

# Hidden Voices: Silence, Shame and Growing up to be OK



*Below is the 23rd in a series of blog posts created by adults who have lived experience of parental imprisonment. By sharing these hidden voices, we hope to raise awareness of the impacts of parental imprisonment to inspire immediate change for the children of today.*

My father was sent to prison when I was 10 years old. It was for petty, irresponsible crime that can never have been worth the suffering it caused. Aside from my mother, not one adult ever talked to me or my siblings about it. Not one, ever.

It wasn't as if nobody knew - it was in the local paper after all. And there were consequences. Some little girls at my primary school were no longer allowed to play with me, and I was uninvited from birthday parties. One girl explained that 'your dad is in prison and we're not even a swearing family'. I laugh at these words now - a 'swearing family'? - but at the time they made perfect sense. As a child you internalise the shame, and you don't question the prejudices that produce it. Thank goodness there were some parents who didn't think this way - even after all these years I thank those who continued to make me welcome.

As I moved into secondary school later that year the fact that my Dad was in prison was never mentioned. Did the teachers know? I haven't a clue. I don't think they treated me any differently from others, which was a blessing, but it also meant there was zero support.

I have one memory of talking about it during my whole secondary school career: on the very first day of my very first term, a fellow pupil and I were sent to the school office to get our free school dinner tickets (free dinners were a further source of shame, but that's another topic). As we walked along the corridor I asked her why she was getting dinner tickets. She replied, 'I'm not allowed to say', then added, 'but it's the same reason as you'. I said 'Oh' and we never mentioned it again.

Aside from the shame, the keenest feeling I remember was anxiety. It was a constant inner voice that wouldn't settle down. What was happening to my Dad? Where was he? Was he safe? Was he sad? What was his life like? Why wasn't I allowed to give him things I made for him? My fear and worry for him was as great as it was for my mum, whom we saw struggling to give us a decent life on her own, in inevitable poverty. To have had a knowing adult explain to me what was going on, check in on us to see how we were coping, to reassure us about our dad, would have made an enormous difference.

I escaped into books; I read pathologically, addictively, anything that would take me out of my world and spin a different reality around me. Looking back, this was a lucky choice: there are other, more dangerous ways I could have chosen to escape.

Shame and the anxiety for a child is something you fold up inside, push down and live with. Dad came out, we grew up, and life moved on. The thing that continued was the silence. For years I never told friends or partners about it. Those that knew of it rarely showed any curiosity. It's such a strange, taboo topic that people are reluctant to ask anything and are uncomfortable if you bring it up, so you don't.

Fast forward to me aged fifty-something, proud to be selected as a delegate to the Labour party's annual conference in Brighton. I'm at a seminar about children hosted by Dr Barnardo's, and the Mayor of London, Sadiq Khan stands up and says that we have a problem, a problem that is hidden because nobody talks about it: the experiences of children who have a parent in prison.

I can't explain what a moment of profound relief and emotion this was. All my grown-up confidence and professional standing vanished. I felt like a stone I'd been carrying on my chest for most of my life was, for a moment, lifted. I had to wait over 40 years for that scared 10 year-old girl to feel visible. And until I encountered Children Heard and Seen I had never spoken in public – and rarely in private – about my experience.

Social taboos go deep. My dad never lost the shame and guilt of his imprisonment – it coloured the way he saw his children for the rest of his life. Once he told me that every time one of us achieved something his first feeling was relief, because he could tell himself that he hadn't completely messed our lives up. When I was awarded my PhD I watched his face from the stage and I knew exactly what he was thinking. And he was right to think it.

Having a parent in prison doesn't have to mean your life – or their life – is ruined forever. You and your family can recover. But it's a lot easier with some help. That's why I support Children Heard and Seen, and the incredible work they do.

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