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Family Learning Group, HMP Kilmarnock
An exploratory research report

FINAL REPORT

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Abstract

This research looks at a specific family visit provision for children and young people with parents in prison, known as a Family Learning Group and previously or sometimes referred to as the Homework Club or After School Club. It takes place in the prison gym and involves the family eating together, playing together and the children can bring in their homework. This is an exploratory study of the Group involving participant observation of families at four of the Group sessions and interviews with some of the prisoners and prison officers who attend and run the Group.

Key themes which arose are the importance of the space and the staff on running provisions like this Group. These two aspects feed into feelings of “normality” and an ability to “escape” the prison for that period of time. It also highlighted the importance of attending to issues of quality as well as quantity when thinking of how to improve prison visits.

While ultimately the only way to really reduce the harm caused to children and young people by a parent’s imprisonment is to reduce the, currently growing, prison population in Scotland, by considering different ways of providing contact between the child and their imprisoned parent we may at least be able to mitigate some of this harm.

Key words: Family, Children and young people, Prison visits, Imprisonment

Executive Summary

It is estimated that between 20,000 to 27,000 children experience the imprisonment of a parent each year in Scotland. There are no exact figures, however, as data is not collected on this population and the result of this can be that they are forgotten. While there is an increasing level of research and attention in policy and practice around parental imprisonment and the negative impacts this can have on children's mental health, education and general wellbeing, there is little research which has been carried out looking at the visit experience outside of that which takes place within the visit room. This research addresses this gap by exploring the experiences of participants within what is termed the Family Learning Group at HMP Kilmarnock. This is a group which runs fortnightly within the gym in the prison allowing contact to take place in a more relaxed environment between mainly dads (with one uncle) and their children. The family spend one hour together, eating, doing homework (which the children are allowed to bring in with them) and playing sports or just running around and spending time together in the gym.

The research arises from a qualitative research project involving participant observation at four sessions of the Group and interviews with prisoners and prison staff who attend. It involved three dads, five children, one mum and three grandparents within the participant observation strand of the data collection, three interviews with prisoners (two dads and one uncle) and two interviews with prison staff.

As the SPS Family Strategy points out, "individuals have many ways of defining what constitutes family and what being part of a family means to them." Often, though, there can be a focus on provision for partners and younger children, through bonding visits which take place during school hours or soft play areas within visit areas. This Group enables older children and teenagers to attend and be able to take part in activities which are not geared towards any particular age group. There is also the opportunity for men to attend who are not only dads but have other close relationships with family members, for example uncle and nephew. Though this may become an issue should larger numbers of men become interested in attending the group with a wide range of familial relationships.

The space in which the Group takes place plays a large part in the positive experiences of the families within it. It does not have the same connotations as the visit room, which even if you are in a children's visit where there is greater freedom and interaction allowed still retains the memories of how you must behave in ordinary visits and children seem to struggle to be able to differentiate between when some kinds of behaviour are acceptable and not. The space also allows children to truly run around and interact with their family member. While within children's visits they are free to move around, the physical set up of the room, with tables and chairs bolted to the floor, can prevent this from actually being able to take place. The space looks like any other gym, and the children and their families could be outside in the community rather than in a prison for that period of time.

The staff are also key to the families' experiences of the Group. While there is no compromise on safety and the Group is staffed by prison officers they are staff who work in the gym so therefore wear T-shirts and tracksuits rather than the typical prison officer uniform. Again, while there is no compromise on safety or security, the officers are able to run the Group in a different way than the constant level of surveillance which is present within the visit room and which could potentially be intimidating to children and inhibit their ability to spend quality time with their family member.

The combination of the space and the staff can provide what the staff members who run the Group called an element of "normality" for the families. The ability to sit side by side, to eat together, to do some homework and then to just get up and run about and play together is something which may be taken for granted by families outside of a prison but is something which rarely happens in any other situation while someone is serving a prison sentence.

The question of quality as well as quantity is something which the experiences of the families within this Group also highlights. While sometimes arguments over "better" visiting can come down to simply more frequent or longer visits, we must also consider the quality of those visits. The ability to foster intimacy within family relationships during these periods is key to either their maintenance or rebuilding these connections. This can be done through the ability to have physical contact, and not just a hug at the start and end of a visit; to have the "privacy" which allows sharing and disclosure of personal information between the child and their family member; and an opportunity to create memories together linking the child's life stories and history into that of their family member's.

A note of caution at this point, in that while children should be offered the opportunity to maintain or rebuild relationships with their family member whilst they are in prison, cognisance should be taken of what may happen to that relationship on someone's release. Particularly where the relationship was difficult or more sporadic prior to the imprisonment the period of a prison sentence can offer a time when the family member is in the same place, is perhaps having to deal with substance misuse issues which may have impacted on their relationships outside, or is simply in a place where they have an excess of time so are able to devote this to family. On release, however, these pressures can return and there is the risk that a relationship built up and supported in prison can breakdown on release, causing further harm to the child or young person. We cannot simply see these relationships in isolation, something to be supported while someone is in prison but not outside in the community on their release.

In conclusion, this is an exploratory study with a small number of participants. It does not claim to be representative even of the overall experience of this Group given that not all participants in the Group took part in the research. It does, however, highlight the need to consider provisions like this in greater detail. Rarely does research look at visits outside of those which take place within the visit room. It indicates how children's experiences of contact with their family member could be improved by thinking about the space in which this takes place, the staff who run these visits, and aspects of quality as well as quantity of visits. While more work needs to be done in looking at these questions this piece of research

Key Findings

- Family can mean different things to different people; all aspects of family should be reflected in the provision of visiting experiences within prisons and this Group is one way of doing this.
- The space, staff and activities provided all contribute to the 'normality' of the families' experiences within the Group.
- The quality of visiting experiences is as important as the quantity or length of visits and groups such as this one are one way of addressing this issue.
- Families visiting prisons should be considered in the context of their lives more widely
- More research is required to look specifically at visiting provisions which are outside of the ordinary prison visits which tend to be the focus of work within familial imprisonment research.

is intended as an initial exploration of the potential from this work and a starting point for more in-depth considerations of these themes in future work.

Introduction

It is estimated that around 20-27,000 children experience the imprisonment of a parent each year in Scotland (Scottish Government, 2012) with a corresponding figure of 300,000 children and young people in England, although no official data is collected on this population. It has been well established that parental imprisonment can have a range of negative impacts on children and young people. While contact with the imprisoned parent is seen as important for the maintenance of their relationship, research about face-to-face contact between children and their imprisoned family members tends to focus on that which takes place in the context of formal prison visits. This report looks at an alternative family contact model through exploring experiences of children and their dads or uncles within what is referred to by different participants as a Family Learning Group, Homework Club or After School Club. (It will be referred to within this report as a Group, unless within a participant's quote where their own language usage will not be changed). This is an hour-long group run within HMP Kilmarnock which runs fortnightly between 5 and 6pm for up to five families. It takes place not in a prison visiting space, but within the gym area of the prison. There is the opportunity for the children to bring in their homework to complete with their dad, to play board games, sports, or other activities suggested by the dads.

The data on which this report is based comes from participant observation carried out at four Family Learning Group sessions during the Winter of 2018/2019 as well as interviews with two dads and one uncle who were imprisoned at the time of research and attend these sessions and two of the staff who attend and run the Group. It was carried out on top of the researcher completing a PhD in the same subject area supported by expenses only funding from the Scottish Centre for Crime and Justice Research.

This report will explore the key themes arising from the data collected during this research as below:

- Who are families?
- The importance of space
- The importance of staff
- "Normality"

- Considerations of quality as well as quantity for prison visits
- Issues on release

It will also outline the potential implications for future research, policy and practice which these give rise to.

Centring and de-instrumentalising children and young people's interests

While the data sources may suggest a focus on the parents displacing the ability of children and young people to tell their own stories, this choice was a pragmatic one based on the practicalities of carrying out research within a prison with a limited timescale and budget to complete the research. Even where children and young people feature directly within research, often the implicit underlying focus can come from desistance theory or a focus on preventing offending or re-offending, either the parent's or the young person's (research links a parent's imprisonment to a greater likelihood the child themselves will go on to commit antisocial or offending behaviour). The intention of this research is to shift this focus instead on to the children and young people, and their needs, rather than to see them instrumentalised or treated as resources or assets in someone else's journey. It will therefore be framed around the experiences of the Group from the point of view of children visiting the prison in this way, though it may not contain their voices directly.

Background to Research

History of the Family Learning Group

The Family Learning Group was established within HMP Kilmarnock, a privately run prison in Scotland operated by Serco. The Group was started around four years ago by Laura¹, a member of staff within the education department. She established the group following an experience with a learner within the department who had spoken about trying to understand Scotland's new educational policy and structure (which governs provision from pre-school through high school and FE), the Curriculum for Excellence and the different types of homework which his children were now getting from school. It was originally called the Homework Club and ran through school term time with the purpose of allowing the dads within the prison to spend time working on their children's homework for an hour each fortnight. Laura was also able to then support the dads outside of this time to enable them to be able to help with their child's homework the next time they would come in. This group was held within a classroom in the education

¹ All participants have been given pseudonyms.

department of the prison for around two years. During this time the dads and children would be within a classroom and the mums or caregivers who brought the children would spend the time within the library area.

Around two years ago the Club moved and began to be held within the gym in the prison. At this time the Club also changed from being solely around the completion of homework and was instead re-named the Family Learning Group. This change of location and focus meant that the group could continue throughout the year rather than being limited to school terms, and there was a move away from focusing simply on learning through the completion of school set homework and instead, although homework could still be brought in, there was also learning through play. Therefore there were opportunities during the session to play board games, sports, or other activities suggested by the men in prison themselves in respect of interests their children may have.

Where the Group had previously taken place every fortnight, during the time I carried out the participant observation element of the research it was taking place each week on a Wednesday evening, from 5-6pm, though individual families still only attended every fortnight. Each week up to five families were able to attend. The increased frequency for the Group was due to demand, however this had reduced by the time I was completing my interviews five months later and the Group had been reduced down to running once a fortnight again. The timing of the Group was chosen to fit in with other activities which take place within the gym area (e.g. different halls attend gym sessions at different times during the week). There is therefore a tight turnaround after the Group where the visitors had to be out promptly at 6pm and the tables and benches cleared away before a group of prisoners come to attend their session within the gym following this.

When the Club took place within the education department it was staffed by the member of staff from this department who instigated the group and prison officer visits staff. Due to there now being a remand visit at the same time as the Group it is no longer staffed by visit staff but instead the member of staff from education, a prison officer member of the gym staff who is also responsible for the prison's family strategy and two other members of gym prison officer staff.

The men who attend the Group are mostly fathers, although one uncle also attends and is visited by his nephew. Any child of school age (e.g. 5-17) is able to attend, though staff spoke of it having mainly been

children around age 8/9 who had attended over the course of the Group's existence. There is no fixed period the men are allowed to attend the group and those that I spoke to during this piece of research had continued to attend throughout their sentence since first becoming aware of the group.

Prisoners are made aware of the Group through adverts on the terminals within the prison where prison notices are placed as well as where they are able to book visits, order meals, etc. Other outside groups who are linked to the family strategy work of the prison are also aware of this provision, for example Vibrant Communities who work with prisoners in the visits hall. Staff comment, however, that word of mouth between prisoners is the most common way that people come to hear about the group and then approach staff about being able to attend. As is in line with the Scottish Prison Service's² view of visits as a right of the child and not a privilege of the parent, no prisoner is excluded from being able to attend the Group and anyone who has children is able to register their interest, regardless of their disciplinary record within the prison. The exception to this is if a prisoner was placed within the segregation unit or intelligence was received to indicate there was a risk to someone's safety should they attend (this has never been the case during the time the Group has been running).

Research on Children with an Imprisoned Family Member

It is estimated that around 27,000 children experience the imprisonment of a parent each year in Scotland (Scottish Government, 2012). There are no exact figures as there are no official records of children whose parent has received a custodial sentence. While those entering a prison are asked on their induction whether they have children this information is not collated, and is unlikely to provide a full picture of the levels of parental imprisonment, where there can be a variety of reasons people choose not to disclose their parental responsibilities.

There has been a growing focus on parental imprisonment since the early 2000's, where a Social Exclusion Unit (2002) report in the UK linked the role of families to the rehabilitation process. This was not new, but this report once again brought it to the forefront of thinking within the criminal justice system. The last two decades has also seen a number of research reports linking the experience of a parent's imprisonment to a variety of negative outcomes for children and young people. This includes externalizing behavioural changes (e.g. aggressive behaviour and delinquency) (Farrington et al, 2001; Aaron and Dallaire, 2010;

² HMP Kilmarnock is run by a private sector operator (Serco) but under contract to the Scottish Prison Service. It is therefore required to deliver an equivalent standard of services and work towards the same strategic outcomes as the rest of the Scottish prison estate.

Wildeman, 2010; Geller et al, 2012); anti-social behaviour and a risk of future offending (Murray and Farrington, 2005); impact on education (Murray and Farrington, 2005; Miller and Barnes, 2015; Hagan and Foster, 2012; Yau and Chung, 2014), mental health and emotional problems (Foster and Hagan, 2013; Boswell, 2002; Miller and Barnes, 2015; Murray and Farrington, 2008; Bockneck et al, 2009); and experiencing stigma and worries around disclosure due to the fear of stigma (Nesmith & Ruhland, 2008; Yau & Chung, 2014). It should be noted that the statistical studies amongst this research rarely control for other factors in the children's lives which may also have contributed to these outcomes (with the exception of the Murray and Farrington longitudinal study based on the Cambridge Study in Delinquent Development), and Knudsen (2016) has cautioned against pathologising children with a parent in prison. Though it is, of course, necessary to recognise the potential negative impacts of this experience, which many children speak of directly within the qualitative literature in this field.

As Oldrup (2018) notes in her research on family prison visiting, there is a tendency to privilege the idea of family as having only younger children. This is similar in research and policy and practice, where often there can be a focus on younger children (cf. Deacon, 2019a). This is reflected in the lack of research which focuses on young people/teenagers/adolescents specifically (see Deacon, 2019a; Deacon, 2019b; McCulloch and Morrison, 2002; Flynn, 2014; and Johnson and Easterling, 2015 for exceptions). It can also be seen in policy documents such as the National Performance Framework for Prison Visitors' Centres in Scotland (2017) where provision for younger children is "essential" but only "desirable" for older children.

Initially, much of the research on children's experiences of imprisonment generally, and of visiting more specifically, was told from the point of view of their parents or carers. This is beginning to change and with more research including the voices of children and young people themselves. This research does not do this to any great extent, although the children were present at the sessions I attended and some did speak to me while I was with their parents. One of the reasons for this was the constraints on my approved access for this research as detailed in the Methodology section below.

A specific area of familial imprisonment research which is relevant here is that which relates to prison visits. The prison visit room has been described as a "liminal carceral space" (Moran, 2013) where those who attend visits are temporarily subsumed into the prison, and made subject to its rules and regulations, before again returning back to the outside world from where they came (Comfort, 2008). As with familial imprisonment focusing on children's experiences more generally, there is a growing level of research

which looks at children's experiences of visits as told by the children themselves rather than through their parents or carers. Visits have been noted as providing an "invaluable opportunity" (Sharratt, 2014, p.763) for children to have face-to-face contact with their parent while they are in prison, and within the research children speak about the positive aspects of visits where they are excited to see their parent, enjoy being able to play with them and look forward to them (e.g. McCulloch and Morrison, 2002; Boswell, 2002; Loureiro, 2010). Visits also offer the opportunity for children to see their parent and confirm that they are okay. Often children only know about prison through television or what they have seen in films and seeing the parent can allay some of their fears about the unknown world of prison that their parent is now inhabiting (Lanskey et al, 2016).

While children do enjoy visiting their parents they also encounter problems in attending visits. One issue may arise from the wider issue of transport and financial issues for parents resulting in a restriction in the number of visits children are able to attend (Flynn, 2014). The practical issues of entering a prison can also prove difficult for children. They speak about concerns around the security procedure, their treatment by staff, the long (boring) wait to get into the visit, the lack of activities once they are there and the fact their parent is unable to move during conventional visits (e.g. McCulloch and Morrison, 2002; Boswell, 2002; Glover, 2009).

Simply visiting a parent in prison may impact on how children see and relate to their parent. Older children are likely to already be aware of their parent's master identity in this space being "prisoner" rather than simply a "mother" or "father". This can be reinforced by some of the experiences of children within the visits themselves. For example, restrictions in visits mean that generally they are only able to have physical contact with their parent at the beginning and end of each visit, and that their parent must remain seated throughout. In Scotland, as in some other countries, there are specially designated children's visits (sometimes referred to as 'family' visits) or what are termed 'bonding' visits (generally for pre-school children) at a different time than regular prison visits, where the parent is able to move about and interact with the child throughout the visit. Even in these, however, there is still a level of control ceded to the prison officers within the room. Comfort's (2008) observations that officers can tell parents and children off when children misbehave in visits highlights an area where children may begin to see a shift in power from their parent as having the ability to discipline them to the prison officers having this ability, not only over themselves but their parent as well.

Carceral geographers have recently begun to consider the prison and the visits room within their area of research. This has introduced the idea of intimacy to these discussions and how it can be cultivated, or prevented, in relationships which are carried out within the prison environment. Moran and Disney (2018) argue that while families are brought together within a visit room there can still be an emotional distance where intimacy is unable to be experienced due to the set-up of the room. Visitors sit across a table from the prisoner, with the chairs and table often both fixed to the floor, increasing the space between them and increasing their discomfort when they try to reduce this. Other aspects of intimacy, such as the ability to have physical contact, intimacy through silence (talking-not talking) (Gabb, 2008) and the ability to share and disclose information within families are all impacted when family is having to be done within a prison visits room.

Where researchers have considered visits into the prison these are mainly focused on those visits which take place in the visit room, whether this be standard visits or special children's visits. Very little of the literature thinks about the other opportunities children and young people may have to interact with their imprisoned parents face-to-face, as takes place within the Family Learning Group.

Reasons for encouraging contact between children and their imprisoned parents can come from a human rights perspective, where the rights of the child to have a relationship with their parent is recognised, or, alternatively, from the idea of desistance theory, which focuses on reducing reoffending. The former basis is officially the policy of the Scottish Prison Service: visits are the right of the child and not a privilege for the parent. At the same time the larger mission of the SPS is explicitly based on desistance theory where families can be important in someone's journey towards desistance or stopping re-offending, and this is implicit in policy and practice across the UK. For example, the recent Farmer Review (2017), whose title itself centres the prisoner and their offending behaviour ("The Importance of Strengthening Prisoners' Family Ties to Prevent Reoffending and Reduce Intergenerational Crime"). The report explicitly states that "A theme of the academic research which I also heard in my evidence gathering, was [that families] should not be 'instrumentalised' or 'used' in order to serve the aims of the criminal justice system..." (p.17). It goes on, however, to use the word 'resource' or 'asset' in relation to families of prisoners a number of times throughout the report. While it is likely that most children would wish their parent to stop offending, and would be supportive of this, there is a danger that families can end up being treated simply as a tool of an offender's behaviour change rather than being seen, and supported if necessary, in their own right. This is in respect of children's rights specifically and the right of all to a family life. This report, therefore,

is framed around considering the importance of attendance at the Family Learning Group from the view of the children, rather than how this contact may support the parent, whether in respect of their behaviour during their sentence or in relation to any potential impact on reducing their re-offending on release.

Methodology

This report is based on two data sources. The first is from participant observation which took place at four sessions of the Family Learning Group between September and November 2018. The second is semi-structured interviews which took place with two dads and one uncle who attend the Group as well as two members of staff who attend and run the Group after I had completed the observation element. Ethical approval was received to complete this research from the College of Social Sciences Research Ethics Committee at the University of Glasgow, the Scottish Prison Service Research Access and Ethics Committee and from Serco.

Prior to beginning the research I sat in on a meeting with six prisoners who were currently attending the Family Learning Group and was able to explain the purpose of the research to them and provide them with Information Sheets (see Appendix A). I then returned to attend the Group every second Wednesday; therefore I was only present along with half of the Group's overall participants, as while it ran every week participants only attended fortnightly. This was due to this being what I had gained ethical approval for (at the time of the application the Group was only being held fortnightly). It was also due to time and financial constraints as part of my travel was funded through the Scottish Centre for Crime and Justice Research, but otherwise the research, i.e. my own time and other costs, was unfunded.

Participant Observation

I carried out participant observation at four hour-long sessions of the Group. Over this period the Group was attended by five different families comprising:

- 7 children,
- 5 dads,
- 2 mums,
- 4 grandparents and
- 1 residential worker.

Consent was received in respect of carrying out participant observation with three of these families (comprising of 3 dads, 5 children, 1 mum and 3 grandparents). Using this method allowed me to observe the interactions between the children and their parents during these sessions, the interactions between the prison staff and the families and also any interactions between the families themselves. It also allowed me to gain an impression of the atmosphere of the Group which would not have been possible through the use of interviews alone. For three of these sessions, I arrived prior to the session beginning and entered the prison along with a member of staff from the Group. On one session, due to the unavailability of a member of staff to collect me, I entered the prison along with the families. This meant I went through the same process of waiting in the visitor centre and going through security as I would as a family member visitor to the prison. This experience also formed part of my observations and was reflected upon in my fieldnotes. I did not take these notes during the sessions but instead wrote full fieldnotes immediately upon leaving the prison.

Interviews

After carrying out the participation observation I then carried out semi-structured interviews with two of the dads and one uncle who attended at the Group, along with two members of prison staff who attend and run these sessions. Semi-structured interviews were used as they allow an element of the interview to be led by the participant while also allowing the researcher a level of control should the interview drift off from its intended focus. These interviews took place within a room in the gym area of the prison. Only myself and the prisoner were present in the room, however a glass window between the room and the office for the gym prison staff meant that we could be seen. I audio recorded three of the interviews and took notes in two of the interviews. I was unable to audio record these two interviews as one prisoner was due to be released and there was insufficient time to go through the procedure to allow me to take an audio recorder in to the prison prior to him being released. Therefore, in order not to lose the opportunity to carry out this interview, I took notes during it. Staff had arranged for another prisoner to be present for interview on this date as well, therefore both were carried out and handwritten notes were taken during these interviews, with full notes written up from them immediately afterwards.

The interviews which were audio recorded were transcribed in full by the researcher as soon after the interview as was practical.

Recruitment

In respect of the participants within this research it should be borne in mind when going on to read the report that this was a self-selecting group in two ways. Firstly, the participants come from a group of male relatives who have chosen to join a group such as the Family Learning Group. Therefore, they are more likely to have good relationships with their children or be looking to re-establish this relationship or to maintain it, and to put in the effort it can take to do so while serving a prison sentence. Secondly, not all of those participating in the Group wished to take part in the research, indicating that those who have chosen to do so may differ from those who did not, perhaps providing a certain perspective on the Group, and also of those who participate in it.

Consent

I attended four of the Group sessions and during these sessions three of the dads consented to themselves and their children taking part in the research. I also obtained consent from the adults who brought their children to these sessions (one mother, two grandmothers and one grandfather), as well as consent from the other parent or guardian where this was not the adult who attended with the children. One dad did not wish to take part in the research and was not included, though he attended at the Group and was happy for me to be present. I did not ask the other father who was present as he was not the legal guardian of his son, who was currently staying in a residential placement. Due to time constraints and the additional and complex logistics of obtaining ethical approval for a child in care I decided that it was not possible to include this family. I also obtained consent from the two main staff members who attended at and ran these sessions, one was a prison officer and the other was a civilian member of staff based in the education department within the prison.

Anonymity

All participants have been given pseudonyms within the research, although the limited nature of this promise of anonymity was explained to the participants prior to their being interviewed. This was due to the fact the group was small and anyone who was reading the research and was aware of who attended the group, whether in respect of the prisoners or the staff, would potentially be identifiable irrespective of the use of pseudonyms.

Analysis

A thematic content analysis was carried out on the fieldnotes taken during the participant observation of the sessions as well as the interview notes and typed transcripts. This analysis was both deductive, with themes identified from the literature, and inductive, so identified from within the interviews themselves. The themes arising from this analysis are outlined and discussed in detail below.

Limitations

There are limitations within this piece of research. Firstly, it is small scale and not even all the attendees of the Group participated in either the participant observation or interviews. This was partly down to some choosing not to take part and others not being eligible due to the ethical approval which was in place, particularly in respect of the children involved in the Group. This Group will also be self-selecting, as noted above. They are likely to already have good relationships with their children, perhaps also with a partner or caregiver who is able to bring the children to the Group, or even to visits generally, and also to be motivated to work on these relationships while they are serving their sentence. Given the fact this is an exploratory piece of research, however, the small number of participants does not mean that the conclusions drawn are not useful. They also indicate that this is something which should be explored further, with research being carried out beyond just the visit room experience of visiting and particularly including the voices of the children themselves.

This lack of children's voices is another limitation of the research. While the intention was never to interview the children or the parents/caregivers directly, I had hoped to be able to speak to them during the sessions. Due to the fact I only attended a small number of sessions and that when I was actually in the Group I realised that talking to the children would take time away from the already limited time they had with their dads, these conversations did not happen. This is something which should be addressed in future research.

Participants

From within the prison, three dads, one uncle, one civilian member of staff and one prison officer took part in this research. Their family and sentence situation are set out below:

Laura – Civilian member of staff working within education

Mark – Prison officer working within the gym

Paul – Father to an 8 year old son, serving a short-term sentence

Andy – Father to three sons aged 10, 11 and 12, serving a long-term sentence

Terry – Uncle to a 5 year old nephew, serving a long-term sentence

John – Father to an 8 year old son, serving a long-term sentence

A long-term sentence in Scotland is over four years.

Findings

“Children’s” Visits – Who and what are they for?

“...individuals have many ways of defining what constitutes family and what being part of a family means to them”

This is taken from the Scottish Prison Service Family Strategy (2017, p.5). Often, however, there can be explicit or implicit restrictions on what family can be where we look at visits to the prison. Within HMP Kilmarnock bonding visits take place on Wednesday afternoons during school time, suggesting that only when children are under the age of five do they require a bonding visit with their parent. Children’s visits take place first thing on a Saturday morning (9.30-10.30am) with a breakfast club also running first thing on a Sunday morning (10.30-11.30). These visits are on top of the standard number of visits each prisoner is allowed (one a week for sentenced prisoners and five a week for those on remand).

Andy commented on the time of the bonding visit specifically, noting that he had asked the school if it was possible to take his children out of school even just one afternoon a month for this visit but that this was not possible. Terry also spoke of bonding visits, feeling they implicitly targeted pre-school children; when his nephew went to school and he was no longer able to attend the bonding visits he started coming to the Family Learning Group instead. Terry noted that he appreciated this continuity of contact as his nephew does not deal well with a change in his routine.

Andy also spoke of the problem of having children’s visits first thing in the morning at the weekends. His children were up early for school all week and, particularly as they are getting older, are less likely to want to also get up early at the weekend. This time is also when activities like football training or dance classes or similar are likely to be held which the children may want to attend, meaning they have to make a choice

between seeing their family member in prison and taking part in activities along with their peers. Paul also touched on this issue saying that his son used to come to visit on Saturday mornings but that he now does taekwondo at this time. This idea of children, as they get older, having other draws on their time and having to make decisions about visiting links in to the need for them to 'want' to come and visit. Both Paul and Andy were aware that where their children were bored in visits they would be less likely to want to visit. Both spoke of not wanting visits to their dad to seem like a "burden" (Paul) for their children or for visiting to be a "chore" (Andy):

"I'll always be able to hold my boys' interest for the entire hour in that environment [the Group in the gym]. In the visit room it's a struggle, and you don't ever want them to feel that it's a chore going to see dad, out of duty they're going to see dad..." (Andy)

This idea of quality as well as quantity in relation to visits is explored in more detail below.

When asked about the differences between their children's experiences in the Group rather than standard prison visits (whether children's or ordinary visits) they felt visits catered for younger children. Andy spoke of the play space in the visit room really only being suitable for much younger children, under the age of seven, so no longer suitable for his own sons. Paul spoke of the room being set up more for toddlers than older children, saying there was a play area but it was for "wee kids" not older kids such as his son (aged 8). He also spoke of the play park that was available, but again that it was for younger children and older children weren't able to play on it; additionally there was more pressure on parents to be aware of older children's behaviour when there were younger kids in the area. Research has shown that teenagers are less likely to attend prison visits than younger children (McCulloch and Morrison, 2002). This may simply be down to the factors outlined above in relation to this being a time in their lives of growing independence and other draws on their free time (see Deacon, 2019a). It may, however, be due to a lack of provision or attempt to accommodate them and their needs. This is an area where there is a lack of information and knowledge and is something which needs to be addressed.

This raises the issue of how we define children and childhood, and whether these are flexible enough to incorporate additional needs as was the case for one participant's son, who had autism. Andy pointed out his son's needs would be met by the bonding visit or children's visits perhaps past the biological age of where he would be seen as a child, or a child young enough to require these types of specialist visit, due

to his additional needs and development. Where we think about families, and who is within them, we have to think of the range of people and the differing needs that this can cover. Laura also spoke of the potential issues with this, noting that any child may struggle to just sit in a chair during a visit, but where that child has autism or ADHD (or other additional needs) then this may be impossible for them.

How families spend time together and the underlying purpose of the visit is also dictated by the restrictions on the numbers of people who can attend at these visits, and what they are called. Andy spoke of the “family” visits that were available at a previous prison and how the fact that visits are labelled “children’s” visits in Kilmarnock (and other prisons), with the subsequent restriction on only one parent or caregiver being allowed to be present with the children at these sessions, which further constrains the ability for the family to spend time together as a “unit”. While it is acknowledged that these visits are there to provide time for the imprisoned parent to spend time with their child(ren) this does restrict the time that they can spend as a family, the unit that the person may be returning to on their release. Terry’s experience, however, was that his nephew liked the fact it was “just the two of us”, preferring to spend time alone with his uncle rather than also with his gran who brings him to the visit (though there may have been a different dynamic were it his mum who was present instead). The Group seems to allow both of these experiences, with Paul eating together with his son and partner and spending time together as a family but also going off and playing football or running about with just his son.

While the purpose of this report is to focus on the children and their experiences it is also worth noting that while some participants wished to spend time as a family, some of the caregivers also noted that the Group was a time where the child was with their father and could be valuable time which they then had to themselves. For example, one of the grandparents who was the guardian for her grandson spoke about how this time was time for her to get some peace and quiet. This highlights the experiences of partners who can essentially become single parents during periods of imprisonment or kinship carers, as in the case of the grandmother above, who can find themselves taking on the care of a child full-time when their own child is imprisoned.

Who is deemed a family member for these visits is also something which must be considered, particularly where there are limited numbers who can attend the Family Learning Group. While I was attending, the prisoner participants were mainly fathers though there was one uncle who had contact with his nephew. The range of people who can be seen as family members and it could be argued the child has a significant

relationship could require a more rigid definition where there are restrictions on numbers within the Group (staff said there was a maximum of five families each week due to safety within the gym area). Numbers of attendees is something I was surprised at when I was attending at the Group. At the time of finishing this piece of research the Group was back to being held fortnightly for five families within the prison. The low numbers of people who wish to attend the group is something I had not expected. With a potential maximum capacity of 692 men, HMP Kilmarnock is likely to have significantly more than only five fathers who wish to have contact with their children and the fact that there are not more families who want to attend this group is something I would be interested in finding out the potential reasons for.

Summary points:

- The Group provided a means of continuing 'natural' family contact when children were no longer eligible (due to age) or able (due to school and activity schedule) for child or bonding visits; this raises questions about how family and child visits are organised.
- The Group could provide a break or respite for the child's main carer.
- Larger issues were brought into relief about prison visits – who and how many can attend them, how they impact on feeling part of a family unit, etc.
- In a maximum prison population of 692, only five families attended a group that was uniformly praised in interviews; understanding levels of participation would be valuable.

The Importance of the Space

The men in prison and the prison's staff both identified the space in which the group takes place as important. This was both in respect of the practical set-up and the 'feel' of the space provided.

Where the Homework Club was originally held within a classroom in the education department Andy noted that the space was "more restrictive" as the children couldn't really get up and move about, and instead were mainly seated at a table. Now the Group is held within the gym the children are able to "...run, they can scream, they can dance, whatever, and it's brilliant, you know what I mean". One of the prison staff, Mark, also spoke of the importance of what the Group being held in the gym allowed the children to do:

“In the visits hall it’s obviously very structured, searched in, walked in, there are the four seats and that’s where you don’t move from, so it is. In here you walk in here a completely different way, so that’s new. You come into a big open area and then you’re free to roam...”

While we might often talk about parents being able to get up and move around, interacting with their child in bonding or children’s visits, the reality may be that the space itself is not particularly conducive to this. For example, within the visit room in HMP Kilmarnock the tables and chairs are bolted to the floor so are unable to be moved out of the way, restricting the movement of children within the space even if parents are able to get up and play with them during a visit. A specific play space is provided, but the fathers who spoke to me talked of this really only being suitable for much younger children, generally pre-school. Terry’s nephew is five and so is catered for by this space within the visit room, though he noted that within ordinary visits because they cannot join in the conversation around the table and cannot play near their family due to restrictions imposed by the furniture, children would go off to play alone in the area set aside for this.

Where families are larger small visit room tables cannot always easily accommodate them all together. One grandparent noted the difficulties of watching her three grandsons in an ordinary visit; trying to get them to stay seated or keeping an eye on all of them if they don’t. Instead, in the Group they could all fit easily around the table to do their homework or run about if they wanted.

Provision for older children to play in the visit room comes in the form of two computer consoles. Andy raised issues about these, however, as a barrier to interacting with his children:

“They’ve got two computers which, again, they’re the bane of my life cos kids are tech savvy but that immediately shuts them down. In a normal adult visit that’s okay if the kids are kicking off, go and plug them in to the computer, they’re quiet and the adults can get talking. As far as the bonding visit environment goes, there’s a two player facility, but see unless you can get up and move there, I hate it when the kids go to the computer cos then that’s basically my visit finished, they’re plugged, tuned into a computer not dad, you know what I mean.”

Andy also reflected on the feel of the space the Group takes place within, coming from the fact it is held within the gym in the prison:

“See when they come in here, this could be in the local community centre, it could be in a spare room at their school. It feels like, a bit like a cross between a parent’s night and a day at the local community centre. The visit room will always be a visit room. It will always be a repressive atmosphere. They’ll always be fully aware that they’re in a prison visit room [...] ‘cause they come to the standard visits in the visit room, when, the usual stipulations so it’s still got that overtone, even when it’s a bonding visit, it’s still the visit room. ‘Cause they came to see dad last Wednesday night as an adult visit with maybe uncle whoever or auntie whoever and they’ve had to be sitting there, like, I mean you can’t move, uniform officers patrol it all the time looking at them, it’s still the same venue so they’re, they think, they’ve got to behave differently there.”

Paul also reflected on the fact that his son could not always differentiate between the different types of visit (children’s and ordinary), given that they took place within the same space in the visit room. He spoke of how his son had come to an adult [ordinary] visit once but couldn’t understand why his dad couldn’t stand up when he was able to in the visits in the same space on Saturday mornings. Having a space entirely separate from the visit room to hold the group offered a space in which it was always and consistently allowed to get up, run around and interact with their family member in this specific way. There is no confusion, as there can be in the visit room, about what behaviour is allowed on which day. One of the grandmothers also spoke of how differences between prisons can be an issue, noting how her grandson was able to move about at all the visits at a previous prison but isn’t able to do so here. This has led to difficulties where he has been unable to understand why his dad can’t always get up and move about.

This idea of certain spaces within prison being used for certain things and having certain connotations, despite the activity that is actually taking place in them at that time is reflected in the literature around carrying out interviews within a prison. Where researchers go into a prison to speak to prisoners there is a careful consideration of the space in which the interview will take place as there is a recognition that despite the fact that it is a research interview if it takes place in a room which is usually used for visits with solicitors or social work then the connotations of the space will affect the interaction which is currently taking place (Gormley, 2017).

Crewe (2009) has spoken of how prisoners within his research viewed the ‘feel’ of the education department and that it was one of the few areas within the prison that did not “feel like prison” (p.119)

for them. This was intrinsically linked to the attitudes of the staff within this space, as well as the layout and physical aspects of the space itself: the fact that the classrooms were more like a further education college and that the staff valued the sanctity of the student-teacher relations, regardless of where this relationship was being carried out. Similarities can be seen with the gym space where the Group takes place, where it will resemble any standard gym and where this, combined with the attitudes exhibited by the staff within, can lead to it being experienced differently to other prison spaces (both by prisoners and those visiting the prison).

While the visit room can have positive connotations, for prisoners and their families, as a space where they are able to have family contact, it is still clearly a 'prison' space. There are few other areas in day-to-day life outside of the prison where families will enter a space specifically set out in this way for them to have contact (although there may be links to supervised contact or social work visits – which are also not positive). The education and gym spaces within prisons could be seen as spaces which people would frequent outside of a prison – a college classroom, a council run gym. The importance of having these events or groups in spaces which are not 'prison' spaces should not be underestimated.

Summary points

- Prison research has previously found that different spaces can induce different emotions and relationship possibilities within the prison; this was found to be true as well for those participating in the Group.
- Locating the Group in the prison gym facilitated a sense of normality for dads and children, and was also an improvement over some of the constraints of prison visiting rooms.

The Importance of the Staff

As with the importance of the space, different qualities or perceptions of staff also had an impact on the feel of the Group and participant dispositions towards it. Staff qualities that mattered included both what they wore (specifically whether staff were in uniform and what kind) and their perceived attitude. This latter issue is intrinsically linked to the space within which the Group takes place, the gym.

Laura is a civilian worker within the education department and as such she wears a polo shirt (albeit with a Serco logo on it) and smart trousers. Mark is a prison officer but, as with the other gym staff who work at the Group, they wear clothes which would be typical of someone working in a gym (e.g. polo shirt, tracksuit, shorts) rather than the more typical prison officer uniform of a white shirt and smart black dress trousers. Though both Laura and Mark carry radios and alarms they do not immediately look like prison staff as you would see in other areas of the prison, including the visit centre.

Research around uniforms generally has shown that what people wear can impact on the person wearing them and those they come into contact with (Joseph and Alex, 1972; Johnson, 2017). Where we look specifically at children's perceptions of those wearing a uniform, Durkin and Jeffrey (2000) showed that children's perceptions of the police, and their status, were influenced more by what they were wearing, than by knowing a person was a police officer even when they were wearing civilian clothes. This suggests that despite an aim to make visits 'family friendly' staff in prison officer uniform will entrench a sense for children of being in a prison. The fact that prison officers and police officers may be seen to dress similarly (when Andy spoke about the lack of a uniform he likened how prison officers usually dress with 'policemen') may also be a particularly pertinent issue for children who have witnessed the arrest of their parent. This is something which has been shown as being a traumatic experience for the child (Loureiro, 2010) and which they may then be reminded of when they attend at a prison to visit.

Terry spoke of his young nephew (age 5) not currently being aware that he is entering a prison when he comes to the Group but instead that he thinks he is visiting his uncle at work. Therefore, while at the moment Terry appreciates the fact that the staff are not wearing a uniform as this makes the experience more relaxed he also feels that as his nephew gets older that the fact they are not wearing the uniform will become more of an important factor in his experience of coming to the Group to see his uncle.

When I asked Paul whether he felt the space where the Group is held, and the officers who are there, made a difference to the experience he replied with an emphatic "yes". He spoke of it being important that in this space his son only sees the gym staff and Laura, who are all in civilian clothes (though they do have the Serco branding on their polo shirts). He went on to talk about how it was not only what the staff wore but how they acted which was also important. He spoke of the fact that he doesn't know how it feels for his son to be constantly watched within the visits room but that though he knows that they are under the same kind of surveillance within the Group that it does not feel as if the staff have constant

“eyes on you” as they do within ordinary visits, they are able to do this “discreetly” – it is “completely different”.

Two of the grandparents who bring the children to these visits also commented on the appearance and conduct of the staff. One spoke of the fact that they’re “always nice” and stand back during the visit. The other commented on the importance of the staff not wearing the prison officer uniform and that the atmosphere in the Group is much more relaxed than at other visits. While she went on to note that she knew they were still being watched as they were in any visit she said that here it was not done in the same way, and that her grandson also felt this way.

Andy also spoke about aspects of the appearance and attitude of the staff running the Group and the importance of this for the experience of the children attending. He noted that while the staff still did the job that they were required to do in this situation they were also more laid back, and in their interactions with the prisoners themselves spoke to them as equals, “they’ll give you a request rather than a command”. This is important in respect of how the children see their parents being treated. He contrasted his children’s reactions when they want to go and ask a prison officer for a pen or pencil within the visit room compared to how approachable the staff are at the Group where they are happy to go up and ask for some equipment, for example:

“They’ll quite happily wander into the office and ask, please can I get this, please can I get that, but see when they, see when it’s the visit room and we have to maybe ask for a pen or a pencil, they’ll go, [muttering] ‘Dad, is it alright if I go and ask them?’ and they kinda go up kinda like that, ‘Excuse me, but can’. You know, it is as if they’ve walked up to the front of the classroom, the teachers’ like that, ‘What are you doing away fae your desk?’, you know what I mean.”

Watching the sessions I could also see how the Group afforded the men in prison an opportunity to be a parent. One of Andy’s sons asked his dad for a bat and ball, and his dad just told him where they were and he went and got them. The child asks their dad and there is no need to go through a prison officer intermediary to ask for permission. Where the prison can so often remove the control and autonomy of those held within it, this Group offers some level of this to be exercised and the children to retain this element of a family relationship.

The staff also spoke of the importance of how they are dressed in respect of the experience for the children with Mark saying:

“...we’re dressed exactly the same as attendants and instructors and coaches would be at any other clubs or community leisure centres and stuff, like, it’s the T-shirt, tracksuit, trainers. There is the issue we carry the radio but that seems to blend into the uniform and disappear...”

Both Mark and Andy also contrasted the attitude of the staff within the gym area of the prison with prison officers working in other roles. They note that the role of officers working in the gym is different to those working in the residential areas or at visits, and that “the gym staff have got a different relationship with the prisoners” (Mark). In other areas the staff can bear the brunt of difficult behaviour by both staff and visitors, with Andy noting that visit staff can regularly receive abuse and he expects they are rarely thanked by anyone for having had a good visit. The staff within the gym and education however, may be seen as providing services the prisoners actively want and have chosen to take part in. Therefore the attitude of prisoners to these staff, and the resulting attitude of the staff towards the prisoners may be different. This can impact on the atmosphere at the Group and the experience for those attending, both prisoners and their children and other family members.

When I asked the staff about their role at the Group, Mark spoke of himself and the gym staff as being there as “facilitators”:

“I see us as purely facilitators. Sometimes we’re a wee bit more than that, so that, we are, we’ll engage ourselves, I don’t mind engaging and doing some coaching with the kids, and getting involved with the kids, and you’ve probably seen one or two instances sometimes, we need to assist with the families with various others issues. But I’ve got to say, we’re purely here as facilitators, as an area for their family to do their own thing [...] or just talk to the families and make them feel welcome and stuff like that. But it’s pretty much, this is the area, there’s the equipment, do your thing, and we just oversee and supervise the area. It’s pretty much free play for the families, so it is.”

Laura made it clear that she was not there as a teacher but was there for support, for the dads and the families:

“I think I break down barriers quite well for them, you know, and make, I hope I make them welcome and comfortable...”

Crewe's (2009) ethnographic research in prison also highlighted the demarcated nature of the education department and the gym as spaces where staff were viewed by the prisoners in distinctive and generally positive ways. Where he was discussing the different roles prisoners played in respect of aspects of adaptation, compliance and resistance he noted that while 'players' saw all prison employees as representatives of the system which they were pitting themselves against, that “[s]ome staff were seen as benign – in particular, education staff and some gym officers” (p.211).

Summary points

- Dynamics of staff, tied to the space where the Group is held, were important for facilitating a relaxed and normalised environment for children, their carers and parents in prison.
- Specifically, uniforms have been found to shape relationships with children and to emphasise a given space as part of the prison; the visual absence of uniforms in the gym space where the Group is held fostered positive relationships between staff and participants as well as a more relaxed dynamic generally.
- Staff also described their role as facilitative rather than as security based, which supported a positive environment.

Normality

Both the space and the staff can have an impact on what some of the participants termed the “normality” of the experiences and interactions taking place within the Group.

When I asked Mark about what he felt was most important about the Group he spoke about its ability to provide as much of a level of normality for these families as is possible within a prison environment:

“I think it promotes normal life, and I think it’s as close as an offender can get to a normal family outing, or the fact that there is food there, they can sit round the table and have as close to a meal together as that could be in the prison, do some homework and then having a run about. It

pretty much replicates a kid coming in from school to me, that's the kid coming in from school, sit down, something to eat, homework and then you have some play with them, so it is. And it's as close to the community setting, the home setting as an offender can get."

When I asked Laura the same question she replied with, "Normality." She then went on to expand on this:

"You know, something that's as near to home as they could probably get in here, you know. I don't know, it's just maybe me as a mum I don't like the idea of necessarily kids coming up, I don't know if, and you quite often hear people say, 'oh I don't want my weans there', you know, and I get that [...] The fact that you've got food and you're not sitting across, you know, it's, the barriers are broke down. It's a bit more relaxed and I think it's quite a normal environment, you wouldn't feel strange, you wouldn't feel odd, you wouldn't, you're just sitting in a gym having, like a café, having a wrap and some fresh orange and talking about school, doing your homework, Boys Brigade, your Duke of Edinburgh award, whatever, you know."

When the dads spoke about this experience they spoke of a number of things which take place within the Group which could contribute to this 'normal' experience of family. One of these is the fact that food is provided for the families and they are able to sit and eat together at the group. While it is possible for visitors to buy food when within ordinary visits they cannot share the food in the same way as takes place at the Group. In visits the prisoner is not allowed to buy the food and nor are they allowed to share the food or drinks with their visitor:

"...cos the visit room atmosphere is I'm not allowed to eat out of the same bag of crisps as my child. My child can't go, 'Have a sweetie dad.'" (Andy)

Within the gym there is also not as obvious a delineation or separation between the 'prisoner' and their 'visitors' as in the prison visit room. In the latter, there are four chairs around a table, all bolted to the ground. The chair which the prisoner has to sit on during visits is yellow, different to the other three chairs around the table. In contrast, in the gym everyone sits together on a bench at a trestle table. There is no singling out for the children of their family member having to sit on a different coloured chair during the time they spend together. Watching the families interact in the space, James, his partner and their son sat in a line together on one side of the table, something they may have done on a couch at home but is

not possible in a rigidly arranged visit room. Andy spent one session straddling the end of the bench, his son sitting between his legs and facing towards the table as they did the homework together. The dads did not come to the Group wearing the coloured T-shirt/jumper of their hall, which is required when attending regular prison visits. Paul reflected that where he had been required to wear this clothing during ordinary visits with his son that this had led to more questions forming in his son's head about the experience and where he was.

The ability for children to see their parent in this more 'normal' space can also provide a level of reassurance for children that their family member is okay. Their knowledge of prison may have been gained through watching television or films and Paul spoke of the fact that his son had imagined him wearing "a black and white jumpsuit" with "a ball and chain". The fact Paul could "give him a cuddle" and he was able to see that everything was okay with his dad was something he felt was very important and that the Group gave him the chance to do this.

While the Group no longer focuses exclusively on homework there is still the opportunity for the children to bring in their homework to this visit. While there may not be time for the parent to go through all the homework with their children, Andy noted that it still gave him the opportunity to be a part of his children's lives in this way, without having to rely on updates around his children's schooling from them or through their other parent/caregiver:

"...I can actually keep up to speed with my kid's progress, I can see if they're lagging, I can see if they're excelling, I can get, I've got the teacher's comments in there it's brilliant, you know what I mean. I feel as if I'm still part of their education, their schooling..."

Some control is also handed back to the children in this space. Whereas in other aspects of communicating with an imprisoned family member there are levels of restriction and control imposed both on the prisoner and those visiting them, here some control is handed back to the children. While they still have to attend at a certain time and comply with the restrictions necessary to enter the space, once they are inside they are able to choose what they want to do with their family member, as Terry pointed out, "they have more control" in the Group. They are able to choose whether they want to sit and talk with their family member, to play a game, to play sport, to do their homework. While there are obviously still restrictions on these options, the staff at the Group try and facilitate different activities that the children

have expressed an interest in as much as they can, returning some control, and perhaps some 'normality' to the interactions through this. Laura spoke of what took place during the Group being "led very much by the parent, by the dad."

The ability to produce a more 'normal' atmosphere within this Group can be seen through the comments of both Paul and Andy who spoke about how it did not feel like they were in prison during this time:

"...they [his children] forget they're in a jail and they forget they're, they're no under any scrutiny [...] It's as if I've been able to get out the jail for a night every two weeks and sit in the kitchen with them, they're no aware of what's going on around them, know what I mean" (Andy)

Paul spoke about it just being an hour but you "forget where you are" for that hour and it was "as if he [his son] doesn't realise you're in prison at that time".

Paul also spoke about how his son would do things in these visits, things he might do at home, which he would not do in other visits. He gave the example of colouring in. Paul is then able to take these pictures back to his cell after the visit.

The staff also spoke of this feeling of the prisoner and their families not being in a prison during this period:

"And I always feel as soon as the families come in it's as if the offender, the prisoner, completely switch on, switches off to the environment and who's round about them. It's as if prison staff don't exist, they're no in the jail. And I kinda feel that too, it's as if, right, switch off, it's no, sort of, prison officer type role there, it's more like a community games hall and families are there to have fun. And it, sometimes you can see the flick of a switch, you can see the kid running in and then the offender's just like that, flick of a switch, we don't exist and they're running about with their kids and stuff until the end of the visit, and then it's, like, flick the switch back on, we're back to prison life, so it is." (Mark)

Laura spoke about the ability of the parents to take part in activities with their children in similar ways to how she would have interacted with her own children:

“...but the dads will maybe play Scrabble with them, the way we, I would’ve done with my own kids, teaching to spell and, you know...”

Summary Points

- The Group provides an opportunity for families to have a level of ‘normality’ in their interactions – they can sit side-by-side, they can share food, they can do activities such as completing their homework or playing sports together – that is not possible in other visiting spaces in the prison.
- The space, the staff and the activities all contribute to this overall feeling of ‘normality’, or at least not feeling as if they are in a prison.

The Importance of Quality as much as Quantity of Family Contact

Where we talk about improving the experience of visiting for family members this can often focus on the length or frequency of visits, questions of quantity, rather than also thinking about the quality of those visits. This has been shown to oversimplify the experience (Kotova, 2018). While Beckmeyer and Arditti’s (2014) research showed that the frequency of visits was not related to the quality of the imprisoned parent-child relationship (the parents were all fathers). Problems within the visits were instead related to a lack of closeness in the relationship. This idea of closeness can be explored using the concept of intimacy.

Intimacy is a relatively new concept which is beginning to be considered in respect of experiences within prison visits. Morgan (2011: 35) set out three different dimensions of intimacy – embodied, emotional and intimate knowledge – all of which can be affected by the restrictions on where and how these family practices can be carried out when someone is in prison.

Embodied intimacy can involve elements of what is termed “embodied caring” as well as the everyday physical contact which takes place within relationships. Thinking about this in a prison context within ordinary visits, physical contact between the visitor and the prisoner can only take place at the beginning and end of a visit. While caring can, and will, still take place, the ability to carry this out in a physical or “embodied” way is severely restricted due to the physical separation between, in this case, the child and their family member. The Group can potentially allow this type of intimacy to be fostered between the child and their parent/uncle through the ability to physically interact in this space. This takes place not

just through traditional displays of affection and caring such as hugging but also just being able to play together, to be there when a child falls and pick them up.

Emotional intimacy comes from “sharing and disclosure” which leads to “a kind of understanding of the other which is not simply at a verbalised level” (Morgan, 2011: 25). This ability to share information about each other’s lives can be inhibited by the feeling of constant surveillance within prison communication – whether this be letters, telephone calls or visits. The opportunity to even share little day-to-day things in the child’s life can be removed where there are restrictions on when calls can be made from a prison, the child cannot call in to their family member and has to wait for a specific time to visit.

Looking at how the Group can enable children to foster this type of intimacy in their relationship with the imprisoned family member, both of the dads who participated in this research spoke of the fact that while at the Group they felt their children were able to “open up” to them more than in other visits or contact they had with them.

“...it’s amazing how much you, you, you don’t, you don’t realise till it’s gone. See being at home and you sit down at night round the kitchen table or the dining room table depending on the size of your house, wherever. Even if you are sitting round the coffee table on the sofas, it’s a time where families touch base and as they’re relaxing and eating together kids’ll come out with something that they wouldn’t normally come out with in that visit room. They just wouldn’t come out with it, they wouldn’t feel comfortable or relaxed enough to come out with something that’s bothered them, something that’s on their mind, even a good thing or a negative thing, it can be positive or negative but they, in that atmosphere over there it wouldn’t have come across...”
(Andy)

Paul spoke about the fact it could be just “me and him” away from everyone else, and that his son opened up to him more in these situations than when there were officers and other people within the visit room. Andy also spoke about that ability to be “away” with his children where they would open up:

“...there’s nowhere in that visit room but see here you can go over there and we can slowly kick a ball round that court and they feel as if they’re away. It’s as if we went a walk down the park and

they totally open up. But you cannae get them to open up like that in a visit room, you know what I mean.”

Laura also spoke about the ability to create the illusion of “privacy” within the space, while obviously there were still staff and CCTV monitoring within the gym as there are within the visit room:

“I think that, there’s almost a bit more privacy, you know, they can walk about with, they can go away up and play, they can do, they can do things...”

The fact the children are able to be doing something at the same time as speaking to their parents may also encourage this ability of them to “open up” and foster intimacy within this space. Paul spoke about the fact that even when they were at home there would be better levels of communication with his son when they were outside playing football rather than just sitting in the house, that he would speak more freely when they were doing something. When comparing the time spent in the Group with other visits he noted that one of the differences was “just being able to speak”. When they’re kicking a football around, having fun, he then seemed happier within himself and would open up. Andy also noted the difference in communication he had with them while at the Group and within other visits:

“...that kinda meaningful communication has all been through, we don’t have all that in a visit room, most of my contact with them here is at this club, know what I mean [...] Over there it’s, like, filling time, here it’s communication, that’s the difference.”

The ability to make these connections within visits links in to research which has been carried out showing that there must be consideration given to the quality of contact as well as the quantity. This is reflected in the participants’ comments below:

“I would rather see them once a fortnight at this club as it runs than three times a week in that other environment, you know what I mean, you’ve got more time, more closeness with them through this...” (Andy)

There is “better bonding in an hour than a full month of Saturday visits” (Paul)

Paul also spoke about how his partner had noticed a difference in their son after these visits. He would talk about what they'd been doing, what they'd been speaking about and that he couldn't wait for the next time to come and visit his dad in this type of contact but not other visits. His partner also said this, saying her son doesn't want to come to ordinary visits, now, and that he's an eight year old boy who just wants to run about.

This is in no way to argue that the number of visits allowed between children and their parents should be reduced, but instead to point out that participants felt, in line with previous research, that the number or length of visits was not the only or even the best way of maintaining a strong relationship with children. This quality can be something which is achieved in less regular family events (e.g. Christmas or Halloween parties) but Andy noted that the Group can provide the same level of enjoyment as these but on a far more regular basis. The importance of the Group, and the type of contact it allows, to these families can be seen in the quotes above as well as Terry stating that the Group is "precious" to both him and his nephew.

Those who attend the Group are also in a variety of different situations – there is no one experience of imprisonment, or of a family member's imprisonment. Some members were serving short and some long-term sentences. Some were also trying to maintain a relationship which had been close prior to the imprisonment while others were trying to rebuild relationships which may have become distant, for whatever reason, prior to their being sentenced. The Group can therefore provide different things for different families. For Andy, who is serving a long sentence, he sees the Group as allowing his children build memories, something they will be unable to do with him for the rest of their childhood while he serves his sentence:

"...this is memory building. It's no just coming and ticking a box, seeing dad like a formality. This is the only memories I'm building with these boys, through their childhood and their adolescence [...] See in that environment here, we've been able to make some memories, remember that time we did this, remember the time we did that, the fun and games we've had [...] This is nice memories for them to remember [...] It's no memory building over in that visit room."

This ties in with the final dimension of intimate knowledge. This is said to partly come from elements of embodied and emotional intimacy but also to be about "the interweaving of personal biographies over a

period, often a considerable period of time” (Morgan, 2011: 25). Particularly where someone is serving a long sentence, the imprisonment of a family member can reduce or even remove the opportunity for children’s lives to be so closely interwoven with their family member’s to allow this form of intimate knowledge to take place. Though it should be noted that this is not only the case with those serving a long sentence but also those who have served multiple short sentences over their lifetime. John’s mother stated that he had been in and out (mostly in) of prison almost all of his son’s life and that visits in prison are almost the only way he knows of seeing his dad. It should be remembered when thinking about the provision of visiting experiences in a prison that these are not always there to help maintain a relationship and prepare a child for someone’s release but in fact this may be the only type of contact the child will have with their parent and what this can mean when we are thinking about visits and contact for families within a prison environment.

When I asked Mark about the differing circumstances of participants and how he felt these could all be catered for by the Group he spoke of the experience of rebuilding, rather than simply trying to maintain, a relationship within the prison environment and the potential difficulties associated with this:

“...in this environment I think it is more conducive for the relationship to be built positively much more quicker than in the structured visits hall sitting at a table type thing. The awkward silence you would think would raise its head a hell of a lot more often in there than here where they can actually not speak to each other. They can go for a game of badminton and you don’t need to actually talk but you’re still coming in and having some sort of relationship, building the bond there, having a laugh or talking about the shots rather than trying to find stuff to talk about with that person that you’ve not had a relationship with for ages.”

Where we look at relationships when someone is within a prison and how children or young people can maintain (or rebuild) a relationship with this person, we must also consider what can happen following someone’s release. Where the focus is only on the period of imprisonment this can result in relationships being encouraged and fostered within this environment but then breaking down on release, for any number of reasons, and causing further harm to the child or young person.

Laura recognised some of the potential issues around this, stating:

“I know, and that’s one thing that does worry me that it, sometimes I do it and I think, oh I hope it continues like that, cos I don’t know, will it continue when they leave, will it carry on. I don’t know if there should be some kind of thing that they could maybe do in the community, and they go out to clubs in the community, oh, I don’t know, I just hope it would continue.”

This can be where it is important to see families in context rather than simply looking at their experiences during the period of imprisonment. Where we also fail to recognise that imprisonment may not be the only issue these children and their families are dealing with we can also fail to see that support or service provision should not only be provided to them during a family member’s imprisonment but may be needed prior to or following this period.

Summary Points

- If we are serious about improving family contact within prisons we must think about the quality as well as the quantity or length of visits.
- The idea of intimacy allows us to think about quality within relationships – the importance of physical contact, the ‘privacy’ needed to share and disclose feelings and information, and the opportunity and ability to create shared family histories between members.
- Families must be seen in their full context; they do not just exist while they are within the prison and their individual circumstances must be taken into account.
- Not all family circumstances are the same. For those visiting the prison they cover a wide spectrum, from maintaining well-established and strong relationships to reinitiating previously difficult or non-existent relationships.

Conclusion

The only certain way to reduce the harm to children and young people caused by a family member’s imprisonment is to reduce imprisonment. However, recognising that there is an imprisoned population, the focus will also need to be on minimising the harm of imprisonment on families. As Oldrup (2018) points out in her research it may never be possible to have family-friendly visits because the prison is somewhere that inherently erodes family relationships. It is, however, possible to at least try and improve these experiences.

This piece of research was a small study that, while not representative of all imprisoned parents or generalizable at this stage, provides an exploratory glimpse that identifies themes which could be explored in greater depth in future pieces of work. These limitations do not, however, mean that the conclusions which are drawn from the work cannot inform policy and practice now. The experiences of families within this Group are consistent with other research in this area and speak to similar experiences within other literature, e.g. the impact of wearing a uniform, or the feelings of different spaces within prisons. It does, however, indicate that more work should be done looking specifically at provisions such as this which are outside of the ordinary visits which are so often the focus of work within familial imprisonment research.

Despite the small number of participants there is still important knowledge and learning which comes from this exploratory research of the Group. Firstly, the fact this research is of a Group which allows visits between children and their family member to take place outside the visit room and what this then means. The Group provides a way to have contact that is different from ordinary and even children's visits. This difference and its benefits comes from the space the Group takes place in, the gym, and the staff who run the Group.

This comes from the ability to have the group in a space which is separate from the rigid restrictions and connotations of the visit room – which can remain for children regardless of whether they are attending an ordinary or children's visit within the space. Within the gym, there has been a space carved out within the prison which does not look or feel like being in a prison. The combination of this, along with the staff who run the Group, who do not wear the 'traditional' prison officer uniform, and who, despite ensuring that the same level of safety and security is present within this space as there is in the visit room, are able to do so without making the families feel as if they are constantly being watched (though with CCTV and staff in the gym they clearly are) allows an opportunity for the fostering of a closeness or intimacy within these relationships which does not take place in other visits. This can come from the physical contact, the playing together as they would outside or the "privacy" that is felt that allows children to open up and share with the family member where they would not do so in other visits.

Whilst I think learning can be taken from this piece of research, and the running of this Group generally, it is not just about picking up the Group and replicating some of the ideas – e.g. being able to bring in

homework. Instead it is about thinking about the replicable elements that make the Group work for the children, and how we can think about visits and their experiences in different ways. For example:

- the space it takes place in not feeling like the prison
- the staff not looking like prison officers
- to be able to sit together (next to and not across from each other) and share food
- being able to be children in that time and not having to fit with what children must be in a visit room
- to comply with all the necessary security within the prison but also to offer “privacy” to these families.

Some of these seemingly small and simple things can be the basis of contact and time together which benefits the child and the relationship with their family member.

An important consideration for these types of contact is also who counts as family and is able to attend provisions such as this. While the SPS Family Strategy encourages a wide definition and recognises that family can mean different things to different people, with restricted numbers there is the potential that stricter definitions of who can attend may need to be put in place. This Group is mainly for dads (the prison only holds male prisoners) with one uncle attending. Research has shown that children and young people are also impacted by sibling imprisonment (Meek, 2008; Deacon 2019a). So, with younger prisoners within adult prisons having the potential to have younger siblings who fall into the category of “children” or particularly if something was set up within the Young Offenders Institution, should provision also be provided for this group?

To finish, I want to sound a note of caution. Firstly, we cannot focus on encouraging contact while someone is in prison, either to maintain or rebuild a relationship, without thinking about the potential support needed to maintain/support relationships on release. Without considering this we run the risk of exposing the children and young people to further harm should a relationship, specifically encouraged within prison, break down on someone’s release with no support in place for the child or young person. Some of the families within the Group were maintaining already good relationships from prior to the imprisonment, but others were reinitiating contact or there were other issues going on for the family aside from the imprisonment. Therefore, while the provision of a contact environment such as this may

be beneficial for re-establishing and building on this contact there is also a risk that on release, when the pressures and demands of life outside of prison return, that the relationship will break down without the support that is available only when someone is serving a prison sentence.

This leads on to the second point, that for many families who are experiencing a member's imprisonment this is not the only issue they are dealing with in their lives (e.g. see Foster, 2017). Instead, imprisonment is just something else to be dealt with, rather than being seen as a single, devastating experience for these families. The result of this is that while consideration should be given to improving the visit experience for children and young people with their imprisoned family members it should not be assumed that the prison is the only place within which these children can have issues within their lives and consequently that it is the only place in which they can be addressed. Instead, these children may need, and deserve wider recognition and support outside of the penal sphere to tackle wider inequalities.

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