

Hidden Voices: Annie's Story



Below is the nineteenth in a series of blog posts created by those caring for children with a parent in prison. The series aims to shine a light on the harms experienced by children and families when a parent goes to prison, and highlight the benefits that providing good support can bring.

I met my children's father in 2013. It very quickly turned into an unhealthy relationship. He was controlling and abusive, but I couldn't get out of there. It was too late, I was in this vicious circle: I can't do it on my own, but I can't do it with him.

Then I found out that he abused a girl. He had raped his ex's daughter. When I found out, he used a lot of manipulation on me so I would keep it quiet. It was really hard. By the time that I finally finally managed to get away from him we had two children.

A year later, when his new girlfriend moved in, I saw she had a daughter. I knew I couldn't change the past, but I didn't want the past to repeat. I knew from other incidents that he was already grooming her and it was just a matter of time before he did it again - so I went to the police.

When I went to the police, they didn't want my statement because they thought maybe it was just his ex trying to get revenge. But they went and spoke with the victim, who made a full disclosure. Then the police went and arrested him.

That was really scary. I knew my life had suddenly completely changed, and I knew it was all going to change for my children.

I felt very very alone because I didn't know of anyone who went through anything like what I was experiencing. My boyfriend and my Mum were very supportive, they were lovely. But they had no idea what it was like.

When I went to trial, I testified against him. I had the screen up to make sure I didn't see him so I could focus on what I had to say without being scared of him. I told the truth and he was found guilty.

He was sentenced in the end. So, I phoned the school and preschools about it, and I spoke to Matthew's play therapist so she knew what Matthew's situation was. Things were changing for the boys and I needed the school to know that. That was a very difficult conversation to have with them. It was really hard because I thought my

children were going to be judged for what their father did and it was not their fault. And yet, when I think about it from another person's perspective – if my child had come home and said, "So and so's dad is in prison", I wouldn't just think about the man alone, I would think about the family. I didn't want the boys to be singled out because of what their father had done.

That's when I found Children Heard and Seen. My child's play therapist told me she found a charity. She said she didn't know if it was any good but that they help people in situations like mine.

I emailed someone at Children Heard and Seen and then James got in touch. I think I was emailed back within two hours or something silly like that. He was absolutely amazing. We scheduled our first Zoom call. I remember how hopeless I felt and then, and within the very first Zoom conversation with James, I just didn't feel alone anymore. That was massive. I spent that day after our Zoom call just crying my eyes out because I felt so relieved.

James sent me loads of resources for the boys. He told me he could arrange one-to-one sessions with the boys, he told me about the group sessions where they could come and meet other children and feel that they are not alone in their experience.

I was just gobsmacked, I was like "how come no one ever talks about this?" I had no idea at all. I had tried to find some help, I had googled and the help was just not out there it seemed. And yet, there was this amazing community of people who were in the same situation as me. I spent the better part of basically my previous three years being completely on my own, completely singled out, struggling every single day. And then those guys were there and happy to help out. How did I miss it?

It was just life altering.

James sent me a crib sheet of things I could say to the boys to help me speak to them about what happened. I remember hyperventilating before speaking to the boys because I was so stressed. I thought, "oh my god it's going to be absolutely awful. They're going to hate me and they're going to be devastated". But I used the crib sheet and it was nowhere near as overwhelming as I thought it would be. My eldest, who I was the most worried about, was telling me about what goals he had scored about five minutes after I told them what happened with his father. And then the little one said he felt "sorry for the person that my father hurt". That was just absolutely amazing. At the time he was maybe three and a half, something silly like that. I was really impressed.

In that conversation, the boys both asked me how long their father was going to be gone. He was sentenced to 14 years, so it was going to be a long time. So I said he won't be back until they're almost grown-ups. And they just accepted it and got on with it. Every now and then they would ask questions about their father, but those conversations were never anywhere near as bad as I thought because I had those answers on the crib sheet and I got to speak to James. James gave me tips and some answers to questions children normally ask in those situations. He helped make sure that I was really ready.

After that, the boys and I went to an art session at Children Heard and Seen and the boys got to meet the staff and other people that the charity helped. The boys were shy at first, but they very quickly got to love everyone. They met Theo, one of the Children Heard and Seen staff, maybe three times and now they will always ask if Theo's going to be there every time we go to something Children Heard and Seen does. That was big because Matthew didn't used to trust adults.

His father used a lot of mental manipulation on him. After we split up, the boys' father would come to the house, not knocking or anything. He would just come into the house and start shouting, being abusive, going through all the cupboards and taking whatever he wanted. Then, when I was scared of what else he might do, I would ask him to leave. This would cause him to get more agitated and angry and I'd say I would call the police if he doesn't go. He would then go upstairs where the boys were asleep to wake them up and say "I just came to see you because I want you to know that I love you very much. But your mother says if I don't leave right now that she will call the police. So I'm really sorry, I wish I could stay...". So Matthew never trusted adults because of this manipulation. It took him probably two years to accept my boyfriend as part of the family. Yet then he met James and Theo and he just got on with them right away. He started telling James random things that even I didn't know. It was amazing.

If I have any problem now, I get in touch with Children Heard and Seen. For example, my youngest, Thomas, was in preschool and the preschool manager started overreacting to everything when it came to Thomas. There was a situation where Thomas and his friend were pretending to be dogs and Thomas said, "we should sniff each other's bums because that's how dogs say hello". And she reported it to MASH because she felt it was inappropriate behaviour for a four-year-old to pretend to be a dog. There was another situation where boys in the bathroom were showing each other their privates when they went for a wee. I work at a preschool so I know how common this is, but she went and reported Thomas for inappropriate behaviour.

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I felt very sad and singled out in that situation because I felt another child would have been treated differently. I didn't know what to do so I emailed James who got in touch very quickly and we were fully supported in that situation. With my elder son in school, the head teacher started being a bit funny about things. So again, I got in touch with James who attended one of the family meetings and the head teacher has never been nicer. It's amazing - it's like the head teacher and I are besties now.

It feels like I have a big brother in James. If anything bad happens because of the situation with the boys father, I can get in touch with James and he'll have my back. He'll be like "It's alright, I've got it covered. My people will contact their people." It's just amazing. It's a feeling of belonging - that we belong to a community of lovely people.

We got to meet so many families at the summer events and we always look forward to Christmas at Children Heard and Seen because we look forward to seeing them all. And both the boys made friends. Matthew, who was never able to make friends, made friends with a boy at Children Heard and Seen. They even recommend books to each

other. It was amazing to see him play freely in a place where he could actually speak about his biological father and other children knew what he meant. No one pulled faces or acted funny, because they've all been through it.

It's so nice to know someone has got your back. No matter what, you're not judged. And if you are judged by someone else, there are people at Children Heard and Seen who make you feel special as well. The boys get to experience things there that they can talk about and their life doesn't revolve around their father's acts, it revolves around going to Christmas parties and campfires, and there are so many different activities that they get to experience and tell their schoolmates about.

Looking back, I don't know where I would be if I wasn't with the charity. I'd be in a mental hospital probably, and my kids with my Mum. No one would be happy. I don't think I would have pulled through. It was such a lonely, sad place I was in. I had a number of breakdowns during the court proceedings and I don't think I could take another one.

The fact that their father went to prison for raping another child...I don't think many people know how to navigate life in that situation. I wish I could put the feelings I have about it all into words but it's just so hard to describe how it feels, how lifechanging it was. It was like going from deserted ghost town, into a nice friendly village where they all welcomed you with freshly baked bread.