

Hidden Voices: Debra's Story



Below is the 20th in a series of blog posts created by adults who have lived experience of parental imprisonment. By sharing these hidden voices, we hope to show how the impacts of parental imprisonment can stay with people well into adulthood.

I'm the eldest of eight children. When I was thirteen and a half, my father stabbed my mother to death.

My father and mother had split up because he had tried to kill her. I'd managed to stop him by hitting him over the head with a poker. He actually said to me 'if you're going to hit me with that, you best knock me out, because I'll kill you as well.' My mother left him. She took my brothers and my sister, but she left me behind. About a week and a half later, he went out one night and then the police came to pick me up at about 3am. I knew straight away why they were there.

As a result, myself, my brothers and my sister were all split up, as no one wanted to take eight children on. I remember family members arguing over us, 'well I'll take that one', 'you take that one' like we were a litter of puppies. Some of us lived with family members from my father's side, and some of us from my mother's side. It was made clear to us 'if you speak to them, you're a traitor to your mother's memory' and vice-versa. We were put into different foster homes, where we all experienced horrific treatment.

I moved in with my mother's sister and so I was still going to the same school. But then my father wasn't happy about me living there. When you're in prison, no matter how serious the offence, apparently you have the power to say where your children can and cannot live. So I was given a choice either to go and live with a member of his family – which I flatly refused to do – or going into foster care at my grandmother's house. That was absolutely horrendous as it was her husband who used to molest me.

People who had been my friends for years since we'd been little were suddenly told by their parents not to be friends with me. Their attitude was 'her father's a murderer.' I remember one parent saying 'bad blood runs in families.'

I remember at school one particular teacher screaming at me in the classroom why I didn't have my books, and demanding that I explain why I didn't have them. I had to stand up in front of everyone and say 'because I no longer live at home, I'm now in foster care.' 'Well

why are you in foster care?' 'Well you know, because during the summer holidays Miss, my father killed my mother.'

What I remember most though is one particular boy who used to sit behind me. Most of my actual friends were fine, although I couldn't go round most of their houses anymore because of their parents' attitudes. But this particular boy would sit behind me and say over and over again 'your father's a murderer, your father's a murderer, your mother's a slag, your father's a murderer.' This went on for a few days. Until I finally stood up in class, put my hand up and said 'please sir, I have something I need to say.' I turned around to this boy and said 'Yes Christopher, I know my father's a murderer because my mother was the victim. I lost both my parents, I've lost my brothers, I've lost my sister. I don't need you to tell me – because I know. And then I did hit him over the head with a maths book.

Those are all experiences that do affect your life growing up. Being told by one foster mother that it must have been my fault that my father went out and killed my mother last night, because I must have known what he was going to do. I was thirteen and a half, how did I know what my father was going to do that night?

When my father was first sentenced, social workers used to force my brothers and sister to go and see him in prison. They never succeeded with me, I just flatly refused to go.

I didn't speak to my father for ten years after he did what he did. When I did decide to speak to him, it was of my own volition. Whilst part of me understood some of the reasons that had driven him to do what he did that night, he never ever apologised to us kids for what we went through. He never even saw what we went through as a result of his actions. We had suddenly lost both parents, and he never understood that side of things.

My father only served 14 months in prison. After he was released, he met another woman and two of my younger brothers were made to live with him. They put my brothers through hell. They were beaten, they were starved, and they were thrown out onto the streets in the freezing cold. They were four and five years old.

About a year later, he caught her in bed with another man and my father went back to prison again. He nearly killed her, and threw the other man through the bedroom window. Because I wasn't speaking to him at the time, I heard this on the radio. I remember just thinking 'oh my god, we've got to go through all of this again now.'

My childhood experience – the fact that my father was in prison – was used by my daughter's ex against her in court for a parental alienation order. It's been weaponised against me and my family - which is quite disgusting really.

I've never hidden the facts about what happened with my parents. It's not my shame to carry. I went on to do a law degree, work for the Solicitors Regulation Authority and became an intelligence officer for them. I always say to my brothers 'don't be ashamed, it wasn't our fault,' 'you don't choose your parents and you're not responsible for their actions.'

As a child, you just feel trapped as you don't know what to do. Social services could have said 'this child doesn't want to go see their father in prison, that's okay – I'm not going to force them to.' Would that have been so difficult? I would have liked support services to actually listen. Listen to the voices of the children. Because they didn't, and they still don't now.