

My Dad is in Prison

An example of a duty line call – EP telephone consultation with a head teacher

The situation

A Head Teacher of a junior school rang the duty line to talk about how the school might best support a little boy, Adrian and his younger sister Jessica, whose Dad had been taken into custody. Adrian had become more argumentative and oppositional, particularly with other children on the playground. Jessica appeared to be coping well with no outward sign that anything might be going on for her.

What happened...

The school was reassured by the Educational Psychologist (EP) that children can react differently to and have different strategies for coping with life events. It was appropriate to apply their normal rules and sanctions, but with sensitivity and understanding. Maintaining rules, boundaries and structure is important when other things in a child's life have become unusual or abnormal and might seem to be disintegrating.

The EP reinforced the idea that having a parent in prison can be a significant loss to a child not too dissimilar from loss through bereavement or divorce/separation. Monitoring the young person without being over-protective was important. The school was encouraged to continue their good practice in giving opportunities to children for raising concerns - 'circle time' and class 'worry boxes' (where children wrote down things that were worrying them and the class teacher later followed this up in private).

The EP reminded the school to be aware of pressure points that might arise for the family such as the trial, the verdict, sentencing, visiting arrangements for which children might need time off and the eventual release of their parent which might prompt a variety of feelings such as joy, anxiety and anger.

It was also suggested that it could be supportive for the family if the imprisoned parent received information about school such as progress reports and school trips or performances in which their child has been involved. The most important things were for schools to be approachable, understanding and supportive and have a named contact person for the remaining parent and children.

The duty call line was also able to sign post the school to web-based information such as www.barnardos.org.uk, where information booklets for families are provided and www.learningsupport.co.uk who provide information for teachers.

Psychology used

Humanistic Psychology

Psychodynamic Psychology

