

Building a therapeutic care team

Foster care intervention when a mother is imprisoned – a case study

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This paper presents the case study of a family which was supported by a Victorian foster care agency over a two-year period whilst both parents were imprisoned. The article aims to raise awareness amongst practitioners across a range of fields of practice about the issues faced by the children of prisoners, and to document effective and collaborative practices which enable the impact of parental incarceration to be managed and minimised for the children involved. The paper is based on data gathered for a study examining the impact of maternal incarceration on young people conducted by one of the authors. Through focusing on one family, the paper discusses the increasing phenomenon of mothers in prison and the challenges this presents both to their families and to practitioners. The paper concludes by reflecting on the process and suggests that collaborative work with the families of prisoners requires not just good intentions but resources, commitment from all parties, and mutually respectful relationships.

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IMPRISONING WOMEN – IMPRISONING MOTHERS

In recent decades, western countries have seen a staggering increase in the women's prison population – far outstripping the growth in men's prisons. In Australia, the women's prison population increased by 90% over the past decade (ABS 2006), while in the UK and the US the growth is more than double this rate (Home Office 2003; Miller 2006). Women in prison present particular challenges. They are generally young and marginalised; they have low educational attainment; limited employment experiences, skills and opportunities (Department of Justice 2002); and poor housing (Commonwealth Office of the Status of Women 2003). Abuse, mental health problems, substance abuse and poverty are also common (Dalley 2002; Greene, Haney & Hurtado 2000; Loucks 2004a). All of this suggests a range of intersecting factors which can negatively affect the lives of these women and their children.

Alongside these existing personal and social problems, it is now well established that around two-thirds of women in prison are mothers of dependent children (Woodward 2003). Most of these children live with their mothers prior to imprisonment and are likely to return to her care upon her release (Cunningham & Baker 2003; Dalley 2002; Greene, Haney & Hurtado 2000). Because of women's primary carer status, there is often a crisis when they are imprisoned, with children frequently displaced, generally moving home and often school. The potential for crisis is compounded by women being increasingly remanded into custody, with little or no time to arrange suitable care for their children (ABS 2004).

Whilst the children of imprisoned mothers are typically cared for by members of their extended family, they are also much more likely to end up in foster care (Farrell 1998; Johnston 1995; Mumola 2000), particularly when they reach school age (Sheehan & Levine 2007). It is argued that this is, in part, due to the challenges faced by extended family carers – who are often living in poverty – in meeting the children's increasing range of intellectual and social development needs (Gaudin & Sutphen 1993).

The personal difficulties described above are of concern because of the risks they pose to children and the difficulties they present for planning for a mother's return home after prison. Family reunification receives little attention in pre-

release planning (VACRO 2006), with mothers 'often left to rebuild these relationships with little support' (Anderson 2003:4). The added challenges posed to children in foster care in maintaining contact during and after prison have been noted by Hayward and DePanfilis (2007). Strained worker-parent relationships are seen to impede effective planning and mothers are often 'excluded from formal review processes' (Beckerman 1989:178), with workers focusing more on the children and the carer.

Exclusion is also a common experience for the families of prisoners, with few accessing or being offered any support services either during or after imprisonment (Healy, Foley & Walsh 2000; Tudball 2000). Many feel that they are 'left to pick up the pieces [of] problems [that have] escalated beyond their control' (Goulding 2004:42). Intervention from community-based services often ceases when an individual is imprisoned, yet this is arguably the time when they and their families most need support. Little research, however, has focused on what works with the families of prisoners.

WORKING COLLABORATIVELY

As described above, prisoners' families are typically challenged by a range of personal and social difficulties. Current social welfare practice suggests that effective work with families experiencing multiple problems relies on a coordinated approach (O'Connor, Wilson & Setterlund 2003). Winkworth and McArthur (2006) argue strongly that such partnerships are essential in child-centred practice. It requires timely intervention and interdisciplinary cooperation – drawing on the combined knowledge and expertise of those involved, including children. Foster care practice in Victoria, informed by the Minimum Standards for Home Based Care Services (DHS 2003) as well as the Looking After Children (LAC) framework, also stresses the importance of partnerships and communication between caregivers, children, young people and their families. Winkworth and McArthur (2006) note, however, that interagency cooperation often falters after initial information sharing, with Ainsworth (2004) highlighting the impact of the differing expectations held by those involved. To be successful, partnerships require the skilful management of both relationships and resources (Walker, Pietsch, Delaney, Hahn, Wallace & Billings 2007). To date, however, the adult and child services with which prisoners and their families may come into contact are fractured and fail to provide a 'single coherent system of support around a family' (Burns, Brandon, Oakes, Olopade & Krikorian 2007:15). Families remain marginalised and engage minimally with the service system. Whilst a collaborative approach is seen as vital to good practice generally, the challenges to implementing this are clear; this case study explores what was needed for an

effective partnership to be established and harnessed with the Kostos¹ family.

IMPRISONING MOTHERS STUDY

During 2004-2005, one of the authors conducted a study examining the impact of maternal incarceration on twenty adolescent children whose mothers had been imprisoned in either one of Victoria's two women's prisons. The sample for this study was drawn largely from a pre-existing study population of women who had exited prison in Victoria during the period December 2002-December 2003. Maximum variation sampling was used, augmented by snowball sampling via study participants and 'well-situated' (Patton 2002:237) welfare agencies. Case studies on each young person were developed, using an analytic framework based on existing knowledge in relation to children of prisoners, knowledge of women in prison as well as the researcher's professional social work practice. [See Flynn (2007) and Sheehan & Flynn (2007) for further discussion of this study.] It is from this study that the data on the Kostos family has been extracted.

METHODOLOGY: CASE SELECTION

In line with the overall aim to build knowledge about the children of women in prison, the Kostos case was purposefully selected as an extreme case (Patton 2002) in which there was a large sibling group that atypically had a professional worker involved and in which reunification was both planned and successful, despite chronic parental problems. This case is not intended to be representative of the families of prisoners, typical of intervention with these families or generalisable. The aim of selecting this case is to learn from those who are 'exemplars of good practice' (Patton 2002:234).

THE KOSTOS FAMILY – BACKGROUND

Kylie and George Kostos, aged in their mid-thirties, were in a relationship for some fifteen years and had six children together. The three oldest children in the family, Hayley, Bec and Louise, then aged 13, 12 and 11 years respectively, participated in the Imprisoning Mothers study. Kylie described considerable problems in her relationship with George, with indications of domestic violence. She said his heroin addiction led to her offending; she began committing armed robberies to obtain money to support his drug habit. Her description of life at this time indicated a family under pressure, with Kylie trying to balance the demands of her drug-dependent partner and the needs of her children:

I didn't have the habit, but I had the lifestyle. Every morning I'd wake up thinking 'We have to score!' I was getting the kids

¹ All names, surnames and forenames, with the exception of the foster care worker (Jenny), have been changed to ensure confidentiality.

off to school and thinking [about it] ... I was running around like a goose – trying to keep him happy; trying to keep the kids happy.

These parental problems had an obvious impact on the family. Information gathered by the foster care agency indicated that there were ongoing observable problems in the family prior to imprisonment, with social isolation and poor supervision of the children. The children's teachers advised that at events like the school fete and working bees, the children would often attend on their own. The family did, however, present with strengths: the children had never before been separated from their mother and they had attended only one school. As a result, they brought with them a strong sense of family as well as clearly established support networks within their school community.

... it is now well established that around two-thirds of women in prison are mothers of dependent children.

THE ARREST

After their mother was arrested, the children did not know where she was for a few days. Kylie herself said she was not able to speak to the children directly for about four or five weeks. Hayley described that particular day.

Dad picked us up from school. A few hours after that, mum and dad went out, but only dad came back. Later, dad and me and my younger brother went out in the car ... looking for mum. About 11 o'clock at night or 12, the police came ... [and] just took dad. Smashed the door down; didn't tell us anything. We didn't even know what had happened.

At this time, the children were divided up amongst a number of relatives, and moved a number of times. Louise commented, 'No one [told] us anything.' All expressed a sense of confusion about this time. Both Kylie and George were remanded into custody.

FOSTER CARE INTERVENTION

Anchor Foster Care became involved after a Department of Human Services (DHS) Child Protection referral. Anchor Foster Care is part of Anchor Incorporated, a not-for-profit organisation which provides a range of services in the outer east of Melbourne². Program staff estimate that between

² Anchor Foster Care provides short and long term placements for children aged from birth to eighteen years, many of whom have experienced physical, sexual and emotional abuse, neglect and abandonment or whose families are in need of respite. The Program has seven direct care staff and 75 accredited and active foster care

10% and 20% of children in the foster care program have a parent in prison, although this is typically not the only reason these children have been placed into care.

MANAGEMENT OF CARE

The DHS referral for the Kostos children was initiated because both parents were imprisoned – no other protective concerns were evident. The children recounted:

We were not allowed to stay with our uncles or aunts. DHS wouldn't let us. They didn't tell us why. They just told us they found us a place.

Anchor's understanding of the extended family situation is that there was simply no one able to care for all the children.

At the time of the referral, there were also no foster carers available who could take all six children. To enable the sibling group to remain together and attend the same school, DHS provided resourcing to Anchor in the form of a house and funding to lease an eight seater van; the agency then provided 24 hour carers. Approximately one month later, care-givers, Pauline and Rob, who could take all six children, became available, and the children moved to this foster care placement; they remained there for the duration of Kylie's period of remand.

During this time Kylie made a number of bail applications which were denied. This created practical and emotional difficulties in the placement – the children's hopes about returning home would be raised and then dashed. It made establishing routines difficult because of the uncertainty of how long the placement would be required. It was difficult to link the children into recreational activities, with workers and carers wondering whether, if they commenced, Kylie would be able to continue these if released. Would they even be living in an area where this would be manageable?

Kylie was granted bail on her fourth application and the children returned to her care. This was somewhat unexpected for those involved, given the previous denial of bail and the comments of the presiding magistrate, who had stated that having parenting responsibilities was not sufficient reason to grant bail, and that Kylie should have considered the consequences for her children before she became involved in offending. As a non-sentenced prisoner, Kylie had no access to any counselling or support services during her 12 months in prison and no pre-release preparation. She was bailed to reappear six weeks later.

In preparation for her court appearance, Kylie said that Pauline and Rob were on 'stand-by'. Jenny, the Anchor foster care worker, confirmed that when Kylie was sentenced, the children returned to Pauline and Rob. She says, however, that this wouldn't have been possible had

families and provides placements for approximately 50 children each month. For further details, see <<http://www.anchor.org.au>>.

they received another urgent referral. Fortunately for the Kostos children, this didn't happen. The children remained in this placement until Kylie was released 15 months later. Comparing the impact on the children of Kylie's period of remand with her period of sentenced imprisonment, Jenny recounts that the first period of imprisonment was much harder for them, as it involved considerable waiting, not knowing, and a number of unsuccessful bail hearings. The second time 'there was a bit of "going home" – to Pauline's'.

Intervention from community-based services often ceases when an individual is imprisoned, yet this is arguably the time when they and their families most need support.

FACILITATING RELATIONSHIPS

As well as the provision of direct care to the children, Anchor provided a range of other services: support for the placement – for both Kylie and Pauline, and encouraging positive communication between the two women; supporting Kylie in her role as parent; assisting with prison visiting; networking with other services involved; helping the children develop community linkages; and planning for Kylie's release.

Despite the challenges of working collaboratively with a diverse group of individuals, including differing organisational cultures and varied prior experiences of collaborative work (Bronstein 2003), through harnessing the existing positive relationships and creating and sustaining new relationships, Anchor built a therapeutic care team with, and around, the family. This team consisted of the foster care worker, the carers, DHS, the prison welfare worker, the school, recreational programs, Kylie and the children. Having a cohesive team and approach enabled services to be provided in a consistent manner, rather than in a fragmented and confusing way, which can be the case when a number of agencies are involved (Weber 2006). Three key interventions and their outcomes are discussed here to illustrate the working of the team: supporting the mother role, facilitating the children's visiting, and planning for reunification.

Supporting Kylie in her role as mother

Jenny advises:

We wanted to keep Kylie involved. I would fax things to her, via the prison welfare worker, to sign, for example school excursions, reports, etc.

Jenny describes the role played by the primary school in this process:

The children's school was instrumental in our success. They were aware of the situation and ensured that school notices and consent forms were forwarded in a timely manner ... It meant that Kylie knew what was going on; she was kept involved.

To maintain Kylie in a parenting role required commitment from other members of the care team. Jenny reflects:

When Hayley commenced Year 7, she had some problems in settling in. When I suggested we have a meeting and include Kylie via telephone conference from the prison, the Student Welfare Coordinator was willing to accommodate. Kylie was able to participate in the meeting and speak directly to her daughter about the difficulties she was experiencing ... These types of communications were able to be facilitated because we had a worker who was based in the prison. Later, when the prison lost staff, she was less available but, by then, we had already established that relationship with Kylie. What we learned was that you need someone to go through when negotiating the prison system. The worker could call about specific issues. When in prison, little things can blow out of proportion, because prisoners can't do anything. Sometimes it's just about reassurance. Without a supportive contact person there, the impact on the kids would have been much more negative; if as a parent, Kylie was not able to cope, the children would not have coped.

'Relationship with children is consistently identified as a major issue for the health and wellbeing of women in prison' (Commonwealth Office of the Status of Women 2003:6), with mothers typically feeling distressed (Poehlmann 2005), removed from their role as a parent and powerless (Goulding 2004). This is often compounded by having minimal contact with children. Whilst contemporary prisons advocate the maintenance of family connections for prisoners and encourage visiting because it is seen to lead to lower recidivism and better post-release adjustment (Codd 2005; Loucks 2004b; Stanton 1980), as well as having a positive impact on their morale and likely behaviour whilst in prison (HM Inspector of Prisons for Scotland 1996), it is clear that parents held in prison are first and foremost prisoners (Berry & Eigenberg 2003). It has been suggested that to enable mothers in prison to remain connected to their children, greater institutional support and acknowledgement of the parenting role are needed (Martin 1997). By maintaining a commitment to Kylie's primary role as parent and shaping interventions around this, with clear support from within the institution and from other care team members, Anchor was able to support and foster Kylie's mothering. This was strengthened and enabled her to cope both whilst imprisoned and in the challenging post-release period.

It is important here to discuss the role of Pauline, the foster carer. Jenny comments:

Over a six month period Pauline formed a trusting relationship with Kylie and issues with the children were then able to be resolved quickly between them. They achieved a 'united front' and supported each other's positions with the children ... credit must be accorded to Kylie for her openness and willingness to work with Pauline, and not in competition with her. Equally Pauline's generosity and non-judgemental approach facilitated this process.

These actions identify Pauline as being what Enos (2001) labelled a 'supportive and competent carer'; one who not only provided practical assistance to the children, but who saw Kylie as the children's mother and actively involved her in decision-making about them. The outcome of such an approach was a connected and ongoing parent-child relationship which facilitated family reunification after Kylie was released.

As noted above, women in prison are often excluded from processes and decisions about their children. Many women fear they are being replaced by their children's carers (Enos 2001); yet as described above, the role of carers in enabling women to remain connected is vital in shaping their motherhood trajectory during and after prison (Enos 2001; Farrell 1998). Martin (1997) reminds us, however, that this is not a linear process, and will be influenced by the mother's confidence in her parenting role, and her subsequent ability to involve carers in a partnership of shared parenting. In the case of the Kostos family, Anchor's overall commitment to Kylie as mother enabled her to feel confident in this role and hence to work effectively with Pauline for the benefit of the children.

Facilitating mother-child contact

Initially, all six children visited their mother together on a regular basis. This differs markedly from the findings of much previous research, which indicates that around one-half of the parents held in prison do not receive visits from their children. The visiting arrangement was, however, altered after a few months. Kylie said:

I learned that having all the kids to visit at once was too hard. Pauline noticed that the older ones were pushed away, and the little ones were all over me. So we changed the visits to the three older kids would come one week and the three younger ones the next week.

Hayley stated that when they all visited together, 'we couldn't get close to mum'. Louise agreed: 'I liked the splitting up. We got to talk to mum'. Jenny advises that this change was made in consultation with DHS after the older children had reported to both herself and Pauline that they were unable to talk with their mother about issues important to them as the three younger children disrupted any meaningful conversation. The views and experiences of the older Kostos children are not unexpected, given previous research findings which indicate that many older children

find communicating with family members during prison visits difficult due to lack of privacy or individual time with their parent (Brown 2001; Gursansky et al. 1998). The Kostos family situation differed from the typical, however, in that the children had adults with whom they had developed trusting relationships and with whom they could talk. The clearly established partnership, between both adults and children in the family and all professionals involved, enabled the voices of all to be heard and incorporated, resources to be available and visiting to be a better experience for the children.

Work with this family demonstrates that collaborative team work with families of prisoners relies on a range of factors: the involvement of community and prison-based services, mutually respectful relationships, the contributions of all participants being valued and valuable, as well as adequate resourcing.

Re-establishment

While Jenny perceived that planning for reunification was easier the second time, with Kylie's release date known and her sentence completed, housing remained a significant challenge. Two weeks prior to her release Kylie did not know where she would be housed. This is a typical experience for women in prison, many of whom are homeless and in need of support to re-enter the community. A recent Victorian study indicated that 41% of women exiting prison sought assistance from housing services prior to release (Trotter, Sheehan & McIvor 2006). Participants in the same study also anecdotally noted that it was not uncommon for mothers to be unable to access suitable family housing without having children in their custody, but also to be unable to have their children returned to their care without adequate housing. In the case of the Kostos family, housing uncertainty flowed onto uncertainty about the children's education and how community linkages could be maintained after Kylie's release. The children had clearly indicated to Anchor staff that they did not want to change schools as this had been a source of considerable support and stability for them. Letters of support from both DHS and Anchor were provided to the prison-based housing worker to advocate for maintaining the children in their local area. The prison welfare worker became a key member of the care team at this time and kept Anchor informed about the progress of Kylie's housing application. It was a very anxious time for the children who had become accustomed

to security and stability and routines in placement. Approximately one week before she was due to be released, Kylie was allocated transitional housing in an area from which transport to the children's school was manageable.

In assisting the family to reconnect after Kylie's release, Jenny worked with all the children to develop their own reunification plan; this was presented to DHS who approved the proposal. Jenny reflects that again the quality of the relationships and the trust developed within the care team allowed this to occur. The children identified that after not living with their mother for the best part of two years, what they wanted most was individual time with her. Kylie similarly identified that she would like time to get to know each child again before tackling the sibling group as a whole. It was thought that addressing this would minimise competition amongst the children for their mother's attention. The children individually spent a day and night on their own in their mother's new home during the reunification process. They brought with them their personal effects and each helped set up their bedrooms.

Louise described what happened:

We had to wait a week or two, then we could visit Mum in her home for a one hour visit, then four hours, then we started staying overnight, and then we started living there.

Bec's understanding of the purpose of this staged reunification process was that it was:

... to let mum settle in more – help mum get used to us six again.

Kylie said doing things individually helped her to 'get back to knowing who they were again'. Jenny recounts:

The first time they went home it was overwhelming. So we thought this time, let's split it. We put to the kids, how do you think we should do it? We knew that mum needed to connect with each kid individually.

She believes this process of reunification was a successful strategy. Feedback from Kylie and the children supported this view. Again, this process is not typical for mothers exiting prison. Most mothers and children who reunite do so with no planning or support. Women often reflect that they feel overwhelmed with the reintegration process, and its concomitant 'financial strain, physical strain, isolation and strained relationships with children' (Sheehan & Flynn 2007:229).

FAMILY OUTCOMES

The outcome of this intervention was that relationships were supported and maintained between Kylie and her children. All returned home to live with her after her release. Community linkages for the children, in terms of education and recreation, were able to be sustained. Hayley said 'It's like we're starting a new life again', while Bec reflected that

life was 'Much better than before'. George also reconnected with the family, having attended an anger management program whilst in prison and recommenced contact with Kylie, who reflected that he had changed. To date there have been no further foster care referrals for the Kostos children.

CONCLUSION

Although the lives of the Kostos children were significantly disrupted when their parents were incarcerated, the impact of this was mediated by effective intervention facilitated by Anchor Foster Care, and the therapeutic care team built around the family. The three interventions with the Kostos family discussed in this paper relied heavily on a collaborative model of working: partnership both with the family and other key professionals. In reflecting on successful intervention with the Kostos family case, Anchor staff commented, 'the basis of any good collaboration is relationship'. Trusting and mutually respectful relationships were developed and encouraged between all stakeholders by Anchor staff. This is noteworthy, as Weber (2006:237) argues that a significant barrier to effective teamwork is participants believing they have 'limited power ... authority and influence'. In the case of the Kostos family, all were active participants: the children's voices were heard and incorporated in key areas such as visiting and reunification; the foster carer's role and opinions were actively validated and she was encouraged to relate independently with Kylie; Child Protection staff were key partners and providers of significant resources, and prison staff were engaged in dialogue in which communication and sharing were a two-way process. Work with this family demonstrates that collaborative team work with families of prisoners relies on a range of factors: the involvement of community and prison-based services, mutually respectful relationships, the contributions of all participants being valued and valuable, as well as adequate resourcing. While this case is not argued to be typical, it does highlight how good, collaborative practice is possible and the benefits of this for children and families. The challenge now is how to do more of this. ■

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