

# Children Heard and Seen Who's Calling?



HMPPS has issued guidance relating to calls from prisoners, meaning that, from today, anyone receiving a call from somebody in prison will hear the following automated message:

*"This call is from a person currently in a prison in England/Wales. All calls are logged and recorded and may be listened to by a member of prison staff. If you do not wish to accept this call please hang up now."*

Whilst guidance states this will take effect in prisons in England and Wales from the 13<sup>th</sup> December, it was happening already in some prisons last week.

We understand the need to make people aware that calls from prisons are being monitored and recorded. However, the potential impact on children and families who have contact with a loved one in prison appears to have been overlooked.

For many families with a parent in prison, the children will not be aware that this is the case, instead being told that the absent parent is perhaps working away from home. There is now a significant risk that, every time the telephone rings, a child will answer and hear the cold, automated message. A message that will need to be explained. At home, the phone could be kept out of the way so only an adult can answer it. However, if the call from a loved one in prison comes when the family are in the car, perhaps on the school run, and the call answered hands free, then everyone in the vehicle will hear the automated message. How does a parent or grandparent explain this to a child?

Parents or family members may also travel by car with other adults, perhaps friends or colleagues who are not aware of the imprisonment, when a call is made. The automated message may force families to explain a situation that they have kept private for weeks, months or even years. Often, when families contact Children Heard and Seen, it is the first time they have spoken to anyone outside their immediate family about the parent being in prison. The judgement that often comes with a disclosure can lead to children and families being ostracised and children being excluded from activities the rest of their classmates are involved in. This isolation can have catastrophic impacts on their emotional wellbeing.

For families and children who have contact with their loved one in prison, telephone calls are one of a limited number of means of staying in contact. They are an opportunity to connect, check in with each other, for the person in prison to hear about what their children are doing, how they are developing. A chance for couples to have time together, to share news, good and bad, to try to maintain relationships. Particularly during the pandemic with the suspension of social visits, telephone calls, although often limited, allowed children and families to keep in touch and provide reassurance. Telephone calls provide a brief window of normality. This fragile normality is now being

shattered by an automated message that declares and reinforces the imprisoned status of a loved one.

Even for children who are aware of their parent being in prison, is it necessary for them to be reminded of this each telephone call? Is this not unnecessarily cruel and insensitive when there could be more sensitive alternatives?

Could consideration be given to a text message being sent to all mobile phone numbers on the prisoners PIN with a simple yes, or no response to accept or reject all calls in the future? Could Family Services providers secure signatures on a simple pro forma? Visitors will have ID with them when they book in for a visit so could this be used to agree to telephone calls being logged and recorded? Where a landline is on the PIN could the message be played once with an option to press one for yes that covers all calls in the future withdrawing the need for it to be played each time?

Families are all too aware that their calls are monitored and recorded but the daily reminder a loved one is in prison feels unnecessary. Exposing children to a truth they are not yet aware of is cruel and potentially exposes what is a family secret to colleagues or others. This could be avoided if alternatives were considered.

At Children Heard and Seen, we understand that many families choose not to tell children about a parent being in prison. We believe that, in most cases, it is in the best interests of the child to be told, in a sensitive and age-appropriate way, that their parent is in prison. This is to avoid them discovering this fact unexpectedly, when they cannot receive appropriate support, and to avoid the feeling that a secret has been kept from them. In our experience, it can be particularly damaging for young people to find out where their parent is in this way.

If you are struggling with when or what to tell a child, we can support you by writing a specific crib sheet with age appropriate language and information and/or we could be with you when a child is being told. This leaflet, which was prepared by families that we support, might also be useful:

<https://childrenheardandseen.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/2020/11/Leaflet-FAQs-How-To-Tell-Children.pdf>