

# Recovery-Focused Work with Children and Incarcerated Parents

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On any given day in the Netherlands there are 25,000 children who have an incarcerated parent. This is an estimate based on the average birth rate in relationship to the imprisoned population. In reality, the number of children with imprisoned parents is higher, because parents who are in pre-sentence detention are not included in these calculations. That we are obliged to estimate the number of affected children is both astonishing and painful. In this digital era, such data should be accurate and readily accessible.

## Pursuit of Collaboration

Dutch authorities, such as the police and the judiciary, often utilize their own instruments to develop a picture of the social network (including children) of a suspect or person in detention. The police have an obligation to execute a “Child Check” before proceeding with the arrest of a parent. Upon arrival at a penal institution, a check is also performed to determine if the detainee has children and whether arrangements must be made for the care and shelter of these dependents. This Child Check is a standard procedure for police, certified institutions, municipalities, and penal institutions to ensure that alternative care is arranged for children who have been left without caretakers as a result of the arrest or detention of a parent. The purpose of this Child Check is also to promote cooperation between these parties and to guarantee the health and safety of children with an incarcerated parent. Parents are expected to provide accurate information about the care of their children and to arrange for the care of their children within their existing social network. In practice, it is evident that there is minimal to no coordination within the criminal justice system to ensure that the needs of the child(ren) are adequately served. This assumes a care and registration system, coordination among all parties, and a shared vision regarding children who have incarcerated parents

## Parenthood is Universal

Parents remain parents, despite the restrictions that detention imposes upon their freedom of movement. Parenthood is a given and remains so even for a parent who is incarcerated; parenthood is not a temporary condition that eventually ceases to exist. The moment a child is born, an individual becomes a parent, and this will never change. Even if a person no longer has contact with his or her child, or if the child is deceased, the person remains a parent. Parenthood means that from birth onwards a person is responsible for the well-being and development of a child. A person *becomes* a parent; this is not a status that can be exchanged or reversed. Parenthood is always unique, and every parent fulfils his or her parental role in a manner that corresponds to his or her personality. Parenthood is an identity, while parenting is a variety of actions which occurs exclusively in the first years of the child's life has often ended by the time the child reaches the age of 18. During adolescence and puberty parenting frequently takes on a different and often more limited function.

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Parenting comprises feeding, caring for, and providing rules and boundaries for a child in preparation for all facets of adulthood.

### **Recognition of Parenthood is Crucial**

Recognizing the parenthood of an incarcerated parent is extremely important. Scientific research shows that detention interferes or prevents individuals from fulfilling their role as mother or father. This results in negative consequences for the mothers and fathers as well as their children, and in the long term negative consequences for society<sup>2</sup>. Because conventional thinking often associates the role of primary caregiver with motherhood, the question of how to care for an incarcerated person's child is more likely to be raised regarding female prisoners. Incarcerated fathers, however, experience serious difficulties as well. We know that fathers who are involuntarily separated from their children long for involvement in their children's lives<sup>3</sup>. They experience an even higher degree of stress related to the unfulfilled parent role, which can lead to aggression, violent behaviour, or depression<sup>4</sup>. In short, the lack of attention for fatherhood among detained persons forms a risk factor for the well-being of incarcerated fathers.

### **Effects of Detention on Families**

The incarceration of a parent also forms a risk for the well-being within a family, with visible effects on the social attachment within the entire family. In addition, the child experiences negative effects including but not limited to: traumatic stress, difficulties at school, poverty, negative self-image, behavioural problems, depression, anxiety, addiction, shame, and stigma. Furthermore, the literature describes these children as "second generation prisoners"<sup>5</sup>. They themselves have a significantly greater chance than other children of eventually being convicted or detained for a crime.

### **Focus on Attachment**

Strengthening the attachment between incarcerated parents and their children has the potential to free up the social and human capital of the child, the detained parent, and their social network. This is particularly the case when there is adequate support from the social network of the incarcerated person. Research points to the importance of social support, especially from families, in the process of stopping with criminal activity<sup>6</sup>. Social support generates feelings of reciprocity and explains the incarcerated parent's motivation to change their lifestyle and maintain this change for an extended period of time.

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<sup>2</sup> Reef, J, Dirkzwager A.J.E. & Nieuwbeerta P. (2015), 'Children's well-being prior to paternal incarceration', *European Journal of Parental Imprisonment*, (2) 25-27.

<sup>3</sup> Nurse A.M. (2002), *Fatherhood arrested: parenting from within the Juvenile Justice System*, Nashville: Van Derbilt University Press.

<sup>4</sup> Loper A.B. (2009), 'Parenting Stress, Alliance, Child Contact, and Adjustment of Imprisoned Mothers and Fathers', *Journal of Offender Rehabilitation*, (6) 483-503.

<sup>5</sup> Novero, C.M. Booker Loper, A. & Warren J.I. (2011), 'Second-generation prisoners: Adjustment patterns for inmates with a history of parental incarceration', *Criminal Justice and Behaviour*, (38) 761-778.

<sup>6</sup> Cid, J. & Marti, J. (2015), 'Imprisonment, social support, and desistance: a theoretical approach to pathways of desistance and persistence for imprisoned men', *International Journal of Offender Therapy and Comparative Criminology*, 1-22.

Conversely, this also means that the involvement of incarcerated parents can prevent children from demonstrating problematic behaviours in the home<sup>7</sup>. In recent years, the relationship between children and incarcerated parents has received growing attention in the Netherlands. In 2017, the National Child Ombudsman wrote a report containing recommendations based upon interviews with a diverse group of children who have experienced life with a detained parent. The goal of this report was to improve the information, care, and support for children with a parent in detention<sup>8</sup>. As a consequence, a great number of suggestions have been drawn up to improve the care for children whose parents have been arrested or otherwise incarcerated<sup>9</sup>. It is also evident that increasing attention is being paid to this subject on a European level, resulting in specific recommendations from the Committee of Ministers of the European Council in 2018. These recommendations are specifically focused on the rights and needs of children with detained parents, throughout the entire period from initial detention up to and including the execution of the sentence<sup>10</sup>. Nevertheless, these recommendations remain generally unknown and/or unacknowledged within the Dutch police, penal, and judicial systems and there is still much work to be done.

### **The Necessity of an Integral View**

Attention for children with detained parents in the Netherlands is mostly focused on the performance of concrete, practical tasks. There are positive examples in Dutch prisons with respect to the organization of children's visits, programs in which parents record themselves reading stories for their children, arts and crafts sessions, or even an autumn camp in which children have the opportunity to spend a few days with their detained parent. However, these opportunities generally remain limited to a particular activity carried out at a specific moment. Often, they seem to be strictly demarcated activities such as sports, a walk, or work within the prison. Absent is a broader, integral view regarding the relationship between a child and his or her imprisoned parent. This integral view places the relationship between a child and the detained parent within a process or journey. How does the child see the relationship with his or her father? What does the child expect? And what expectations does the father have? How do they want to build a relationship together? And what about the mother who has been left behind? Or grandmother and grandfather? What support do they need? What is the role of the penal institution? Or of other professionals? Secondly, an integral view means that other organizations involved with the child, such as school, community teams, volunteers, youth organizations, etc. are given a place in this process. Conversely, various professionals and volunteers involved with the incarcerated parent can also play a supporting role. In this instance, integral means not only broadening the network to include more professionals and volunteers, but actively bridging the gap between life inside and outside the detention setting, both for the child and for the incarcerated parent.

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<sup>7</sup> Cid, J. & Marti, J (2015), 'Imprisonment, social support, and desistance: a theoretical approach to pathways of desistance and persistence for imprisoned men', *International Journal of Offender Therapy and Comparative Criminology*, 1-22.

<sup>8</sup> Child Ombudsperson (2017). *Zie je mij wel? Kinderen met een ouder in detentie*. Utrecht: Author.

<sup>9</sup> Reef, J. & Ormskerk, N. (2019). *Zorg voor kinderen bij aanhouding van ouders*. SDU: Den Haag.

<sup>10</sup> Recommendation CM/Rec(2018)5 of the Committee of Ministers to member States concerning children with imprisoned parents (Adopted by the Committee of Ministers on 4 April 2018 at the 1312<sup>th</sup> meeting of the Ministers' Deputies).

## **New Dutch Centre of Expertise on Children of Imprisoned Parents (K I N D)**

An integral view of the relationship between children and incarcerated parents entails focusing on the participation of a variety of professionals and volunteers. It is precisely these participants in the process who are requesting additional information, advice, and especially tools to intervene when noticing signs from the child or detained parent. As well as the professionals who provide assistance to detainees, groups such as teachers, family organizations, and social services organizations within communities are also searching for an operational framework within which they can work on the often damaged relationship between children and their incarcerated parents. The first Dutch Expertise Centre was founded a year ago (November 2018) with the purpose of answering the aforementioned questions of professionals, volunteers, children, and incarcerated parents. This Expertise Centre is the result of a collaboration between Avans University of Applied Sciences and Exodus Nederland<sup>11</sup>, an organization specialized in (after) care programs for (former) prisoners. The Expertise Centre believes that the restoration of the bond between child, (formerly) incarcerated parent, and the social network contributes to an improved quality of life for the child. The social network comprises the people and organizations within the child and/or incarcerated parent's social system, including but not limited to the family context, the detention context, the school, and the family's neighbourhood.

### **The Child's Interests as Focal Point**

In the view of Expertise Centre, the rights and the wishes of the child determine the starting point to focus on restoration of the bond between child, incarcerated parent, and the social network. By aligning with the individual talents, strengths, wishes, and goals of the children, their incarcerated parent(s) and the social network, efforts can be made to restore their relationships and work toward a better quality of life. The Expertise Centre works from a recovery and strengths-oriented approach and professional framework to enhance and expand the resilience of all involved.

### **Recovery-Oriented Work**

The Expertise Centre strives for the restoration of the bond between child, incarcerated parent, and the social network. Many relationships within the social network of the detained parent are damaged by his or her criminal act(s). The restoration of relationships among the child, the parent who is not incarcerated, and other members of the social work is often necessary. This restoration can lead to multiple positive effects for the child. It can also have the effect of preventing the development of certain negative feelings and experiences such as traumatic stress, problems at school, poverty, negative self-image, behavioural problems, depression, anxiety, addictions, shame, and stigma. These positive effects are also applicable for the incarcerated parent. For example, criminal activities become more likely to occur when the incarcerated parent's bond with the family are weakened or entirely severed. Social ties are important factors that deter individuals from committing crimes. In their relationships with family, friends, or their own sons and daughters incarcerated parents can discover the motivation and support to make enduring changes to their lifestyles.

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<sup>11</sup> For more information: [www.exodus.nl](http://www.exodus.nl)

## **Information and Advice**

The Expertise Centre primarily focuses its services on the children of an incarcerated parent, the detained parent, their social network consisting of family, school, social services agencies, and other professionals actively involved with these parties. The Centre is a network organization which serves to inform and advise the target group of those involved with detained parents. This useful information and advice is an essential precursor for offering customized support, guidance, and both general and individual prevention strategies. Providing information and advice, as well as the crucial recovery and strengths-oriented framework, empowers professionals to take appropriate actions. This also contributes to increased attention from professionals and volunteers who are actively involved in the broader social network of the child and incarcerated parent. To ensure accessibility of these necessary services, the Expertise Centre is readily available to the aforementioned groups by telephone (weekdays) and online (around the clock)<sup>12</sup>.

## **Further Research and Training**

In addition to providing information and advice, the Expertise Centre conducts practice-oriented research into best practices and the effects of recovery and strengths-oriented interventions in the restoration of the bonds among children, incarcerated parents, and their social networks. This practice-oriented research provides the opportunity to educate and train professionals and volunteers in the use of recovery and strengths-oriented interventions. The Expertise Centre aspires to increase the attention for recovery-oriented work focused on the relationship between children and incarcerated parents. While the Expertise Centre is primarily focused on work within the Netherlands, it certainly does not exclude the possibility of collaboration with other countries. This network organization – working from a position of cooperation, sharing of knowledge, providing support and information, research and training – can contribute added value to organizations and professionals in other European countries.

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<sup>12</sup> For more information: [www.expertisecentrumkind.nl](http://www.expertisecentrumkind.nl)