

Parents of adults in the criminal justice system

The issues confronting parents of defendants/offenders are complex and difficult. Parents frequently experience strong and conflicting emotions about their child's situation.

Common emotional reactions include:

Anger

Parents can be outraged that their child could have committed a crime. You may feel resentful and angry with questions such as: "Why did they do it?" "How they cause us so much pain?"

Worry

No matter how old the defendant/offender is or what the offence was, they are still your child. Parents almost always feel deeply concerned about their child's health and safety while in police custody, going through the court process or in prison.

Guilt

Parents may feel guilty that they have negative feelings towards their child. One strategy that can be useful is to try to separate what your child did (their behaviour) from how you feel about them as a person. You can disapprove of someone's behaviour, but still love them.

Parents of defendant/offenders sometimes report feeling guilty if they do not want to support their child by, for example, putting up bail, paying out their debts or taking them back home when they are released. Many parents report finding it hard to say no to demands from their child who is experiencing the criminal justice system, and feeling guilty if they do.

Shame

There is a social stigma attached to criminal behaviour. As a result, parents often worry about how they are going to tell others about what has happened. Parents may

decide not to tell their friends out of fear that they will be judged by them as being bad parents or rejected by their association with a 'criminal'. Secrecy can increase parents' sense of shame, humiliation and isolation.

Isolation and alienation

Friends or extended family may not support the defendant/offender and condemn the parents' continuing feelings of loyalty or concern for them. Parents may feel that no one could possibly understand what they are going through and this can give them a sense of being different from other parents and isolated from their social networks and supports.

Relief

Some parents may experience a great sense of relief when their child has gone to prison. Their child might have been using drugs or alcohol, or endangering themselves or others, and it is comforting to know that they are now being closely monitored and are off the streets. For some offenders, prison might be the first time that they will access treatment for health issues, among other things, and this can be a big relief to parents.

Self-blame

Parents may wonder whether they are responsible for their child ending up in 'trouble' and compare themselves to other families in which none of the children are in prison. People commit crimes for all sorts of reasons, such as to support a drug habit, to get out of debt or because of mental health issues. Blaming yourself ignores the reality that your child is grown up and has made their own decisions and has their own issues.

'Every time the phone rang, I expected it to be the police or him saying he is at the cop shop and needs bail. Or if I heard an ambulance at night while I was in bed... and this sounds horrible, I thought they were going to get him. I actually feel some relief now he's in prison.'

How much support is enough?

Parents might have to ask themselves the following questions: “Should I put up the money for bail? Should I put money into their prison account? How much money should I put in? Should I visit my son or daughter every weekend? Should I let my son or daughter live with me when they get released?”

You may be following up things such as reminding your incarcerated son or daughter that they need to inform various people and authorities that they are in custody. This would include the Office of Housing, banks and any other financial institutions.

There are really no ‘shoulds’ or ‘musts’. Many parents of defendants/offenders come to a point where they realise that they have to set boundaries around what support they are prepared to or can provide. For example, they may decide that it is simply too hard having the person living at home with them, and that they are not prepared to do this any more. Whatever choice you make is valid so long as it is meeting your needs.

In making decisions such as these, it is important to think about your own needs and limitations, and those of others in the family. It may also be worth considering whether bailing your son or daughter out of trouble – for example, by paying off their debts – may allow them to avoid full responsibility for their own actions.

There may be differing views among family members regarding the offender. One family member may wish to provide support to the prisoner throughout their sentence, while another may consider prison to be the last straw. It may be helpful to talk through the issues together with a counsellor.

You can arrange a referral to a VACRO family counsellor or support worker by calling (03) 9605 1900.

Supporting your other Children

It is important for parents to be aware of the impact that involvement with police, court and prison may have on other children in the family. While it is recognised that incarcerated older children can have high levels of influence on their sibling’s offending behaviour this is not the case for all siblings. Some are certain that they do not want to end up like their older sibling, others will require significant support to deal with the separation

from their older sibling. Understanding that ‘losing’ a sibling can manifest in a range of behavioural and emotional difficulties for children is the first step towards countering ongoing issues. Parents should consider:

- What type of support their other children require depending on their age and individual needs. Areas to watch out for are:
 - If they have lost contact with peers or other family supports due to stigma and isolation
 - If they have a need for information about what has happened and the outcome
 - If they need support to work out who they can trust and inform
 - If there is extra responsibility being placed on them to be ‘good’
 - If limited freedom and more pressures have been applied to deter them from similar outcomes
 - If they are feeling accountable for fulfilling their parent’s happiness

Your other children will require support to come to terms with what their sibling has done, how they re-evaluate their relationship with their sibling and how they continue to develop as individuals without their sibling around.

You can arrange a referral to a VACRO children’s counsellor by calling (03) 9605 1900 to talk through these issues.

Other supports

Family Drug Help is a service for people affected by another’s problematic alcohol or drug use. It offers services to assist families to deal with the devastating effects that alcohol and drug use in the family can have on all family members.

Family Drug Help also offers ‘Renegotiating Relationships’, a program run in prisons to assist prisoners with drug or alcohol issues and their families to prepare for release.

Contact Family Drug Help on (03) 9573 1700 or visit their website at www.familydrughelp.org.au