



# **Best Practice in Early Years** Supporting Children with a Parent in Prison

**Leyf**  
Nurseries



# Contents

Who we are	3
Foreword	4
Introduction	5
Did you know?	6
What can we do to support the Family?	7

Section 1: Supporting the Child	8
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Section 2: Supporting the Family	22
----------------------------------	----

Section 3: Reading Resources	27
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Section 4: Additional Resources	31
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# Who we are



Together with families and communities, we give London's children – especially those most in need – the best start in life, by providing access to high quality, affordable Early Years Education and Care.

[www.leyf.org.uk](http://www.leyf.org.uk)



We bridge the collaboration gap between the grown-ups who raise young children. We support early years providers and families to communicate, share information, handle admin together, run their business, and learn new things – so they can focus on the early interactions that count.

[www.famly.co](http://www.famly.co)



Pact is a pioneering national charity that supports prisoners, people with convictions, and their children and families. We provide caring and life changing services at every stage of the criminal justice process: in court, in prison, on release, and in the community.

[www.prisonadvice.org.uk](http://www.prisonadvice.org.uk)



# Foreword

**“I am delighted to endorse this excellent and important new Best Practice Guide from LEYF.**

**I strongly encourage everyone involved in Early Years to make use of it. Children who have a parent go to prison are a largely hidden group who have a range of distinct needs which, if not met, can lead to lifelong exclusion and disadvantages.**

**This new guide is a much-needed resource and I congratulate LEYF for their focus on these often-marginalised children and their leadership in the sector.”**



**Andy  
Keen-Downs  
CEO PACT**

# Introduction

## Dear Colleagues

I have written this pack with LEYF colleagues to help you understand and respond to children in your setting where a parent or close relative is in prison. We have learned through experience that coping with this situation can be difficult and emotional for everyone involved. For many children they operate within the language of the “unsaid”, trying to understand what is happening at home.

Over 100,000 children have a parent in prison at any one time in the UK and the number is growing. One of these children could be yours. Understanding how best to navigate this sad and sensitive situation is critical. Generally, there are three sets of people involved in this experience, the children, the staff and parents or carers, (often a grandparent

who picks up the parenting reins). We also know that when a prisoner is supported by their families, they have a 39% chance of never reoffending. That is good for their children, themselves and society!

Children are always the innocent party in this situation and our role is to advocate for them and help them cope successfully. That means we need to build our understanding and knowledge and do the right things to get the best outcome. This pack has been developed with this in mind.

We hope this pack helps you to consider your role and that of your team in identifying and supporting children who are trying to deal with all the complications that occur from having a parent in prison.



**June O'Sullivan OBE**  
Chief Executive,  
The London Early  
Years Foundation

# 100,000

Over 100,000 children have a parent in prison at any one time in the UK

# Did You Know?

86,000

Up to **86,000** people are in prison at the moment.



Around two in five prisoners who leave prison reoffend at a cost of £18 billion a year.



**5%**

prisoners are women.



**40%+**

of children of prisoners experience poverty.



**65%**

of boys with a convicted parent go on to offend themselves.



**50%**



of prisoners within England and Wales are parents.

**28%**

of prisoners are from minority ethnic backgrounds, although in London 6/10 are people are from minority ethnic communities.



**3 Years**

is the average stay in prison for parents.



**25%**

of children with a parent in prison are at risk of mental health problems including depression, anxiety, eating and sleeping disorders.

**Does this surprise you?**

# What can we do to support the Family?

- Think about your own values and attitudes, it will filter through in your responses.
- Consider if a mindset change may be needed. It's easy to judge!
- Think about how this situation may affect colleagues and other parents. It may be a trigger for childhood or personal experiences.
- Reflect with your colleagues about how you will respond as a team. It will make all the difference for the child and his family.

## Why Does it Matter?

- Keeping families involved reduces reoffending by 39%.
- Most prisoners reported being close to their families (74%) and 88% want their families involved in their lives.



## Section 1

# Supporting The Child



# The Rights of the Child

**This pack was designed in line with the principles of the 1989 United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child.**

The Convention applies to every child without discrimination, whatever their ethnicity, sex, religion, language, abilities or any other status, whatever they think or say, whatever their family background. The best interests of the child must be a top priority in all decisions and actions that affect children.

The 42 rights are connected and of equal importance. Children should not be deprived of their rights.


Having a parent in prison may impact on a child's right to family life, education and security. Therefore, anything we can do to ensure we can apply the Convention on the Rights of the Child is beneficial.



# Good Practice for Helping Children to Deal with Distress

- Explore current theorists who focus on Emotional Wellbeing. Stuart Shanker's work on the five domains of stress and Ferre Laevers Leuven Involvement Scale are two examples to consider.
- Think about neuroscience and the impact of trauma and distress on a child's brain.
- Consider various play approaches, and forms of communication to encourage a nurturing environment.
- Create a positive environment and encourage lots of Play.
- Provide activities indoors and outside to develop social skills, self-esteem and confidence.
- Design physical games to encourage independence and self-expression.



- 
- Highlight the use of music, art and physical play to promote confidence, language and social skills.
  - Promote sensitive language and communication including lots of conversations remembering to serve and return.
  - Understand emotional literacy and promote activities and books to encourage children to articulate how they are feeling.
  - Agree on ways to help children understand, express and manage their emotions especially during transitions.
  - Highlight the need of working together to protect children.
  - Share the experiences of the child with parents to encourage a supportive and empathetic parenting approach.

# Observe The Child for Signs of Distress

- Revisit the Attachment Theory to understand how to identify signs of distress and how to help.
- Children who had been independent may start to panic and regress. They may start sucking their thumbs and slipping back into 'insecurity habits' and behaviour.
- Withdrawing from activities they once enjoyed.
- Routinely expressing worry.
- Crying and tearful.
- Showing fearful reactions.
- Becoming overly clingy.
- Changing eating and sleeping patterns.
- Aggressive and intolerant.



**Let them play;  
it's the best  
therapy. Watch  
what it is  
telling you.**



**What are Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs)?**  
**Watch this with your Team and be warned some**  
**of the content may be upsetting.**





**Over 8 in 10  
prisoners  
reported at least  
1 ACE, and nearly  
half had 4 or  
more ACEs**

Ford et al. (2019) The Prisoner ACE survey.  
*University of Bangor.*

### **Child Maltreatment and Peer Victimization**

- Emotional abuse
- Physical abuse
- Sexual Abuse
- Emotional neglect
- Spanking
- Peer victimization


### **Household Challenges**

- Exposure to physical IPV  
(Intimate Partner Violence)
- Substance abuse
- Mental illness
- Parental separation or divorce
- Parental trouble with police
- Parental gambling
- CPO (Child Protection  
Organisation) contact
- Poverty




# Talk to the Child

- Help the child to separate the person from the action. This may support them manage their confused feelings about still loving someone who has done a bad thing.
- Find out what the child knows and what story they have been given by their parents or carers.
- Help parents and carers understand how the children are feeling.
- Children may keep asking the same things over and over again. Keep answering their questions: Be patient.
- Children become aggressive when they can't communicate what's going on for them, so give them words or Makaton signs to express their feelings.
- Read to them, see book selection later in the pack.



**Keep things stable,  
children may be missing  
the parent who used to  
bath them and collect  
them from nursery.**



## Preparing a child for a prison visit

- Check out the prison rules so you understand what will happen. All prisons have a visits section on their website which should hold all relevant information. They will also have a contact number for visit enquiries.
- TALK! Have positive conversations with the child about the visit and the person they are visiting.
- Think about the journey – it may be long and visits can be cancelled at the last minute.
- Children may become restless – there is LOTS of waiting around before a visit occurs.
- Children may be exposed to new language.
- Children will be searched and have interactions with many unfamiliar people.
- Part of the security process may include being sniffed by a dog.



- Prisons do not serve healthy foods – children may end up having sugar rushes if supplied with lots of sweet treats.
- Leaving comforters behind can be difficult for children. What else could be used instead? Have a look at the PACT prison visit guides or speak to a PACT colleague based at the prison who will get a suitable alternative for the child, especially those children with learning needs or at a development stage when managing change is really hard.
- Prepare a pack of little activities for the child to take on the journey. Remember they may not be able to bring them into the prison. Think about things that will not be perceived as a risk.
- To help understand/prepare for the prison visits create a story and write it down so it can be used to explain where their parent has gone, in an age-appropriate way. This could be shared at home so that there is a clear way of explaining to the child what has happened and all adults are giving consistent answers rather than “Daddy has gone to work”, etc.

**Prepare a pack of little activities for the child to take on the journey**

# How can we support a child after a prison visit?

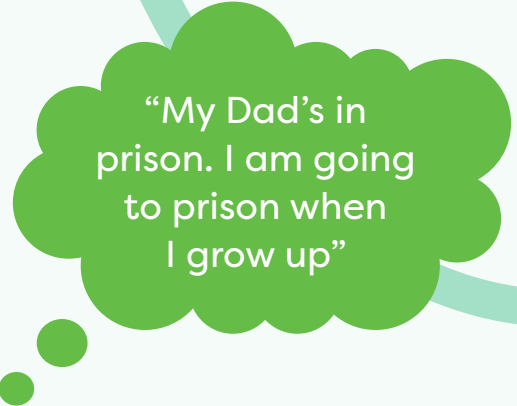
Children may want to talk about the visit as it may have been very sad or very happy. However, be aware they may have been told to say nothing.

Children may be confused and ask you questions.

Some children especially boys aged 6 to 10 years want to emulate their father and aim to go to prison too. (*Krisberg, et al. 2007*)

Children may not be able to articulate how they feel and demonstrate signs of distress and changed behaviour including:

- Withdrawn and tearful.
- Asking lots of questions.
- Not interested in their food.
- Disturbed sleep and nightmares.



“My Dad’s in prison. I am going to prison when I grow up”

**10,000**

children visit public prisons each week



“I am going to be a burglar because I am really good at creeping around”

# Practical ideas to encourage bonding, emotional engagement and positive play



## **Colour Monster and Collage**

Share the 'Colour Monster' book by Anna Llenas with children aged about 2 years. Create a collage using assorted coloured materials and recall the varying emotions displayed by the colour monster. Allow the children to express their own emotions and create their own collage. Play some classical music alongside as this can settle a child.

## **To-and-fro scrapbook**

Design and populate a scrapbook for the child which tells the story of their nursery day. This book can be taken to and from nursery. Have photographs of each family member with the child's photograph in the front and then add positive things that have happened each day, quotes from the child, their drawings etc. This book could be shared with the parent in prison.

## **Puppets**

Use puppets to initiate discussion without the child feeling any pressure. E.g., "Fred (puppet) has been feeling very sad/worried recently, What might Fred need his teachers to do?" or "Fred went to visit his Dad yesterday. How do you think he might be feeling today? What can we do to help him?"

## **Drama Story Time**

Stories with drama help children to act out things that worry or confuse them. Children can develop story themes, change them, stop them, take the story in any direction they want. It gives them a sense of control and authority over the narrative and the story plot. It helps them act out worries from real life because in their story dramas they are masters of their destiny.



# Practical ideas to encourage emotional resilience



## **The Worry Jar**

Children need real examples of things to help them articulate their feelings. Adults can help children to understand/ name emotions and the effect they are having on them. For example, 'worried' might present as stomach-ache. A Worry Jar can be made using a jar or metal tin which can be decorated by the child who then ceremoniously places their worries inside the jar.

## **Role Play**

Allow children to role play and re-enact their experiences to explore their feelings and emotions.

## **Mindfulness Sessions**

Mindfulness sessions can include music & movement, yoga and breathing bears which are placed on the children's chests to help them focus on their breathing therefore supporting them to soothe themselves, self-regulate and calm their fears.

## **Art Therapy**

Encourage a child to put their feelings into art, providing a creative and emotional outlet.

## **Gardening Activities**

Use gardening to encourage relationship building. Children may share how they feel as they work in the garden alongside an adult they trust. It can provide a safe space for the child to talk about their worries and their absent parent.

# Practical ideas to support the child at home



## Writing a Letter

Writing a letter gives children a chance to be creative and practise their early writing skills. Helping the child write to their parent in prison is a way for parents to connect with their child and keep the letters and read them when they are missing their children.

## My Space

When a parent goes to prison, a child's life can change irrevocably. They may

be separated from siblings and find themselves in a new place with a new family or in a new home where nothing is familiar. It is important for children to have their special place at nursery where they can have some photo books of loved ones, special scents of home, some LED fairy lights to feel calm and some cushions to rest and relax. This is particularly good for children who may have additional needs, suffer from anxiety or feel overwhelmed.

## Time Capsule

The Time Capsule seals the golden moments and significant milestones. For example; the day they took their first steps, said their first word, rode a bike independently for the first time, lost their first baby tooth. These memories can be sealed with dates in the time capsule for the parent to share with the child because knowing those things is important for both the child and the parent and form some of their lifelong memories.

## Section 2

# Supporting the Family



# How do People Discover a Parent is in Prison?

- Grandparents or other family members start collecting and dropping the child more often.
- A parent suddenly stops coming to nursery.
- You hear rumours locally.
- Somebody spots the story in the local press.
- The child mentions something about police and arrest, sadly lots of children see the arrest as it is happening which can be very traumatic.
- You see gossip on social media.

**“Those families in greatest need of support tend to be those least likely to engage”**

Ghate and Hazel, 2002



# How can we Support the Parent in Prison?

- The parent is still the parent even if they are in prison.
- Do not make judgements. There is a lot of stigma around being in prison and families are often very ashamed, reluctant to seek help, vulnerable, at risk of bullying and social isolation.
- Share cards for special events such as birthdays, Mother's or Father's Day.
- Seek permission to send the nursery reports to the parent in prison.
- Be an active listener, sometimes just having someone to talk to is all that is needed.



# How can we Support the Parent in Prison?

- Some parents choose to talk to their children about prison, while others choose not to talk about prison at all. It is essential teachers remain neutral and respectful of the families wishes whatever they decide to do.
- Think about financial support for the family and their ability to pay fees.
- Be prepared to offer information to the family or signpost them to help, advise and direct them to <https://www.prisonersfamilies.org/prison-life> videos. These useful videos are available in a variety of languages and explain things like first days in custody, healthcare and how to stay in touch.

**“The impact of imprisonment on children and families can be significant and wide ranging, including emotional, social, psychological, financial, relational, physical and developmental effects. However, the extent to which a child or family will be affected will be influenced by a myriad of factors particular to that child and their family, and the impact will vary according to the nature of the offence, pre-prison variables and other underlying difficulties, relational dynamics, care arrangements (before and during the period of incarceration), and the wider support systems and socio-structural context.”**

*Weaver and Nolan (2015)*



# How to advise a parent about the big question: shall I tell my child that Dad is in prison?

- Honesty is the best policy – encourage this with parents and carers.
- Remind them that children are always watching and they notice a lot!
- For many children understanding what is happening is very important especially if they overhear adult's conversations, or see adults making signs of keeping quiet to each other.
- Find out about the rules of sharing information with someone in prison so you know how best to maintain contact by sending updates from the children and the nursery.



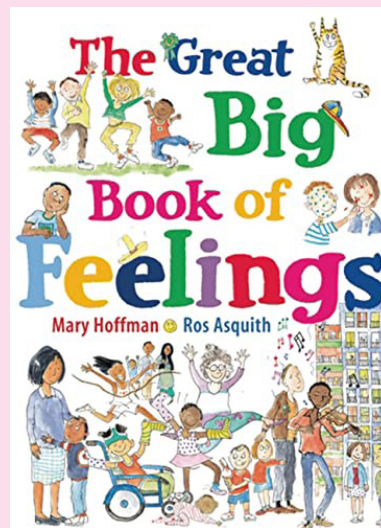
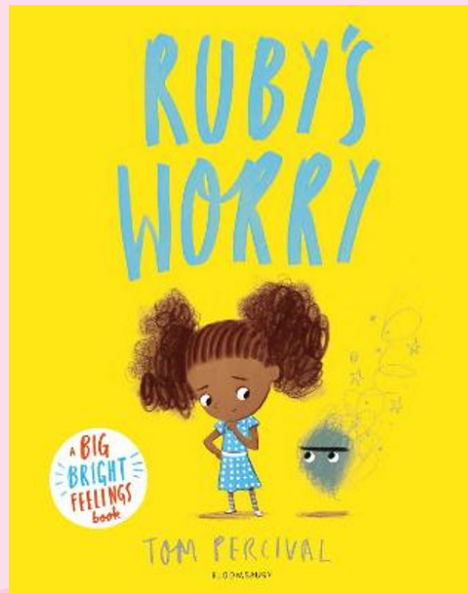
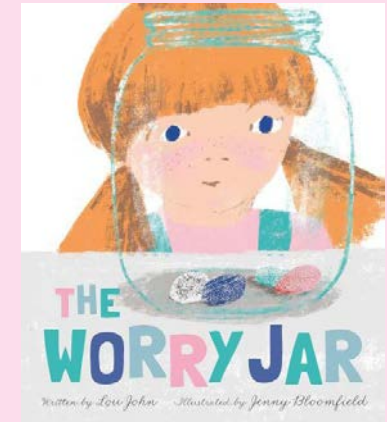
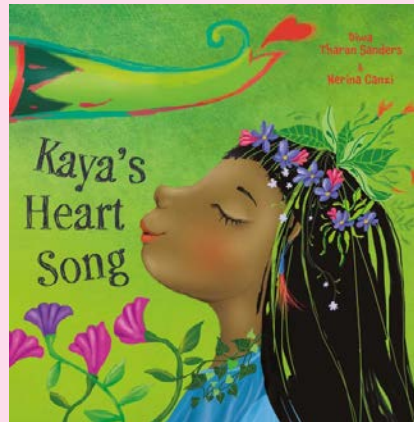


## Section 3

# Reading Resources

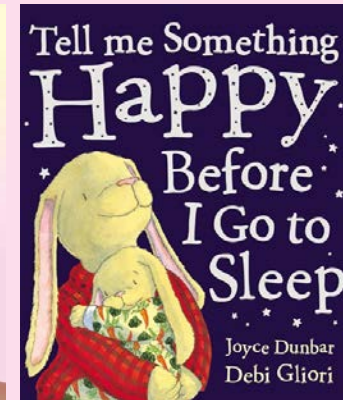
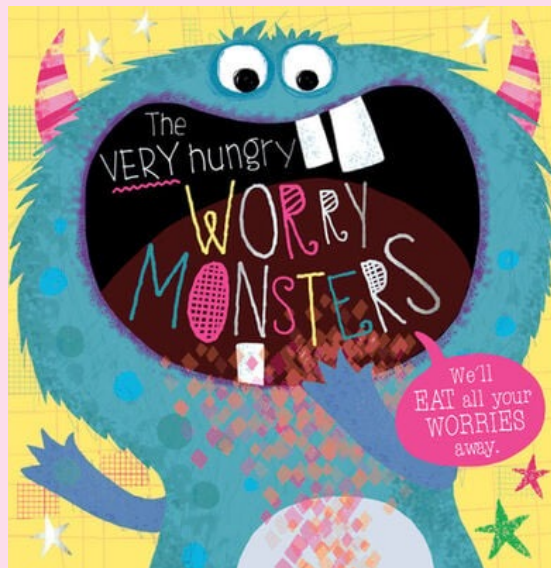


# Books about Feelings and Loss

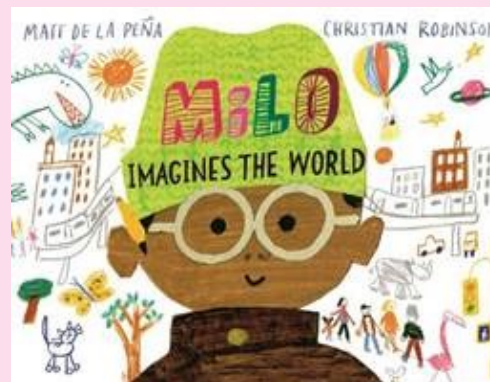
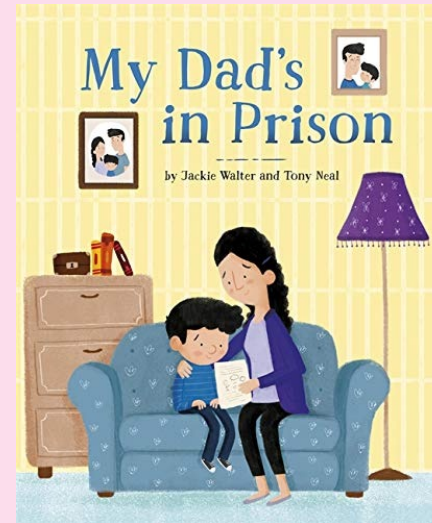




# Books Dealing with Worry and Sadness



# Books Dealing with Separation





## Section 4

# Additional Resources



# Helpful resources from Prisoners Advice and Care Trust (PACT)

- Pact has a range of free resources to support children affected by imprisonment from books to jigsaws and animations.
- Go to [www.prisonadvice.org.uk](http://www.prisonadvice.org.uk) or email [cyp@prisonadvice.org.uk](mailto:cyp@prisonadvice.org.uk) for further support and training.
- The Prisoners Families Helpline is a HMPPS service with its own website and phone line. It is managed by Pact.
- The Helpline gets thousands of parents calling each year, grandparents caring for prisoners' children as well as teachers and social workers. It is really useful for Early Years staff seeking informed and independent advice and information.

- It's open 7 days a week and is free and confidential. It also has a safer custody portal so that worried families can alert prison safety teams.

Prisoners Families Helpline  
0800 8082003

[www.prisonersfamilies.org](http://www.prisonersfamilies.org)

## Additional resources

- Heard And Seen  
[www.childrenheardandseen.co.uk](http://www.childrenheardandseen.co.uk)
- Catch 22  
[www.catch-22.org.uk](http://www.catch-22.org.uk)

# How can we Support our Colleagues?

A photograph of a woman with long brown hair, wearing a teal t-shirt and a gold necklace, holding a white disposable coffee cup with both hands. The background is blurred. In the top left corner, there is a large orange circle. On the left side, there is partially visible text: "ning", "an", and "S".

ning  
an  
  
S

Think Feel Do:  
A Wellbeing  
Handbook for  
Early Years  
Staff  
Available from  
amazon

The book cover features a blue silhouette of a person's head facing right. Inside the head, there are several colorful circular icons representing different aspects of wellbeing: a green umbrella, a blue heart, a pink family icon, a yellow sun, a green leaf, a pink heart, a blue pill, and a red heart rate line. Above the head, the title "Think Feel Do" is written in pink, green, and yellow respectively. Below the head, the subtitle "A Wellbeing Handbook for Early Years Staff" is written in white, followed by the authors' names "By June O'Sullivan and Lolo Mannix" in smaller white text.

Think  
Feel  
Do

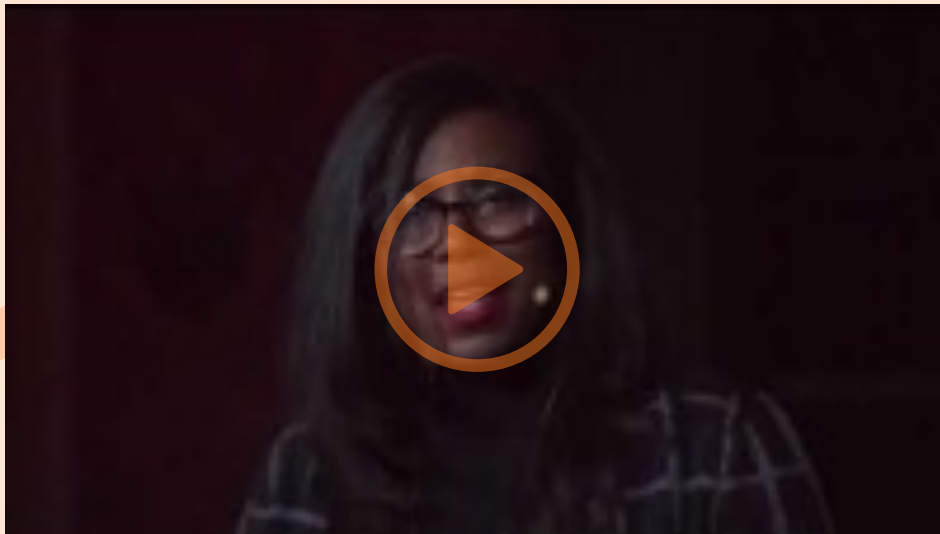
A Wellbeing  
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Think Feel Do:  
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amazon



# Watch at a Staff Meeting



## **Healing from Parental Incarceration**

Nicole Ausmer

TEDxCincinnatiWomen – [YouTube](#)



## **How storytelling helps parents in prison stay connected to their kids**

Alan Crickmore – [YouTube](#)





## With special thanks

[www.prisonadvice.org.uk](http://www.prisonadvice.org.uk)

[www.famly.co](http://www.famly.co)

[www.leyf.org.uk](http://www.leyf.org.uk)



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