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Maintaining the mother-child relationship within the Irish prison system; the practitioner perspective

Corresponding Author

Dr Carmel Devaney,

UNESCO Child and Family Research Centre,

School of Political Science and Sociology,

National University of Ireland, Galway.

Email: carmel.devaney@nuigalway.ie

Telephone: 00353 91 495733

Ms Sinead O' Malley,

Doctoral Researcher

UNESCO Child and Family Research Centre,

School of Political Science and Sociology,

National University of Ireland, Galway.

Email: S.OMALLEY17@nuigalway.ie

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Abstract

There is a dearth of research on the experience of motherhood within the Irish prison system. This paper considers the specific issue of facilitating contact between incarcerated mothers and their children. It is based on a study which explores the views of practitioners working directly with mothers in prison on how the mother-child relationship is accommodated and supported. Data presented is based on 8 one-to-one interviews with participants from within the prison system and with participants working in an external support agency. The research findings highlight examples of good practice within the prison system with a sense that participants endeavour to support this relationship whenever possible. Suggestions for improved practice and the associated resource needs are also discussed. Internationally there are many exemplars of supportive initiatives promoting relationships between incarcerated mothers and their children. Such models and the relevant research and literature are considered in this paper. The paper concludes with reflections on the findings of this study with reference to this literature.

Keywords

Prison, mother, child, contact, relationship, practice

Introduction

Forming a close attachment to a care-giving figure is regarded as the most important early social relationship and a key component of normal child development. The quality of such relationships and attachments inform emotional functioning and personality development throughout childhood, adolescence and on into adult life (Howe, 2005). The importance of a close continuous care-giving relationship for long term emotional development, and the impact of loss and separation in early childhood on well-being in later years is widely accepted (Bowlby, 1979; Howe et al., 1999). Of particular relevance to this paper, the significance of the mother-child relationship has been well established in the literature with

widespread acceptance of the need to support and maintain this relationship as part of the child's overall development throughout the formative years of a child's life (Bowlby, 1979; Fahlberg, 2012; Howe, 2005; ~~Fahlberg, 2012~~). For incarcerated mothers and their children maintaining a relationship is a particular challenge. While there is some research on the specific needs of incarcerated mothers in Ireland (Martyn 2012; IPRT 2011(a); see Reilly 2011, ~~IPRT 2011(a), Martyn 2012~~) it remains an area which requires further attention. Regardless of their individual circumstances incarcerated mothers who wish to have contact with their children rely on the policies and practices within their particular prison -to enable contact at any level. This paper presents the perspective of practitioners working with mothers who are in prison in the Republic of Ireland in relation to maintaining contact with their children. Relevant national and international literature is initially described and later reflected on in light of the findings presented.

Mothers in prison and their children

Motherhood is something that everyone is touched by in some way, shape or form. Consequently, motherhood has been researched via every imaginable theme (O'Reilly, 2007). However, motherhood within the prison system has a very specific focus with added complexities. Imprisonment of parents is noted as being harmful to children, even when they come from dysfunctional families (Crawford, 2003). Imprisoning parents is seen as more likely to compound, than to mitigate, pre-existing family problems. Children of incarcerated parents experience separation, loss, shame, guilt, worry, confusion, isolation, unhealthy behaviours and financial hardship (Barnardos, 2013; Jbara, 2012; Martyn, 2012; Samuel & Machara, 2014; ~~Jbara, 2012~~). Research also highlights that these children experience reduced education and employment attainment and future relationship and mental health problems (Daly, 2012; Kauffman, 2001; Sheehan, 2011).

In many instances incarcerated mothers are the sole or primary carers for their children which is noted as a contributing factor to the poor outcomes experienced by these children (Carmody & McEvoy, 1996; Robertson, 2007). Consequently, an overwhelming 95 per cent of children of incarcerated mothers are displaced from their family home and cared for either by relatives, in State care or with relative foster carers as a direct consequence of their mother's incarceration from which a disproportionate level of adverse outcomes usually occur. (Block & Potthast, 1998; Gill, 2013; IPRT, 2011).

Children of imprisoned mothers are also likely to have had a change in their primary caregiver(s) and face particular challenges in attempting to visit their parent in prison, partly due to a lack of accompanying adults, such as social workers (Robertson, 2007). Research suggests that only 50 per cent of women who had lived with, or been in contact with their children prior to incarceration had received a visit from them since going to prison (Caddle & Crisp, 1997 as cited in Gill & Deegan, 2013, p. 7). Further disruptions for children can occur as siblings are often split up and cared for by various caregivers (Robertson, 2007). In discussing care placements for children of mothers who are awaiting trial or have been sentenced Katz argues that, although not current practice, the criminal justice system and child welfare system have shared commitments in this regard (1998). Sheehan (2011) has also emphasised the need to address the instability and disruption to the care these children experience, recommending early intervention and the joint development of child protection service protocols.

For children who cannot remain with their mothers visitation and communication is the most basic method to attempt to maintain a parental role and attachment bonds (Block & Potthast, 1998). Gabel and Johnston (1995) assert that the 'interlude' time in prison should support the mother-child relationship insofar that when the mother is released ties are as strong as when she left. European Prison Rule (2006) states that 'the arrangements for visits shall be such as to allow prisoners to maintain and develop family relationships in as normal a manner as possible' (cited in Council of Europe, 2014, Part II, 24.4). However, as Byrne, Goshin, and Blanchard-Lewis argue common methods of visitation are particularly insufficient for infants and toddlers (2012, p, 78). Contributing factors include time restrictions, hard to reach prison locations, restricted physical contact, visits behind glass, sniffer dogs, unfriendly staff, and more generally the non-child friendly physical environment (King, 2002; Robertson, 2007). Distances families have to travel for visits and the costs involved present as genuine obstacles in maintaining relations (Samuel & Machara, 2014; Soltes, 2012; UNODC, 2008) particularly for incarcerated mothers and their children due to the fact that women's prisons are fewer in number and therefore more geographically spread ([Martyn, 2012](#); Robertson, 2007; [Martyn, 2012](#)). Additionally, caregivers may not be in a position to bring children to visit their parents in prison possibly due to other work or childcare commitments, financial hardship or familial breakdown (Wolleswinkel, 2002 cited in Willems, 2007).

Nonetheless, there is evidence of innovative practice in this regard. Robertson (2007) highlights examples of voluntary, charitable, or subsidised schemes globally where in certain

circumstances -services have been established to enable children to visit imprisoned parents-. In Kenya and China, families meet in child-friendly facilities for visits and staff hold non-uniforms days.- In [certain prisons in](#) Canada, children can stay with their mothers for two days a week with the mothers taking on full parental role for the duration of the visit. Such initiatives mean children are more inclined to visit and maintain contact (Robertson, 2007).

Lewis, Bates and Murray note that in the United Kingdom there have been numerous developments and initiatives to support the maintenance of family ties (2008). These range from better resources and support in visitors centres and enhanced family visits to parenting programmes. In Northern Ireland, the Family Links programme provided by the Northern Ireland Association for the Care and Resettlement of Offenders provides free transport for families for prison visits (NIACRO, 2015). Similarly, the Assisted Prison Visits Unit in England, Wales and Scotland provide assistance with the costs of prison visits for low income families. This includes covering the costs of an escort for a visiting child or young person (NOMS, 2013). Six of the 13 female prisons in the United Kingdom have mother and baby units accommodating 64 women and 70 babies allowing for one set of twins in each unit (Justice, 2015). In England and Wales, charitable organisations such as Pact provide support programmes which focus on awareness of the effects of imprisonment on children and offer parenting and relationship courses (Pact, 2015). Anawin a charity based in Birmingham, England provides practical and emotional support for women nearing the end of their prison sentence. This includes support in relation to accommodation, financial or legal issues in addition to support for drug and alcohol abuse. Their 'Re-Unite Programme' works with the local housing authority to place women and their children in appropriate housing upon her release from prison (Anawim, 2015). In the United States of America (USA), the Girls Scouts Beyond Bars (GSBB) project is an enhanced visiting programme aimed at tackling some of the issues daughters specifically suffer when their mothers are incarcerated. The GSBB programme was established in 1992 and its objective is to preserve or enhance the 'relationship, to reduce the stress of separation, to enhance the daughter's sense of self, to reduce reunification problems, and ultimately to help decrease the likelihood of the mother's failure in the community' (Block & Potthast, 1998, p. 567). Evaluations on the programme findings report that the programme improves visitation, the mother-daughter bond, and the daughter's sense of self, reduces a range of separation issues, improves both mother and daughter behaviour and develops healthy leadership skills in the daughters (Block & Potthast, 1998; Soltes, 2012). In an Irish context, research conducted by Enright, Boyle, and Murphy

(2007) noted a number of measures to promote positive mother-child contact and visitation. Mothers can be granted temporary release for special occasions in their child's calendar and family visits can be granted (albeit infrequently). More interestingly, children up to 14 years of age are permitted to sleep over with their mothers in the prison campus. Reilly (2014) also notes the dedicated mother and baby unit within the female prison. This is however located within the general prison campus therefore mothers and babies move freely among the general female prison population, some of whom have committed crimes against children therefore posing serious child protection concerns (O'Keeffe, 2011)

The MATCH (Mother, Fathers and Their Children, formally Mother and their Child programme) model in the USA is a positive model of supporting contact between a parent and child. It facilitates lengthy visits in a child friendly visiting area within the prison (Gabel & Johnston, 1995). In some instances the MATCH programme helps to fund travel and accommodation for children who live far from the prison. MATCH also advocates and educates on the particular issues faced by children of incarcerated parents. It offers counselling and parenting skills for inmate-mothers and promotes positive relationships between the prison staff, mothers, children and caregivers (mothersandtheirchildren.org).

Studies show that children manage parental imprisonment better when they are able to see their parents (Robertson, 2007). Katz recommends additional support during incarceration for the children and family and suggests that this support will foster better outcomes for all involved including the incarcerated mother (1998). One example of facilitating communication when this is not possible or not available as frequently as desired is through 'Story Book Mums'. This programme facilitates prisoners to make audio recordings of children's books to post out to their children. The programme's objective is to 'strengthen parent-child attachments and an important means of communication between mothers and their children' (Solinger, 2010, p. 98). Additionally, prisoners reported their own literacy skills improved through the programme. Children reported finding comfort and reassurance in listening to their parents' voice. For children who are too young to read letters the programme offers an age appropriate alternative. It also provides families with a fun child friendly topic to talk about during visits. Finally, it can combat the burden of costly telephone calls and postage especially for international prisoners (Solinger, 2010).

Block and Potthast (1998) recognise and highlight the difficulties faced by child welfare professionals in working with children who have mothers in prison, including the distance,

untimely visiting schedules, the difficulties in preparing for and supporting visits and the negatives effects of a mother's imprisonment on her child (p, 561). Nonetheless, children have a right to a relationship with their parents, and when this is ignored it impacts on the right to family life as outlined in Article 8 of the European Convention on Human Rights (ECHR, 2010, Art. 8). As noted the importance of this relationship is widely accepted with a corresponding need to support and promote it with reference to the rights of parents and the needs of children~~whenever and however possible~~. Quinlan (2011) highlights how mothers who do receive visits spend a great deal of their time in prison preparing for these. Programmes such as the aforementioned MATCH model and GSBB are accompanied by compulsory parenting classes and counselling which help to prepare and support mothers participating in such visiting programmes (Block & Potthast, 1998; Soltes, 2012). There is also significant preparatory work carried out by support agencies with the children in advance of attending for a prison visit (Barnardos, 2013; Gill, 2013; Gill and Deegan, 2013).

Methodology

The data on which this paper is based is taken from a wider study on the experiences of mothers in the Irish prison system. The focus of this paper is on how the mother-child relationship is accommodated and supported within the prison system. A purposive sampling approach was used in this study. This involves the researcher seeking out participants with the most valuable data (Denscombe, 2010). The sample group included staff members in one prison in the Republic of Ireland where female prisoners are accommodated and with staff working in an external agency that support these families. This prison is a medium security closed facility for females over 18 years of age. The sample group therefore included the prison governor and probation officers (PS) based within the host prison and a social worker (SW) and project workers (PW) from an external support agency whose role is to support female prisoners with their needs both while in prison and when they leave. A qualitative method was employed in the research with the findings based on data collected through semi-structured one-to-one interviews (n=8). Question areas included: the visitation and contact arrangements for mothers and their children; the physical space available within the prison for visits, specific needs of mothers of babies and young children; and procedures in relation to mothers involved with child protection and welfare services. Ethical approval was granted by the relevant university and by the prison authorities. Each interview was audio-recorded

and immediately transcribed.

A thematic analytical approach was applied to the findings. This involves examining the data 'to extract core themes that could be distinguished between and within transcripts' (Bryman 2012, p.13). Although thematic analysis is recognised as a more time consuming process, its ability to identify both explicit and implicit ideas makes it a worthwhile approach (Namey *et al.* in Guest & MacQuenn 2008, p.138). Thus, the data relating to the theme of supporting and facilitating the mother-child relationship was extracted and analysed. In order to validate the findings, an overview of the analysed data and the associated findings was forwarded electronically to each respondent with a request for feedback on the content. Respondents were satisfied with the findings presented to them and agreed with the interpretation of their interviews.

Limitations

As with any research there are limitations to this study. The sample size is relatively small and not a complete representation of the practitioners who work with mothers in prison. The time available and scale of this study did not allow for saturation in terms of including all practitioners who work with women prisoners. However, the sample does include the main practitioners involved directly in efforts to maintain the mother-child relationship in this specific prison. Finally, given the sample group was made up of professionals only the voice of the mother, her child_(ren) and other family members or carers is not included in this paper. Furthermore, the paper does not consider the father-child relationship and the experience of maintaining this while fathers are incarcerated. The perspective provided is that of a small number of practitioners in relation to the mother-child relationship only.

Findings: Maintaining the mother-child relationship

Admission to prison

On arrival to the prison all females are questioned whether they have children or not and if so what the arrangements are for their care. According to participants this would ideally have been discussed at an earlier point when the woman is first given her sentence however this is not guaranteed to happen. As one participant explained:

“You would presume that this would have happened at court. That if there was a crisis the solicitor or someone would have notified a relative, or the mother herself would have spoken up and got things sorted. But I don't think they have an automatic protocol on this” (PS).

All respondents highlighted that this aspect of the admissions process is in need of improvement as they rely on the prisoner to provide accurate information. One participant expressed her concerns:

“This policy is very loose and needs to be tightened up. It's very important that policies are implemented, so that everybody knows what to do at committal, at induction and who to contact” (PW).

There is also no way of knowing or verifying if a mother is involved with the statutory child protection and welfare services at this point. Supports such as these which can be used to support the mother child relationship may only be realised if a statutory child protection and welfare social worker makes him/herself known to the prison authorities.

Visiting arrangements

All adult prisoners are entitled to one 30 minute visit per week, this can involve up to three adults and an unlimited amount of children. Prisoners who are still on remand and awaiting sentencing are allowed up to five 15 minute visits a week (ICCL/IPRT 2011, p. 15). Additional visits and time are at the discretion of the prison governor.

Participants explained how female prisoners are generally allowed a second weekly visit with flexibility allowed in terms of days and timing.

“So we facilitate as much as we can ... particularly if someone is coming from far away in the country, they need extra time, a morning or an afternoon or both” (PS).

Mothers are also occasionally allowed an additional outing with their children:

“If a woman wants a day out at the zoo with her kids or whatever, there isn't a huge amount of resources for every woman and every case, but it does happen occasionally” (PW).

Furthermore, mothers are allowed what are termed ‘welfare visits’ when their children and their carers cannot attend the prison itself. In such circumstances mothers are escorted by prison staff to a suitable neutral venue to meet their children. Such visits are dependent on prison resources but according to participants are facilitated where possible.

Mother and children visiting space

Participants described the space for children to interact with their mothers in this prison as quite limited. The indoor visiting area is described as small and lacking in natural day light however it is reported to be clean, pleasant and quite bright in colour in comparison to the rest of the prison. The same space is also used as a dining area when visits are over. There are no outdoor play areas. One participant reflected on this area:

“Visits are okay, they are family friendly, but more could be done. I would hope that the numbers will go down and that would help” (PS).

There is also a small private room available which is made available by request. Participants outlined circumstances when use of that room is essential:

“When there is a sensitive issue and a visit would need to take place, or there are things going on for children that need to be discussed. Life is complex and there can be difficulties in relationships too, especially when someone is in prison, you would need a space apart from the general visiting area” (SW).

Participants also described how they would like to be able to replicate normal family life more with kitchen facilities available for mothers to cook and eat a meal with their children. However, the capacity for this type of facility is diminished because of the large numbers accommodated within the prison.

“We did it before, where a mother could have her child in and they could cook a meal together. At the moment we cannot have that facility because we have way too many people” (PS).

Facilitating babies

Babies are allowed to reside with their mothers in the prison until they reach 12 months of age with all respondents acknowledging the importance of this time to develop the mother-child relationship. After this point children are cared for by extended family members or by foster carers. One participant reflected this viewpoint:

“I am 100 per cent behind it. It is where the baby should be the only time I question that is where there are child protection issues ... no case is the same. And we will be guided by the [then] HSE¹ ... I think it is so important for the child to be with the mother; full stop. And I will do all I can under the guidance of our child protection agency” (PS).

The positive impact of having to care for your baby was also emphasised and viewed as part of the rehabilitation of those particular prisoners.

“If a mother can keep her child with her it would work as beneficial for the rehabilitative process for that mother” (SW).

Nonetheless, participants highlighted that many mother-child relationships and bonds are already strained or non-existent due to the chaotic lifestyles of mothers. Stable relationships are however necessary as a basis to any rehabilitative effort and the child’s best interest are always viewed as of paramount importance.

At the time of the research there were three babies residing in the prison with another two women pregnant. The possibility of another pregnant prisoner arriving was quite high. An accommodating approach to these mothers and their babies was emphasised:

“That is the potential ... and we’ll look after them, we have six cots, six buggies and six of everything that there is” (PS).

It was however noted that caring for your baby within the prison system can be extremely stressful and all-consuming and that after a certain age the environment within prison is deemed unsuitable for young children. As highlighted:

¹ At the time of the research the HSE referred to the statutory child protection and welfare service in the Republic of Ireland. This service is now an independent agency called TUSLA, the Child and Family Agency.

“There is no crèche or other supports in here, it’s full on – they have to mind their own babies” (PS).

“Its fine when they're a little baby but once a baby begins to walk and be more aware of their surroundings, when they get bigger, it is a prison, with all that prison brings” (PW).

Additional challenges with children’s visits

A number of additional challenges were described by participants in relation to children’s visits. One such concern is that women convicted of harming children are accommodated alongside women who are having their children visit and this brings anxiety for the mothers in relation to their children’s welfare. Mothers of new-born babies can have unease about other prisoners physically touching their baby. Finally, it can be difficult for women whose own children are in care to be around other mothers and their children.

Other contact opportunities

Along with direct contact visits there are additional contact opportunities for mothers and children within the prison. In the main this takes the form of telephone contact or letters. According to participants all adult prisoners are permitted at least one telephone call per week with women prisoners permitted one six minute telephone call every day. Telephone calls can be made to a maximum of six telephone numbers, one of which must be their solicitor. In addition, a newly implemented ‘Incentivised Regime’ allows that following a period of 6-8 weeks in prison women can be awarded an extra daily six minute telephone call. Participants explained how this additional call is vital for maintaining mother-child contact particularly in situations where mothers have more than one child who may be looked after by a number of different carers.

“The child would know that at a particular time on a particular day their parent would call. Although calls are only six minutes, at least it is regular and it’s the child's time with their parent” (SW).

There are circumstances where mothers have a larger number of children which require special arrangements which the prison facilitate where possible. One such instance was described:

“While she [the mother] was still on basic grade, we arranged that she made two additional phone calls a week through the Chaplain’s office to speak to the younger children on their own. They visited her regularly as well. But this was a standard thing that this is my time with mammy each week. We try to facilitate what we can” (PS).

However, at an overall level the process of communicating with children over the telephone is described as problematic:

“Such communication is very difficult considering incarceration is focused on containment and security. Moreover, children do not communicate the way that adults do... there is also the added concern when the contact does not go well, who is there to pick up the pieces? (SW).

Mothers also use letters as a means of maintaining contact with their children. Participants explained how there is a charge for sending over seven letters per week, however, the policy and practice within the system is that all national and international letters and telephone calls are free. All prisoners are eligible for a gratuity payment with a small percentage of this recently was cut to offset the cost of telephone calls and letters. .

Support for practitioners

The general view expressed by participants is one of wanting to support the mother-child relationship whenever possible. An embargo on hiring of staff due to an economic recession has resulted in no new prison staff being recruited, this was noted as a significant positive factor in this regard.

“Because we've had no recruits everybody has been here for over a year or more and they have nothing to prove any more. We have great experienced officers here now” (PS).

All prison officers are receiving Children First training² for the first time and child protection issues are very much on the agenda within the prison system. Prison officers have also recently received Marte Meo training. The Marte Meo approach involves supporting positive interactions and interventions between children and their carers (Early Childhood Ireland, 2013). This training is reported by respondents as being very beneficial. Adult retrospective disclosure is noted as being extremely prevalent in prison as people have time to reflect on their past and officers are also receiving training in how to deal with and process this information. Prison staff also reported participating in a Women Awareness Staff Programme (WASP). This programme aims to raise awareness of gender specific issues such as abuse, trauma and self-harm. It offers workers the knowledge and skills to identify, cope and manage such issues. Additionally, prison officers with an interest in child care and child welfare are being invited to train and specialise in the area. This is viewed as a very welcome initiative:

“It is much needed and would be a huge support to the women here as well as to the individual officer” (PS).

Although the prison system does not employ social workers directly a number of mothers are involved with external statutory and non-statutory social work services. In such circumstances the probation officers liaise with the social workers on all issues concerned with the mother - child relationship. One participant described how this works:

“We would be on the phone a lot with social workers and the community agencies around that whole piece. A lot of it would be around the practical element, such as visits, access, what's going on with the children, what going on with mum” (PS).

For other mothers where there is no social work involvement or where the social worker is not in contact while the mother is in prison the probation officers or the community based workers support and facilitate the contact between the mother and her child(ren). This is however an additional tasks for the probation officer and not necessarily their main role or priority. The following quote emphasises this issue:

² Children First National Guidance for the Protection and Welfare of Children, 2011 provides the guidelines on responding to and reporting to child abuse in the Republic of Ireland.

“I think it’s important in the sense well, who's going to do it if we're not doing it ... But I'm at the stage now where we can't be all things to all people and we can't take on all of that role” (PS)

The final issue raised by participants in relation to maintaining contact involved the varying length of sentences that mothers receive and the transitory nature of their stay in prison. Participants described how it can be difficult to fully support a mother’s relationship with her children during a short stay in the prison as it can take some time to become familiar with individual family circumstances.

Discussion

A women’s sense of motherhood gives her life meaning while in prison. Maintaining the mother-child relationship is seen as beneficial for mothers while in prison with positive outcomes for all involved (Shamai & Kochal, 2008). This paper highlights the supportive endeavours and ‘good will’ that is present amongst the participants in this study in order to maintain contact and relationships between mothers in the Irish prison system and their children. In the absence of a clear policy on maintaining the mother-child relationship this element of ‘good will’ is a critical component in this process. Shamai and Kochal outlined how incarcerated women in their study explained that motherhood offered them a 'reason to get up in the morning', protected them against insanity, offered something positive to think about and provided a reason to plan for the future (p 327-339). Their research affirms the efforts of the practitioners involved in this study and highlights how supporting the mother-child relationship can be included as part of the overall rehabilitative effort with prisoners. It would seem self-evident that if there are positive outcomes for the children and mothers involved there will also be positive outcomes for the prison system itself.

Studies specifically concerned with babies and young children have shown that those who stay with their mothers in prison have healthier attachments than their counterparts who leave soon after birth (Byrne *et al.* 2010; Catan 1998; [Jbara 2012](#); Kubiak *et al.* 2010; [Jbara 2012](#)). While efforts are made in the prison in this study, where appropriate, to facilitate young

babies staying with their mothers the seemingly large numbers accommodated in the prison may impact on the possibility of this option being available for all mothers. For those children who cannot remain with their mothers, such periods of incarceration are disruptive to the mother-child bond. Once attachments have been disrupted, particularly at a vulnerable age and for long periods of time, it is extremely arduous, if not impossible, to re-establish (Fahlberg, 2012). Researchers have focused on the use of prison nurseries as a way to promote positive secure attachments (Davis 2012; Goshin & Byrne 2009). Davis (2012) claims prison nurseries give mother and baby an opportunity to remain together during the crucial child development stages, while at the same time offering the mother the experience of intense motherhood. While participants in this study exhibit good intentions in this regard it seems apparent that a more robust policy driven directive accompanied by the necessary resources is required to support the implementation of such arrangements on a routine basis for all who require them. It is also worth noting the need to involve children in an age appropriate manner in facilitating contact between the mother and child. Best practice in child welfare terms involves children's participation at an individual level and hearing their views on matters which affect them (United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, 1989; Ferguson, 2011). The welfare of the child must be the paramount consideration at all times (The Child Care Act, 1991) with ~~the~~ unique needs of each child and family requiring consideration on an individual ~~needs-led~~ basis. As with all considerations with regard to child welfare a balance is necessary between the rights of parents and the needs of children-(Davis, 2007). ~~Supports~~ are also necessary for children when contact visits do not proceed as planned or are upsetting for those involved (Ferguson, 2011).

On a related point, the issue of prisoners convicted of very different crimes being accommodated together does impact on the experience of children visiting. As Reilly notes high risk women prisoners are accommodated with women prisoners posing little or no risk (2011). Any potential risk to children visiting the prison needs to be carefully managed with measures in place to ensure their safety at all times. The anxiety felt by mothers in these circumstances has the potential to negate the positive impact of a visit from their children. Again, this is a policy and resource based decision that impacts on the maintenance and development of the mother-child relationship. At a wider level a more focussed approach and risk assessment of the population of prisoners who have contact with the babies and children could have additional benefits. The literature highlights that the opportunity for prisoners to

help mothers (who have their babies with them) offered added meaning to their daily life while missing their own children (Shamai & Kochal, 2008).

In terms of older children as Block & Potthast (1998) note most incarcerated mothers attempt to remain close to their children through letters and telephone calls. These methods are particularly vital when location and cost of travel is an obstacle for regular visits. This reflects the findings of this study which highlights the provision and use of free telephone calls (in particular) and letters by mothers to maintain contact with their children. Supporting the need for this contact within the Irish prison system Reilly (2011) states that women who have children who live long distances from the prison and cannot visit regularly should be permitted longer visits or extra telephone calls (pp.12-13). Participants in this study did however note that as far as possible direct contact visits including outings and ‘welfare visits’ are supported and facilitated. Improved amenities to accommodate children’s visits are necessary in order to allow ‘normal’ family time to occur where meals are cooked and eaten and games are played.

Incarceration of mothers can potentially be used as an opportunity to promote and develop the mother- child relationship. As Kauffman (2001) points out that rather than ‘crippling the mother-child bond, a prison sentence or residential treatment program can provide an opportunity to strengthen it’ (p. 65). However, this is not the main role or remit of the practitioners working within the prison system and training and resources are required if staff members are to support prisoners in this regard. European Prison Rules (2006), state that prison staff ‘shall include a sufficient number of specialists such as ... social and welfare workers’ (cited in Council of Europe, 2014, Part V, 89.1). However, as evident in this study, practitioners in the Irish prison system are supporting mothers with their relationships with their children largely because of their good intentions and willingness. It is very welcome that training for prison staff in relation to child care, child protection and gender specific issues has recently been introduced.

Imprisonment for women has been identified as a route to homelessness, unemployment, lone parenthood and re-offending (Donson & Parkes, 2012; IPRT/KHF, 2007; Reilly, 2011). Such

post release struggles create additional barriers to regaining the custody and care of children. Furthermore, it is extremely difficult for mothers to see out their sentences with minimal contact with their children, and then to re-establish relationships post release (Kauffman 2001). However, research has shown that programmes which support the mother-child relationship while the mother is incarcerated can have very positive effects on recidivism rates and the mothers' overall wellbeing. Meadows and Sheff-Cahan (2003) report on a programme which facilitates mothers in keeping their children from 0-6years. It is the first of its kind in the USA and it set up for 'non-violent' female offenders. It provides parenting classes, drug therapy and educational courses six days a week. The children attend day-care and education and child-rearing is the main focus of the rehabilitation process. Recidivism rates are reported as being three times lower than their equivalent group. Jbara (2012) also asserts that lower recidivism rates are a consequence of a prisoner's stronger sense of attachment to their families. Thompson & Harm (2000) explored a 15-week parenting programme in women's prisons also in the USA. The programme aims to address the disruption of the mother-child relationship and the detrimental effects on the child's emotional development as a consequence of their mother's incarceration. Findings revealed the mother-child relationship improved as well as attitudes towards self-esteem, children, prison, and the family unit. It is worth considering the potential of such support programmes with mothers within the Irish prison system.

Conclusion

This small scale study into the experience of maintaining the mother-child relationship within the Irish prison system has revealed many examples of good practice in this regard. The research and literature clearly highlights the positive outcomes for all involved from the efforts in place to facilitate regular contact and to develop positive relationships between mothers and their children. However, in the main, the exemplars of good practice noted in this paper appear to be driven by the intentions of individual practitioners. It is evident that if such endeavours are to become standard practice for mothers who are in prison there is a need for accompanying policy measures and resources. The importance of maintaining contact between family members in these circumstances is accepted with many exemplars of such practices available internationally. This study has highlighted the need for further

research within the Irish context to consider fully the needs of incarcerated parents and their children and to identify an appropriate response to such need.

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