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research article

Silent voices: listening to children of criminalised individuals

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This article considers the features of support that children of criminalised individuals (CoCI) value and how they perceive this impact on their everyday lives. Despite the recognition of children's voice as a basic human right and an integral feature of child-focused research, CoCI remain silenced and marginalised in England and Wales. A body of research discusses the impact of parental imprisonment on children, most notably from an adult perspective, yet scant research has explored CoCI perspectives, particularly those focused on support. This article provides a unique contribution to the academic field by exploring the impact of targeted support from the perspectives of CoCI. The research findings presented in this article argue for the prioritisation of strengths-based, responsive support for CoCI, which can create safe spaces for them to process their emotions, develop self-reliance, feel listened to, and engage in supportive activities that are fun. The implications of this research for relationship building and family wellbeing are also discussed.

Keywords children of criminalised individuals • fun • marginalisation • need-based support • stigma • silence • voice

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Introduction

The last four decades have been characterised by a repositioning of those under 18, spearheaded by the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989). Articles 12 and 13 compelled governments to find effective ways of engaging with

children through enhanced listening. Regardless of the commitment to voice, however, many children's voices remain silenced (Cooper et al, 2019). The silencing of children's voices is evident among those who live with a family member who is seriously ill (Bennett et al, 2017), those affected by parental alcohol use (Hill, 2015), and those who find expressing their views challenging (Cooper, 2023), as well as those with a parent in prison (Minson and Flynn, 2021; Cooper et al, 2023) who are the focus of this article.

While the research corpus is growing, little is known about the experiences of children of criminalised individuals (CoCI), particularly their experiences of support. The combination of the lack of policy intervention to identify their needs, fragmented support services and stigma can create and preserve a veil of silence surrounding them. Hutton (2021) discusses how it is crucial that we put the rights of children to the forefront of policy and practice, and how a child should not be valued solely in terms of their contribution to their parent's journey to desistance. Hutton herself has lived experience of familial imprisonment, so this adds a unique dimension to her research and reinforces the importance of this core message.

Statistical estimates for the number of CoCI in England and Wales range from 200,000 to 312,000 (Cooper et al, 2023). There is, however, a dearth of up-to-date data. One of the key issues in ascertaining the number of children impacted by parental imprisonment is the veracity of the data collected by His Majesty's Prison and Probation Service (HMPPS), responsible for correctional services in England and Wales, and the basic custody screening (BCS) process used by HMPPS. The BCS data come directly from prisoners' answers. When an adult is sentenced, they are not necessarily asked to disclose if they have children. Research suggests that prisoners may choose not to provide this information for a variety of reasons, including fear of social service interventions, for example, or making their children more vulnerable (Cooper et al, 2023).

The far-reaching impact and 'symbiotic harms' on children and 'left-behind' parents/carers when a family member is imprisoned are well documented (Minson, 2019). Symbiotic harms describe the negative impacts of imprisonment that may filter through existing relationships with the person in prison, including financial strain, unstable housing, disrupted education and blighted friendships. Applying a family perspective reveals how familial imprisonment can disrupt relationships within families, which can have far-reaching impacts for family wellbeing and children's futures (Arditti, 2012). Parental imprisonment is recognised as a potential risk factor for many adverse outcomes for children, including anti-social behaviour and poor educational attainment (Kincaid et al, 2019). These risk factors reflect a variety of complex processes, including children being separated from their parent and the disturbance this causes; financial struggles; stigma and difficulties in trying to keep in contact with the imprisoned parent (Murray and Farrington, 2008).

Existing services for families of prisoners vary according to the status of the service user: child, young person or adult. Services often require the capacity to engage with online support. Many organisations provide information on what happens when a family member is incarcerated, how to make contact, and information on prison visiting processes or support for the problems families may face, such as housing and financial issues. While there are organisations that offer guidance, practical and emotional support, such as the Prison Advice and Care Trust, Children Heard and Seen and Sussex Prisoners' Families, many of these organisations are regionally specific and can be dependent on formal referrals. The lack of holistic provision across England

and Wales results in many families struggling to engage with much-needed support. Furthermore, the stigma associated with parental imprisonment challenges these children and families to reach out and seek help (Cooper et al, 2023).

CoCI contend with disapproval simply because they have a parent in prison, and children may be doubly stigmatised if they are from a minority group (Robertson, 2007). Megan Comfort's theory of secondary prisonisation (2003) describes how relatives of prisoners experience a form of secondary stigma where they are deemed responsible for both the actions of their relative and for their continued support for the person in prison. Many children feel compelled to keep secrets about their parent's imprisonment, which can reinforce feelings of isolation. This theme of isolation is echoed in qualitative research interviews conducted by Brookes (2014), with some families describing their lives as akin to 'living in bubbles', depicting their experiences of always feeling on the periphery of society.

Long-standing recommendations for enhanced support for CoCI in schools have only been partially implemented in England and Wales (Morgan and Gill, 2013), and school support remains inadequate and geographically inconsistent as CoCI are not recognised as a priority group (Leeson and Morgan, 2019). Despite acknowledgement of CoCI in local authority plans, policies to address their needs remain limited (Shaw et al, 2022). Not all schools are fully aware of every child's family circumstances, which can lead to some children missing out on being identified as needing specialist support. By accepting the lack of policy intervention and normalising silence for these families, CoCI are at risk of becoming part of a cycle where silence perpetuates their marginalisation. As Kawabato and Gastaldo (2015) suggest, the silence of the marginalised might be better understood as an apparatus of social control. It is important, therefore, to consider how CoCI can be supported in ways that help stem cycles of marginalisation.

Research exploring the impact of support for CoCI has tended to employ an interventionist approach with quantifiable outcome measures exploring mentoring programmes for at-risk youth, for example (Jucovy, 2003; Bruce and Bridgeland, 2014; Thulstrup and Karlsson, 2017; Merhi et al, 2024; Walters and Dallaire, 2024) and the impact of therapy (Fondren et al, 2020). Research that has examined views about support typically focuses on parent and practitioner perspectives and fails to fully consider children's views (Weidberg, 2017). Authors argue that despite an increasing interest in the topic of parental imprisonment, current literature exploring 'what works' is generally sparse and inconclusive (Wildeman et al, 2018; Matz et al, 2022).

The central premise underpinning the 'what works' agenda is about how evidence is used to make decisions to improve public services. This agenda has informed debates about educational reforms (Pampaka et al, 2016) and social care provision (Thulstrup and Karlsson, 2017), reflected in recent policy initiatives designed to improve children's social care (DfE, 2023). While we appreciate the value of this research, we also recognise the limitations of evaluating impact based predominantly on quantifiable outcomes and with limited recognition of service users. In contrast, our research sought to position children's views and experiences at the heart of our study. This approach not only seeks to redress the relative absence of children's voices in existing research but also places a much stronger emphasis on evaluating impact as it is perceived by those engaging with services.

By examining the often-neglected voices of children through research, researchers seek deeper understandings of childhood experiences (Spyrou, 2011; Cooper, 2023). Furthermore, we appreciate that while children are regularly consulted, many report

feeling frustrated when their views ultimately make no difference or improve their lives (Bucknall, 2014). As Graham and Powell (2015) argue, it is important to link to the real-world outcomes of studies involving children and question what impact research can have on their lives. The focus on voice thus guided our research, which was designed to be responsive to the needs of the children involved. Although we use the term ‘interviews’ for our data collection, how the data were gathered varied according to the needs and interests of each child. Multimethod methods included drawing and talking, and discussing the shared examples of activities they had carried out with practitioners, such as posters, drawings or games. By exploring the silenced voices of COCI, this article not only raises awareness of the urgent need for support but also provides distinctive insights into how support can have a far-reaching and positive impact.

Based on a study of families of prisoners, this article provides an original contribution to the field using voice research to examine the impact of support from children’s perspectives.

Research

YSS, a charity in Worcestershire, England, supporting marginalised children, young people and families, commissioned the authors to undertake a two-year evaluation of the newly funded Families First (FF) project (2020–22) aimed at supporting children and families of prisoners. FF evolved as a service within YSS to provide targeted support for families affected by parental imprisonment. This includes providing one-to-one support to nurture emotional resilience and support with daily practical issues. The research set out to investigate the extent and nature of familial imprisonment nationally, examine how FF was implemented to meet family needs, and explore the nature and impact of FF through analysis of children, family and practitioner experiences.

Ethical concerns were given careful consideration, given the sensitive nature of the study, and approval was provided by the Open University Human Research Ethics Committee. Ethical considerations centred on safeguarding the children while they participated in discussing topics that were likely to be emotional for them. To address such concerns, FF practitioners advised on the interview approach that would suit each participant’s needs. The FF practitioner who had been supporting the family was available to sit in on interviews and act as an advocate if the child showed signs of becoming upset. After reading project information sheets and completing consent forms, which the FF practitioners explained to the families and children, all the participants agreed to take part in the study. The right of the participants to withdraw from the research at any stage was explained throughout the research process.

The mixed methods study incorporated quantitative and qualitative methods, including: an online ‘partners of prisoners’ survey; freedom of information requests; documentary analysis; and interviews with stakeholders, practitioners and families, including multimethod interviews/activities with children. The online survey was completed by 65 parents from 25 counties in England, two in Wales and one in Northern Ireland. All interviews (n=22), including five children (6–15 years old), were audio-recorded and transcribed, and pseudonyms were used throughout. All data were analysed using thematic analysis to explore emerging themes. For the purposes of this article, we focus primarily on our qualitative data.

We have structured this article to engage with CoCI voices to build case vignettes. Rather than taking voices as speaking for themselves, we have developed narratives which, as [Inckle \(2010\)](#) describes, seek to reflect the multifaceted individual and recognise how lived experiences are shaped within relational dynamics ([Arditti, 2012](#)). In doing so, we appreciate [Willis's \(2018\)](#) recognition of the importance of making transparent the seemingly opaque relationship between direct speech and research narratives. The vignettes we have developed here draw on first-person accounts, direct quotations from interviews with CoCI, parents, practitioners and stakeholders, and the case studies from our research report ([Cooper et al, 2023](#)), thereby contextualising children's voices within the broad social contexts in which they have evolved ([Cooper, 2023](#)). Our research highlighted several themes that reveal how CoCI, families, practitioners and stakeholders perceive the impact of support. For the purposes of this article, we are focusing on three: listening, being responsive to children's needs, and strengths-based approaches.

Listening

Matt (age 15) was referred to FF following concerns expressed by his siblings' schoolteachers. Sarah, his FF practitioner, began working with Matt when he was 14 and supported him and his family during his father's imprisonment and following his release.

Matt's family comprises his mum, dad and three siblings. His parents have been together for about 16 years, and during that time his dad has been in and out of prison multiple times. As a result, he has not always been present for the birth of his children, and Matt's mother has had to spend a lot of time bringing up the children alone. She also described Matt's father as an addict. It is important to recognise that families who have a parent or close family member in prison often face a combination of intersecting difficulties, frequently those of poverty, earlier emotional traumas, drug or alcohol dependence, and serious family illness – either physical or mental ([Cooper et al, 2023](#)).

When interviewed, Matt described the emotional impact of his dad's imprisonment on his ability to talk to people and engage with school life. He also talked about how hard he finds it just to be himself with other people and his tendency to 'worry too much what people think. I wouldn't speak to anyone about anything, only my mum. At school I wouldn't ask a teacher if I needed anything. If I didn't know what to do, I'd just stay quiet.'

Our research reveals how many children withdraw socially following the imprisonment of their parent. The children also describe how they feel they must keep their parent's imprisonment a secret, often choosing not to disclose information to people other than close family and feeling they have no one to talk to, as Oscar (age 6) describes here when talking about his dad's imprisonment.

Oscar: It is difficult, and I only talk to ladies about Dad, and grown-ups.
 Researcher: Not to your friends?
 Oscar: No. I've never told them that he's in prison.

Shame and stigma are among the most difficult challenges of parental imprisonment reported by children and families during our study, which supports a body of

research in this area ([Comfort, 2003](#); [Knudson, 2018](#); [Minson, 2019](#)). Keeping secrets can be an isolating experience and restrict how these children engage with their communities and seek and receive help. Susan (age 13) describes how children in similar circumstances might feel embarrassed: 'It means some people might not want their friends to know. I just wouldn't tell my friends.'

The need for secrecy can make it difficult for children to process their loss, which is further compounded by the nature of parental crimes, with sexual offences identified as particularly impactful. During our interview, Matt described how the time before his father went back into prison had been difficult, arousing feelings he needed help with to adjust to:

The last time I saw him, it was quite ... quite rough ... I dunno, he wasn't in the best state of mind, I don't think. I don't think he was thinking well. Hopefully, when he comes out, he's not going to go onto that stuff again ... I wasn't here when he got arrested, so I didn't even get to say goodbye ...

[Arditti et al \(2003\)](#) describe parental imprisonment as an 'ambiguous loss' because, while the parent is still alive, it is often difficult to maintain contact. It can be extremely traumatic for a child to watch their parent being arrested and taken away from the family home, but it is also very distressing for children who were not present at the time to not know where their parent is or why they have left. This may be exacerbated when the parent is not allowed to leave their children a note or make arrangements for them. Lack of information can be very difficult for children, many of whom are completely unaware of why their parent is no longer at home. In cases of domestic violence, feelings may be more ambiguous or include relief. A FF practitioner explains how, for many families, sharing the nature of their family member's crime can be very difficult.

Mum's gone to prison for a sexual offence, which ... but she's not deemed a risk to her children or young children ... I helped the grandparents tell the kids where mum is, but they don't understand why she's gone to prison. They just know she's unwell, and she's gone to prison to get better. But it's not been something that we've been able to touch on because they're about, they're five and ten. They're quite young. But I'm just helping them manage their feelings around mum, their anger, the not knowing why she's in prison.

Drawing on relational theory ([Gergen, 2009](#)) and the exploration of relationships within families, [Mitchell \(2024\)](#) describes the 'relational trauma' that CoCI can experience when family relationships are disrupted. Her work focuses primarily on the impact of maternal imprisonment, but the implications of disrupted family relationships and the impact this can have on a child's wellbeing can also be applied to paternal imprisonment. Helping children to understand what has happened to the family member who has gone to prison and exploring with them their feelings associated with this separation is a key aspect of the work of FF.

We encourage family members to be honest about where that parent has gone because children pick up on things, they hear things, and there's always that concern that they might feel further down the road when they understand

what's happened that they were lied to, so we encourage honesty. It's about sitting down with those children and explaining about prison, what prison's like, maybe doing activities with them where we talk about what do they think a day in prison is like. And then also helping them to maybe explore their feelings around that ... (FF practitioner)

Lack of understanding can manifest in different ways, with children displaying emotions and behaviours that are very similar to grief. Matt's mother, for example, described the challenges Matt faced when his dad was in prison, where he 'would refuse to do anything – clubs, after school, anything like that', preferring to 'hide himself away at lunchtime'. She describes the acute anxiety he experienced: 'He will get physically ill with his anxiety, like he'll get bellyache, he'll get headaches, he gets sick ...'.

Matt's mother also describes how he took on a sense of responsibility for his father's future behaviours, trying to find ways to help his dad avoid reoffending, supporting [Leeson and Morgan's \(2019\)](#) findings, which explore how CoCI take on more caring responsibilities within the family.

I think Matt puts a lot on himself, doesn't he, so he thinks he has to worry about if daddy's going to not do things or whether, you know. I think when you've been in a situation where you have things like this go on, you grow up too quick because you've seen too much ...

During our interview, Matt described the type of support Sarah provided.

Matt: We chat loads ... we got on to the topic of outside socialising and she found the group. I would never have just gone ... If when I first met her, she'd been, like, 'Let's go here,' I probably would have been, like [facial expression of refusal]. But I think it's because I've known her for nearly a year ... I wouldn't just go with someone I've just met.

Researcher: So, is it the relationship you've got with [Sarah] over time that makes that okay?

Matt: Yeah.

When we asked Matt how important FF support is, he emphasised the value of being able to talk to someone outside the family: 'I think it's very important. I think people need someone to talk to, not necessarily their parents. Someone else. Because she's there to help you get over it.'

Matt also reflected on the impact of FF. He could see that his confidence outside the family had grown since working closely with Sarah: 'It's helped with my confidence. Say now, if the teachers ask a question, I can put my hand up. I never used to put my hand up, even if I knew the answer. But I've started to get better with that now.'

Similarly, Matt's mother noticed a difference: 'Matt's become more confident – not brilliant, but he has attempted things that he wouldn't have attempted and, again, I don't find he's as stressed.'

By listening, FF practitioners work with children to explore their needs and consider strategies of support. Similarly, and referring to her FF support, Susan (age 13) said that it had helped her to talk about things she found difficult to express.

Researcher: How do you think doing these things has helped you?

Susan: I don't know how to say ... I don't really like to talk about it [father's situation], but I have talked about it.

She spoke positively about the strategies that her FF practitioner had helped her to learn to use.

She gave me ideas ... and she brings stuff with her, like she brought me this book. And if I ever felt sad or angry, then I'd go into my first aid kit [made by FF practitioner] and it has things I like inside of it and I have to pick one out of it, like some pictures of the Earth, usually some sweets in there, and a pad and pencils because I like to draw.

The impact of listening to children is well documented for its recognition of children's rights (Cooper, 2017) and for nurturing positive self-regard (Cooper et al, 2019). Set along a trajectory of experience where families have felt overlooked (Cooper et al, 2023), FF promotes an ethos of listening, where children and family experiences are validated and where they feel listened to.

Good-quality information that can help children make sense of their situations, as well as provide pointers for support, is vital. Yet current provision within the English and Welsh criminal justice system is typically oriented to the rehabilitation of the imprisoned adult with a drive to reduce reoffending and fails to fully consider the needs of children left behind and the wellbeing of the family as a whole (Arditti, 2012).

There's very little ... support that's actually about the children and not the adult. So, I think it's based upon that pressure for a child to be a part of a protective, contextualised network for those. Somehow, they're expected to be part of some kind of supportive network for their parent. And even if no one turns round and says it's up to you to make sure your parent doesn't offend again, everything is based around prison visits, prison releases, writing letters, having phone calls ... but I wonder whether or not that's even helpful for some children. (Stakeholder)

Without automatic referral systems and a national network of services, many families and children find the imprisonment of their close relative very difficult to bear. Consequently, they may experience challenges to their mental health and are at risk of becoming socially isolated (Cooper et al, 2023).

While it has been argued that it is important for children experiencing trauma to share their experiences, Eriksson and Pringle (2019) draw on the work of Leira (2002) to consider the impact of cultural taboos that render some experiences difficult to share, forcing a child into the position of 'invisible victim'. Writing on the topic of violence within the home, Leira (2002) reflects on how children are often rendered silent and unable to share these experiences outside the family, thus engendering feelings of helplessness and shame. CoCI are similarly living with the stigma of parental imprisonment, and their experiences are often difficult to articulate. The idea that children wish to or have the skills to share their experiences overlooks the difficulties that talking about highly sensitive issues can present. Furthermore, such assumptions

risk, as Wade and Smart (2002: 43) suggest, 'creating a culture where children are expected to talk'. In her research exploring young people's experiences of living with a parent with alcohol problems, Hill (2015) notes how most of them do not choose to talk about personal experiences outside the family. Hill goes on to argue that when given the opportunities to do so, young people will adopt a variety of different ways to share their experiences. There is also the danger that the very notion of listening may be conceived as somewhat stable and assumes that merely being afforded the opportunity to talk will enable support. This overlooks how listening takes time and is a process that depends on relationships of trust and respect. Building relationships over an extended period is central to the work of FF.

While for Matt, and the other children, talking was emphasised as important in enabling them to share their experiences with a trusted adult with whom they had built a relationship, our study revealed that some children found it very difficult to express their feelings through talk alone.

FF has developed a responsive approach in how children are supported, which recognises children's diverse needs and the distinct ways in which they choose to share their experiences.

Being responsive to children's needs

David (age 10) found it exceptionally difficult to talk about his father's imprisonment. David was referred to FF by his primary school when his behaviour had been noted as a cause for concern. He started by coming into class, where he elected to sit facing the back wall, with very little engagement with his teacher. Soon, the relationship with his teacher deteriorated, and he did not participate in learning. David had increasingly retracted from communicating, was distant from peers and emotional, often displaying anger. He found it very challenging to talk, retreating under his hoodie, and appearing to prefer silence.

Rachel, a FF practitioner, provided one-to-one support for David and supported his mother. She explains that the sessions with David were initially quite challenging as he found it very hard to express how he was feeling: 'He struggles to articulate what the feeling is that he feels, so he'll say, "I don't know."'

Rachel describes how she drew on a variety of strategies to connect with David's needs and support him in finding a way to give voice to his emotions.

I said to him, 'Right, I want you to imagine' – because he loves watching TV – 'I want you to imagine that you are in the middle of a TV screen, that you're on telly, you're actually there and I just want you to talk about anything that you're comfortable to talk about,' I said, 'and I'm going to be the remote control and then when I put you on pause, I just want you to stop. Yeah?' ... And, for me, that was light bulb, and I just sat there, I didn't show it, but inside I was like, something has dropped in this person to actually see it, without owning it, this is your life, this is your journey, and right at the end of the session ending, he said, 'I can't thank you enough for what you've done,' and he went home and he told his mum, and mum has actually been doing this TV role-play and we're finding that the role-play is helping him to identify with the emotion of what it feels like ...

During our interview with David, he made it very clear that he would not talk about his dad, stating, 'I'm not going to go there.' He indicated that he found his circumstances very 'hard' to talk about and described his desire to pull up his hoodie and 'do' his 'own thing'. He did, however, talk about the support he received from Rachel and how much he had enjoyed 'playing games' and 'doing stuff'.

David's teacher, who had referred David and his mother to FF and observed his progress, shared her views on FF support and what made it effective.

How they work with school is key. The way that they work with the whole family is key. They helped build a bridge between school and mum, that was really helpful. I hadn't realised that things had got so bad. [FF practitioner] has empowered this young lad at a time when it was absolutely critical for him.

She explained how the whole family nature of the support had had a profound effect.

[David's mother] very quickly built a very trusted relationship with [FF practitioner], and [FF practitioner] encouraged, set her little bite-sized tasks that mum had agreed to, of course, and mum started to move forward. She attended doctor's appointments. She sought advice on housing and, you know, [FF practitioner] was there in the background, ready to listen, ready to say 'That's a good idea,' and just helped her rebuild a trust in professionals again.

This teacher's assessment of what would have been the likely outcome for David had FF not been able to provide support was stark.

I'd love to say that school would have swept in to help ... [but] there's only so much a school can do to help parents ... I think, for David, he would have carried on spiralling. I think possibly he would now be living with dad. ... Going into high school, there'd be truancy, if I'm honest ... I think without support, David would very soon have been known to the police.

Silence or withdrawal characteristic of the behaviour of many children living with the trauma of parental imprisonment may easily be labelled as disruptive when closer analysis reveals emotional upset, long-standing trauma and a need for support. Taken out of context, behaviours such as these can be misunderstood or important aspects overlooked. Understanding is thus rendered partial at best. This has implications for professional practices, where engaging with and supporting children is fundamental to ethical practice (Graham and Powell, 2015).

In previous work (Cooper et al, 2019), we have examined the conceptualisation of voice as predominantly verbal, thus discounting different conceptualisations which acknowledge the embodied qualities of voice (Gallagher, 2020). Listening to the views of children includes rich multimodal experiences that are embodied and situated within multilayered social dynamics (Cooper and Preece, 2023).

FF practitioners employ a variety of approaches to respond to the individual needs of children. This can include drawing, game making, sharing photographs, storytelling and embodied activities to help process emotions.

Sarah, a FF practitioner, describes the support she provides to Charles (age 8), who was referred to FF by his primary school. Charles's father had recently returned

to prison following a pattern of imprisonment and release over many years. Both Charles's teacher and his mother had indicated to Sarah that he was finding it difficult to manage his anger and would often lash out at school and home.

He really struggles to verbalise how he feels or even to say sorry when he's lashed out. So, what we do is we actually made together some small, little signs that we stuck onto cocktail sticks and they said 'I'm angry' or 'I'm sorry' with drawings on that he made and that's his first step in actually telling people how he feels because he struggles so much to actually verbalise that but it's his way of still feeling he can express his emotions.

Sarah went on to explain how FF uses different approaches to help children explore how they feel in their bodies.

We get the child to lay down on the floor on some big bits of paper that we've sort of taped together, and we get them to draw around themselves, or we draw around them. And when they stand up, we then ask them to talk about where they feel anxiety on the body, how it comes across ... some may talk about their stomach because they get a feeling of burning, some may talk about their thoughts that are going on in their heads. So, we just get them to start almost verbalising – 'Well, what am I feeling in my body?' – and help them to understand that this is normal, and then from there we kind of start to look at triggers, get, help them to talk about when do you feel angry, and then we try and work on sort of techniques to help them deal with their anger

Sarah uses this approach with Charles to support him in labelling emotions felt in his body: 'He coloured in his knees and his elbows because that was where he wanted to fight and lash out ...'.

During our interview, Charles illustrated the impact FF support can have in helping children voice their feelings and navigate complex emotions, which he described as his 'monkey' called 'Flamey'.

Charles: So, I drew around myself on a big piece of paper, and I put orange where I would get angry and use [it] when I get angry. I drew orange all over my fist, on my knees, on my legs, on my head, and I think that's it.

Researcher: So, you drew all around your body and showed all the bits where you perhaps felt angry in your body?

Charles: Oh yeah, I think my face because I would shout a lot and in the middle on my chest I drew what was inside of me, my own version of a monkey.

Researcher: Is that your angry monkey?

Charles: I think I drew someone called Flamey, because when I am calm it would sit, drink and watch TV, but when I get angry it would just take over me.

Researcher: And what does Flamey do when he's angry?

Charles: Shout, hurt and does, yeah.

Charles then goes on to describe the impact that this work with Sarah has had on his ability to talk about and manage his feelings.

- Researcher: That sounds a really interesting thing to do. Was it a hard thing to do or did you find that quite easy?
- Charles: I found it quite easy because I get angry quite a lot, but now I'm getting a little bit better of controlling it.

This approach highlights the impact of embodied activities to support children in connecting with and processing their emotions. Using activities that are 'fun' but also enable children to talk about their parent who is in prison in an environment where they feel safe is central to the work of FF. Charles talked about the things he enjoyed doing with Sarah, such as 'drawing with her, I like playing Play-Doh with her, and I like talking with her'.

Similarly, Oscar (age 6) describes how 'Dad is in prison right now. He's been to prison, like, three, four times,' and how much he enjoys coming out of class in school to spend time with his Sarah, his YSS FF practitioner: 'Everything is fun with Sarah ... She's very, like, fun and educational ... and I like to talk about Dad with her.' This response is particularly poignant for Oscar, who, during the interview, also described how he didn't talk to other people about his dad, other than his mum and siblings.

Through listening to the children's experiences, the concept of fun emerged as a key part of FF support, thereby contributing to broader literature that highlights the impact of fun in therapeutic contexts (Davis, 2010; Klyve and Rolvsjord, 2023). In researching the impact of fun activities with young carers, Wind and Jorgensen (2020) describe fun as providing respite from the emotional turmoil these young people face.

By drawing and articulating his worries about his dad with his FF practitioner (by drawing a picture of a hand with a 'good' side and a 'bad' side) and his imminent release from prison, Oscar describes his concerns.

- Oscar: This was my worry hand about Dad. Going to prison again, might argue again, everyone will steal Dad from me, because everyone just steals Dad from me.
- Researcher: So, of course, you miss him.
- Oscar: Yeah, I miss him. Yeah, I miss him a lot.

Research reveals that family relationships do not merely revert to how they were prior to imprisonment (Mitchell, 2024). It is important to consider how imprisonment redefines parenthood and family relationships (Arditti, 2012) and the impact of absent parents on children (Western and McLanahan, 2000; Mitchell, 2024). FF practitioners have adopted responsive approaches that allow children and families to prepare for parental release and provide extended support to families as they readjust. Building relationships and enhancing wellbeing within families is a core aspect of the work of FF and one that recognises the importance of strengths-based approaches.

Strengths-based approaches

Susan (age 13) was referred to FF as part of a family referral for her, her mother and siblings. Susan's father had spent a large proportion of her childhood in and out of

prison. Susan appeared comfortable talking about her dad and was keen to share things she had produced during her time spent with her FF practitioner. As a creative young person, Susan enjoyed drawing and had worked with her FF practitioner to create a poster for other young people who were living through similar circumstances.

During our interview and referring to her poster (Figure 1), she explained her thinking and her feelings, and also revealed how her FF practitioner had used the exercise to help her discuss her questions and emotions.

Susan: This is questions they might ask. This is what they might feel. This is what they could do to make them get through it.

Researcher

[reading

the poster]: *Writing a letter, looking at a picture or videos. Are these things you do?*

Susan: I haven't written a letter. I look at pictures. I don't really need to remind myself of him because we talk about him anyway. There's a few [videos] on the laptop.

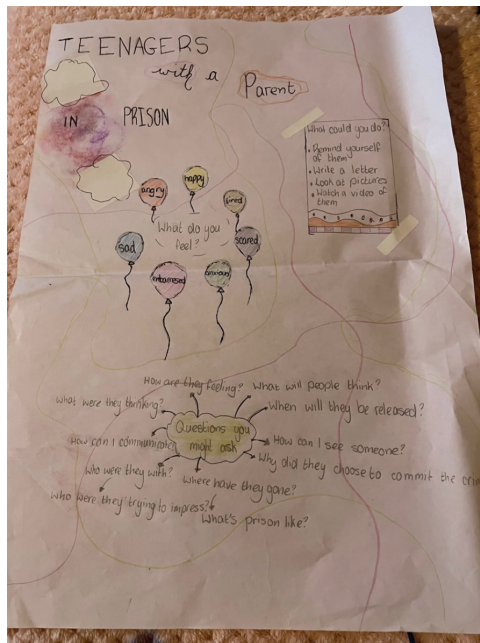
['might feel']

Happy, tired, scared, sad, anxious

Researcher: 'Embarrassed' is a hard one, isn't it? Hard to talk to other people about it?

Susan went on to create a board game on her own initiative to play with her dad when he came out of prison, to help him understand the consequences of making different choices in life (see Figure 2). She explained the purpose of the game and some of its components.

Figure 1: 'Who were they trying to impress?'



A teacher who referred a pupil and family to FF reflected on the approach taken, which not only encouraged her pupil to become more confident and respectful but also enabled his mother to support him in ways that further nurtured his growing confidence. The focus here on strengthening family relationships is key (Arditti, 2012).

He's got some good friendships, he's confident. He's more open, he's more respectful. He's all in all a much happier child. And I don't think it's just because of the work that [FF practitioner]'s done with him, but I feel that because [FF practitioner] helped mum move forward also, I feel that the improvements in mum have really helped the improvements in [the 11-year-old]. (Teacher)

Our research indicates that offering families access to responsive, strengths-based support from FF, along with opportunities to share their experiences and feel listened to, can provide a 'lifeline' of support which can make a positive difference to their lives. This supports a body of work which emphasises the importance of holistic, family-focused support for left-behind families (Western and McLanahan, 2000; Arditti, 2012; Mitchell, 2024). Through skilled practitioner intervention, CoCI and their families can be supported to express and manage their emotions during periods of significant emotional strain. This approach centres on family wellbeing and recognises how the children of today with imprisoned parents need support to help them to deal with the trauma and distress, to continue to grow, and to engage fully in their education, relationships and futures.

Conclusion

Our research is one of very few studies that place CoCI at the heart of research exploring the impact of targeted support for children and families affected by familial imprisonment. The importance of adopting a responsive research approach is unique in illuminating the impact of listening and strengths-based support for CoCI. Findings from our research have fed into the development of a YSS handbook to support families, and our recommendations have been advocated by other local organisations. In this article, we have explored the impact of targeted FF support services from the perspectives of CoCI, their families and the network of supporting practitioners. Our research adopted a wider agenda in exploring not just the outcomes but the everyday experiences valued by CoCI. The children emphasised what is important to them regarding 'what works' in support. They stressed the importance of talking to trusted adults outside the family and being listened to. They showed they valued their individual needs being responded to by engaging in different activities. Being able to engage in activities, supported by practitioners, which support diverse voices and are fun, provides a brief respite from challenging circumstances. Furthermore, their responses show that adopting a strengths-based approach enables children to explore their emotions, develop confidence in their skills and self-reliance, and process traumatic experiences. Supporting children within their families, using holistic approaches that recognise the importance of family wellbeing and relational dynamics, has significance not only for addressing CoCI needs as they present but also for enhancing their wellbeing for their futures. This research has much broader

implications for how targeted support of this kind can be adopted by other services in education and social care to provide much-needed support for CoCI and their families.

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Conflict of interest

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest.

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