children, particularly when the mother is the primary caregiver (Rees et al. 2017). Women often receive short custodial sentences for non-violent offences without adequate consideration of the impact on their children (Baldwin and Epstein 2017; Ministry of Justice and Welsh Government 2019). The imprisonment of mothers commonly leads to extensive disruption, including changes in caregiving arrangements, school instability, separation from siblings, and increased financial hardship (Minson 2017; Beresford 2018; Rees et al. 2023). In Wales, the lack of a women's prison necessitates long-distance travel for visits, further constraining contact and exacerbating economic pressures (Rees et al. 2022; Families Outside 2023). Reduced parent-child contact has been shown to weaken relationships and intensify adjustment difficulties for children, contributing to poorer social and psychological outcomes (Lösel et al. 2012; Robertson et al. 2016).

Parental imprisonment is widely recognised as an Adverse Childhood Experience (ACE) and is associated with increased exposure to other forms of childhood adversity (Felitti et al. 1998; Brown 2020). Having a household member in prison is linked to a fivefold increase in exposure to additional ACEs (Turney 2018). However, debate remains regarding whether parental imprisonment constitutes an independent ACE or operates primarily as part of a broader constellation of adversity (Kincaid et al. 2019). In contrast, the protective role of Positive and Compensatory Childhood Experiences (PACEs), such as stable relationships with trusted adults, can buffer the effects of adversity and promote resilience (Morris and Hays-Grudo 2023; Rees et al. 2022).

Despite the scale of parental imprisonment, no systematic mechanism exists for identifying or monitoring children who experience it. Linked administrative data estimate that approximately 192,912 children in England and Wales experienced a parent's imprisonment between October 2021 and October 2022, although these figures remain imprecise due to the absence of routine data collection (Ministry of Justice 2024). Improved data collection could support better service planning and policy development, particularly for marginalised communities (COPE 2019). However, this raises ethical concerns relating to consent, privacy, stigma, and discrimination, and must be carefully balanced against children's rights under the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child and related European frameworks (COPE 2020; Council of Europe 2018).

Schools play a critical role in providing stability, routine, and emotional support for children with imprisoned parents (Mannay et al. 2015). However, they can also be sites where stigma is reproduced through bullying, low expectations, and biased interpretations of behaviour (McGillivray 2016; Warren et al. 2019). Teachers often lack knowledge and

confidence in responding to parental imprisonment, resulting in limited or inconsistent support (Goldsmith and Byrne 2018; Cooper et al. 2023). Training, awareness raising, and whole-school approaches are essential if schools are to function as protective environments (COPE 2022b).

The literature strongly advocates for coordinated, multi-agency approaches involving schools, prisons, local authorities, probation services, and community organisations (COPE 2022a; Kincaid et al. 2019). Such approaches recognise that children affected by parental imprisonment are not a homogeneous group and that their experiences vary according to age, resilience, cultural background, caregiving arrangements, offence type, and prison location (Sutherland and Wright 2017; Prison Reform Trust 2022). Child impact assessments and individualised support are crucial to ensuring that responses are proportionate, rights-based, and responsive to changing needs over time.

The sections below outline the research the ASPIRE team conducted to explore and address these issues.

3. Methods

3.1. Phase One: The Literature, Policy, and Practice

As summarised above, a review of the literature was conducted, alongside a review of policies and existing practice relevant to children affected by parental imprisonment in Wales and further afield (Loucks et al. 2025a). An expert advisory group and online survey completed by 28 of a possible 30 respondents from prisons, probation, education, third sector, health, young people with lived experience, and Welsh Government verified and added to the reviews to ensure the work had a complete picture of the wider, transferable issues as well as the context in Wales.

3.2. Phase Two: Review of HMP and YOI Parc School Zone Model

A comprehensive evaluation of the Invisible Walls scheme delivered in HMP and YOI Parc was published in 2017 (Clancy and Maguire 2017) that contained pertinent findings relating to outcomes for the parent in prison and, importantly for this project, the wellbeing and educational progress of the children whose parents were held in HMP and YOI Parc. The ASPIRE project did not replicate this evaluation but instead used a cross-sectional, case study-based review to explore how this model related to the evidence gathered through the literature review and baseline assessment, and to identify lessons learned to inform development of a national model of support.

To do this, the team made a two-day site visit to HMP and YOI Parc to:

- Review descriptive statistics.
- Observe delivery of a School Zone event.
- Undertake interviews.
- Facilitate focus groups with fathers in prison, children, and carers.

Table 1 below details the participants the ASPIRE team spoke to in the course of the two-day visit.

The team also visited a School Zone event at HMP Cardiff, where the model was newly in place, to observe how the project operated in a new setting compared to the more established practice at HMP Parc.

Table 1. Number of participants and their involvement in the research.

| Participant Group | Number of Participants | Consultation Method |
|-----------------------------|---|--|
| Children | 10, aged 3–15 years | <p>Focus group facilitated by three ASPIRE team members to enable children of different ages to engage in various ways depending on their age. For example, older children were supported to complete activity sheets, while younger children took part in discussion activities using flip chart paper, storytelling, and a fictional character with a father in prison.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The group took place in the visits hall, adjacent to the play area. • Invisible Walls Wales staff were available to supervise younger children who wanted to play after participating in the focus group. • Data gathered via facilitators' handwritten notes, children's completed worksheets, and annotated flip charts. |
| Fathers in custody | 8 | <p>Focus group facilitated by two ASPIRE team members and recorded by an additional member of the team in a lounge room adjacent to the visits hall.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The focus group was recorded digitally and transcribed. |
| Parents and carers | 6 (4 mothers and 2 grandmothers) | <p>Focus group facilitated by two ASPIRE team members in a lounge room adjacent to the visits hall.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Data gathered via facilitators' handwritten notes and follow-up online survey (due to time limitations in the focus group, participants were offered an opportunity to share further information via an online survey, which asked the same questions as posed in the focus group). Four parents/carers completed this survey. |
| Teachers | 23 (including 9 in leadership roles) | <p>Semi-structured interviews with school staff around the perimeter of the visits hall while families shared food together following the showcase event.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Interviews conducted by individual members of the ASPIRE team with teachers in school groups. Some interviews were one-to-one, while others were with two or three teachers together. • Data gathered via facilitators' handwritten notes. |
| Prison staff | 4 supervising the School Zone event, from a range of designations | <p>Semi-structured interviews conducted one-to-one and in small groups of no more than three individuals.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Data gathered via facilitators' handwritten notes. |
| Invisible Walls Wales staff | 3 | <p>Semi-structured interviews conducted one-to-one and in small groups of no more than three individuals.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Data gathered via facilitators' handwritten notes. |
| Showcase event participants | 16 fathers and their families | <p>Observation</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • All ASPIRE team members observed the delivery of the showcase event from the parameters of the visits hall and recorded their observations by hand. • Observations focused on how the event was delivered and interaction between teachers, prison staff, and families. |

3.3. Phase Three: Foundation-Building

This phase of the project consisted of a pan-Wales multi-agency stakeholder event, hosted by Cardiff University and facilitated by the ASPIRE team. The event engaged with 44 key stakeholders (prison officers and governors, teachers and head teachers (mainly from primary schools), policymakers, third sector service providers, and people with lived

experience of imprisonment or of having a parent in prison). The event provided an opportunity for delegates to discuss the needs of children affected by parental imprisonment, the barriers to supporting them currently and how support could be improved in the future. The cross-sector gathering received universally positive feedback and was suggested as a way of progressing future discussions regarding implementation:

'I found meeting and listening to other professionals involved with the care of children with a parent in prison helpful and [allowed] teachers a voice in the process who could feed back their own interpretation of that vital relationship with parents in custody.'
(Education professional)

3.4. Phase Four: Final Gathering of Evidence

Phase four built on the knowledge garnered through the previous phases and aimed to develop a more detailed understanding of how a pan-Wales model could meet the needs of all key stakeholders. Semi-structured interviews were conducted online or in person with a range of participants selected as a cross-section of personal and professional perspectives and geography. These included:

- Twelve prison staff from a range of designations from prisons not currently operating the School Zone model¹ (Heads of Operations, Head of Skills and Learning, Reducing Reoffending, two Governors, an education practitioner, and wing and visits staff).
- Four education staff from different roles (primary school teacher, secondary school teacher, pupil referral unit (PRU) headteacher, education welfare officer (EWO), and a Thrive practitioner)².
- Five Welsh Government policy stakeholders (social work, education, ACEs and trauma-informed practice, criminal justice).
- Four children and young people with experience of a parent's imprisonment other than in HMP and YOI Parc.
- Three carers of children and young people with a parent in prison other than HMP and YOI Parc.
- Three parents (2 fathers and a mother) in a prison other than HMP and YOI Parc, plus two written responses from Welsh-speaking fathers in prison.

Finally, an online survey was circulated to young people who have experienced a parent's imprisonment and had not received support via HMP and YOI Parc. To encourage participation, they were invited to share their views online. This method elicited the intended target of 10 responses that was set in light of time and budget restrictions.

Limitations on time and funding for the ASPIRE project meant that participation throughout all phases was opportunistic rather than randomly selected. Participants were targeted to garner cross-sector responses, but the small number of participants means that responses are not representative and should not be generalised. Rather, the research gives a rough overview of the levels of awareness and types of challenges faced in providing support to children in Wales when a parent goes to prison. The findings, therefore, draw heavily on the expertise of the research team and advisory group, the policy context, and previous research, as well as on the responses of participants in the online surveys, site visits, and interviews.

4. Findings

The review of the literature for the project revealed a disconnect between prison-focused policies promoting family contact and policies relating to the needs and rights of children (Loucks et al. 2025a). Few UK policies refer to the needs of children with a parent in prison, and the rhetoric remains focused on the prevention of reoffending or on 'breaking the cycle' of offending and imprisonment within families (Ministry of Justice

2024). Meanwhile, the review of practice in Wales showed positive pockets of support in prisons, schools, and communities as well as Wales-specific resources developed to support practice (e.g., [Welsh Government 2018, 2021](#); [Estyn 2020](#)).

The site visits in Phase 2 highlighted the many benefits of School Zone for all involved and created a framework for exploration towards a national model. Positive outcomes included: improved prison–school collaboration; improved school–family relationships; reduced stigma; improved confidence and emotional wellbeing in children and parents; and improved knowledge and understanding amongst school staff.

The visits brought to light important considerations in developing a national model, namely:

- Retaining a focus on a children’s rights approach while working within the confines of a prison environment;
- Reaching all children in Wales, regardless of where their parent is held or whether they visit the prison;
- Creating the infrastructure required in terms of training, collaboration, and funding to ensure services are accessible and sustained.

The children, parents and carers (in and out of prison), and teachers who participated spoke highly of the School Zone event and the work of Invisible Walls:

‘It helps me feel more comfortable in school as my teachers know the seriousness of what’s going on with Dad, so when I have a bad day, they have a better understanding.’ (Young person)

‘This has really opened my eyes to what children and families go through—even the cost of getting here [the prison], never mind the emotional cost.’ (Teacher)

‘We will understand their behaviour more now, and it will help us to provide consistent support.’ (Teacher)

‘I can’t even begin to explain how beneficial this has been for me. Nobody in the outside world seems to understand the continual stress, devastation, emotions and daily obstacles that we go through more than they do.’ (Parent)

However, the realities of working in a prison context flagged a number of concerns for a rights-based approach. First, a tiny percentage of fathers (16 of the 1600+ people imprisoned at Parc) were able to participate. Second, participation in the programme was set up as an incentive for good behaviour in the prisons, with fathers threatened with removal should they misbehave. This treated family contact as a tool for control in prisons rather than recognising high-quality contact as a right of the child.

An incident that took place during the site visit flagged up a third issue: children remained completely invisible in the day-to-day decisions in prisons that might affect them. In this case, a child taking part in the School Zone event looked forward to seeing his father for the first time in several months. Unfortunately, on the day of the event, the father was transferred to another prison to allow him to access the courses he needed to apply for his parole. The transfer was necessary, but its timing completely failed to recognise the devastating impact it might have on a child who needed to see his father again. A true children’s rights approach would recognise and prevent this clash.

As the project progressed, the team identified a range of issues that children and young people faced when a parent or carer went to prison. These issues and responses (or, more accurately, the failures) were reflected in a case study that showed what the failure to respond to the needs of children and young people can look like. Megan’s story reflects the experiences many children and young people faced and why a child rights-based approach was so important:

Megan's Story

Megan (not her real name) was 17 when her mother first went to prison. Although still a child, her needs were not considered in any of the criminal justice decisions regarding her mother: *"I remember someone at court saying to my mum, 'You're living with your daughter', but that was the only time I was ever mentioned."* Megan was left alone in the house with no money to buy food or essentials such as toiletries: *"I had a social worker at the time, but I was just left in my house with no food. I couldn't eat. I had no money for food or anything. The social worker was not with it at all, he didn't understand what I was going through. He used to walk round with his briefcase and not do much."*

The housing association that provided Megan's mother's flat took back the lease and said that Megan did not qualify for housing as she was under 18. She felt judged by her mother's crime: *"These two ladies who worked there spoke to me as if I was nothing. They did everything they could to undermine me. One of them said to me, 'I wouldn't do to my daughter what your mum has done to you.'" Megan was rendered homeless and was offered a place in a homeless shelter where she felt very unsafe. Over the last two years, Megan's mother has been in and out of prison 11 times. Megan has spent that time sofa-surfing at friends' houses, sleeping in her boyfriend's car, and occasionally staying with extended family.*

The first time Megan's mother was arrested (which did not lead to a custodial sentence), she was at school. Megan was aware that some staff knew, but she was not sure how they knew or what they knew: *"The social care person in school found out mum had been arrested. . . the police or my social worker maybe told her. I wasn't told they'd told her. . . it would've been better to tell me that school had been told."* No one at school asked her how she was or offered her support: *"[A teacher] just said, 'I heard about what happened with your mum.'"*

Megan's experiences have left her with a clear sense of what would have made a difference at school and college: *"They [teachers] should . . . have compassion and understanding. . . you need to actually understand what they're going through. . . listen to people's experiences. . . listen to everyone's situation. Decisions have been made about me, but no one has ever asked me. . . schools could ask me what I need."* While she feels that information sharing is important (*"It is good that college knows so that they can try and support you."*), she is clear that, *"children and young people need to know who's being told [and] asked their opinions about who should be told. The person who works with you should say, 'Would you like the school or college to know?'"*

When her mother first went to prison, Megan approached the job centre for support with accessing universal credit: *"This woman was really unhelpful. She said, 'Get out, we can't help you'. She didn't listen to me or anything. . . I said, 'Look I'm struggling, my mum's gone to prison', and she said, 'You're not 18, we can't help you.' She seemed in a bad mood. There was animosity from her, like she was judging me."* There were meetings about her (*"My social worker, mum's probation worker, and someone from college had a joint meeting. . . but there was nothing in the meeting about housing."*), but Megan felt no one actually listened to her, far less acted: *"I felt nobody cared about me. They're being paid, all these workers who were meant to help me, but nobody did anything."*

Megan found visiting her mother in prison frightening: *"It was very blunt. It was straightforward blunt—they should make it less scary. I saw tables with colouring books and stuff, but the general vibe was scary. . . it wasn't welcoming"* Prison staff did not help alleviate these fears: *"They didn't even speak to me, they treated us like an army: 'Walk there, do this, don't do that.'" She is clear what would help: "Prison staff should get training on what it's like for kids. . . it would definitely help to hear from young people like me in training."*

Megan has experienced small acts of kindness over the last two years: *"College did help out of anyone; they gave me toiletries (shampoo/shower gel and stuff. . . I'm not sure how they knew, but college just knew [that mum was in prison]."* Her mother's probation practitioner showed compassion: *"Before my mum's release, my mum's probation officer texted me to say, 'Your mum's coming out, call me if you need me.' She is really nice and really understanding. She understood my situation."* And two neighbours each provided a meal for Megan (which she still remembers in detail two years later).

These isolated incidents of compassion are not enough to ensure children and young people like Megan receive the support they need and deserve. As Megan says, *“There should be more support from schools, social workers, and prisons—more overall support emotionally, being truly understood and practical help and support.”* Megan is clear that the practical help must include housing for young people like her: *“The housing people need to understand—housing is a massive part. . . your mum’s been taken away from you, but how can you live independently now? You will need support with housing and stuff because you’re just left out. . . you look at all your friends’ mums, and you realise you’re left out.”* And while a collaborative approach is essential, *“When people come into teams [around a child] and when they gather organisations together, they should actually do [something] instead of making it the child’s responsibility. They say they’re going to help but they don’t—that really lets the child down.”*

Megan’s story shines a light on the systemic failings of a criminal justice system that does not consider the impact on children. This report is an opportunity to ensure that those with the power to make changes listen to the children and young people impacted by their decisions. As Megan says, *“The government should listen to people like me.”* But listening is not enough; urgent action is required so that no more young people in Wales echo Megan’s words: *“I have literally had no help. I am homeless right now. I have seen the worst things. I’ve watched my life fade away. All I’ve ever had is to be shut down. I wouldn’t wish what’s happened to me on my worst enemy.”*

Analysis of the findings from phases one to four of the ASPIRE project identified nine priorities for the development of a national model:

- A strengths-based, children’s rights approach to support.
- Effective policy and resourcing.
- Centralised access to information and resources.
- Multi-agency working.
- Training.
- Identification of children affected by parental imprisonment.
- Including all children in support.
- Safeguarding.
- Monitoring and evaluation.

Figure 1 below outlines these nine key priorities:

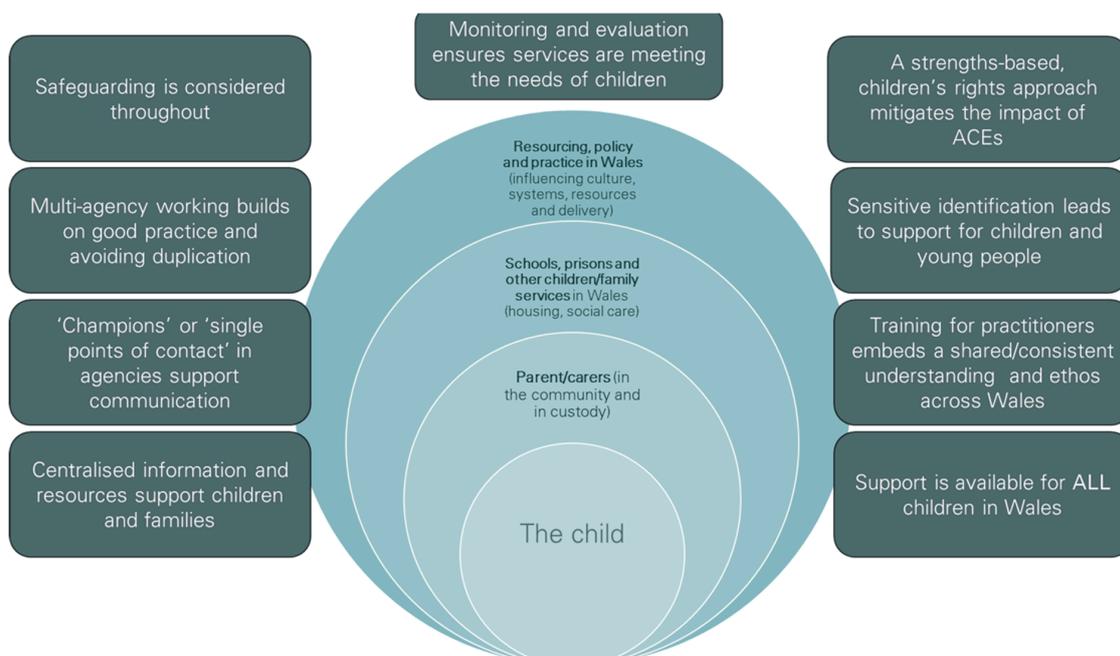


Figure 1. Nine key priorities for a national model.

The model places children at the centre, surrounded by their parents and carers, who in turn should receive support from schools, prisons, and family services, supported by a cultural context, legislative framework, and resources that ensure this can happen. In this context, the nine priorities required for a national model can be summarised as follows:

4.1. A Strengths-Based, Children's Rights Approach

Both schools and prisons can play a unique role in upholding the rights of children impacted by parental imprisonment and recognising their potential. Children who experience a parent's imprisonment often become defined within a deficit model; a strengths-based approach focuses on a child's abilities, positive characteristics and relationships, and potential. Rights-based practice recognises children as having a distinct set of rights rather than passive objects subject solely to decisions made about their parents.

4.2. Policy and Resourcing That Supports a National Model

While some education and criminal justice policies mentioned children affected by parental imprisonment, few considered their needs or how these needs should be supported. How services are commissioned and resourced impacted on the nature, availability, sustainability, consistency, and quality of support available to children affected by parental imprisonment.

4.3. Centralised Access to Information and Resources

Throughout the research, a centralised resource hub was suggested as a valuable resource for professionals and for children, young people, and families to access the support they needed. This could be an online resource alongside a champions network, delivering specialist training to identified 'champions' in organisations across Wales. 'Champions' would be trained individuals who champion the rights and needs of children affected by parental imprisonment within their organisations.

4.4. Multi-Agency Working

Participants in the research believed comprehensive, national support requires full collaboration between prisons and schools, as well as a wide range of agencies supporting children and families, including public health, social care, and third sector organisations.

4.5. Training

All stakeholders agreed that training was an important element of any national model of support. Multi-disciplinary training sessions available to a wide range of practitioners would serve to support collaborative working, consistent understanding, and shared learning.

4.6. Sensitive Identification of Children When a Parent Goes to Prison

Throughout all discussions regarding identification, respondents highlighted that relationships are key: families must feel confident that the motive is to offer support rather than punish or further discriminate. A balance must always be in place between the need for support and the right to non-disclosure.

4.7. Including All Children in Support

Children are not a homogeneous group, and not all children with a parent in prison are in school or are visiting their parent. Therefore, a 'one-size fits all' approach will not work. Development of a national model in Wales also had to recognise that not all imprisoned Welsh parents reside in Wales: all mothers, and a significant proportion of fathers, are in custody in prisons in England or even further afield. Whatever their circumstances, all

children needed a kind, sensitive, and trauma-informed approach and tailored care and support that recognised them as children first.

4.8. Safeguarding

Safeguarding is integral to all work with families and must be a priority in collaboration between schools and prisons. Any model of support should have the wellbeing of children at its heart and should not cause any unintended harm. Safeguarding is a dynamic and ongoing process that relies on a child-centred approach with a whole-family focus, effective multi-agency working, and transparent information sharing.

4.9. Monitoring and Evaluation

Both UK-based and international research describe the significant and ongoing impact of parental imprisonment on children and young people (Loucks et al. 2025a). However, evidence about what works in improving outcomes for children and young people remains patchy, particularly in terms of their education and wellbeing. Furthermore, limited evidence is available about the impact on, and what works for, specific groups of children. Consideration should be given as to whether quality assurance and inspection frameworks across Criminal Justice, Education, and Public Health should recognise children affected by parental imprisonment as a distinct group.

5. Discussion and Recommendations

The priorities borne from the findings provided a clear roadmap to developing a more comprehensive, national model of support. While the research was conducted with the Welsh context in view, the findings contain important transferable considerations for other jurisdictions. The recommendations and associated actions in the report included the following messages:

- The rights of children and young people must be considered at all stages of a parent's journey through the criminal justice system, recognising that children with a parent in the criminal justice system deserve support in and of their own right and not simply as a means of influencing their parent's sentence or rehabilitation.
- A children's rights-based approach requires a consistent, visible, national commitment to children affected by parental imprisonment, including a national commissioning model for the provision of support for children that promotes collaboration, sustainability, and nation-wide support.
- All children and families affected by imprisonment must have access to consistent and appropriate support, regardless of whether they visit or wish to remain in contact, and regardless of where the parent is held in prison.
- A rights-based approach requires a culture of collaboration for support for children affected by parental imprisonment. This includes development of a detailed understanding of the national training landscape for key professionals in relation to children affected by parental imprisonment—something that should be agreed, comprehensive, and consistent.
- Awareness about the impact of parental imprisonment across all agencies working with children and families must increase, ensuring that all government-funded or government approved training programmes provide consistent messaging; are underpinned by common principles (trauma-informed, destigmatising, children's rights-centred, and strengths-based); are accessible to all professionals working with children and families; and are evidence-based, monitored against a common set of learning outcomes.
- Ongoing discussions about the identification of children with a parent in prison must avoid perpetuating stigma and should embrace the six key elements of safety, trust,

choice, collaboration, empowerment, and cultural consideration crucial to trauma-responsive practice (Office for Health Improvement & Disparities 2022). Sensitivity to the methods, purpose, and use of identification is paramount.

- Schools should create environments in which families and children feel safe to disclose the imprisonment and, through training, staff should feel confident in knowing how to respond to that disclosure and provide appropriate support. Equally, prisons must be supported to create environments in which parents in custody feel safe to disclose that they have children, and prison staff should feel confident in knowing how to support parents in prison to engage with their child's school, where appropriate. Schools, nurseries, youth services, and colleges, as well as universal, statutory, and third sector services, have a vital role to play in supporting children.
- The support offered to children with a parent in prison must be consistent nationally but flexible enough to allow for a diverse range of needs. Support for children with a parent in prison cannot rely solely on in-prison provision, as not all children visit prisons, and not all parents are imprisoned locally. Children and young people must have the opportunity to define what their needs are, so that progress is monitored against outcomes that are informed by their unique needs. Child impact assessments (Prison Reform Trust 2022; Beresford 2018) are one tool available to identify the needs of each individual child in their own words.
- Any national model must provide support for parents and carers of children affected by parental imprisonment.
- All agencies working to support children with a parent in prison must have robust child safeguarding policies in place that are clearly communicated to all partner organisations.
- Any national approach needs to develop an improved understanding of the number and needs of children affected by parental imprisonment across the country. It also needs to ensure that outcomes, informed by children's unique needs, are central to any national model of support, ideally embedded within existing policies and supports to prevent it from being seen as an additional strain on time and resources.

The research revealed a second, positive case study demonstrating what a child's experience can be when all supports are in place and implemented well. Evan's story, below, depicts the benefits of a comprehensive approach that truly recognises the rights, strengths, and needs of children and young people when a parent goes to prison.

Evan's story

Evan (not his real name) was 13 when his mother went to prison. He was looked after by his grandmother who found the experience difficult and frightening: *'We're a normal, everyday family. We were in shock. It is absolutely petrifying for families.'* In contrast to Megan, who was left alone and unsupported, Evan's story is one that demonstrates the difference that all agencies can make by having a kind and compassionate approach. This was evident right from the arrest, as Evan's grandmother explains: *'The police brought [Evan] round to ours after they'd arrested his mum. They phoned me and said they're bringing him round to me in a normal car, not a police car. The police were lovely—their priority was [Evan]. They really were wonderful.'*

Following the arrest and subsequent imprisonment, Evan and his grandmother connected with Pact, a third sector organisation that supports people in prison and their families in England and Wales. Evan's grandmother is clear what difference this support has made to the family: *'The Pact staff have been kind and gentle. They've held our hands through all of this and have given us amazing help and support.'* In the early days of Evan's mother's imprisonment, the family did not know what to do: *'We were petrified about the thought of going into a prison.'* Pact staff offered practical advice about arranging a visit, including accompanying Evan and his grandmother on an initial visit. Evan's grandmother was struck by the kindness they experienced in the prison: *'The prison staff were amazing with the children—they could see we were nervous. We were so scared. They [prison staff] just put us at ease and explained everything, like what to expect when we got in [to the visits' room].'*

As well as practical help, Pact provided vital emotional support. Evan's grandmother is clear about the importance of this: *'We felt safe with Pact. Knowing we are not the only ones has made a huge difference.'* Pact staff liaised with Evan's teachers about the support he may need at school. School staff were also invited to undertake Pact's training on the impact of parental imprisonment on young people and their families. Evan's teachers told Pact why this is so important: *'The link with Pact was really helpful to improve our knowledge, and therefore support, of [students impacted by parental imprisonment].'* Evan's grandmother agrees that support from organisations like Pact is key: *'Pact helped the school to support us—they [the school] were doing that already, but it was better when Pact got involved.'*

It is clear from Evan's story that training and understanding for practitioners at all stages of the criminal justice system are key to ensuring families feel listened to and receive the support they need. As Evan's grandmother says, *'We've been very fortunate—the teachers, police, prison staff have all been so kind. You could tell they had a heart. I was imagining all sorts, but they were all very kind. I think they have all had an understanding of what it is like for children to have a parent in prison.'*

When asked what has made the most difference to Evan and his family, Evan's grandmother is in no doubt: *'Being kind is really important. And listening to what the children are saying. Everyone has always given us our place in making decisions about [Evan]. I have always felt included.'*

The issues identified in the research share resonance across other jurisdictions, not least the need to focus on what a children's rights approach should look like when a parent or carer goes to prison. More work is needed to build on existing practice, promote existing services and resources, and to support collaboration.

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Notes

- 1 As the project progressed, more prisons introduced the Invisible Walls School Zone model, which meant that some prison staff we interviewed were now familiar with that model in their prisons.
- 2 Considerable efforts were made to include additional education staff, but these did not come to fruition during the timescale for the project.

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