

# Parent in Prison: Understanding the Child's Needs in Educational Institutions

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**Abstract.** The departure of a parent to serve a sentence of imprisonment affects the change of a family's climate, which can be divided into three groups: (a) changes in daily life navigation and activity; (b) changes in parent-child relationships; and (c) changes in financial circumstances. The abrupt change that a child experiences can lead to the development of externalized and internalized behavioral problems, as well as changes in student academic achievement due to lack of motivation and concentration. Since the school is an educational institution that provides children with secondary socialization opportunities, it has an important role in supporting students whose parents are serving prison sentences. This paper presents research suggesting that stigmatizing students whose parents are in prison can bring shame, discomfort, and withdrawal to themselves. Considering that there are no clear suggestions on how the primary school should act when the parent goes to prison, the authors of this paper propose guidelines on minimizing the harmful consequences on socioemotional development and academic success of students whose parents go to prison.

**Keywords:** child, imprisonment, parenting, school success, stigma.

## Tėvai kalėjime: vaiko poreikių supratimas švietimo įstaigoje

**Santrauka.** Vieno iš tėvų išvykimas iš namų atlikti laisvės atėmimo bausmę lemia šeimos klimato pokyčius, kuriuos galima suskirstyti į tris grupes: (a) kasdienio gyvenimo valdymo ir veiklos pokyčiai; b) tėvų ir vaikų santykių pokyčiai ir c) finansinių aplinkybių pokyčiai. Staigūs pokyčiai vaiko gyvenime gali paveikti jo motyvaciją ir susikaupimą, o šie gali sukelti elgesio eksternalizavimo bei internalizavimo problemų ir paveikti mokymosi rezultatus. Kadangi mokykla yra vaiko antrinę socializaciją užtikrinanti ugdymo įstaiga, ji atlieka svarbų vaidmenį remdama mokinius, kurių tėvai atlieka laisvės atėmimo bausmę. Straipsnyje pristatomas tyrimas atskleidė, kad mokinių, kurių tėvai yra kalėjime, stigmatizavimas gali jiems sukelti gėdą, diskomfortą ir atsiribojimą. Atsižvelgdami į tai, kad kol kas nėra aiškių nuorodų, kaip turėtų elgtis pradinė mokykla, kai jos mokinių tėvai patenka į kalėjimą, straipsnio autoriai siūlo gaires, kaip sumažinti žalingus tėvų patekimo į kalėjimą padarinius mokinių socialinei ir emocinei raidai bei mokymosi rezultatams.

**Pagrindiniai žodžiai:** vaikas, įkalinimas, auklėjimas, pasiekimai mokykloje, stigma.

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## **Introduction**

The development of society in the 21st century brought great changes, visible in technology, medicine, economy, science, education, but also regarding human rights. Marginal and especially sensitive social groups have been given a lot of attention, which is also discussed by the former Croatian Ombudsman for Children Maja Gabelica Šupljika (Gabelica Šupljika, Romstein, & Gabelica Šupljika, 2018). One of these groups represent children whose parents are in prison. The process of growing up of a child whose parent is imprisoned can significantly affect the emotional state of that child, because children can grieve for the absent parent for a long time, which in turn creates insecurity and a sense of stigma that can lead to post-traumatic stress, withdrawal, and internalized and externalized behavioral problems (Naudeau, 2010; Arditti, 2012; Majdak, 2018, p. 72), and mental and physical health. Namely, research shows that children whose parents are serving sentences in prisons or penitentiaries are exposed to negative emotional experiences, which affect their psychophysical health in multiple ways (Majdak, 2018, p. 71), as well as various psychosocial consequences (Knežević, 2016). Children of prisoners are often forgotten by society, and are indirectly held accountable for the actions of their parents. An example of this is visible in educational institutions, but also in the attitude of peers towards these children. The stigma of the “problematic child” is not uncommon: Glover (2009) emphasizes that children whose parents are in prison are frequently subjected to many forms of discrimination (Macanović, 2018, p. 55).

The experience that the child went through and is still experiencing is itself traumatic, and that is why it is important to understand the importance of the educational institution when it comes to approaching the child and developing empathy in other students. With its approach, the school can influence the mutual relations of children, but also of teachers towards the child, through mutual tolerance, respect, and solidarity. This is also stated in Article 29 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (Pravobranitelj za djecu, 2011), adopted in 1989 and ratified by all countries which are members of the European Union, which states that the child's education should be directed towards preparing the child for a responsible life in the spirit of understanding, peace, tolerance, and friendship. Therefore, the approach of the staff of the institution that the child attends in terms of communication, support and understanding of the child's needs and adequate fulfilment of the same is of great importance. Likewise, Article 3 and Article 9 of the already mentioned Convention (Pravobranitelj za djecu, 2011) state that the state parties have an obligation to ensure that services and institutions responsible for the care and protection of children are supervised, and that they comply with the standards of the competent authorities and, in the event of a parent's imprisonment, act in the best interests of the child. This, of course, applies to schools, which with a careful and responsible approach to the child can greatly alleviate the difficult period. However, the Convention does not offer guidelines for the educational institution, so all work with the child remains within the framework of expertise, good will, and the willingness of its employees to cooperate.

Moreover, the authors of this paper want to point out the problem of success in school for a child whose parent is serving a prison sentence. This particular issue can depend on various reasons, such as lack of motivation and concentration, fear, or negative emotional states. In this case, the child should be provided with learning support so that they can fulfill their school obligations. Understanding the child's traumatic experience as well as informing the educational staff about that experience provides better support for the child. This paper is based on a theoretical meta-analysis of the official documents and previous inquiries on the impact of parents' imprisonment on children in the Croatian context and beyond. The available documents were analyzed. However, it was seen that there is a lack of systematic research on this subject in the Croatian context, which is a possible limitation of this analysis.

### **The Impact of Parental Imprisonment on a Child**

Children of prisoners represent a particularly sensitive, socially vulnerable group. Their needs can only be met once we begin to understand the impact that the serving of a parent's prison sentence has on them. By understanding that impact on a child's inner world, the detrimental consequences of that experience can be reduced. The parent being sent to prison changes the whole family dynamic, which can lead to emotional difficulties in children, externalized and internalized behavioral problems, difficulties in school functioning, and low self-esteem (Robertson, 2007; Murray, Farrington, Sekol, & Olsen, 2009). The changes that a child experiences can be divided into three groups: changes in daily life habits and activities, changes in the parent-child relationship, and changes in financial circumstances (La Vigne, Davies, & Brazzell, 2008). Sharing news about the event and the reasons for parental imprisonment can be a source of anger and shame, so the other parent or guardian shares incorrect information about the parent's departure to the child (Robertson, 2007), and dishonest explanations carry a number of risks: additional concern for the parent and fear for their life (Brkić, 2013). Therefore, honest and open communication is very important for the child. It is the first approach to the child during this traumatic event that can play a significant role in reducing negative consequences and emotional difficulties (Nijnatten, 1998). Furthermore, the level and type of communication with an imprisoned parent may be one of the protective factors in preventing negative patterns of behavior. Regular and continuous communication between children and parents is important for maintaining attachment and successful family reunion after the separation (Brkić, 2013).

Brown (2020) emphasized that children of (former) prisoners are twice as likely to drop out of school, primarily because they do not have sufficient educational support. Furthermore, Cho (2011) stressed that adolescents whose mothers were incarcerated were at greater risk for dropping out of school during the years when their mothers were serving a sentence, especially if the incarcerated mother would lose custody of the child in the process. It is necessary to emphasize that the impact of new circumstances may differ depending on the characteristics and traits of the child and the parents, as well as of the type of crime committed (La Vigne et al, 2008). However, given that parental im-

prisonment poses a risk of developing behavioral problems, we can conclude that these children need additional support (Hairston, 2007), which is a prerequisite for cooperation between key institutions.

When given insight into the problems that children of imprisoned parents may face, it is the educational professionals' duty to support the child, refer the other parent or guardian to possible counselling, and work diligently to build a classroom and school climate that will be *supportive* of that child. One of the institutions with which cooperation could be established with the aim of supporting the child and their family is Zagreb's Centre for Social Welfare, within which the Family Centre operates. This Centre offers free counselling in the parent-child-adolescent relationship, as well as parenting and organizing the learning process, which can contribute to strengthening the motivation and maintaining the academic success of the child (Centar za socijalnu skrb, 2017). In order to better understand the needs of children of imprisoned parents in the Republic of Croatia, this paper will present research on this issue and propose to offer support to primary school students whose parents are serving prison sentences.

### **The Child of a Prisoner and the Educational Institution They Attend**

The educational institution is the key element in the process of secondary socialization of a child. In addition to the task of this institution being the education of children, its task is also the participation in the upbringing of children who attend it. It is important that teachers understand the responsibility they have towards children, but also that they possess the appropriate competencies, because the importance of teaching competencies in a modern democratic society is a key issue in a quality educational system (Divković, 2013).

Children going through difficult times in life need the understanding and support of a teacher. It is known that those children whose parents or close people are in prison or have lived through that experience do worse in school in terms of a lower school overall education, are excluded from school, and lack social and emotional support (Morgan, Leeson, & Carter Dillon, 2013).

In the international document of the Council of Europe (2018), which refers to the children of prisoners, its chapter Basic Principles emphasizes that the children of prisoners should be treated with respect of their human rights, and with due respect for their special situation and needs. Also, the document proposes the cooperation of local community services, police, attorneys for children and schools. It is not clearly defined in what way should the institutions participate and cooperate with each other. In addition, none of the international documents has clearly defined the obligations of a teacher towards a child whose parent is in prison. The skill of approaching a child who goes through such a period of life is not taught anywhere, instead found within the framework of knowledge and the good will of teachers and educational institutions. The educational institution and its staff play an important role for two reasons. The first reason is that all children attend school, and thus the school represents a major opportunity in providing support to children whose parents are in prison. The second reason relies on research, which has shown that parental imprisonment and their absence has a direct impact on children's school achievement, as

well as on socioemotional development, which often leads to behavioral changes that can escalate to suspension or non-attendance (Robertson, 2007).

According to the official documents of the Centre for Social Welfare Kutina, it is evident that the Centre for Social Welfare receives the most information (Poredoš et al., 2007) when it comes to children's rights violations, and as much as 40% of that information comes from a school, unlike the police, who send only 5% of information. However, research by Hrabar and Korać from 2003 (Poredoš et al., 2007) suggests opposite results. The data show a lack of action from the school when it comes to child protection, which brings us to the conclusion that the rights of children of prisoners have been neglected for many years. It is only in the last ten years that they have received some attention (Majdak, 2018). Therefore, it is not surprising that there are no legal documents for the treatment of such children by the educational institutions, which is why, from a pedagogical perspective, it is especially important to offer guidelines for strengthening the support for a student of an imprisoned parent, in order to mitigate negative consequences for that student. In order to strengthen student support, a study was conducted in 2011 in the southwest of England, examining school support for a student whose parents were imprisoned (Morgan et al., 2013). The study used a mixed method approach, which included a questionnaire and a semi-structured in-depth interview. This approach was used so that the researchers could, using a questionnaire, allow a larger number of schools to participate in the study, while the semi-structured interview method provided the opportunity of explanation and in-depth response of the respondents. The study was conducted in 75 schools; the questionnaire was completed in either digital or physical format. The study was designed to provide researchers with information on supporting children of prisoners, in what way can schools support this group of children, and how existing support could be strengthened. After collecting the data and processing it, the researchers created four main categories on how schools can more effectively support the children of imprisoned parents. The first category refers to *the awareness of school staff about this group of children*. In a large number of schools, teachers were unaware that there were students whose parents were imprisoned, and they did not know what the needs of those students were. It is necessary to understand the prison regime and the needs of children for support, given that their guardians can also seek advice from the school staff. The second category focuses on *the child and his needs*. The imprisonment of a parent does not affect every child in the same way. For example, some children will consider parental imprisonment a trauma, while some will have a sense of relief due to the fact that a parent is no longer physically present, especially in cases of violent perpetrators. A child's reaction can depend on many factors, some of which are: the child's age, whether such a situation has happened before, the child's support at home, and how friends and the wider community view them (Morgan et al., 2013). The research data showed that children whose parents were imprisoned are those who are actively involved in providing support to other people, but also to the parent who is at home, which indicates a change in family dynamics and a new role that the children often take on themselves. The third category refers to the question of *what to support and at what point*. It provided an explanation of the methods such as motivational interviews and group work, which

researchers believe teachers should apply in their work with children. Also, it is stated that sometimes a child does not want an intervention, but only to share with someone how they feel. This part of the paper emphasizes the importance of the connection between the school and the local community. Roberts (2011, as cited in Morgan et al., 2013) described a program for children of prisoners that lasts 12 weeks, one hour per week. In that program, the children discussed topics that were important to them, for example how to tell their friends about their parent's imprisonment. The last category in the categorization refers to *providing support regarding the child visiting the parent in prison and maintaining contact with the parent*. According to a United Nations document (2011 as cited in Morgan et al., 2013), a child has the right to contact a parent serving a prison sentence, as long as it is in the best interests of the child.

Since prison visits are mostly held during the period when the child is in school, children can be allowed to skip classes in order visit their parents. However, skipped classes and possible termination of cooperation between parents and the school represent a potential problem. Due to the lack of understanding of teachers and professional associates of the school, a child of an imprisoned parent may have some skipped classes in their school record due to a visit to a parent in prison, which leads to a possible disturbance in the relationship between the parents and the school (Morgan et al., 2013; Poehlman, Dallaire, Booker Loper, & Shear, 2014). Many research participants are aware of the fact that schools could offer aid to children in enabling them to stay in touch with a parent in prison. Some of the proposals of providing support are writing letters and making drawings for the parent, as well as informing parent prisoners about their children's education. A parent in prison has a statutory right to receive copies of information about their child's success and behavior in school (Morgan et al., 2013; Vrtarić, 2017). However, it is important to have the child's best interest in mind (Hairston, 2007), especially regarding keeping in touch with their parents through visitation (Seymour & Hairston, 2001; Pravobranitelj za djecu, 2018).

### ***Stigmatizing a Child***

Prior to approaching the problem of the stigmatization of children, we should define the meaning of that term. It is important to distinguish the terms of stigma and prejudice. The main difference between the two concepts is that prejudice can have a positive side. For example, people may form a prejudice of someone being a "nerd" based on the fact that that person studies much and gets good grades. Unlike stigma, which is defined as something negative and which reduces the stigmatized person to a "diagnosis," i.e., makes that person less of a human being in the eyes of others (Hromatko & Matić, 2008).

When a parent goes to prison, they are not the only ones that are being punished – their children, if they have any, are punished too. At that moment, the child loses the constant physical presence of the parent and their emotional support (Macanović & Šindić, 2019; ). Such experiences are difficult enough even without the stigmatization of the child by society and school peers. Children are often ridiculed for the actions of

their parents, teased, labelled as different, and described as children with undesirable traits (Majdak, 2018). The child is also judged for the crime committed by their parents; therefore, these children suffer stigmatization in their neighbourhoods, kindergartens, schools, and communities (Majdak, 2018).

The children of imprisoned parents experience shame, which can have long-term consequences for their self-confidence. They avoid spending time with other children because they are afraid of collective ridicule. Negative reactions can have long-term consequences on a child's self-esteem and development (one child said "that it is hard to find some value in yourself if everyone tells you that you are worthless"), and shame and stigma remain even after the parent is released from prison (Matak, 2010).

Nevertheless, we must not neglect the role of the community and schools, which have the opportunity to properly approach the child of a prisoner and show other children that sensitive social groups should be provided with understanding and support instead of condemnation and stigmatization. According to that, one of the prerequisites for the development of an empathetic society is working on the school and classroom climate with the aim of destigmatizing students of imprisoned parents, and that sort of empathetic society is one of the main advantages that comes with the teaching profession (Domović, 2003).

### ***School Performance***

The school performance of a student depends on many factors. One of the important ones is the intrinsic motivation of the student. Motivation is crucial when it comes to learning new material, and is associated with good performance in school and having a positive attitude towards school. In addition, it also creates a greater mutual satisfaction between students and teachers (Vizek-Vidović, Rijavec, Vlahović-Štefić, & Miljković, 2003). Children of imprisoned parents may feel demotivated in class because of their emotional state. Separation from parents can cause anxiety, depression, and increase introversion in children (Macanović & Šindić, 2019). Therefore, it is not surprising that children are not completely focused on the material taught in class and do not excel at exams. Also, having an imprisoned parent can, in addition to school, reflect on the child's extracurricular activities, as children are the ones who suffer the most, and often such relationships are reflected in their behavior, emotions, motivation to do their school assignments, and perform their obligations (Macanović & Šindić, 2019).

A 2008 survey conducted at the Banja Luka Penitentiary aimed to investigate in what way and intensity do parents in prison maintain contact with their children. One of the questions referred to the relationship between out-of-prison benefits and the way in which prisoners monitor their children's behavior. The following categories were offered:

- I show interest in the *child's school success and behavior*;
- I show interest in *my child's company* at school and outside of school;
- I show interest in whether they *obey their mother*;
- I show interest in *everything* regarding the child.

The respondents could choose only one answer, i.e., the one that they considered to be the most important. Of the respondents, 30.6% said that the most important category is the one that deals with the child's school success and behavior (Macanović, 2018). We should emphasize that in the Republic of Croatia there still exists an unrepresentative number of surveys conducted with the aim of understanding the school success of students with imprisoned parents, as there are no detailed descriptions or specific methods related to assistance and help with the learning process. Therefore, the authors of this paper consider it important to offer guidelines for providing support to students of imprisoned parents, with emphasis being put on strengthening the classroom climate.

### **Guidelines for Providing Support to Primary School Students of Imprisoned Parents**

Based on the fact that the children of an imprisoned parent can develop externalized and internalized behavioral problems (Robertson, 2007; Majdak, 2018), as well as challenges in their academic success (Macanović & Šindić, 2019) it is important to set guidelines for teachers to know how to provide support for these students. Since primary school is mandatory in the Republic of Croatia (Narodne novine, 2020) the authors propose a series of guidelines regarding the approach towards students of imprisoned parents at the primary school level. The guidelines aim is to reduce the negative consequences of changes in the family dynamics of students and to provide support. A prerequisite for this is to form quality cooperation between parents, teachers and the school's professional service. Therefore, the guidelines refer to the formation of quality cooperation (partnership) within the school staff, partnership with families, and cooperation with institutions outside the school that can help in this challenge faced by the school.

(a) Firstly, the primary school should work on building a quality partnership (Maleš, 1996) with parents, since the quality of the family-school partnership is of great importance for the child's performance at school (Škutor, 2014, p. 209). Also, establishing trust in the parent-teacher relationship sets a precondition for sharing problems that the student's family faces, which includes the imprisonment of a parent. When teachers are aware of the changes in the family dynamics of their students, they can monitor the changes in the child's behavior and pay attention to signs that indicate that a student has difficulty coping with the new situation.

(b) Furthermore, in order to approach the new situation responsibly, it is important to work on achieving quality cooperation between the school staff, which implies the exchange of knowledge with the school's professional service. By cooperating with a pedagogue, psychologist, and/or an expert in the field of education and rehabilitation, teachers can develop a plan or a scale for monitoring changes in student behavior. Thus, they can, in time, recognize the difficulties that the student is facing, write them down and analyse them in a conversation with the school's professional service. Then they should design a support plan for the student, depending on the area in which the student is showing changes.

(c) Creating an individual student support plan can vary in several directions. An individual approach to each student is very important; standardization and unification when it comes to designing a support plan will not show the same effects as an individual approach. Therefore, if a student shows a decline in academic achievement, does not write homework regularly, the assessment of that student's school success indicates *poorer achievement, apathy, and demotivation* when it comes to learning new teaching material; the support plan should go in the direction of helping the student to learn, finding strategies that will motivate the student and get them back on the path of learning. Furthermore, if a student shows changes in socioemotional functioning, such as *clamming up, fear, shame, discomfort* (internalized behavioral disorders) or *aggressive behaviors, outbursts, violence towards other students* (externalized behavioral disorders), a support plan will be structured through individual and/or group work with the student. This form of support takes place with the school's professional service, and teachers should be regularly informed about the success made while working with the student. If the socio-emotional difficulties are extremely strong and outside the professional knowledge and authority of the school, it is necessary to refer the student to receive external support. This brings us to our last guideline, which is the cooperation with external institutions in order to provide support to the student.

(d) Through cooperation with external institutions, the school creates a space for providing systematic support to the student, which will also bring positive change in the school functioning. If the child is experiencing too great of a trauma with having one parent being sent to prison, and that trauma is beyond the scope of work of the school's professional service, it is necessary to use the connections that schools could have with external institutions. That is why working on the building of cooperation between schools and institutions dealing with the problems of children in difficult situations is an important prerequisite in providing comprehensive support to the student. Family Centres within the Centre for Social Welfare can help schools with this. With their free individual and group therapeutic work, they can contribute to eliminating negative consequences for the student. Therefore, it is necessary to cooperate with the school and work on relationships with external institutions, in order to know, at all times, to whom a child can be referred to if necessary, depending on the difficulty the child is experiencing.

The outlined guidelines make it evident that access to a student of an imprisoned parent starts at the micro level, which is the class community, and goes to the macro level, which is represented by a number of institutions that deal with providing support to children.

## Discussion and Conclusions

One of the challenges a family may face is certainly the lone fact of serving a prison sentence for one of the parents. In particular, this change in family dynamics affects children, their success at school, and/or socioemotional development. Seeing that family represents the first important role in a child's life, with the second role reserved for the

child's educational institution, more precisely school as a place of secondary socialization, it is the responsibility of the school to recognize the difficulties and problems the child faces. Apart from recognition, it is crucial to provide support to the child during education and growing up, and that support should be adjusted to the child's individual needs in a supportive environment. Given the potential trauma that can occur when a parent is imprisoned, one can experience withdrawal, emotional difficulties, and shame, which can all come as a result of a misunderstanding and stigmatization by teachers and peers. We conclude that it is extremely important to develop clear guidelines for schools in order to avoid negative changes in children's school success and socioemotional difficulties. First of all, we should start from understanding the needs that this sensitive group of students has, only then can we act towards creating a supportive school and classroom climate, and providing the child with necessary help in mastering the material and achieving educational outcomes and/or support in dealing with change. That is why this paper offers an overview of guidelines for the treatment of children, and the elimination of the negative consequences that this experience can cause in children. Primary school actions should start from the micro level; through partnerships within the school staff and partnerships with parents, to the macro level in the form of the school's cooperation with external institutions.

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