

## **Children and Their Incarcerated Parents: Maintaining Connections – How Kids’ Days at Tasmania’s Risdon Prison Contribute to Imprisoned Parent-Child Relationships**

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To many in our society, the impact of imprisonment on offenders and their families is a matter of little or no consequence. In the face of everyday issues such as meeting financial demands, finding a balance between work and family commitments, attempting to access services in a less than satisfactory healthcare scheme and worrying about the state of the education system for our children, the needs of the families of offenders is not an issue of concern for many members of the public. Furthermore, in a political climate where to be perceived as being ‘soft on crime’ can cause the loss of crucial votes, advocating on behalf of prisoners’ families is an unwise platform for any politician seeking office. Prisoners are often assumed to have ‘got what they deserved’ – such a notion is at the heart of the overly simplistic yet frequently used adage ‘If you do the crime, you do the time.’ This one-dimensional, retributive attitude towards punishment neither critically questions why we punish as we do, nor takes into account the wider, ‘ripple effect’ of imprisonment.

The Honourable Justice David Harper said:

If truth is the first victim of war, one of the first victims of crime is objectivity in the debate about punishment. No topic of general interest is tackled with less reason or reasonableness. No subject is more vulnerable to rank political opportunism, media irresponsibility or meanness of spirit. And it is the latter which particularly affects the families, including innocent children, of prisoners. They, too, are the victims of crime (cited Tudball 2000: Forward)

Parental incarceration affects a large and increasing number of children, many of whom face significant uncertainty in nearly every aspect of their lives. The Honourable Alastair Nicholson, in his endorsement of the Action Paper (Hannon, 2007) produced by the Victorian Association for the Care and Resettlement of Offenders (VACRO) expressed the opinion that Australia, as one of the principal protagonists of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNROC, 1989) has little cause to congratulate itself in upholding the tenets of that charter. It is his view that the cause of human rights in general, and children’s rights in particular, have suffered considerably over the last decade, particularly at Federal level, but also at State and Territory level. While attention is most often focused on the victims of crime (as ideals of a humanitarian approach would warrant), it is often forgotten that children of prisoners are also victims of crime and this too, should be acknowledged. Resources devoted to their needs and welfare will benefit not only the children themselves, but also the communities in which they live.

### **Children of Incarcerated Parents**

What is it like to grow up with a parent in prison? What are the immediate and long term effects of parental incarceration on children? What it means to a child to lose a parent to prison depends on individual circumstance: whether that parent is a mother or a father; whether the child lived with that parent before arrest, and what the family’s circumstances were; why and for how long the parent will be incarcerated; who cares for the child in the parent’s absence, and what supports that child obtains (Bernstein, 2005).

There are an increasing number of studies nationally and internationally that examine the effects of imprisonment on children. In general, published research confirms that incarceration of a parent is a challenging and a potentially distressing event for children. The arrest and removal of a mother or father from a child’s life forces that child to confront emotional, social and economic consequences that may act as a catalyst for behavioural problems, poor educational outcomes, and a disruption or even severance of the relationship with the incarcerated parent that may persist even after the parent is released from prison.

Researchers acknowledge the challenge associated with disentangling the effects of parental incarceration on children from the effects of risk factors that may have preceded a parent’s imprisonment (Christian, 2009; Murray and Farrington, 2006). While incarceration is unlikely to mark the beginning of difficulties for children

(see Diagram1), it is often a continuation or exacerbation of an already challenging situation in lives marked by multiple disadvantage (Johnston, 1995; Dallaire, 2007; Goodwin, 2008; Kjellstrand and Eddy, 2011).

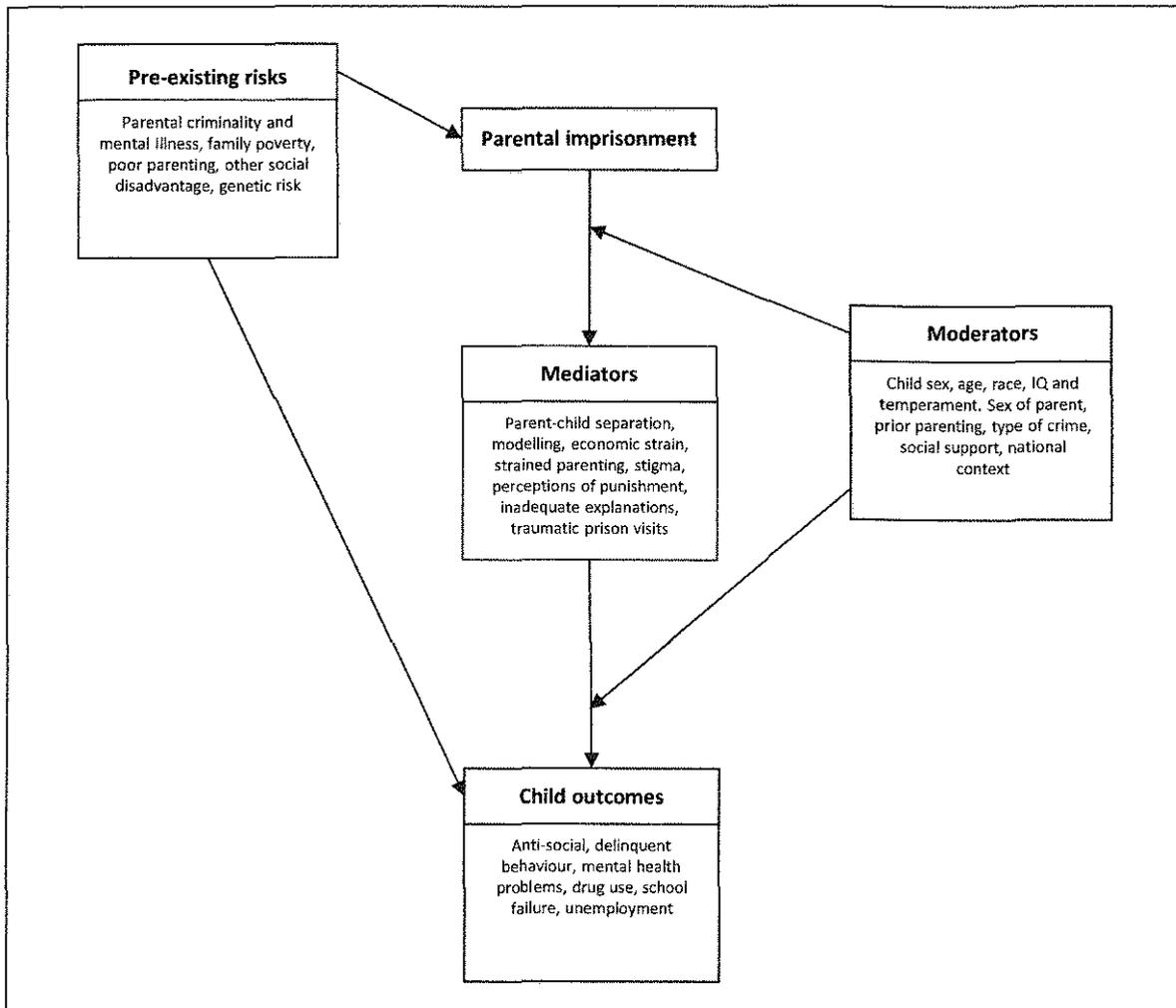


Diagram 1: Pre-existing risks and their impact

Source: Social Care Institute for Excellence (2008) *Children of Prisoners – maintaining family ties*. London: SCIE, p.20.

Current literature identifies problems associated with the nature of children's living arrangements which may be profoundly altered with temporary, informal situations that potentially separate children from their imprisoned parent, their family and friends (King, 2000; Loucks, 2004; Robinson, 2008). The expense and discomfort of prison visits that undoubtedly limit the contact between parent and child, restricting the maintenance of a relationship during incarceration, may also affect both children and their imprisoned parent (Brooks-Gordon and Bainham, 2001; Brooks-Gordon, 2004; Arditti, 2003; Arditti *et al.*, 2003; Christian, 2005; Codd, 2007; OARS, 2008; Robinson *et al.*, 2011). Parents who repeatedly cycle in and out of prison further contribute to the uncertainty and instability that children of incarcerated parents experience (Bales and Mears, 2008; Baldry, 2008).

Nationally and internationally, the families of prisoners tend to be among the poorest in society (Hownslow *et al.*, 1982; Naser and LaVigne, 2006; Baldry, 2008; 2003). In addition to the day-to-day burden of low incomes, many families experience dramatic reductions in parental revenue (Murray, 2007; Malone and Peacock, 2008). Resource-strained caregivers may experience significant financial hardship, impacting upon the children for whom they are caring (LaVigne *et al.*, 2008). Lost wages, prior debt, the cost (for some) of having to move house, and the additional outlay associated with maintaining and visiting the prisoner are issues consistently identified in the literature (Phillips *et al.*, 2006; Rosenberg, 2009; Light and Campbell, 2010). Furthermore, the expense for prisoners of making phone calls from the prison compounds the difficulty for inmates who do not

receive regular visits to maintain contact with their children (Cunningham, 2001; Phillips *et al.*, 2006; Christian, 2009).

Children typically exhibit short-term coping responses to deal with their loss, which can develop into long-term emotional and behavioural challenges, such as depression, problems at school, delinquency and drug-use (Johnston, 1995; Arditti *et al.*, 2003; Murray and Farrington, 2005; Kjellstrand and Eddy, 2011). The literature generally identifies three main health effects of parental incarceration upon children: physical health, emotional health and mental health/conduct disorders (Murray *et al.*, 2009; Murray and Farrington, 2008; Social Exclusion Unit, 2002). These health problems may change over time, with emotional upset, attachment and physical problems when the child is young; anger, violence and bed-wetting during middle childhood; and a range of at-risk behaviours involving drugs, sexualised behaviour and acting out once the child reaches adolescence (Johnston, 1995; Parke and Clarke-Stewart, 2001; Woodward, 2003; Trice and Brewster, 2004; Light and Campbell, 2010; Murray *et al.*, 2009).

Children of incarcerated parents are potentially exposed to considerable stigmatisation (Goffman, 1963; Cohen, 1995; Major and O'Brien, 2005; Brown and Bigler, 2005; NZ National Health Committee, 2009). While children who lose a parent for reasons other than incarceration will likely receive sympathy and care from others, children who lose a parent to incarceration risk being denied many of the necessary supports and normal social outlets for grieving a parent who has gone (LaVigne *et al.*, 2008; Condry, 2007; Murray and Farrington, 2006; Comfort, 2003; Cunningham, 2001).

Children may experience problems at school; various studies have documented low levels of numeracy and literacy, poor attendance and compromised peer and teacher interactions, often due to frequent changes of school (Murray and Farrington, 2008; Dallaire, 2007; Sheehan and Levine, 2004; Tudball, 2000). The international literature considers the link between educational success and staying out of prison to be a strong one, if not well-understood. There are a variety of elements to this which include raised self-esteem, increased likelihood of obtaining well-paid employment, and improved life-chances (Murray *et al.*, 2009; Social Exclusion Unit, 2002).

Additionally, the risk of intergenerational crime is increased, as children with parents in prison may be socialized to follow in their paths (Hagan and Dinivitzer, 1999; Dallaire, 2007; Glaze and Maruschak, 2008; Goodwin and Davis, 2011; Robinson, 2011). With repeated separations from parents because of incarceration, and being witness to criminal behaviour, children may develop a cognitive model that illegal activities are somewhat normative (Reed and Reed, 1997; Arditti *et al.* 2003; Pettit and Weston, 2004).

Childhood Trauma	Emotional Response	Reactive Behaviour	Coping Pattern	Criminal Activity
Physical abuse	Anger	Physical aggression	Fighting with peers	Assault
Parent-child separation	Sadness, grief	Withdrawal	Substance abuse	Drug possession
Witness to violence	Anxiety	Hypervigilance	Gang activity	Accessory to homicide
Parental substance abuse	Anger	Verbal aggression	Asocial behaviour (lying, stealing)	Fraud
Sexual molestation	Fear, anxiety	Sexualized behaviour	Promiscuity	Prostitution

Table 1: Intergenerational Behaviours, Crime and Incarceration

Source: D. Johnston (1995), 'Effects of Parental Incarceration', in K. Gabel and D. Johnston (eds) *Children of Incarcerated Parents*, New York: Lexington, p.81.

## **Imprisoned Parents**

Prisons deny inmates many aspects of their 'outside' identities, seeking to substitute the identity of 'prisoner'. Applying Burke's (1996) strand of identity theory to incarcerated parents posits that imprisoned parents are often unable to enact pre-incarceration parental behaviours (also see Stryker and Burke, 2000; Arditti *et al.*, 2005; Dyer *et al.*, 2006). 'Prisonisation' refers to identity transformation resulting from the acculturation into the prison environment (Arditti *et al.*, 2005) whereby individuals come to mirror the norms and values of the prison setting. This situation is highly regulated and seeks to keep prisoners both controlled and contained. It is therefore reasonable to expect that the nature of incarcerated parenthood can only be understood in relation to the limits placed upon it by the prison environment.

Research indicates that female and male offenders feel the experience of imprisonment very differently. However, there are issues that have been pinpointed by both incarcerated mothers and fathers that share a common thread. Tudball's 2000 study, commissioned by VACRO, identifies the following as being of particular concern to imprisoned parents:

The prisoner's loss of parental authority over their children concerns

The prisoner's inability to protect their children

The physical separation of parent and child that contributes to emotional distancing in parent-child relationships

Severe constraints within the prison system that impact on a prisoner's capacity to participate in decision-making regarding their children

Losing day-to-day contact with their children, resulting in prisoner being out of touch with the details of their children's lives (pleasures, sport, difficulties, accomplishments and even developmental stages).

## **Mothers in Prison**

Continuity of care for children is generally more disrupted by maternal rather than paternal incarceration, as female offenders are often sole parents (Kingi, 2000; Woodward, 2003; Gilham, 2012). Women prisoners have reported that their children are unprotected and vulnerable while the women are in prison (Healy *et al.*, 2001). For example, in Guransky *et al.*'s 1998 South Australian study, two of the 24 women participants reported their daughters being sexually assaulted since they [the women] had been in prison, and another believed that her children were being neglected and physically and emotionally abused but felt unable to protect them because they were in the custody of their father.

Incarcerated mothers differ from incarcerated fathers in that prior to imprisonment, they are more likely to have faced multiple threats from substance abuse, trauma due to sexual abuse, violence, and mental health disorders (Celinska and Seigel, 2010; Sharp and Marcus-Mendoza, 2001). Glaze and Maruschak's study (2008) found that between 60% and 73% of incarcerated mothers reported prior physical and sexual abuse. The fact that two-thirds of incarcerated mothers lived with their children prior to imprisonment means that many of the children may have been victim or witness to these same acts of abuse. 90% of female inmates interviewed by DeHart and Altshler (2009) had children of their own or cared for a partner's children. Over three quarters of these women mentioned the impact of abuse on their children prior to their incarceration.

Kauffman (2001) maintains that women suffer more than men from the stigma of incarceration with a societal tendency to view imprisoned women as unfit and indifferent mothers.

## **Fathers in Prison**

Research identifies men's descriptions of incarcerated fatherhood centre around feelings of helplessness and difficulties in being a 'good father' (Arditti *et al.*, 2005). Clarke *et al.*'s 2005 UK study discovered uneasy and disjointed identities in respondent's evaluations of their role as fathers. Many of the men involved with the study viewed fathering as something that took place 'out there' and 'not inside' prison.

For men who have been the family's financial provider, it may be hard to relate to their children because their role has been altered (Boswell and Wedge, 2002; Hairston, 2001). Studies have indicated that men equate

being a good father not only with providing financially for their children, but also being physically in attendance to protect them. Being unable to govern their own day-to-day routines, to make commonplace decisions about their own lives or carry out traditional roles, can encourage imprisoned men to perceive themselves as ineffective, and can de-value their role as parents (Hairston, 1995; 2001). A prisoner's life involves child-like dependency, and their main responsibility is following rules (Arditti *et al.*, 2005). For many men, this discourages the behaviours required to be a responsible parent, or even a caring and compassionate adult (Hairston, 1995; 2001; Dyer *et al.*, 2004).

Characteristics of prison life and the wider criminal justice system are clearly factors that shape the experience of fatherhood behind bars (Clarke *et al.*, 2005). Prison culture has distinct norms of how the 'ideal man' should act, and ideas on masculinity which, if adopted, would most likely lead the incarcerated father away from an identity that supports his children's positive development (Dyer, 2005; Dyer *et al.*, 2004). For example, it may be less acceptable in a men's prison to admit to missing one's children and wanting to see them than it is in a women's prison. This can result in imprisoned fathers being more reluctant to make public demands for contact rights with their children, meaning that the necessity of child-father contact is more likely to be ignored (Arditti *et al.*, 2005).

These ideas, whilst useful, cannot be generalised to all imprisoned fathers, as every situation and establishment is distinct, and every inmate will react differently to imprisonment, as will their children. In some cases, a father's pre-prison lifestyle may have involved little contact with his children, in which case imprisonment may not impact upon contact levels. Conversely, in cases where fathers were very much involved with their children pre-prison, pride, hurt and grief may cause these fathers to disengage from their families (Hairston, 2001; Bedford Family Row Project, 2007).

### **Maintaining Child-Prisoner Contact**

It is evident from the literature that children's coping and general adjustment is enhanced by promoting parent-child contact during imprisonment, to allow a child to see and communicate with his/her parent and to have their fears about prison allayed (Johnston, 1995; Block and Potthast, 1998; Trice and Brewster, 2004; Hairston and Addams, 2001). Indeed, maintaining contact with one's incarcerated parent appears to be one of the most effective ways to improve a child's emotional response to the incarceration, and reduce the incidence of problematic behaviour. Better outcomes with decreased disruptive and anxious behaviours have been identified for children who maintain contact with their parent during incarceration (LaVigne *et al.*, 2005; NZ National Health Committee, 2009).

In addition to these direct benefits to the child's emotional health and behaviour, maintaining contact helps the incarcerated parent. Direct correlations between child visitation and coping mechanisms of imprisoned parents have been reported (Tuerk and Loper, 2006; Sheehan and Levine, 2006; NZ National Health Committee, 2009). Frequent visiting has also been seen as lending support to family reunification (Martin, 1997; Bruns, 2006; LaVigne *et al.*, 2008). Studies suggest that child visitation contributes to lowered recidivism rates (Harrison, 1997; Klein *et al.*, 2002; Hairston, 2004; Codd, 2007; Bales and Mears, 2008). These improvements for the parent will indirectly benefit the child by adding a greater degree of stability to their life once the parent has left prison (Murray *et al.*, 2007).

### **Kids' Days at Tasmania's Risdon Prison**

Kids' Days at Risdon Prison are organised by the prison's Child and Family Support Officer (as part of the Integrated Offender Management (IOM) Unit) in conjunction with Prison Fellowship, and utilising a strong volunteer base from the Christian Family Centre located next door to the prison. Kids' Days are based on the following principles:

- Children have a right to maintain contact with their imprisoned parent.
- Children affected by their parent's imprisonment are often socially excluded and vulnerable.
- Children have a right to be treated with understanding, compassion and respect.
- Good quality, child-friendly visits help support and nurture the child-parent relationship.

The concerns (as noted above) of prisoners who are parents are acknowledged and Kids' Days are viewed as an avenue for addressing these.

Kids' Days provide children with time to relax with their parent, enjoy 'normal' activities, feel reassured and have some positive memories of shared experiences. The days are for inmates and children only – children's primary carers are not present.

The program hosts Kids' Days in the following prisons:

- Risdon Prison Complex (RPC) Medium and Maximum security facilities
- Mary Hutchinson Women's Prison (MHWP)
- Ron Barwick Minimum Security Prison (RBMSP)

Kids' Days are held in each of the prisons four times a year, to coincide with school holidays (April, June, September and January).

Risdon's Child and Family Support Officer has responsibility for contacting inmates and children's primary care-givers well in advance of the projected Kids' Day. 60% of offenders housed at Risdon Prison reside outside of the metropolitan area (Breaking the Cycle, 2010). As such, offenders' children residing in other areas of the state who have long distances to travel need to have time for their primary carer to organise transportation to the prison, as well as accommodation.

Suitable and fun activities are planned by the Child and Family Support Officer and Family Church volunteers, and are usually thematically-based. For example, the Kids' Days held in each prison in June 2012 revolved around a 'princesses and pirate' theme, with inmates and children applying face-paint to each other reflective of the theme, painting 'Jolly Roger' flags, playing 'Pin the Patch on the Pirate', decorating biscuits using a variety of toppings, making pirate hats and princess tiaras, and additional activities such as play-dough, drawing, skittles and quoits.

The September 2012 Kids' Days saw a 'round-the-world' theme enacted; a highlight was cooking pizzas. The children were issued with a passport containing their photo, height and weight (measured on the day). They 'visited' Italy (pizza); Japan (face-painting with a Japanese theme) and a game where they picked jelly-beans out of a bowl with chop-sticks; Switzerland and Germany (soccer); Canada (memory game with photo cards of Canadian animals, blindfold 'feed the chipmunk' and a jigsaw puzzle map of Canada; Australia (biscuit decorating); as well as several craft tables where flags could be made, a globe of the world constructed, play-dough, finger painting and bubble blowing. Outdoor sports were played in RBMSP and MHWP.

Children are brought to the Visitors' Centre by their carer and given into the supervision of volunteers, who escort them to the Kids' Day venue. These days are keenly anticipated by children and parents alike, and provide an opportunity for prisoners to be 'just a mum' or 'just a dad' for two hours, rather than a prison number in a highly-regulated environment. For that comparatively short time, prisoners are able to be responsible parents, to make decisions about what activities will be done when, to ensure their children have food and something to drink, and to talk to them about what has been happening in their lives.

Food is prepared (usually something simple such as hotdogs or a barbeque), and children can share a meal with their mother or father. For some, this is the first meal they have had with their parent for many years.

Photos are taken and printed out immediately. Children can choose one or two pictures to take away with them; inmates are able to select and purchase photos later in the week. Without exception, these photos reflect immense happiness and are treasured by inmates and children alike. The number of photos ordered by the inmates of the four prisons after the June 2012 Kids' Day totalled 1300, and in September, 1900.

The dynamics of Kids' Days varies in each section of the prison. Days held in RPC are conducted in a large, quite well-lit room that has a concrete floor, with chairs and tables bolted to it. There is a small, fully-enclosed outdoor area under a pergola with outdoor seating, but with concrete underfoot – there is no lawn. A small, somewhat inadequate play area is available for young children inside the main room. Activities for Kids' Days are laid out on the tables, and parents and children move from one activity to another.

While the most is made of the available space, and the area brightened up with the colour of the various activities on offer, there is no opportunity for fathers and children to partake in any outdoor pursuits, such as kicking a football or soccer ball, or playing basketball. However, it is apparent that for most of these children,

they have not known anything different in terms of prison facilities, and seem not to care about the austere surroundings.

Conditions are rather different in the Ron Barwick Minimum Security Prison and the Mary Hutchinson Women’s Prison. A well-maintained lawn area is available in both, and children and parents are able to play outside in addition to the indoor activities provided. The age range of the children is also more diverse – the children visiting RPC tend to be younger than twelve, with some as young as two or less. Those visiting parents in MHWP and RBMSP are from a wider age range, with young teenagers (some of whom have been visiting their imprisoned parent since they were very young) a representative group (see table below).

	MHWP			RPC Maximum			RPC Medium			RBMSP		
	Apr	Jun	Sep	Apr	Jun	Sep	Apr	Jun	Sep	Apr	Jun	Sep
<b>Inmates</b>		7	14	1	3	8	4	7	7	10	6	13
<b>Children</b>		9	24	1	3	10	7	10	9	18	10	25
<b>Age Range</b>	n/a	4-13 yrs	1-15 yrs	n/a	20 mths - 6 yrs	20 mths - 12 yrs	n/a	2-12 yrs	16 mths - 12 yrs	n/a	4-14 yrs	2-15 yrs

Table 2 - Kids’ Days, April to September 20

In the Mary Hutchinson Women’s Prison, it is evident that many of the mothers are happy to be self-sufficient in terms of pursuing activities, and most require little or no assistance from volunteers. It is much the same in the Ron Barwick Minimum Security Prison, although the June 2012 Kids’ Day witnessed a father and his children participating for the first time, so the presence of volunteers to help initiate activities was welcomed.

The number of Kids’ Days participants has gradually increased over a 12 month period. Knowledge of the days was initially slow to permeate the prison (where communication can be notoriously difficult), but with the assistance of inmate mentors, supported by the Child and Family Support Officer and Prison Fellowship, more incarcerated parents are now aware of them (see chart below).

Kids’ Days also provide a forum in which prison staff (particularly Correctional Officers) are able to observe inmates in a caring role. This is juxtaposed with the normal prison environment where some inmates present as cold and occasionally hostile. The opportunity for staff to witness a different side to the prisoners in their care has facilitated increased communication, and contributed to a more settled atmosphere.

Kids’ Days present an opportunity to reassure children about their parents’ circumstances. For children unable to visit their incarcerated parent on a regular basis, these days allow them to see that their parent is safe, and while housed in a place that is essentially ‘behind bars’, offers educational opportunities, a library, and various programs and courses aimed at helping their parent move beyond whatever situation resulted in their imprisonment.

One of the most important aspects of Kids’ Days is the chance for parents to talk to children, especially teenagers, about staying out of prison. Intergenerational offending is a noted problem by criminal justice agencies, governments and researchers, and if parents, through their own experience of incarceration, are able to guide children in a different direction, then Kids’ Days are essential. Equally, the children of incarcerated parents can be viewed as powerful motivators in encouraging their parent to desist from crime. The nature of Kids’ Days, with the emphasis on child-parent communication and bonding, is valuable in paving this ‘two-way street’.

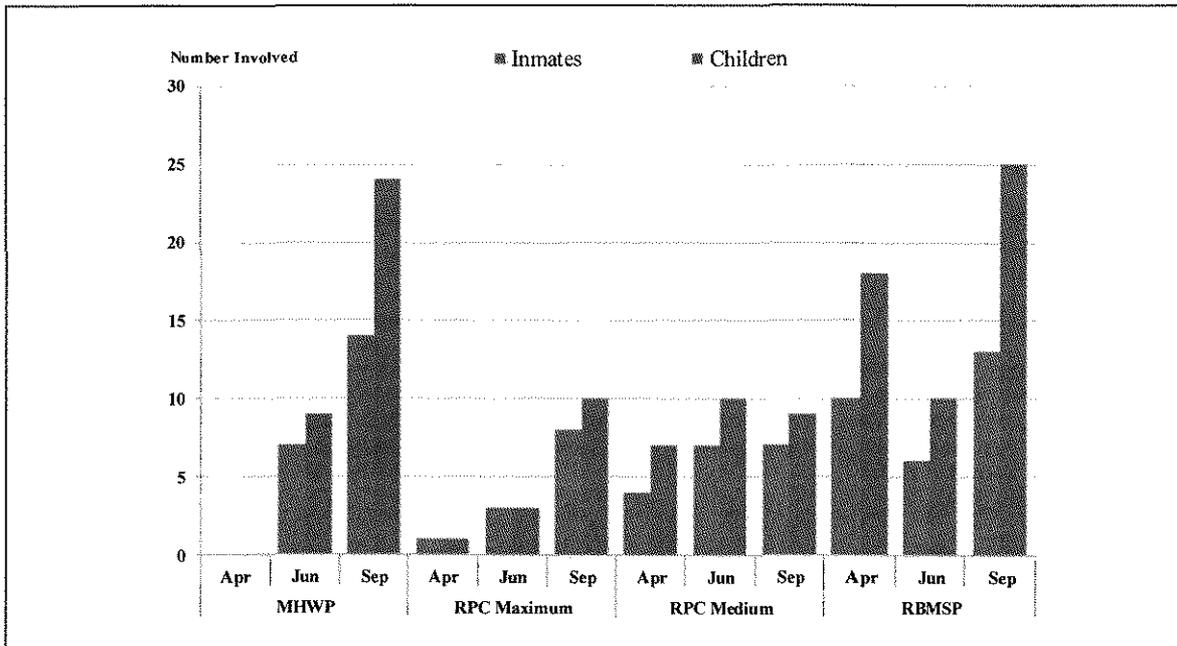


Figure 1 - Kids' Days Participants, April to September 2011

## Conclusion

In the simplest human terms, prison places an indescribable burden on the relationships between imprisoned parents and their children. Incarcerated mothers and fathers must learn to cope with the loss of normal contact with their children, and lost opportunities to contribute to their children's development. Their children must come to terms with the reality of an absent parent, the stigma of parental imprisonment, and an altered support system that may include grandparents, non-familial arrangements or foster care. The potential for changed living conditions, as well as the possibility of being separated from siblings, may also threaten to further de-stabilize children's existence.

Within our neighbourhoods, within our communities, and particularly within our criminal justice system, children of prisoners remain in the shadows. Yet they are undeniably a recipient of the sentence handed down to their parent, a situation that warrants formal recognition. Children of incarcerated parents should not be labelled 'someone else's problem' – they are part of the future of our neighbourhoods, our communities. They should not be the future of our criminal justice system.

Risdon Prison's Kids' Days are instrumental in drawing prisoners' children out from the shadows, creating patches of sunshine by offering warmth, friendship, acceptance – and fun. Above all Kids' Days provide a forum in which to foster and maintain one of the most important bonds of all – that between a parent and child.

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